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John T. Knox

Rosie the Riveter World War II American Homefront Oral History Project

A Collaborative Project of the Regional Oral History Office,
The National Park Service, and the City of Richmond, California

Interviews conducted by
Laura McCreery
in 2003

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Interview with John Knox
Interviewed by: Laura McCreery
Transcriber: Audrey Yu
[Interview #1: June, 24, 2003]
[Begin Audio File Knox1.doc]

1-00:00:16

McCreery:

This is Laura McCreery speaking and I'm interviewing John T. Knox at his home in Richmond, California. It's June, 24, 2003. This is our first tape. Mr. Knox, I know you been interviewed before about your career, and we are gonna focus today a bit more on the city of Richmond and your early time here in the 50s and 60s. But let's go back and start if you don't mind, by having you state your date of birth and just talk about where you were born.

1-00:00:46

Knox:

I was born on September 30, 1924 in Reno, Nevada. My dad had worked for George Pepperdine, the founder of the Western Auto Supply in Los Angeles, and he met my mother there who was worked for the Pasadena Star News. They were married and he shortly thereafter was promoted in the company and sent up to manage the Reno store and so I was born in Reno. Incidentally, my mother wrote this slogan, "Biggest little city in the world," and won a thirty-dollar prize from Reno newspaper. When she died, the wire services carried that, so I'm sure she would've been very proud. But then in about 1928 or '29, my father was promoted again from the Reno store to the Sacramento store, so I grew in the early 30s in Sacramento, went to David Lubin School there, and later have the year in Kit Carson Junior High, which in those days, had just been built as part of the first class and I heard not long ago that the school had been retired for being over age, so it's a profound event.

1-00:02:14

McCreery:

Do you know much about your mother's family?

1-00:02:17

Knox:

A little bit. My grandfather whom I never met was Rene Monat and he was a Huguenot Frenchman who migrated down to Northern Wisconsin from Canada, and was a skilled dairy farmer. I saw his farm, though I never met him. He died before I was born or shortly after. It was a beautiful dairy farm in north central Wisconsin near Chippewa Falls. I know nothing of her mother. Old Monat raised a large family as most families, particularly farm families, did in those days.

1-00:03:10

McCreery:

What about your Dad's family?

1-00:03:11

Knox:

My father's father was born in Lockesburg, Arkansas. The Knox family is an old Southern family. The story is that they landed in the northern part of the country around Massachusetts, I

don't know what date, and that one of the brothers migrated to the South to Roanoke, Virginia. Then after the War Between the States, as they say in the south, they migrated west and had families in Mississippi and Arkansas principally. My father grew up in Arkansas, then migrated to Texas, in the Dallas area.

1-00:04:01

McCreery:

Do you know what brought him out there?

1-00:04:04

Knox:

Well, he went to Arizona and went to secretarial school, which young men did at that time, and became a skilled secretary. There weren't very many women secretaries then, as I understand it. Then he was drafted into the army in World War I, and served as a secretaru at Fort Lewis in Seattle. He was a very young man. When he came out, he moved backed to southern California and ultimately got a job as clerk at Western Auto Supply on Hope Avenue in Los Angeles. He was gradually promoted into management as a young man and moved on to manage the Alhambra store where he met my mother. She had some college at Yankton College in South Dakota, and then migrated west because of a friend of hers, Dorothy Williams They were both young women and got jobs on the Pasadena Star News.

1-00:05:23

McCreery:

Did she talk much about those experiences?

1-00:05:25

Knox:

A little bit. Her friend, Dorothy Williams was a Rose Queen in the parade. That's about all I remember. They were young women, having a great time, I guess. She met my father and they were married down in southern California. About that time he got his promotion by George Pepperdine and came up to manage the Reno store of the Western Auto Supply.

1-00:05:54

McCreery:

Now you describe how you got to Sacramento in your early years, what was your religious upbringing if any?

1-00:06:01

Knox:

Well, it was Protestant primarily, I think I was baptized in the Baptist Church in Reno, and then in Sacramentowe were sent to Presbyterian Church. Typically as young kids, we weren't very enthusiastic about going to Sunday school, but my mother and father, particularly my mother insisted on it and then later on my mother became interested in Christian Science, so we did some of that. My father was raised as a Baptist and went along with my mother, but to say that he was a devout church going Christian would be overstating the case. He was not anti-Christian but not, shall we say, a particularly religious man.

1-00:07:01

McCreery:

Okay. What were your parents' personal interests.

1-00:07:05

Knox:

Well, of course this was early during the Depression, which was hard on them, but we lived actually a sort of middle class existence in the early 30's. I think my father told me, he reached a peak salary of seventy-five dollars a week, which put him in the middle class. So we always had a reasonably decent automobile, we had a little house that they rented. They couldn't buy, this was before FHA. Nobody, unless you had a lot of money for a down payment, which nobody did, owned a house. Most people were rent payers. I recall my parents saying the rent was thirty five dollars a month for our two bedroom house with a big lot. I remember an apricot tree in particular, and mowing the lawn. Those were interesting times in which to grow up. At my youngest brother's funeral a few years ago, I pointed out that if we heard an airplane engine when we were kids, we all ran outside to look at it. One day we were rewarded, I remember, by a low-flying Akron dirigible coming right over the house. It was quite a sight. As I said then, nowadays if people hear an airplane, they go out to call their congressman to complain. But in those days, it was an exciting event.

1-00:08:29

McCreery:

Now as the Depression went on, you ended up in southern California. How did that come about?

1-00:08:33

Knox:

Yes. My father started having problems with alcohol and ultimately lost his job as manager of the Western Auto Supply and migrated. We moved around a lot. He became a car buyer and automobile salesman. Then we lived briefly in Vallejo and San Francisco. And in 1938, the financial pressure was tough. I had a cousin back in Wisconsin who lived with my mother's older sister and they sent me back to spend a year with him. I ended up spending almost two years. I did the last part of eighth grade and freshman year of high school back in this little town, called Boyd, Wisconsin, where my uncle was the town doctor and my aunt had been a public health nurse. My cousin and I endured and enjoyed having the great American experience of living in a small midwestern American town. There were five hundred people in the entire town, eighty-five students in the high school, and that included all four years. It was a marvelous school. They didn't have lab courses or languages, but they had the basic preparation and I think that experience was educational and worthwhile. Ultimately, at the end of the first year of high school, I got to go home. They sent me back on a Greyhound bus all by myself from St. Paul to Los Angeles where my family was located at that time. This was in summer of '38 or '39.

1-00:10:32

McCreery:

You finished up high school there?

1-00:10:34

Knox:

Yes. They ended up back in Alhambra and I went three years to Alhambra High School and graduated in 1942 when I was eighteen years old. Of course, the war was underway, it was clear that we were going into service. I matriculated in UCLA in the fall of '42 and got in one semester. I remember the entrance fee was twenty-nine dollars, which I borrowed from the PTA. I had been working at an ice cream parlor at a rate of thirty-five cents an hour. My father was still having a good deal of trouble, and we were a little on the shorts. But I got through one

semester at UCLA and went into the Enlisted Reserve Corp. But of course we were long gone. I went into the service on the 1st of March of 1942.

1-00:11:29

McCreery:

Where did they send you?

1-00:11:31

Knox:

Based on your testing and so forth, they sent you to various services from Fort MacArthur in Los Angeles. I was assigned to the U.S. Army Air Corp, (that was before the air force was a separate service) and went for basic training to Fresno. I've always been quite near-sighted. I was forty-four hundred. I couldn't see the big "E" on the eye chart. So I went through basic training in the early part of the summer, which was very hot. It was a fairly miserable experience. Then from there, I was sent to downtown Los Angeles to live in a hotel with other troops. They called it an engineering and operations clerical school. From there I was transferred to an outfit in Texas, the 398th Service Squadron of the Army Air Corps., in the little town of Pyote in west Texas, pecos country. The principal mission of the base was the final putting together of B-17 crews. They brought in the pilots and the planes, the gunners and navigators and so forth, put the crews together and trained them together, and then they would fly on over, mostly to Europe, and become part of the air force that was bombing Germany. I guess a lot of those fellows didn't come back. It was hot in Peyote. I remember I worked in the orderly room as a clerk. And one day when this so-called air conditioning was on, it was 120 degrees inside. You would work all day and go out and drink GI beer starting at five o'clock and that was your only cold experience. Then life went on.

1-00:13:46

McCreery:

How did you get to Alaska?

1-00:13:49

Knox:

I became good friends with a lot of people in the 398 Service Squadron. I liked it, I liked the fellows, I liked the leadership and the squadron. In the meantime, the army started a program called ASTP, I forget what that stands for, but it was an opportunity to go on back to school, which I thought at my age of eighteen was probably a good idea, if I could. I had applied for that, but I hadn't heard anything In the meantime, the squadron of which I became very fond, was transferred overseas, I didn't know where to. But I made a decision that I was gonna stick with this squadron, and that involved getting myself off the limited service category, which I knew simply required going in and looking at the eye chart and saying "E". That's all. I knew there was always an "E" at top of the chart. So I asked for repeated eye exams and went in and said "E," the doctor classified me for regular service, and I joined the group. At the time, this was regarded as great bravery. I thought it was the only intelligent thing to do, and it turned out to be. We didn't know where the overseas service squadron was going. The mission was to repair airplanes in combat situations or other situations. We didn't know where we were being transferred when we got on a private train for the squadron, which was about four hundred men. I remember we had Pullman cars. There were two men on the lower berth and one on the upper, by seniority. If you had the longer seniority, you got the upper berth by yourself. Otherwise you

had sleep with another soldier on the lower berth. Our train stopped at Pyote, Texas, and we and headed north. Nobody knew where we were going even during the beautiful trip. I remember stopping at several towns along the way, particularly in the Northwest. We would stop and put on a parade for the local populous. They they usually fed us supper and then we got back on the train and went on our way. We were up in Seattle and we still didn't know where we were going. Seattle was a port embarkation, but it could've been for anywhere. At Fort Lewis, we got on a small ship. I remember they had a band out there playing "Over There" and all that. We went up the gangplank, not having any idea of where we were going except they had issued to us cold weather equipment, so we got some kind of feeling that we were going some place where it was cold. [laughs] We got on the ship, and it started out to Puget Sound. I was on the deck and it was kind of foggy. I saw the big hull of another ship come toward us at the last minute, right along side of our ship, our small troop carrying ship, which had been a passenger ship in the tourist service before the war, and it just tore the side off the ship. There were some fellows downstairs lying in their bunks when side of the ship opened up, but miraculously there were no casualtie. The ship, of course, was wounded badly. So the next day, there we were limping back to Seattle and returning to Fort Lewis after our big send off.. By that time, it became apparent that we were going to Alaska. We didn't know exactly where. I remember there was a lot of unrest because some of our men who had gone AWOL (absent without leave) over the fence to get into town, saw some of our officers freely walking around town, which proved that they were granting officers' passes to go into town but not enlisted men. There was almost a mutiny; the group formed and began to feel an urgent desire to see civilization. The major, after lecturing us, granted everybody a pass.

1-00:18:28

McCreery:

When did you finally get up to Alaska?

1-00:18:30

Knox:

Well, we were there for another week or so, I've forgotten how long. They finally found another ship, which was an old-time luxury vessel, a passenger ship, which was very nice. We all had staterooms -- not individually, of course. They crowded us in, probably four to a cabin with two sleeping on the floor. But we ate in the regular passengers' dining room and it was like going on a cruise. So we had this very luxurious cruise up the Inland Passage, which if you've never seen it, is one of the most beautiful trips in the world. It was nice weather; we just traveled up the passage to Juneau. where we were all formed in a line and marched into town. We went to the Barnof Hotel for lunch, and then got back on the ship and went up through Dutch Harbor, the Dutch Harbor which had been bombed by the Japanese the week before. That was, the only attack in the territorial United States, other than an attempt to shell Santa Barbara, or the sighting of a submarine down in southern California. As we went through Dutch Harbor, we knew by then our ultimate destination would be Nome. At Dutch Harbor, the marines were guarding the dock, and we were not allowed to get off. We shouted down to the marines, "What about Nome?" Of course, none of them had been there, but the rumor was there were two things to do in Nome and that's about all. One was the Dream Theater, which was a movie theater, and two was Dynamite Red. We said, "Who's Dynamite Red?" Well, she turned out to be a half-breed Eskimo girl of albino strain or something, very Caucasian looking. And she was a very attractive young woman who, rumor had it, had vowed to have sexual relations with every single man in

Nome. [laughs] So as young men we left Dutch Harbor, wondering about all that.. Nome, of course, never had any docks because the ice froze the Bering Sea every year and the docks would have just floated out to sea every year. In Nome you have to park out in the bay and come in by tender and land on the beach. We looked over it all and found it pretty desolate. Nome is above the timberline, there are no trees just a desolate looking village. They thought there might be a bombing by Japan, so they had these Quonset huts distributed all around the area. It seems to me it was sixteen men per hut. We arrived around early October, as I remember, and when the snow came it became a difficult situation because the bathroom (the latrine as it was called) was anywhere from a quarter to a half a mile from the huts..

1-00:22:27

McCreery:

Yes, the condition sounds challenging.

1-00:22:29

Knox:

Yes, the conditions were tough. We had good equipment and we were lectured on the serious dangers of being in those freezing climates where and the winter lasts from about October 15th to June 15th. About November, it starts getting very dark, with very few hours of daylight. In the middle of December, it's dark all the time, in effect, which is very tough for morale. It gets a little old.

1-00:22:57

McCreery:

I gathered you stayed there for the duration of the war, pretty much?

1-00:23:01

Knox:

Well, yes. I had two years in Nome. Of course, I was a lucky guy. Our base, the 1469th Army Air Force, had a very interesting mission. The U.S. had started sending a stream of materiel to Russia. Russian pilots would pick up lend lease American airplanes, P-39s, C-47s and B-26s in Fairbanks, which was up a chain which started in Great Falls, went to Edmonton, Alberta, and on up. They would land at Nome for the final check of the airplanes. Our guys would fix them up, refuel and do whatever had to be done, and fly over to Siberia. I later learned that we were actually part of the Battle of Stalingrad. These planes were the major American aid for the Russian side during that battle.

1-00:24:14

McCreery:

But you didn't know it at the time?

1-00:24:15

Knox:

No, we didn't know it at the time; all we knew was the materiel was going to Russia. We had a lot of Russian personnel on our base, they had their own quarters and so on. Of course we couldn't talk to them much because nobody spoke Russian. There was only one place the Army could find a concentration of Russian speaking Americans, and that was the artistic community in Manhattan. A lot of Russians, particularly Russian Jews, from Manhattan spoke the language fluently. They were immediately drafted into service and sent to Alaska. Not long after I got to

Nome, through a wonderful stroke of luck, I got a chance to meet some of these very accomplished Russian émigrés, among them Iliya Bolatafsky, a painter, Boris Tamarin, a well known stage designer, and University of Chicago professor Anatole Rappaport. My duties at the time included opening mail to the squadron office, so I was one of the first to see an announcement of auditions for the Armed Forces Radio Station on the base. A friend and I auditioned, and were selected by a very interesting officer named Edward Helwick, who was a very young man in his early twenties, about twenty-five then, I think. He had been very successful in radio as the co-writer of the Bing Crosby Kraft musical in Hollywood. He was in charge of the radio station and he appointed my friend Frank Trumpter and me to run the station. I became the disk jockey and news analyst, The Russian translators weren't too eager to hang out with the Russian pilots, understandable considering that most of them were from families who had fled the Bolshevik revolution, so the radio station sort of became their off duty salon. I got to listen in on and sometimes participate in a lot of fascinating conversations. And all that at the age of eighteen. It was just a great, marvelous assignment.

1-00:25:46

McCreery:

Good practice for politics.

1-00:25:48

Knox:

Oh, it was great! I really had a grand time. It was just really, really terrific.

1-00:25:53

McCreery:

Well, I need to get you to Richmond before too long.

1-00:25:55

Knox:

Oh, okay, I'm sorry, an old vet talking about the service. [laughs]

1-00:25:59

McCreery:

That's all right. That's all right. Can you talk about the circumstances under which you left the service and continued on to UCLA?

1-00:26:08

Knox:

Well after the war was over, I was discharged in December 1, 1945. Of course, we had the GI Bill in those days, which was a magnificent thing. I had been corresponding with a high school girl whom I knew while we were active in student government. She was very nice, wrote to me all during the war. She had matriculated at Occidental College, a small private college in southern California and told me all about being there. She was the first female ever to become president of the Occidental student body and all that, and I became sort of interested in her. Of course, with the GI Bill, I could miraculously go to a private college. The GI Bill paid full tuition, and I got a check every month to cover board and room, books and some incidentals. It was a scholarship to die for. It was just an incredible opportunity I'll never forget. After that, I always cheerfully paid my taxes, because that was an opportunity I never would have had

without the GI Bill. My family was unable to be of any financial assistance. That's how I was able to matriculate at Occidental College.

1-00:27:29

McCreery:

How early did your political interest begin in school?

1-00:27:33

Knox:

Well, I think I had always been interested in politics even up in Nome and I was a great reader of biographies. I got interested in law. I read biographies of a lot of lawyers. It was just clear that I was destined to be a lawyer and was interested in politics and public affairs. So it came with the territory, ingrained.

1-00:27:57

McCreery:

What was the atmosphere at Occidental after the war?

1-00:28:01

Knox:

We were all dominated by our veteran's group in what had been a small conservative private college. They had a rule, no smoking on the campus, no drinking under any circumstances, and here a whole bunch of vets came in. We customarily went out on payday night and drank a lot of whatever we could afford. [laughs] That's just the way we all lived, and of course it changed the social character of the college. But on the other hand, the faculty loved the vets. I talked to an economics professor, who said that when they ran out veterans, he was going retire, he couldn't go back to eighteen year olds. The government made a great investment in that GI Bill, because we were serious students in the main. I got interested in campus politics—became president of the student body and all sort of thing.

1-00:28:57

McCreery:

How did that come about?

1-00:28:59

Knox:

Well, I was active in the student affairs, did a lot of things. I was on the debating team, had considerable success in that regard and joined a lot of things, including the Occidental Players and all that. Got around, the usual stuff and got myself elected.

1-00:29:18

McCreery:

Okay. What did you major in?

1-00:29:20

Knox:

Well, I started in political science, but I became so active in student affairs, I couldn't complete all the courses, so I ended up as a major in public speaking.

1-00:29:32

McCreery:

Did you know what you wanted to do after college?

1-00:29:34

Knox:

I wanted to be a lawyer. There's no question about it. That's what I was always saying, consciously or unconsciously, that was where I was going to end up.

1-00:29:43

McCreery:

How did you proceed?

1-00:29:46

Knox:

Well, I left college and of course, I would like to have gone to Stanford. There were prominent Stanford lawyer alum's in my fraternity, Sigma Alpha Epsilon, who wanted me to go Stanford. But there's just no way. My GI Bill eligibility was due to run out before long, and there was no way I could afford Stanford even if I could have gotten admitted, as I suspect I could have. But I had heard about Hastings College of Law, which is part of the University of California. By that time, I had had enough of a small college campus, I just wanted to go to school efficiently. The idea of going to Hastings appealed to me, so I went on up to Hastings in San Francisco. I have never regretted that. Hastings at that time had what they called the Sixty-Five Club. The dean, a fellow named Snodgrass, had come up with this brilliant idea. It was very difficult after the war to find good faculty, but the great eastern law schools and others had a mandatory retirement age of sixty-five, which incidentally has now been abolished by all of them. So the Dean very astutely wrote to these fellows, found out how old they were. And to the brightest of them that he chose, he said, "Look, come out to Hastings, we'll pay you a full salary, and you can collect your retirement and live in San Francisco. He put together an incredible faculty, probably the most brilliant law faculty in the history of the education of law. It seemed like every one of our professors in law school was the major author in the field. With very few exceptions, they were great teachers.

1-00:31:44

McCreery:

Who was particularly influential to you?

1-00:31:47

Knox:

Well, they all were. I thought they were all excellent teachers and I can name them for you if you want. They really were excellent teachers. It was exciting and interesting to go to class; they were quoted in all the textbooks. It was just unquestionably the finest law faculty ever established in any law school.

1-00:32:11

McCreery:

What about the political scene in the Bay Area? How did you get your start there?

1-00:32:16

Knox:

Well, after the first year of law school, we moved to the East Bay, because my wife got a job teaching at Contra Costa College—

1-00:32:29

McCreery:

Just let me interrupt you, how did you meet your wife?

1-00:32:31

Knox:

I met her at Occidental. She was a year ahead of me although she was younger, because I had been in the service. She was the class of '48, I was class of '49. She was an English major so she went to New York to take her masters at Columbia University. I got to visit her on a national debating tour one year. I remember I went to New York and it was probably the most exciting theatrical season in the history of New York City. It was the year "Death of the Salesman" and "Streetcar Named Desire" opened. We saw those shows and others, and we were sort of courting. After she came home, we were married at Christmastime in 1949 down in Long Beach where she was from. Our honeymoon was driving up to San Francisco for me to go back to school. She had taken her masters at Columbia but no education courses. In order to get a junior college or community college teaching credential at that time, she had to have some education credits, which was kind of a total waste of time but it was required by law, so she matriculated at Berkeley to get those credits. We found a little apartment in San Francisco and later lucked into a great apartment on the hillside behind The Claremont Hotel. I remember it was sixty-five dollars a month and had a little garden overlooking the bay, just a little stone cottage. It was just one of those lucky finds. Ultimately, we bought a house in El Cerrito, which is a long story about doing a favor for a friend.

1-00:34:29

McCreery:

So you were in Contra Costa at that point?

1-00:34:31

Knox:

And we were in Contra Costa.

1-00:34:33

McCreery:

How did she get the teaching job with what's now Contra Costa College?

1-00:34:37

Knox:

Well, the Contra Costa College District was just starting out with two campuses, one in the middle of the county, which was called East Contra Costa College (now Diablo Valley College) and the other in Richmond which was called West Contra Costa College (now Contra Costa College). The community college on the west end of the county had no campus, but of course the great Richmond shipyards had just been abandoned because the war was over, so the college took over the buildings of Shipyard 3, right out here on Canal Boulevard, and that was where she first taught in the English department.

1-00:35:25

McCreery:

And I gather she was in the college just as it was starting out?

1-00:35:28

Knox:

Yes, the first year.

1-00:35:32

McCreery:

Then how did you happen to move here to Point Richmond?

1-00:35:37

Knox:

The college was located right over the hill here in the shipyard, and a number of the teachers had found Point Richmond. And Point Richmond really was regarded as kind of fringe, the old part of town by people in the “establishment” who might have been born in Point Richmond but had moved on, maybe to Mira Vista, as adults. But there it was, on the shore of the bay, blessed with a relatively fog-free climate and spectacular views of San Francisco. In the 30’s the bay side of the hills had been settled by some astute professors from the university, including Leland Vaughan, founder of the Department of Landscape Architecture, Walter Horn, a well known art historian from Cal John Haley, painter and art professor, and people like that. And they were the ones who located along the shoreline, got these marvelous lots out here for almost nothing. Now they sell by the square inch, I think. And so we saw the Point, and had our sights on it as a place to live if we stayed in Northern California after law school. In fact, the Point is one of the reasons we did stay here; the other was our involvement with Contra Costa Democratic politics which grew out of the Stevenson campaign and the CDC (California Democratic Council.) Of course, while I was in law school, Jean was putting us through with her job at the college. and we were living in El Cerrito in this little house we bought. We had never taken a honeymoon, but we wanted to go to Europe. I had a few thousand dollars from my dear old aunt who died, and Jean had some of her education money left over. We saved as much as we could against a budget of \$10 a day (can you believe, in 1953 that was enough to travel quite nicely) and we went to Europe for five months. We flew to New York and took a small Dutch ship to Southampton. We bought a little car in London, a Hillman Minx. We stayed in London for five or six weeks, going to the theater, which is our thing, every night. Finally, we left England and we drove all around, Spain, France, Italy and Germany. And then came back back broke. But we had this little English car that we drove across the country after coming back on the same ship, and it was our car for a number of years. We went on from there. [Wife] Did you mention the Stevenson Campaign? [Knox] Oh. [laughs]

1-00:37:57

McCreery:

Not yet. Not yet. It’s about time.

1-00:37:59

1-00:38:04

McCreery:

So in the 50s then you were—

1-00:38:08

Knox:

Yes, we took our trip. I graduated from law school in '52, studied for the bar, and waited for the results. Of course we couldn't go unless I passed the bar. Jean had arranged a leave-without-pay from the college, but all our plans would have to be scrapped if I flunked. Then, in one mailing early in '53, we had news that I had passed the bar, received our steamship tickets and new passports. That was a good day.

1-00:38:41

McCreery:

Was it after you returned that you began to set up your law practice?

1-00:38:46

Knox:

Well, during the latter part of my law school career, Jean had met a lot people at the college and through them in the community. They were a great bunch of people. I started to meet people too; I started to tell you how she got her job. Jean had done her practice teaching at San Francisco City College in the spring of 1950. Her supervising teacher knew an administrator at the newly established community college district in Contra Costa county and gave Jean a very strong recommendation. They were interviewing for the start-up faculty when the college opened a full schedule in the Fall of 1950. Jean's aunt was a good friend of the postmistress in Orinda and told her about Jean's application with the new college district. In those days, postmaster and postmistresses, were presidential, political appointments. Truman was the president of the United States, and he had appointed this lady, Laura Mallory. Jean had known met her and her family occasionally at her aunt's house in Pasadena. Ms Mallory knew a fellow named Bert Coffey, who was on the Contra Costa College Board, It's possible that he is the one who arranged for Jean to be to be interviewed for the job, although at that time we had not met Bert Coffey. Now whether he called and what kind of influence he had, we don't know, but Jean was obviously well qualified. She had the educational background though little teaching experience. Once the new faculty was assembles, it was pretty obvious that the idea had been to assemble a diversified faculty, not racially, alas, but diversified in work experience and age. Several people were out of industry, a number were recent veterans. Not everyone had a lot of teaching experience. Maybe Jean got the job in the young age category; she was twenty-three. So she got a job as an English teacher. Bert Coffey, that's another story. He was the leading Democrat in the county, great organizer, great politician.

1-00:40:47

McCreery:

Let's get to that story, I was wondering how you met him?

1-00:40:51

Knox:

Jean came home one day, was in a state of euphoria, and really amazed. She said that this board member, Bert Coffey, had come to talk to the faculty, advised all of them to become members of the teacher's union and talked about the openness of the college. He had been raised in New York, on Manhattan and gone to NYU. He had been active in politics back there and came out to Contra Costa County because he was assigned as an organizer for the United Oil workers. During this period, they had a bitter strike. Western Contra Costa County was, of course, dominated by the oil industry. The big Standard Oil Refinery here (now Chevron) and the big

Union Oil Refinery up in Rodeo were the principal employers in Western Contra Costa County. It was a bitter strike and Bert was active in that and became active in organizing Democratic affairs around here. He was then active in organizing the vote that established the community college district, junior college district as they called it in those days. He got himself elected to the first board. He was very controversial in town. The establishment was primarily Republican and very fearful of this unusually skilled Democratic organizer who was a compelling personality—the dominant personality among Democrats.

1-00:42:38

He had been a part of, to a large extent responsible for, the first break in the Republican hold on the county. That was in 1946 right after the war when a young man named George Miller Jr. who was raised in Richmond, from an old Contra Costa family, ran against a fellow named Siwalisch, I think it was, for the state assembly district, which was countywide in those days.. That was Bert and George's first campaign and it was brilliant. Bert really was a good, very competent professional politician. George worked hard and defeated Siwalisch who'd been in over twenty years, and established the Democratic Party dominance in Contra Costa County, which was merited, because Democrats were a majority of the voters by far. got to know Bert while Jean was starting to teach at the college, and our principal social activity was with the faculty. Gradually we got to know the Democrats in town including George Miller. And I was ambitious politically, I joined everything in town I could while I was still in law school. After we came back from Europe, I became very active. Joe Genser, an attorney whom I had met through Democratic Club activities, (he later became a judge) had an office in town. I was looking for a job, and of course, there was no lawyer in town who was interested in hiring me. Those who would be interested couldn't afford it, and those who could afford it weren't interested in a young Democrat. So Joe gave me a place in his office and arranged that I would get part of the fee for any of his cases I worked on and was free to bring in my own business. I started practicing law, bought as much as I could in town, and became even more active in politics.

1-00:45:01

McCreery:

Now you were mainly trying cases, is that right?

1-00:45:04

Knox:

Well, it was general practice, meaning you scratch out what you can.

1-00:45:09

McCreery:

How did that arrangement with Joe Genser work out?

1-00:45:11

Knox:

Pretty well. Worked out well, gave me a place to be and gradually things moved on, I was doing all right. Jean was teaching, so we were eating regularly and so got along fine. I enjoyed it.

1-00:45:25

McCreery:

Where in town was your office?

1-00:45:26

Knox:

It was downtown on 11th Street. Joe had an office upstairs over the paint store at the corner of 11th and Nevin. Of course in those days, the town was dominated and had been dominated by two law firms. One was Carlson, Collins, Gordon and Bold], That was Tom Carlson, one of the most fascinating people I had ever met, who was the boss of Richmond. The other firm was Tinning and Delap. I never met Tinning but Delap was a wonderful old guy, a very conservative Republican. Their firm was also in Walnut Creek. Tinning was from out there. They were the other dominant Contra Costa firm. Carlson, however, had one of the most interesting law practice. I'm sure there were attorneys who made more money, not too many, but he represented most of the major companies and both hospitals, as well as thee major labor unions. He had strong base in town. He was on the board of the newspaper, attorney for the newspaper. and city attorney of Richmond. That's just a partial list, delightful interesting guy, just a fascinating guy.

1-00:47:03

McCreery:

What kind of a guy was he? Describe what —?

1-00:47:05

Knox:

A little man. I understand a brilliant lawyer, I never saw him in court. But he came to Richmond and he just had the personality. He was a fixer, he was smart, he knew how to handle people. He just handled himself very well. Here's an example I remember. A lady came in my office for a divorce one day, and it turned out she'd been sued for divorce by her husband and the Carlson, Collins, Gordon and Bold was on the other side. So I called up Mr. Carlson one day, said, my name was John Knox and discovered he had heard of me even though I had never met him. He made it his business to know who was who and what was what. I had the back end of a little office I rented from Senator George Miller. It was across from the post office on Nevin. (At that time, I had separated from Joe and opened my own office.)

1-00:48:11

McCreery:

Did the Miller Family own that building?

1-00:48:13

Knox:

They owned the building. I remember my rent was a hundred dollars a month including utilities. As time passed, I made more money, but George never raised the rent. However, he would withdraw pretty soon, I was paying the light bill, and pretty soon, I was paying the gas bill. You know, so on. Pretty soon, I had to pay the secretary whom I had shared with George, but he gradually kind of fit my practice into the building.

1-00:48:36

McCreery:

But Mr. Carlson had heard of you by the time —?

1-00:48:38

Knox:

Oh, he'd heard of me. I called up, and said, "Mr. Carlson, I'm John Knox, and I have this lady," and so on. And he didn't know what I was talking about, but he called his secretary and had him

bring in the file, which was the first time he had seen it, I'm sure. He said, "Well, we ought to discuss this matter." And he said, "Why don't we meet on Saturday morning, and you have your client there and I'll have mine, and we'll talk it over." I said, "Fine, what time should I meet you at your office?" "No, no, I'll come to your office." And here this great man shows up at ten o'clock in the morning on a Saturday with his client in the back, and we send the two clients out and we start talking to them. We settle the matter and after consulting with our clients, we chatted about local politics for a little while. You know, here I was three feet off the ground, I met the leading light in town, whom I had never met before. We became very good friends and he was very helpful to me.

1-00:49:38

McCreery:

Even though you were different sides of the political spectrum?

1-00:49:40

Knox:

Oh, at the time, it didn't matter. He considered Bert Coffey one of his great friends. I mean this was a fascinating man, interesting guy—very capable guy.

1-00:49:52

McCreery:

Let's take a break here and just change tapes. Okay?

1-00:49:54

Knox:

Okay.

2-00:00:52

McCreery:

Okay, here's our second tape with John T. Knox, still June 24, 2003. We were just talking a bit about Tom Carlson and his prominent role in the city of Richmond at the time you came. Just talk a little bit about how you got to know him after that first interaction over the trial case.

2-00:01:15

Knox:

Well, after that we become good friends. We talked on the phone every now and then or I would see him. I knew Tom. His office of course was the dominant law office in town, and the rest of us were kind of young lawyers and other not-so-young lawyers were getting the crumbs off the table. But Richmond was a vibrant, active town and Tom was always there if you wanted him for something. He was interested in politics, never got openly involved, but was clearly very interested in what went on and who was in charge and all that.

2-00:01:57

McCreery:

While we were changing tapes, you mentioned that he was loved and hated here. What do you mean by that?

2-00:02:01

Knox:

I don't know too many people that absolutely hated him, but he, you know, when someone has that dominance over a community there will be those who are envious, I'm sure. But regardless, he made it his business to have something going with every significant element in the city, no question about it.

2-00:02:28

McCreery:

You mentioned some of the clients he represented, including some of the labor groups, do you know much about that?

2-00:02:34

Knox:

Yes. He represented the labor unions and he represented the banks, the hospitals, and the newspaper, as well as a broad base in the community.

2-00:02:47

McCreery:

Now, can you describe the downtown area a little bit where your offices were at that time?

2-00:02:51

Knox:

It was on Nevin, between 10th and 11th, at the center of activity for Richmond and Western Contra Costa County. Richmond, of course, I'm sure you've heard, was called the city with a purple heart, because before the war, before I was here, it was city of 20,000 people or so. It was fairly conservative middle class, oil worker based primarily, although the Pullman yards were here too and the Santa Fe railroads. So it was not strictly a one company town, but it was a lower middle class city. And then Henry Kaiser came in and started building the ships during the war. Of course he needed people, and this city couldn't provide him with a big work force, so he searched all over the country—all over the United States for people. He brought anybody that could walk or do anything out here with their families, and offered them very good jobs in the shipyards, including training. I met people over the years ranging from white folks from Minnesota to many black folks from all over the South, just anybody. He got a major influx of people of all different kinds into town. And then there was no place for them to live, so they had to put up public housing all over town. It's all torn down now, but you could see these public housing units all over Western Contra Costa where all the shipyard workers lived. So of course, in downtown Richmond post-World War II, immediately after the war, you had all these people, most of whom liked it here, had no desire to move back to Arkansas or Mississippi or Minnesota or any place and wanted to stay here. Well, of course, just putting all these people in this area didn't eliminate racial prejudice, feelings that southerners perhaps and others had toward the black folks. And the black folks had separatist ideas as well. It was a difficult situation.

2-00:05:23

McCreery:

Did the growing the pains of the public housing and so on, did those kind of effects still show quite a lot by the time you got there? How was the housing situation by the 50s?

2-00:05:39

Knox:

Well, the situation was bad because public housing was all right as wartime accommodation, but these families got larger and as the housing got older it became clear that; these were not particularly well built two story units. They were just put up as almost pre-fab in an emergency, so that people would have a place to live. Richmond during World War II, I'm told, was just incredibly crowded. You may have heard stories about a man looking for a job; first he had to find a place to live. Getting a job was easy, finding housing was not. Residents were allowed to, even encouraged to, rent out beds by the hour. You'd have three men in a bed, not at the same time, of course, but separately during the three shift day. Housing was that tight. Movie theaters were mobbed twenty-four hours a day. The intense effort to build all those ships had made Richmond a very crowded place. And of course when the war was over, the shipyards closed, people were out of work and a welfare problem developed, particularly for the black folks who had a tough time finding jobs. That's why they called it the city with a Purple Heart, it was recruited for the war and then the war ended, and it was left in a ruinous state.

2-00:07:15

McCreery:

Now you mentioned some of the racial tensions from immigrants both black and white and then of course those who are already here, what was your experience of that by the time you came?

2-00:07:26

Knox:

We got to know people from all sides. There was some hate, but not the kind of vicious hate that you might have had in other places in the country, which I read about. People got along reasonably well under the circumstances, but it was a difficult situation. I remember, for example, that downtown Richmond was the center when we came in the early 50's and through the middle 60's.. There was a major department store, Albert's, which later became Macy's. They hired some black folks, but none got higher than stock person, no black person was hired as a secretary or salesperson.. The menial jobs were all black folks could get at that time. It was just painfully obvious that that was the situation. There was not much integration. Of course, the Democratic Party, I'm proud to say, was interested in their votes and they were interested in what we could do to help them. We helped agitate to change that situation. The primary organization of the black folks in those days was through the Baptist churches. The ministers were very powerful. Those ministers ran the churches and had some influence over the flocks. Gradually we got to know a number of black leaders and to integrate them into the Democratic Party as activists.

2-00:09:40

McCreery:

How early did that start—that effort to integrate the party a bit more?

2-00:09:44

Knox:

I think it was principally through Bert, George Miller and others, early on. I became active in it, got to know all these people and went out to meetings myself. Later on Sunday morning, we would go from church to church and talk right during the Sunday service, which I was nervous about, because I didn't like the idea of bringing politics into somebody's Sunday worship

session. But it was the only place you could get all those folks together, and we were welcomed and introduced by the preacher, so it was okay.

2-00:10:26

McCreery:

What did you say for example in those situations?

2-00:10:30

Knox:

I talked briefly always, and I always talked about the national and statewide situation and what the issues were in the campaign. I always brought up the establishment of a Fair Employment Practice Commission, how important it was and the advantages it would have. I pitched voter registration and also the importance of getting additional training, which Contra Costa College was offering. The college didn't offer just pre-college courses. It offered stuff like automobile mechanics, electricians training, cook's training etc. The college was committed to "meeting the needs" (that was the mantra) of the people who needed training.

2-00:11:30

McCreery:

Did you have a very good sense of who made up the student body there? Were there a lot of people whose families hadn't been to college before?

2-00:11:37

Knox:

Oh, sure. Yeah. Listen, I talked to preachers who hadn't gone through the third grade. You know, a lot of those black folks came from the South where they didn't get an education. They may have sat through school, but they didn't get any real training. There was a lot of illiteracy, especially in the older group. Of course, to their credit, they were determined their kids were gonna get schooling and that was available here. And many of the elders came to the college too. They were often very influential people in their community who took advantage of the open education the new college offered. One notable early student finished what amounted to his basic high school education at the college and then went on to graduate from the Baptist seminary in Berkeley.

2-00:12:05

McCreery:

And it was free.

2-00:12:06

Knox:

And it was free, including college.

2-00:12:11

McCreery:

Well, it's interesting about going around and talking in the black churches. How well did those efforts succeed at drawing the black community into the party at that time?

2-00:12:24

Knox:

Well, the black folks voted pretty well, and we helped turn them out. We had precinct workers in the black community; some were paid and some weren't, but they would all help get people out.

2-00:12:36

McCreery:

Were there any individuals who really became involved in the Democratic efforts?

2-00:12:39

Knox:

Oh, sure. Mostly preachers, it's been so many years, I don't remember all their names now. But we had a lot of activity. In those days, politics was more participatory. For example if you were needed to send out a mailing, you'd have a bunch of address stickers made out and you actually put stamps on letters. We didn't have machines, so we'd sit around a big table somewhere talking or gossiping about politics and so on while we carefully put on the stickers and the stamps, bundled the letters or brochures for the post office and took them to the post office. Getting a mailing out was a major political activity.

2-00:13:34

McCreery:

Mrs. Knox reminded me to ask you, this goes back a little bit, about the Adlai Stevenson campaign.

2-00:13:41

Knox:

Oh yes. We were living in El Cerrito; it was 1951. Our last election while I was still in school. We were all devoted to Adlai, of course. We listened to all his speeches and admired his erudition and his marvelous phrasing. We were all in love with Adlai. That was a grand campaign. We lost. I remember Jean was so into it that when we were listening to the radio in the middle of the night and it became clear that Adlai had lost, she went out and draped the front of the house with black crepe. [laughs] That was a sad thing. I had just finished law school. I took the bar in October of 1952, of course, in the middle of the election. Through Bert's interference or whatever, I got a job working for the Stevenson campaign and my assignment was to pick up this guy from Chicago who was a professor of English and a poet from University Chicago, named Charles Bell. I drove him all around the state so he could meet people. I thought it was kind of waste of time, but he was an interesting guy. He was a Rhodes Scholar and he wanted to meet other Rhodes Scholars. He thought he could get them into the campaign and I said, "Well, it's probably a good idea but there aren't too many of them." [laughs] But we went down to UCLA. John Espey, one of the professors Jean and I had known at Occidental College had been a Rhodes Scholar. He had moved to UCLA. I managed to call John and ask if he would talk to this Bell. He said, "Yes." So we parked on the campus and met him in his office. These two scholars had their nice talk and I was just sitting there. Finally I suggested that it would be nice if we got involved in the campaign and John agreed that he'd vote for Stevenson. So we left. I said, "Well." Then Bell wanted to see the Redwoods, I remember, and a few places like that. He was making a junket out of it. But finally we went up to Chico State, where I was referred to a political science teacher. There was still some fear, you know, some McCarthyist type fear around and he agreed to meet us out in the campus, behind a tree, not in his office or his classroom. He was that concerned.

2-00:16:38

McCreery:

So the people you were involved with politically, hadn't they had some personal experience with the Un-American activities? Tell me something about that.

2-00:16:45

Knox:

Well, Bert did. Bert was called. He had joined the Communist Party as a young man in Brooklyn. There's some question whether he actually became a member and paid any dues, but he was a tough guy and ultimately was called by one of those committees back in Washington. Joe Genser went to represent him. He asked Tom Carlson to represent him, but Tom said he just couldn't do it, but he did help finance the trip for Bert, on the QT in cash. Bert was subpoenaed for a HUAC (House Un-American Activities Committee) hearing in San Diego, and Joe went along as his counsel. Bert took what was called in those days the diminished fifth, saying that he had not been a member of the Communist Party since 1945 or some such date. He then took the fifth for any questions before that time. That was the lowest point in Bert's life. For a living, he had been running a railroad trainmen's newspaper and as a result of being called, he got fired from that and it was a tough, tough time.

2-00:18:04

McCreery:

Did he have trouble making a living after that?

2-00:18:08

Knox:

Yeah, he had trouble. He was married and had two little kids. I started to get together a fund for him. I got various people around town to contribute every month to it, which enabled him to get going again. Ultimately he got a job running the advertising for BBB (Better Business Buying) in Berkeley at Gilman and San Pablo. Discount stores were just coming in at that time, and this was one of the first. He went from there. He was a vigorous talented guy; he managed to figure out a way.

2-00:18:43

McCreery:

Sounds as if his political skills were considerable.

2-00:18:46

Knox:

Oh, brilliant. I mean just a really able guy, really able guy.

2-00:18:53

McCreery:

Now what was the political scene here in Western Contra Costa versus the rest of the county? How did the county central committee handle all that?

2-00:19:04

Knox:

Democratic Central Committee? Well, the Democratic Central Committee wasn't really in charge of all the politics; it was more of a debating society. The real organization in the western part of county was handled by Bert and to some extent by Senator George Miller. George got

himself elected to the Senate. I told you about you the Zowalich campaign for the assembly of '46. In 1948, the Senate seat opened. The Republican state senator, whose name I can't recall now, had been there for a long, long time and it became quite obvious George would beat him. And did, I think in the primary that year, and was elected to the California Senate. Of course at that time before one-man-one-vote prevailed, the Senate district was the entire county, and of course based on George's incumbency, Bert's operation just kind of took over the county, developing primarily in the Democratic areas like Pittsburg and Antioch as well as Richmond.

2-00:20:18

McCreery:

Tell me a little bit more about Senator Miller at the time you met him.

2-00:20:22

Knox:

He was an incredible guy, just a fabulous guy. He'd been raised in Richmond. He was an Irishman, he just had that knack. He was a born politician, much as his son is today. Everybody loved him, just a great guy, really good speaker and he worked hard. As legislator he became probably as good a legislator as Sacramento has ever seen.

2-00:20:53

McCreery:

Who did he use to set up his operations in this county? I mean, who were operators?

2-00:21:00

Knox:

Bert did all work. Bert put all the operation together.

2-00:21:03

McCreery:

What was your role?

2-00:21:05

Knox:

Well, I was kind of an assistant, I was around, you know, I was practicing law and was extremely active in the party.

2-00:21:13

McCreery:

Now we were talking a few minutes ago about the local political involvement and trying to get more Democrats signed up and active. What were some of the campaigns that were of local interest here?

2-00:21:26

Knox:

We had city council campaigns, and we had some good friends on the city council. I remember, James Kenny (I think Jim may still be alive, I haven't seen for him for a long time, old time Richmond family) and Gay Vargas (his first name was Gay) who ran Gay's Tavern., a bar and restaurant at the corner of 12th and Macdonald, The rest of the city council was pretty much the Republicans or Republican sympathizers, but we got the Democrats organized—we knew who they were. A great part was keeping black folks who were virtually unanimously Democratic. I

remember, years later, I carried a precinct in the southside two hundred and two, and Willie Brown said to me, “We found those two guys, they are all right now.” [laughs]

2-00:22:35

McCreery:

I understand you joined the NAACP, what was the local organization like?

2-00:22:43

Knox:

Well, it was fairly active. I didn't go to a lot of the meetings, I felt that was none of my business even though I was a member. Membership was kind of a donation to the cause, but those folks talked about all kinds things, employment possibilities, I'm sure, and black issues, also certain things they wanted to see happen. It took a long time to get a black person on the city council. We were finally successful with two candidates: first, local attorney George Carroll, a very distinguished guy who served as mayor, perhaps the first Black mayor of a major American city, and then Reverend Booker T. Anerson, who's dead now, but his wife, Irma Anderson, is now our mayor. Reverend Anderson had the Easter Hill Methodist Church, which is a still prominent Methodist Church in town. Reverend Anderson also served as mayor before he was transferred to a San Francisco church.

2-00:24:07

McCreery:

What were the employment issues for the black community? What was the situation by the mid 50s, the late 50s.

2-00:24:20

Knox:

The mid 50s had improved a little bit, I think there were more jobs open and city employment was starting to integrate. I think Standard Oil finally agreed to take some black folks in and the situation seemed opened up a little bit.

2-00:24:53

McCreery:

Was it different here than in other nearby cities? Do you know?

2-00:24:57

Knox:

I don't know, but I suspect it was about the same.

2-00:25:01

McCreery:

What kind of neighbor was Standard Oil in those days?

2-00:25:04

Knox:

Standard Oil has always been a good neighbor. I always felt they were responsive to public needs and of course the city was always somewhat solicitous to Standard Oil, which is understandable—they were paying about a third of the property taxes. And most of the Standard Oil leadership in the time I've been here has been fairly enlightened. I mean, it wasn't burdensome to the citizens. Of course, here at the Point, in the early days that we lived here,

about every summer we'd get one or two days when a horrible smell would slip over the area. We haven't had that for years; it's been cleaned up. One year out here standing on this deck, I watched an oil spill which was inexorably headed right for shore and landed at Point Richmond on Labor Day. It was a mess, but Standard Oil turned out just about everybody they had; they were washing boats by hand and cleaning the sand. The oil all disappeared within a day or two. So you had to admire the clean up; it was an accident, just one those things, but at least they responded.

2-00:26:18

McCreery:

You mentioned Mr. Coffey was trying to organize the workers there.

2-00:26:22

Knox:

He was active as well. That was a bitter strike in the late forties and of course the company hated Bert for a long time, doubtless because he had been very effective in organizing that strike.

2-00:26:36

McCreery:

Did it ultimately succeed?

2-00:26:38

Knox:

Yes. Well, there's argument as to who won or lost, which often happens after big strikes, but there was a lot of bitterness, there were some attempts to prosecute some of the participants. It was a bitter strike. Although I did not live here at that time, I heard about it later and realized how significant it had been to local politics.

2-00:26:57

McCreery:

You mentioned the Kaiser Hospital. Talk a little bit about that and where it was.

2-00:27:04

Knox:

Well, of course, when Henry Kaiser came in, he had the same problem he had when he was building Boulder Dam. He had all these thousands of people and no health care. He employed a few doctors and started what became the Kaiser Foundation Health Plan. It was a great concept, then fairly new in health planning. When he came to Richmond, he set up the Kaiser Plan here too, which was a good thing, because, there was no way the local doctors in separate practices and the local hospitals could handle the health needs of the huge population which flooded into Richmond. So he replicated here the plan which had been established for the Boulder project. They opened what was known as the field hospital at 14th and Cutting—the building's still there – and set up a large hospital in Oakland at Broadway and Macarthur. Kaiser has since developed in my opinion, as, the best health care that's available in the United States

2-00:28:29

McCreery:

So you were members going way back as well?

2-00:28:31

Knox:

We became members through Jean's employment at Contra Costa College as soon as we could; we've been members ever since.

2-00:28:35

McCreery:

I know you eventually raised three kids here at Richmond.

2-00:28:39

Knox:

That's right and I'll tell you, at 14th and Cutting they had a pediatric clinic that was open seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. There aren't many people that have health care like that just about a mile from home. We were just very enthusiastic about Kaiser.

2-00:29:01

McCreery:

What kind of a presence was Kaiser in the community? I'm sure they had huge membership.

2-00:29:06

Knox:

Well, not everybody in town, but the majority of people in town used Kaiser. The local physicians were very bitter about it; they were upset because it cut into their practices very severely. Of course, for every social gathering, they'd have horror stories about Kaiser. Those things tend to be magnified, I think. No doubt, Kaiser made mistakes from time to time as any provider would. But gradually their quality was recognized. There are still independent practicing physicians in town, but it's a pretty tough situation for them, I believe.

2-00:29:53

McCreery:

As you're saying this post-war era when the population was so huge—

2-00:29:57

Knox:

Well, when Kaiser came in, the local medical establishment couldn't possibly handle the needs of all those folks.

2-00:30:07

McCreery:

What about the schools here in Richmond, did you send your kids to public school?

2-00:30:12

Knox:

Well, we did starting out, but public schools weren't very good.

2-00:30:20

McCreery:

Had that been true all along, or do you know much of the —?

2-00:30:26

Knox:

I don't really know about Richmond's reputation in the 30's and 40's. I don't think Richmond was ever known for having a particularly good public school system. I heard stories from the early days of teachers getting hired because of family connections, which happened all over the country during the Depression. Teaching jobs were good jobs. Young women talked about sexual harassment. I understand it was pretty bad in those days when women didn't have access to a lot of jobs. I believe the local school administration had always been somewhat autocratic. I do know that when we came in the early 50's there was really intense disagreements between management and the teachers' union, the AFof T, which had a very active chapter here.

2-00:31:20

McCreery:

You said your own kids started in public schools?

2-00:31:23

Knox:

Well, we started my son in public school and he continued through the second grade. I visited his class one day, it was just uncommonly dull. No real teaching, it was pretty bad, and we were concerned that he would get turned off on learning. We had heard of a marvelous school in Berkeley, Walden School, which was run by a bunch pacifists, which I thought was fine. We visited and became convinced that was the place. We sent our son over there, which involved Jean driving him everyday. I was in the legislature by that time. As our two daughters came along, they went to Walden too. We've never regretted sending them there. They learned a lot and, what's most important, they loved school. It was a very good launch for each of them. Walden went just through the sixth grade. All three children went to public junior high schools in Richmond and for most of the time to public high schools, though our daughters each finished in private high schools. Mary lived with me in Sacramento for her senior year and attended the Waldorf School there. Charlotte did her senior year at the Urban School in San Francisco.

2-00:33:20

McCreery:

So it was mixed public school and some other. What about politically, was the school board, much of a force here in Richmond?

2-00:33:29

Knox:

Well, it was a powerful board, not a very good board. When we first came they had an elementary school board and high school board, but later became a unified district. Jean ran for the elementary board in 1956, and gave the establishment a bit of a scare. The principal issue was that the board wanted to close the child care centers which had been set up during the war so that women could go to work in the shipyards. They were still needed by working mothers, of which there were many, but the board wanted to get rid of the centers.

2-00:33:55

McCreery:

They took pain to oppose her?

2-00:33:57

Knox:

Oh boy, they did! But she damned near beat them.

2-00:34:00

McCreery:

What form did that take? What did they do to stop her?

2-00:34:05

Knox:

Well, they spent money on newspaper ads and mailings , and the election system (or lack thereof) was very much on their side. No announcements of polling places were sent to voters, no sample ballots, and elections for school board were not coupled with other elections. Jean was supported by the Democratic Clubs, particularly the Kensington club, and they launched a serious information campaign by way of coffee klatches coupled with a get out the vote drive. Although they narrowly lost, the election was close and the issue was won, for the time. The Elementary Board kept the child care centers open..

2-00:34:52

McCreery:

What was it like to be a Democrat in this town?

2-00:34:56

Knox:

Well, it didn't bother me because I was a Democrat, we kid'd about it and so on, but I think it was threatening to a lot of people. We were seen as the outsiders, we weren't part of the establishment of town. I was the young whippersnapper that had come in and was moving into town with a good deal of vigor, and I had a lot of friends in town among the established people. But you know, they kind of —powers that be, not Carlson, but the kind of Republican establishment which could see the handwriting on the wall and we were the handwriting

2-00:35:04

McCreery:

When you the say the powers that be, besides Mr. Carlson, who were you thinking of?

2-00:35:09

Knox:

There were prominent merchants in town, the newspaper editor, a fellow named Warren Brown, the newspaper publisher who was very conservative and really frankly didn't agree with our political philosophy at all. One of the more powerful people in town was a fellow named Chick Richards, who was the editor of the paper. I used to call him all the time. We had a good personal relationship, but to say the newspaper was friendly to me was not the case. When I first ran for the assembly in the Democratic primary, I was opposed by a fellow named John Sheridan, who'd been mayor of the town twice, was a teamster union official, and very popular.

2-00:36:00

McCreery:

City Council too, right?

2-00:36:01

Knox:

And he'd been on the council for twenty years, mayor twice. But we just out campaigned them. Bert ran a brilliant campaign and I worked like hell, ringing doorbells and everything. In the end, we beat him rather handily in the primary. It was pretty much a case of old Democrats vs. new Democrats, new being those who had been activated by the Stevenson campaign of '52 and the subsequent CDC movement.

2-00:36:18

McCreery:

So this was the summer of 1960?

2-00:36:20

Knox:

Yeah.

2-00:36:22

McCreery:

How did you decide to run for that?

2-00:36:24

Knox:

Well, I always wanted to run for something, it was in my blood. It was something that I was gonna do.

2-00:36:29

McCreery:

But not local office?

2-00:36:31

Knox:

Not for the city council. I was interested in the Congress or the Legislature. I wanted run for Congress in the late 50s when Bob Condon had trouble and the seat was open, but there was a guy in Vallejo, /dic Quinney, a dentist up there who'd been active in the Democratic Party in the district for a long time and it was his turn. Paul Ward, another important guy in town just said, "Jack's it's Doc's turn; we had to support him."

2-00:37:12

McCreery:

For the congressional seat?

2-00:37:13

Knox:

For the congressional seat. It's probably the luckiest thing that ever happened, because I think I would have lost. I think John Baldwin that was in was too powerful in the countywide situation; I couldn't have raised enough money. So—

2-00:37:29

McCreery:

But you set your sights on a higher office and never took interest in running for anything local?

2-00:37:35

Knox:

No. I wasn't interested in being on the city council; I wanted to get into it.

2-00:37:40

McCreery:

Why was that?

2-00:37:43

Knox:

Well, I'm not sure. I was not that interested in those issues; I really I wanted to get into a law making situation. You know, just kind of developed the way it did.

2-00:38:07

McCreery:

Let me ask you a little more about your law practice here in town and how you developed that and got it going.

2-00:38:13

Knox:

Well, typical of a young man in a small town, I joined everything in sight. I always said I was a Lion, a Moose, an Elk, and an Eagle. I went to meetings. I was prominent in the Junior Chamber of Commerce. I was out virtually every night going to some meeting or other. I just was extremely active in town; I just ran around meeting people. I was an enterprising young lawyer.

2-00:38:45

McCreery:

What kind of client did you attract in those early years?

2-00:38:48

Knox:

People of modest means. I didn't represent any big companies. People came in off the street, a lot of black folks, a lot of divorces, some criminal work, adoptions. Once in a while I got one kind of business agreement. Finally I was representing some small contractors. But I worked very hard and scratched out a living and built a fairly prominent practice.

2-00:39:23

McCreery:

By the time you rented from Senator Miller, did you stay in that downtown area then all through your time in the assembly?

2-00:39:33

Knox:

No, we were in that office which George owned, but gradually I got other lawyers, a fellow named Hawkins—he's now over in Marin -- and David.

2-00:39:47

McCreery:

That's Mr. Pierce?

2-00:39:49

Knox:

Yeah. Then a fellow named Kretzmer implored me to join him, and the two of us got together and built a rather elaborate building up on 37th Street. It's still there right across from the court house. By that time, we were pretty well established. He had a practice and I was in the legislature, and the office was doing pretty well

2-00:40:25

McCreery:

What kinds of clients did you try to build up as time went on? What were you trying to emphasize?

2-00:40:33

Knox:

Making money. I mean we were trying get some clients that we could make a comfortable living with. We had an interesting practice. Patricia Herron who later became judge was a former colleague of my wife at Contra Costa who had decided to go to law school at Boalt Hall. She worked for us while she was at Boalt, before she was a member of the bar. She had been a counselor at Contra Costa and assistant dean of women at Stanford before going to Boalt. So she started taking over counseling the divorce clients. While she was in law school, she didn't practice law, of course, but she helped keep the office going. After she finished law school and became a member of the bar she was a major force in the law practice. She was a very skilled attorney and stayed with me until she was appointed to the Superior Court in 1977.

2-00:41:13

McCreery:

How did the downtown area change over the years that you were there?

2-00:41:19

Knox:

The downtown area of course was doomed. The better part of town was what old Judge Leo Marcollo used to call Mortgage Hill , Mira Vista. When we first moved here the Point was regarded as a kind of hippie colony. That wasn't the case, but that was its reputation. I remember as a young lawyer going to parties when we first moved out here—our first house was an old house that's abandoned now at the top of the hill, that we paid eight thousand dollars for. And they said, "Well, a young man like you really ought to move to Mira Vista" The implication was clear that it was bad for my reputation to be coming from the Point.. It was ridiculous, there were middle class people out here just like any place else, but a somewhat more imaginative crowd I would say. And of course, now the Point is a much preferred higher priced area, more valuable than Mortgage Hill, but it was not the situation then.

2-00:42:40

McCreery:

We were talking about the downtown area.

2-00:42:42

Knox:

Oh, the downtown. Well, the downtown was fairly vigorous through most of the 50's, but then the new El Cerrito Plaza began to attract shoppers. Ironically, the developers of that center first wanted to locate in Richmond, on the edge, I believe, of the Richmond Annex at the El Cerrito

border, but the downtown merchants fought against that plan, fearing – rightly, I suppose – that a new big center that close would take business away from them. As I understand it, Richmond refused permits or maybe stalled long enough for the developers to settle on the El Cerrito location. Had the center come to Richmond, of course, the city would have benefited from the sales taxes. Instead, both the business and the taxes were lost to El Cerrito. I remember going to a meeting, probably about 1956, about reviving or preserving the Macdonald Avenue shopping area. Nothing much came of it and the downtown declined over the next decade. And then another competing shopping center opened.

2-00:42:54

McCreery:

You are talking about the Hill Top Mall, 1976 or so it opened?

2-00:43:00

Knox:

Yes. I guess that was inevitable. What happened here happened to downtowns all over the country as I understand it. It just became passé. It's too bad because it was a center of town—it was where people went. We had a department store. We had men's stores, pretty nice stores, women's stores. The malls never became town centers in any way.

2-00:43:19

McCreery:

Yeah, the old Macdonald Avenue was—

2-00:43:21

Knox:

It was a vigorous place. You could go for a walk, say hello to people. It was nice to have a downtown. Walter Wolf, owner of a jewelry store was prominent. So was men's clothier Jerry Blumenfeld, The Hotel Don on Nevin and 10th was running and had a popular bar called the Pinto Room. We logged a lot of time in there. Downtown was the center of things pretty much through the 60's, though, as I said, signs of decline became apparent when El Cerrito Plaza was completed.

2-00:44:05

McCreery:

You mentioned all these service clubs that you belonged to. What kind of organizations were those at that time?

2-00:44:14

Knox:

They were nationwide organizations in most cases. The Junior Chamber of Commerce for example, was all over the country. It was a vigorous group of young men from corporations around here, young lawyers, independent business men, dentists, doctors. We had a very active operation. We were all self-promoting, of course. We would have a "Man of the Year" dinner and appoint some prominent citizen "Man of the Year." We would all get our pictures in the newspaper taken with the honoree. It's the way you became well known as someone who was active in local affairs, "a promising young attorney" as the introductions went.

2-00:44:51

McCreery:

The newspaper you said took a conservative view of most things political?

2-00:44:55

Knox:

Yes. The people they supported were Republicans and conservative people.

2-00:45:06

McCreery:

What about the ownership at that time?

2-00:45:09

Knox:

Well, the publisher was Warren Brown. The owner was Owen's Publications, but they were pretty much absentee owners. Warren Brown ran the paper. Chick Richards was the editor.

2-00:45:23

McCreery:

Talk about him just a little bit.

2-00:45:25

Knox:

Interesting guy, could be a tough guy. He had a column called the "Question Mark Column", which had a big question mark header. He ran bits of gossip which was clever enough so that he was the first thing that people read, sort of like Herb Caen used to be in the Chronicle. He didn't have the talent of a Herb Caen, but he wrote interesting things about the community. I used to see him in his office from time to time. I'd just walk up early in the morning on my way to work and we'd chat. I never hustled him to print anything, except one time, I couldn't resist. We had a little dog called Carlos. Our kids were devoted to him, and Carlos got busted when and he got out the gate one day and was picked up by the pound. I came home to find my little daughter Mary was just bereft—"Daddy, Carlos is gone." I figured he might well be in the pound, so the next morning I called up and sure enough it turned out he'd been picked up. I didn't say anything. I just said I'd go look for him. I drove out to the pound in Pinole and there he was. I borrowed their phone, called home, got Mary on the phone and said, "Mary, I found Carlos. He's here at the pound." And she said, "Put him on the phone." So I told Chick that story, and I told him he couldn't use my name. He liked the story. It was typical of the sort of thing, he would pick up. He was a terrific guy in many ways.

2-00:47:26

McCreery:

When it came to political campaigns, did you attempt to get the newspaper to—?

2-00:47:32

Knox:

Well, at least they started endorsing me after I got in. Even the first time when I ran against Sheridan the editorial was really not bad. They endorsed Sheridan, but they said, "Although Knox is an intelligent, vigorous, able young man, we feel that..." I thought the editorial wasn't injurious to me at all. Of course, we had trouble getting coverage on the news pages, but Bert developed something you can't do now: he would buy space in the paper and use it for a news

story. There was no requirement that such material be labeled “political advertisement.” Sheridan had the endorsements from all the old AFofL building trades unions because he was a Teamster official, but Bert arranged that I got all the old CIO unions and the railroad brotherhoods. He would write a story announcing an endorsement, and run it in the space together with a picture of me and the officers of the union, for example the Brotherhood of Railroad Trainmen. I remember talking to Bert at the time I decided to run. He looked out the window of his office at 11th and Nevin, and he said dryly, “Jack, since you’ve decided you want to run for the assembly, I don’t notice anyone dancing in the streets.” So I went down to bank and borrowed five thousand bucks, which was a fortune in those days, and gave it to Bert so he could get campaign started. As I recall, he spent most of it on one major ad, a quarter page in the newspaper.

2-00:49:28

McCreery:

In the Richmond Independent?

2-00:49:29

Knox:

Yes, in the Richmond Independent, which kind of established us as a major campaign. Right away, I began ringing doorbells. I carried a pedometer and each day when I came in, I’d say “Okay, Bert, what’s happening?” and he’d say, “Before you sit down, I want to see the pedometer.” [laughs] I was ringing doorbells and going to see merchants, just going door from door. I worked like hell in that campaign.

2-00:49:57

McCreery:

Most of your opposition was in the primaries, is that right?

2-00:50:00

Knox:

Yes, that was the opposition. The primary was the election because the district was overwhelmingly Democratic. I think it was seventy-eight percent Democratic. I remember the final vote was something like fourteen thousand to eleven thousand. We raised and spent fourteen thousand dollars and got fourteen thousand votes.

2-00:50:30

McCreery:

So, you borrowed five thousand, where did you get the rest of your money?

2-00:50:33

Knox:

Well, we had some fundraisers. George Miller gave me some money. Jessie Unruh, a prominent Democratic assemblyman who later became a long term and very well known Speaker of the Assembly put a little money in the campaign. We actually raised more money than Sheridan did, but it wasn’t a massive overspending. Bert and I out campaigned him; we just had a better campaign.

2-00:51:04

McCreery:

And that was a lot of door to door work?

2-00:51:05

Knox:

A lot of door to door work, clever advertising, some mailings.

2-00:51:11

McCreery:

Were the political techniques for campaigning starting to change by that time?

2-00:51:17

Knox:

Not really, although I suppose there was more mail than in the 40's and early 50's. I don't think it has changed that much as of today.

2-00:51:27

McCreery:

Really?

2-00:51:28

Knox:

It's basically the problem in a district like this that you can't afford to do the newspaper advertising, because there are bigger newspapers now, and you can't advertise in the Chronicle or similar papers because their circulation is so much broader than the district. But mailings remain the principal medium. I'm talking about for the state legislative offices, not campaigns for Congress or the United States Senate. For the legislative offices, you still have to depend on mailings, door to door calls, phoning and all that sort of thing because even if you could get some mention in the newspapers, people wouldn't see it.

2-00:52:14

McCreery:

Now you had your base here in Richmond, what did you do about the rest of the district in that campaign?

2-00:52:20

Knox:

Well, the district was fairly small. We had Rodeo, not Crockett, and Pinole, El Sobrante, which was not as big as it is now, San Pablo, Richmond,,El Cerrito, and Kensington. That was it.

2-00:52:41

McCreery:

I know it's a working class area. How did you characterize your constituents as you first went in?

2-00:52:48

Knox:

Well, yes, it was primarily working class.

2-00:53:10

McCreery:

Once you got elected, you didn't have too much trouble being re-elected?

2-00:53:14

Knox:

No. We didn't have to spend a lot of money after that. Of the ten elections I engaged in, I twice got both the Republican and Democratic nominations. Bert sent out a mailing to the Republicans asking them to sign up as the Republicans for Knox. He always included a little pencil in the mailing and instructions on how to write me in. As a result, twice I had more votes on the Republican primary ballot than the Republican candidate had..

2-00:53:48

McCreery:

That reminds me to ask you about the abolishment of cross filing, you know officially representing both parties that way. Now I take it the state party, excuse me, the County Central Committee had some role in that, is that right? I'm sorry, I'm saying the wrong thing here. When you were active in the CDC with Senator Miller and so on, was that a major push of that organization?

2-00:54:17

Knox:

Well, we always wanted to abolish cross filing in the Democratic Party because we didn't have the newspapers and the Republicans were beating us around the head because they had more money and we couldn't in most cases get both nominations.

2-00:54:33

McCreery:

So how did you succeed at making that change?

2-00:54:38

Knox:

We ran an initiative campaign and the Democrats campaigned heavily for abolishing cross filing. I believe the year was 1948, was it?

2-00:54:49

McCreery:

'59.

2-00:54:49

Knox:

Yes, '59? I'm sorry. But it was just hard political work, a campaign that we had been trying to work on for a long time. Cross filing was outrageous. You shouldn't been able to cross file in another party's primary.

2-00:55:09

McCreery:

But that's a good reminder that even later when you were in the assembly that you could convince Republicans to support you.

2-00:55:19

Knox:

Yes, but I couldn't get on the ballot, I had to win as a write-in. I don't think that's such a terrible thing.

2-00:55:26

McCreery:

No, not at all. That's quite a different thing. Well, we might be getting kind of near the end of what we want to talk about today actually.

3-00:00:10

Before we start, this is our third tape with John T. Knox, still June 24, 2003. Before we leave our discussion of the California Democratic Council, I wanted to ask you talk a little about Alan Cranston and his leadership role there and how you got to know him?

3-00:00:29

Knox:

Primarily, it was through the CDC, in which Alan was extremely active. The California Democratic Council had followed on from all the Stevenson Clubs that developed around the '52 and '56 presidential campaigns. Alan was always prominent at the annual CDC statewide conventions in Fresno. He was active in shaping policy and raising money. We all knew him very well.

3-00:01:05

McCreery:

How did he operate in these meetings? What kind of a presence was he?

3-00:01:11

Knox:

Well, he was a leader, a very knowledgeable guy; obviously a very fervent Democrat and good spokesman. He was just kind of admired.

3-00:01:28

McCreery:

Was there any infighting within CDC?

3-00:01:32

Knox:

Oh, lots. At any Democratic gathering, there's a lot of infighting. I would say about the Democratic Party, it's like cats screaming each other on the back fence. The end result is more cats. [laughs] When Alan decided to run for the United States Senate, his primary opponent was a guy named Sam Yorty, ex-mayor of Los Angeles, a frightfully evil man, really. He was a member of the House of Representatives, one of the original red baiters. He ran a committee that summoned people, a McCarthy type of guy. And we were absolutely opposed to Yorty and for Alan, so that campaign was a bitter campaign.

3-00:02:35

McCreery:

Did he have a pretty good organization in the state by that time?

3-00:02:40

Knox:

Alan? Sure, he'd been active in the Democratic Council, which was all over the state. So he had a base in virtually every community in the state.

3-00:02:50

McCreery:

Did you have an occasion to work with him at all after that?

3-00:02:53

Knox:

Oh sure. We were always very close to Alan, he was a very good friend. When I ran in the 1960 primary, he was the State Controller. On the day of that election, Alan, his administrative assistant, his wife and his kids all came down here to help get out the vote.

3-00:03:23

McCreery:

That's impressive.

3-00:03:26

Knox:

Yes, you don't forget help like that. And I called on him in Washington a number of times. He was a very, very good and close friend.

3-00:03:35

McCreery:

How close was the Bay Area delegation at that time? Both the state legislators and the national.

3-00:03:43

Knox:

The state legislators didn't have much to do with the congressional delegation. The congressional delegation, I'd say, was not very unified in those days, not as it is now. I think the delegation is pretty effective right now. But then it was not, it was just all over the lot. In both parties there were some legislators who had their own fiefdoms and weren't particularly involved even within their own party. That's the way it operated in those days. It's improved a great deal since then.

3-00:04:16

McCreery:

Now, after your early thought of running for Congress in the late 50s, did you consider another office ever after that time?

3-00:04:24

Knox:

Only when Brick Masterson, who was the assemblyman, got a divorce which cost him a great deal of money, and decided he really could no longer afford to be an assemblyman. The salary was five hundred dollars a month and he couldn't pay his alimony on that. He had to become a judge, or go back to practicing law. His name was Salathiel C. Masterson, but he was always called Brick. He was a very able lawyer, a dead smart operator. He had been a municipal judge before going to the Assembly. He liked being a judge and going to the Superior Court solved his financial problems and opened up the seat I decided to run for.

3-00:05:25

McCreery:

I want to ask you too about some of the other changes here in the Richmond area. Now I know in the mid 50s, not long after you came, they opened the Richmond/San Rafael Bridge, what effect did that have on the community.

3-00:05:41

Knox:

I'm not aware of any major effects in Richmond. It probably didn't cause a lot of our people to move to Marin because our people couldn't afford to live over there anyway. I don't think it had a major effect on Richmond per se, but it did mean more traffic through town. Unfortunately, going through Richmond was a problem. People got off the bridge and went into our city streets system because we didn't have the freeway connections to Interstate 80. Traffic between Cutting Boulevard and San Pablo Ave and particularly on Hoffman Boulevard connecting to Interstate 80 at Golden Gate Fields was very dangerous. Hoffman became known as blood alley. Practically everybody in town knew somebody who had been hurt or killed on that stretch. The accident rate was fierce.

3-00:06:31

McCreery:

Why did it take so long to put the freeway through?

3-00:06:36

Knox:

Well, I can modestly say it's because they were waiting for the proper leadership, but you know, getting a highway built is a very competitive thing. There are a lot of communities all over the state which need highways; they all have a good story to tell. We had pretty good story to tell too, but it was a problem of finding the money. I made that my major effort in the legislature starting right at the beginning. I agitated for it constantly. , John Foran, will remember the effort. He moved from the Assembly to the Senate where he was active in the Transportation Committee. I tried every way on earth to raise that money. At one point, I got a bill through the Assembly increasing the bridge tolls all over the Bay Area, which would go in part to pay for this freeway. But I couldn't get it through the Senate, I just couldn't make it. Finally through Congressman George Miller we got a strong connection to Harold T. "Biz" Johnson of Northern California, a great guy who was on the the Public Works Committee. He was key to securing the federal funding we had to have to launch the project. He put the link between the San Rafael Brindge and Interstate 80 on the federal list of highways, and that triggered the sizeable federal contribution we had to have .

3-00:08:16

McCreery:

And this new section of Highway 580 is now the John T. Knox Freeway, how did that come about?

3-00:08:22

Knox:

That's right. Well, I raised all the money for that road through, you know, all this agitation. It took me almost twenty years to build it, rather to make sure it would be built. It was decided that was what it would be called and I modestly acceded to that. [laughs] I'm very proud of that road; I sure put in a lot of time on that, worked very hard. Now I still have to work on it, because it needs to be protected from the billboard lobby. We have a hard time keeping the billboards off. We haven't had any flare ups lately, but several years ago we had a really tough time fending off the billboard companies who were putting a lot of money into Richmond City Council races and trying to persuade them that for just two (huge) signs on 580 they would take down 25 signs in Richmond (I may not be remembering the number right) Of course a sign looming over the

freeway, gateway to Marin where freeway signs are banned, would be worth many times more than the scattered billboards in Richmond. We took pictures of all those little signs and presented them as part of our argument that the deal was a fraud

3-00:09:01

McCreery:

How does it stand right now? They can't use it at all?

3-00:09:04

Knox:

Well, there are places they could spot in a big billboard where there are breaks in the landscaped areas. if they had the votes. However, we still have a freeway agreement. I think we are fairly well protected now, but we have to be vigilant all the time. There's so much money involved because it's a well-traveled route, and those billboards are very valuable.

3-00:09:23

McCreery:

There's also of course the Miller Knox Regional Shoreline right out the window here named after you and Senator Miller. Tell just briefly how that park was established and named after you?

3-00:09:37

Knox:

The Regional Park District is a very good district. They started with Tilden Park up in Berkeley, very foresighted back in those Depression days when people went in hock by taxing themselves to build that incredible park. We wanted a park out here and had wanted it for a long time. A group of women calling themselves The Little Old Ladies in Tennis Shoes put on events informing people about the potential for a park here and urging people to get politicians interested. I carried some legislation for the park district and loaded it up with the price that they establish the Point Richmond Park. And they did, and they named it after Senator George Miller, which was fine with me. He had recently died, and this was certainly an appropriate way to celebrate his name. George was my dear friend, and I was delighted to have it named after him. They started building the park, but they wanted to expand up on the hills opposite. For that, they needed another four million dollars. Jerry Brown was the governor, and it was a terrible year financially, I mean they were not passing anything out of committee. There were just no money; not as bad as this year, but it was a terrible year. I had befriended a guy named Charles Imbrecht, a Republican from Ventura, who had gone to Occidental College. He was the chairman of the Ways and Means Subcommittee on Recreation and Parks. . They were hearing appropriations that people wanted for various projects all over the state. Everybody has a little piece of pork that you try to get to build a bird refuge or a park or road or something. I had mine in for this park, four million dollars, and the park district people were there to testify. We had the hearing all scheduled. It was my last year in the legislature and I had announced my retirement. I said to the people from the park district, "God, they are turning everything down, and the stuff they approve, the governor vetoes." But I said, "Let's give it our best shot." When we went into the committee and I started making my pitch, Chuck interrupted me. He said, "Mr. Knox, let me tell you something The committee discussed this last night in a briefing meeting we had about various appropriations, and the members decided that as a parting gift for your long service in the legislature they would pass the bill. The Senate did the same thing. And Governor Jerry

Brown signed it. It was just about the only appropriation he signed that year. [laughs] And Chuck had put in the bill an amendment ,not at my request I hasten to add, that the only way, they can get the money is to name the park after me.

3-00:13:12

McCreery:

That's quite a story putting that through in such a tight budget situation.

3-00:13:18

Knox:

Well, I got something for retiring besides the pension.

3-00:13:23

McCreery:

Well, you've been in this community now fifty years or so, how do you evaluate all the changes here?

3-00:13:34

Knox:

I think the town's improved quite a bit. I think people are better off. There are things that I have liked about it and some that I'm not very happy about. But of course, I have lived in one of greatest places in the world (Point Richmond) , I'm just very lucky to have landed here. I mean you can see that it's very pleasant living here. This has been a grand home for us. The only reason we got this house is that our neighbor Lucretia Edwards wanted us to be the lucky ones. She has lived here longer than we have. In 1956, the year we bought the house, and she knew everybody, including the owners of the house., Betsy and Jesse Boyce. He had been transferred from Standard Oil to to Grand Junction, Colorado, to work on the shale program there. Lucretia knew they were going to have to sell this house and told nobody but us. I came down and said to Jesse, "How much do you want for it?" He said, "Twenty-five thousand dollars." I said, "Okay, we'll take it," not knowing where we get the twenty-five thousand. We lived at the time in a little house up here on top the hill, but we said we'd take it. And then I had to start raising the money. We got about twelve thousand dollars for our house up there, owed a little bit of money on it, and we had a few thousand left here and there from various funds and savings. But I needed a GI loan to make the purchase. I had I never used my GI loan, but I had to close the deal right away. So I talked to Bert, and I said, "Geez, Bert, I gotta get a GI loan." He knew a federal attorney in San Francisco. So I walked into the Veteran's Administration on the arms of a federal attorneys and we had the loan approved within twenty-four hours when normally they were taking three weeks.

3-00:16:09

McCreery:

But that was a stretch at the time?

3-00:16:11

Knox:

Well, I wasn't getting anything I wasn't entitled to or wasn't going to get eventually. It was a matter of expediting it. I had to have the money, and that's the way we got it in time.

3-00:16:26

McCreery:

That is a fortunate way to get in. Was there anything else that I should have asked you about the city of Richmond in the post-war years? A lot of changes at that time.

3-00:16:50

Knox:

A lot of changes. Point Richmond was changing all the time and it was an exciting place to live. I really have thoroughly enjoyed living here. It's like living in a small town, but it has all the facilities of a big town as part of the greater Bay Area.. We have had a lot of great adventures here. As a lawyer, I drew the first lease, I was recalling the other night, on the little theater, the Masquers, down here in the village. It's been a great life.,a very lucky situation.

3-00:17:36

McCreery:

What does the city need most now in your opinion?

3-00:17:41

Knox:

I think the city needs to have a little better leadership than we have, I supported the present mayor and I think she's good. But the city council isn't—. What Richmond needs is to amend the city charter to cut the city council from nine to five. Five is the number in general law cities, and that's the right number for reaching a consensus. Nine people are too tough to get things going.

3-00:18:13

McCreery:

Has it ever been tried to reduce the number?

3-00:18:15

Knox:

Not so far. The city council would probably always oppose it. They've developed a kind of a job now; they get a salary (I don't know how much it is currently), take some trips, and that kind of stuff. I just think it's probably a political impossibility unless you spend a great deal of money to get something on the ballot to amend the charter, and I don't know where that would come from. But that's what I think is basically wrong with the city. It needs a tighter knit leadership, so it's not so fragmented and divisive as it is now.

3-00:18:55

McCreery:

Of course, Richmond has had a lot of efforts toward urban renewal since the 70s and how well is that going?

3-00:19:01

Knox:

Reasonably well. We've had a lot of urban renewal, but the loss of our downtown has been bad. It's just not the same city it was. I'm primarily oriented here in the Point and, like other people here, I don't do most of my shopping in Richmond. We don't have a major supermarket near the Point. Fortunately we have a very good small grocery here, the Santa Fe Market, which is popular and brings people together through the bulletin board there and the friendly managers,

Marie and Bob Peckham. Let's face it, we go to Marin or El Cerrito for most of our other shopping. Trader Joe's is definitely a magnet. And what's the great discount? They sell "two buck Chuck" wine.

3-00:19:50

Knox:

I remember buying all my suits in town when there was a viable downtown. We had a couple of nice men's stores. Jean did some of her shopping there. You could do all your business in town, which I liked.

3-00:20:09

McCreery:

But the Hilltop Mall really changed that.

3-00:20:11

Knox:

Yes. That was a big influence. But as I said, by the 60's, the El Cerrito Plaza had already begun to rival downtown Richmond as a shopping destination, and now I understand, Hilltop Mall isn't doing too well. So, you know, this is American society. I mean it moves around.

3-00:20:27

McCreery:

But a lot of changes since the war years?

3-00:20:29

Knox:

Oh! It's a different place, but you know the only thing that's certain is there would be change.

3-00:20:41

McCreery:

Well, I'd like to thank you very much.

3-00:20:43

Knox:

Thank you. I enjoyed it.

3-00:20:45

McCreery:

We'll end there.

3-00:20:48

Knox:

Let's go eat lunch, there's no rush.