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The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

East Bay Regional Park District Oral History Project

Paul Miller:
East Bay Park District Parkland Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Shanna Farrell
in 2018

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Interview sponsored by the East Bay Regional Park District

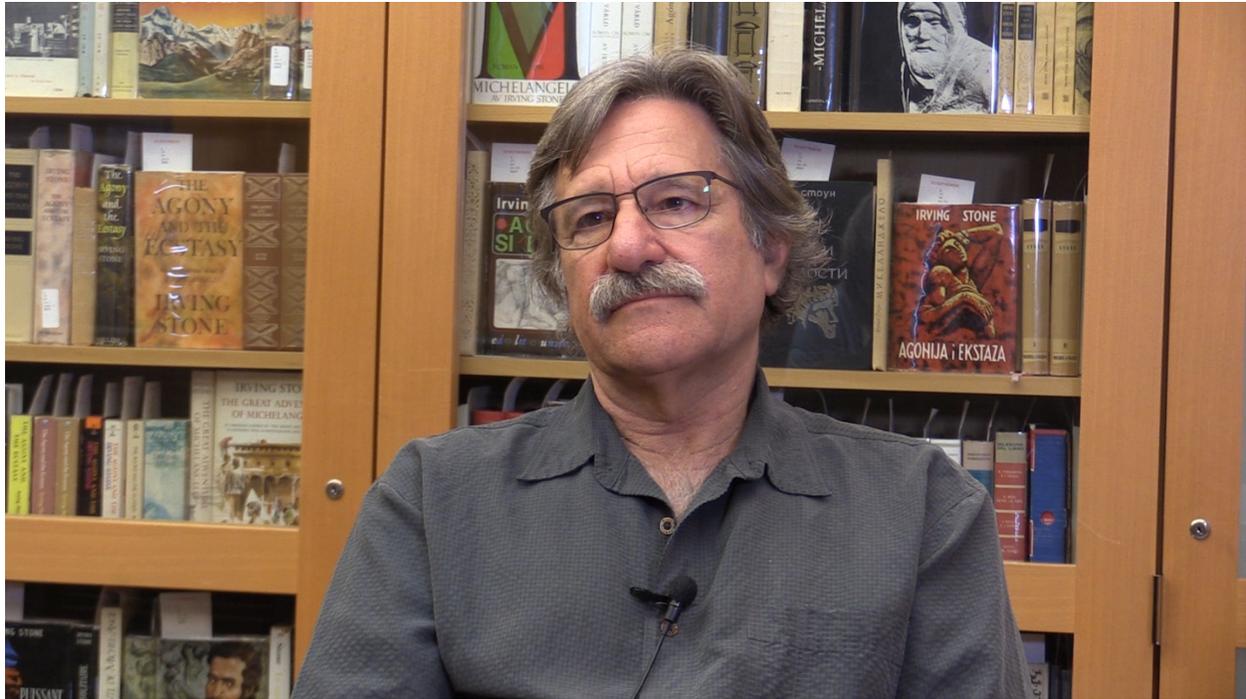
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Paul Miller, 2018
Photo by Shanna Farrell



Paul Miller
Courtesy of the EBRPD

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Paul Miller was a longtime East Bay Regional Park District employee. In this interview, he discusses his early life growing up in New York City, his education at NYU, moving to California and transferring to UC Berkeley, getting hired with the EBRPD in 1981 as a six-month park ranger, working for Bill Graham, becoming a full-time employee, working as a supervisor, joining the district fire department, special projects, changes to the district, bringing the district in line with the American with Disabilities Act requirements, retiring in 2015, and volunteering in the district archives.

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The East Bay Regional Park District Oral History Project

The East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD) is a special regional district that stretches across both Alameda and Contra Costa Counties. First established in 1934 by Alameda County voters, the EBRPD slowly expanded to Contra Costa in 1964 and has continued to grow and preserve the East Bay's most scenic and historically significant parklands. The EBRPD's core mission is to acquire, develop, and maintain diverse and interconnected parklands in order to provide the public with usable natural spaces and to preserve the region's natural and cultural resources.

This oral history project—The East Bay Regional Park District Oral History Project—records and preserves the voices and experiences of formative, retired EBRPD field staff, individuals associated with land use of EBRPD parklands prior to district acquisition, and individuals who continue to use parklands for agriculture and ranching.

The Oral History Center (OHC) of The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley first engaged in conversations with the EBRPD in the fall of 2016 about the possibility of restarting an oral history project on the parklands. The OHC, previously the Regional Oral History Office, had conducted interviews with EBRPD board members, supervisors and individuals historically associated with the parklands throughout the 1970s and early 2000s. After the completion of a successful pilot project in late 2016, the EBRPD and OHC began a more robust partnership in early 2017 that has resulted in an expansive collection of interviews.

The interviews in this collection reflect the diverse yet interconnected ecology of individuals and places that have helped shape and define the East Bay Regional Park District and East Bay local history.

Interview 1: July 26, 2018

01-00:00:04

Farrell:

Okay. This is Shanna Farrell with Paul Miller on Thursday, July 26, 2018. This is an interview for the East Bay Regional Park District Parkland oral history project and we are in Berkeley, California. Paul, can you start by telling me where and when you were born and a little bit about your early life?

01-00:00:25

Miller:

I was born in 1953 in a hospital in The Bronx, New York. We lived down on the Upper West Side of Manhattan until I was about a year and a half, I think, 102nd street and Riverside Drive in Manhattan. We moved to The Bronx when I was about a year and a half and I lived there until I was about ten or eleven, near Yankee Stadium, and then we moved to Manhattan, where I lived on the Upper West Side again this time near Lincoln Center. I lived there until 1973, when I moved to California.

01-00:01:02

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit about the communities that you grew up in, kind of who lived there, what people normally did for work?

01-00:01:13

Miller:

Well, I was fairly young, so I couldn't tell you really what most people did. It was a middle-class neighborhood. My father was a pharmacist. I know there were some other professionals in the neighborhood, and it was probably the whole range of job titles among the people that lived there. I lived on a block, and if you're from New York you might understand that characterization. When you lived on the block, it would be like the urban version of a suburban cul-de-sac or a neighborhood. Everybody kind of knew everybody, and even if you didn't know them intimately, you knew they lived there.

I remember a women leaning out the window and throwing me money and saying, "Go buy me a newspaper." I would go to the store and take it up to her apartment. I think she gave me a tip for my troubles, it was that kind of place. There were candy stores on either end of the block which were like the centers of social activity in the neighborhood. There were enough stores locally where people just did all their shopping within a few blocks.

So, it was kind of a tight community. It was nice. You stayed relatively within your neighborhood because there were sort of dividing lines that you knew you didn't cross because then you'd be going into the badlands, places where it might not be so safe. But, that's just how I remember it as a small child, which was probably just a way of telling me that I shouldn't wander too far. When you grow up in the city, your playgrounds are for the most part the back alleys, basements and the rooftops of the buildings. There were also parks and playgrounds but we mostly hung out on the block when I was small. We played a lot of street games like stick ball, stoop or curb ball and slug, which is a type of handball all played with a pink rubber ball which we call a

“spaldine” its actually made by the Spalding Co, hence the name. There were also the traditional hide and seek and other games. I did wander further with my friends as we got a little older and I can remember having numerous adventures as we roamed about. It was a few blocks from Yankee Stadium and we would go there to try and see the games. Once a policeman gave my friend and I two box seat passes. It was in the time of Mickey Mantle and Roger Maris and many other great players, very exciting. That’s what it was, and it didn’t seem like a bad existence at the time.

When I moved to Manhattan I lived in a high-rise apartment building in a complex in Manhattan, and it was very different. It was not a neighborhood where I got to know people. The people I knew, got to know, I knew through school.

01-00:03:31

Farrell:

Where did you go to school?

01-00:03:34

Miller:

I went to parochial school for the first six years, seven years, including kindergarten. When I moved to Manhattan I went to PS 44, William J. O’Shea Junior High School, across the street from the Museum of Natural History. I went to DeWitt Clinton High School, which was up in The Bronx. I can’t tell you now why I decided to go there. I know my father had gone to Clinton but not to that one. When he went it was in Manhattan. I got on the train every day, and in the wintertime I would get on the train in the dark, and I would come home in the dark.

I made friends in high school that I would hang out with. So, it was different in Manhattan than what I was used to growing up. I went to NYU for two year, from ‘69 to ‘71. That was a rather tumultuous time. The school was closed down by demonstration I think towards the end of ‘70. It probably had to do with the invasion or bombing of Cambodia, as I remember.

I remember going to a few demonstrations in Washington, DC around that time. Anyway, it was an interesting time to be a young person in New York. There was a lot of upheaval. I ended up leaving at the end of my sophomore year, and I went and got a job, making commercials for television. I was behind the camera, not in front of the camera, I made things move. I could look at them now and say, “I moved that,” or you’ll see something I’m holding appear from the side.

So, that was interesting and different. I was pretty young, I was eighteen. I started college when I was sixteen. I was also pretty young to be in college. That could have also been an issue. I did that for a couple of years, and I think during that time I realized that the pace of life and the type of life that you live in New York didn’t really fit with my nature. I wasn’t really sure what I

wanted to do, but life in New York is fast-paced and aggressive, and I think that started to rub me the wrong way.

Again, I don't remember the exact details of why we moved. My father had passed away when I was very young. It was just my mother and I, and my brother was already out of the house. We talked about moving, and she was amenable. She came out to California to look at transfer opportunities where she worked, and we ended up in Oxnard, which is a small farming community about fifty miles north of LA, adjacent to Ventura and just below Santa Barbara.

It's a beach and farming community. I lived on the beach, and I suddenly found an environment that suited me. I took to it right away. From there I applied to school. I thought I was going to go to Santa Barbara. I was interested in marine biology. In those days there were only a few UC campuses. I think there were six. When you applied—I'm sure people would be envious of this now—but there were just a bunch of lines with numbers next to them on the bottom of the application. It was one-two-three-four-five-six. You put your first choice down as one and then second choice and so on. If you were good enough for Berkeley, you got in if that was your first choice. If you're good enough for Santa Barbara, whatever.

I had put Santa Barbara first and then Berkeley, and then before I sealed the envelope, just for the heck of it I erased Santa Barbara and Berkeley, and I reversed them. I put Berkeley first, and the rest is history. I got into Berkeley, which surprised me. I came up here in '74 and got a degree in Marine Biology. In those days it was called Plan D. I don't think they have that anymore. It's Integrated Biology now. A, B, C and D were the plans.

I got a job working for a small consulting firm, the San Francisco Bay Marine Research Institute, as a marine biologist. I considered myself pretty lucky. It paid minimum wage which at the time might have been \$2.85 or \$3.00. I called it starving for science. But I was happy because I had the title. During my time at Cal my roommate was involved with producing concerts here on campus. He worked for a campus organization called Superb Productions. I don't know if they still have that or not. They would put on concerts at the Greek Theater and at Zellerbach. Working with him on these concerts, I became involved in that scene. A mutual friend hired us to work for Bill Graham Presents doing concert security.

I started doing that on the side. I was still going to school and needed to make money, and it didn't pay that much back in those days. It was kind of funny what we got paid. But, that was Bill. During the course of doing that I met some people who worked for the Park District. I remember we did a project at Crown Beach. It was a demonstration erosion control project for the Army Corps of Engineers. I remember working planting these plants in the sand. My

friends, who worked for Bill Graham, also happened to be working at Crown Beach. They would come out at lunchtime and sit there and watch me.

They told me, they said, “You know, you really need to apply for a job with the park district, because we think you’d like working here.” I said, “Okay, I’ll give it a whirl.” So I did. I actually got a job with the park district, and I was amazed because I tripled my salary and suddenly had benefits where I didn’t before. I said, “Wow, this is okay.” But I didn’t expect to give up my career as a marine biologist. I just said, “Okay, I’ll try this.”

So, in 1981, I got my first job with the park district, working at Contra Loma as a six-month park ranger. We don’t have that classification anymore. They used to have three-month jobs, and then they had six-month jobs and nine-month jobs and twelve-month jobs. I was a six-month park ranger at Contra Loma, as I said, starting in 1981 and stayed there for four years. During the offseason, you would be asked if you wanted to work at other parks doing temporary jobs.

Let’s see. In 1981, in the winter I worked at Anthony Chabot for a month or two, and then I worked at Briones in February of 1982 to March of ‘82. And then in April I went back to Contra Loma. The six-month season was April 1 to September 30 in those days. I worked at Contra Loma through the next season. In the offseason I went to work at Temescal in November. I worked there for a couple of months. I did a temporary stint at the Environmental Education Center up at Tilden for a few weeks backfilling. And then, 1985, I transferred to Martinez Shoreline as a nine-month park ranger.

01-00:12:15

Farrell:

Okay. Before we get into that a little bit further, I want to back up and ask you a couple of questions. When you were at NYU, what were you studying?

01-00:12:28

Miller:

Well, I was an undergrad. I hadn’t really declared a major. I was thinking I was going to be pre-med because I was interested in the sciences.

01-00:12:35

Farrell:

Okay. So, growing up and going to school, science was always something that you had an interest in?

01-00:12:39

Miller:

Yes.

01-00:12:40

Farrell:

Okay. What was your mother’s name, and what did she do for work?

01-00:12:46

Miller:

My mother’s name was Sylvia. She had a number of jobs before she was married including being a Rosie The Riveter during the war. She stopped working when she got married and was a housewife until my father passed

away. I was ten, so she had to go to work fairly soon after that. I don't remember any of the jobs she did early on. I think she worked for Look Magazine back in the day. She then went to work for a brokerage firm, and she became a margin clerk. That's what she was doing through the rest of her working career and when we transferred out here.

01-00:13:17

Farrell:

Okay. How did you both, being that you grew up in an urban environment and your mom had moved from the city, you said that you found an environment where you felt like you fit. How about your mom? Did she adjust to life in Oxnard pretty well?

01-00:13:38

Miller:

She did. She did. She's a trooper, and she's had a long and storied life. Growing up, she was born in 1917 and growing up through the Depression, and through so many changes in the world in those days. She took to it pretty well. She seemed to do all right. Again, it was quite a while ago, and I can't say if she was really happy or not. But, I don't remember that she was complaining and saying, "I wish I had never done this." She never did that, to my knowledge. Then she moved to Los Angeles after I came up to Berkeley.

01-00:14:22

Farrell:

That was my next question, if she stayed. When you came to Cal, what made you decide to major in marine biology, or what is now marine biology?

01-00:14:36

Miller:

Well, I'm not sure that it's marine biology anymore here. But, when I lived in Oxnard, I took to the ocean pretty quickly. I learned to scuba dive, and I walked on the beach every day. I lived across the street from the beach. I became enamored of the ocean and everything to do with the ocean. I, like many people, grew up on Sea Hunt and Jacque Cousteau which fed my interest.

I decided that that was the direction I wanted to head in. I wasn't absolutely certain and when I got to Cal I started down that path but I also thought about geology because I really liked that. I took some classes in marine biology. I made the decision to pursue that as my major.

01-00:15:44

Farrell:

When you were working for Bill Graham, did you ever meet or interact with him?

01-00:15:49

Miller:

Oh, yes.

01-00:15:52

Farrell:

Can you tell me just, I guess, briefly about some of your memories of interacting or working for him?

01-00:16:02

Miller:

Well, I have quite a few memories. It was one of those jobs when you started where you did what you were told—I think we made twelve or thirteen or fourteen dollars a concert, something like that. There was no overtime, and you might work from 5:00 or 6:00 in the evening until 2:00 or 3:00 or 4:00 in the morning and sometimes longer if you remember the Days on the Green, the all-day concerts at the Oakland Coliseum.

We were essentially told, “Well, you’ve got this job. Don’t complain. You’ve got a great job because you were in rock and roll.” And, Bill was an interesting character. He was successful because he was a very aggressive businessman. He was firm, and he was somewhat tight-fisted in business. But he could also be a generous person. He didn’t pay his employees a lot of money, but he was generous in terms of the way he shared things. Both with staff and the public. He would serve breakfast to the crowd at the New Years Eve concerts. He would do parties for us and outings. He’d take the whole company someplace for the day.

He too grew up in The Bronx, although his history goes a lot further back. He’s a child of the Holocaust and World War II. He also went to Dewitt Clinton. And, strangely enough, he remembered teachers that I remembered. He remembered being chased by his gym teacher who became the principal when I was there. We had some things in common. I’d been to his house. He invited staff up to his house for parties. He knew who I was, and we interacted casually at concerts. He wasn’t always there, but he was often there.

There were times where, if he went out in the crowd, we would go out with him and just kind of shadow him and make sure that he didn’t get into trouble. I saw a lot of music, and I worked with a lot of good people from very varied backgrounds, some quite artistic and a lot of people who went to Cal and other universities in the area and with some people who for them that was their life.

I never thought it was going to be my life. Again, I was going to Cal at the time. I did keep doing it for a while. I did that from 1976 to about 1985.

01-00:19:13

Farrell:

So it was kind of part time, on the side to supplement income?

01-00:19:16

Miller:

Oh, definitely. At one point I think I had four jobs, going through school, including the park district.

01-00:19:26

Farrell:

How did you get involved in the original Crown Beach erosion project?

01-00:19:32

Miller:

Well, the consulting company that I worked for had gotten the contract, and it was one of a number of different projects that they were experimenting with on Crown Beach to try and prevent erosion. Due to the currents in the bay, the

sand tends to migrate off the beach, and the park district has spent quite a bit of money putting it back over the years. They were looking at ways to slow down the erosion process. It was a little frustrating, and although it caused my friends quite a bit of—well, provided quite a bit of entertainment for them because we would go and plant cord-grass on the beach on one day, and we'd come back the next day, and it would all be gone because the neighbors, who claimed that it trapped algae which decayed and caused a big stink, thought it was part of the problem, not part of the solution.

We'd come back the next day and have to replant them. My friends would sit there, and they'd laugh, and say, "Yeah, well, good luck with that." Their job was to go and rake the algae off the beach every day. That was one of the jobs they had to do. The district spent a lot of money trying to satisfy those people—buying equipment and staff time, things like that.

Of course, the running joke later on was that the plants we were planting were not a native variety, which we didn't know at the time. The park district has since spent a lot of money trying to remove that plant, not from Crown Beach, thankfully, because it's not growing there, but from a lot of other places where it was planted and where thankfully I did not plant it. My friends at the district still find that funny and have not let me forget it.

01-00:21:26

Farrell:

What was your application process when you decided to pursue a job with the district? What was your application process like?

01-00:21:35

Miller:

Well, it was pretty much like it was today. You filled out an application with your job history, and there was a practical exam that was part of it if you got an interview. It was not a particularly rigorous interview. They asked you a few questions. How do you feel about picking up garbage and cleaning toilets? You have to think on your feet and say, "I love picking up garbage and cleaning toilets." I actually did not say that. I thought that would be silly to say that.

But what I did say was, "Well, I won't tell you that I like doing that, but it's a necessary part of the job, and I understand that." I think that answer probably helped me. One of the other things that happened, the first time I applied I was not successful. When I went in, in those days you could talk to a personnel officer and say, "What happened?" and get some feedback. There was a great personnel officer who helped me, and she said, "You need to turn your application upside down because you put all the stuff we want at the bottom," because in those days I was thinking I'd work for a park agency, and I could do environmental science. And, because of my background I thought that that was something that they would be looking for.

She said, “No, we’re actually looking for rangers with maintenance skills. Yes, you’re working in the environment, but you’re taking care of the land and the park facilities.” So, I got the message, and I turned my application upside down and put my maintenance experience up front. That got me in the hiring pool. And then, my boss at Contra Loma, when I went out for an interview, he said the fact that I was willing to drive all the way out there from Berkeley—Contra Loma is in Antioch—showed him that I was interested in working. I said, “Yes, absolutely.” He said, “Okay.” So he gave me the job.

01-00:23:38
Farrell:

What were your first impressions of the district when you started working for them?

01-00:23:45
Miller:

Well, it was hard to get an impression of the district, per se, because we were fairly spread out in those days, and we were not that big as an agency. I don’t remember exactly how many parks we had, but we didn’t have that many in 1981. Contra Loma and Black Diamond were on the edge of the district. The area beyond it was not even within the district in those days.

We didn’t have computers. We didn’t have networked phones. Mail service was either by the central stores delivery or there was a mail person. If they were off work or needed to be somewhere else, and we didn’t have any deliveries that week, we might not get mail. Things took a lot longer to happen. You didn’t meet a lot of people either.

When I say I didn’t really have a sense of the district, I knew what Contra Loma was like, but I didn’t really have a real sense of what the rest of the district was like yet.

01-00:24:55
Farrell:

Was it that isolating at that point?

01-00:24:58
Miller:

Yes, but I didn’t realize it. In retrospect, it was, but in those days, again, we were fairly small. We’d have our annual holiday parties up at the Brazil Room and the whole district could be in there, if you know what that room looks like. Nowadays, they hire a much bigger facility because it’s probably seven or eight hundred permanent employees and quite a few more seasonal employees now. In those days I think it was probably more like a couple hundred.

So, I don’t know. I really have to think about that. My perspective of the district for the most part was isolated to my understanding of the park that I worked in. It was a high-use park, and we had a somewhat challenging user group out there. A lot of what we did was cleaning up every day and, because of the nature of the public out there, we had a lot of cleaning up to do. If things were broken, we’d have to fix them, and there were a lot of things that

ended up being broken on a regular basis—restroom fixtures, signs, picnic tables, whatever.

That's what we spent most of our time doing. We were able to do some development projects because the park was expanding at that time. The facilities were expanding. But my impression as I look back on it now was that I enjoyed the work there was a lot of hands-on work, and I liked doing that. There was a lot of building things. We were working outdoors in the natural environment. When it was quiet, it was beautiful. When the public was there, it was hard to appreciate it, but it was still nice. I felt I was in a good place with the park district. But again, I hadn't decided that that was where I was going to be forever.

01-00:27:03

Farrell:

Yeah, what were you thinking at that point, just give this a try and you'll figure out what's next?

01-00:27:08

Miller:

Well, it paid the rent. Again, I got a nice bump in salary and an increase in benefits. I didn't appreciate that then as much as I do now. But, I knew that it was a good thing, and I was working a number of other jobs at the same time. I just wasn't sure. I was young, and I wasn't sure what the future would hold. The future was just this sort of blank slate. I didn't know what it was going to be. I didn't think about a career with the park district, per se. the district had started in '34, but it wasn't really that old. There were a few people around who had been around for a long time, but the majority of people that I worked with hadn't been around that long so I don't think it felt like a career yet

So, I just sort of went with it day to day. As time went on, you learned about the other parks, and you met people and people who worked in other parks, and you said, "Well, maybe I'd like to go work there if a position ever opened up." As I did these temporary stints in the different parks, I got to meet people and got to see other facilities and realized there was a bigger world out there in the park district. It kind of opened my eyes to other possibilities.

Contra Loma, again, was a high-use park, and I worked in the six active months. In the winter, it was very quiet, but I didn't get to see that. So, unless that's something you really like, you probably want to move on. Plus, I lived in Berkeley, and it was a long commute. It could be hard after a long day to get off at 9 and have to be back at 7.

01-00:28:55

Farrell:

What was it like when you rotated between Chabot and Briones and then back to Contra Loma? Did your role change at all, or were you essentially doing the same thing?

01-00:29:03

Miller:

Some aspects of it were the same, Chabot had the campground and the motorcycle hill climb on Redwood Road but because it was wintertime, it was quieter than the summer focus period. Each park site is unique in its own way. Briones is an open-space park with much less use. I'd say there are more cows than people, which I came to appreciate. I liked it better than being around a lot of people, or working at concerts. When you're locked in a small space with 10,000 imperfect strangers, you come to appreciate being out in the woods for work. It's a lot quieter, a lot less tense.

Some aspects of the job were the same at Briones although at a different scale. There was still routine clean up but much less of it. The work involved more trail maintenance and tree work which are valuable skills that I was grateful to learn. The working environment was different. I did get to appreciate that there were other parks within the district where I could work. I came to really like it and realized that it suited me better. Some people like the action in busy parks and find the open space parks not to their liking. You spend a lot of time out in the park on your own often far away from the park office. Some people like that others don't.

There are different schools of thought about moving around in the district. Some people think that if you have a career path in mind and you want to be upwardly mobile, you should move around and get a lot of experience. Other people think that doesn't matter. If you stay in one place and you do a good job, you're going to be recognized, and you can move up that way.

I can't tell you which is true. I can tell you what worked for me. Getting a diverse experience with all the different places that I ended up working over the years at the park district, I think, served me in good stead in several ways, because I got to meet a lot of people. I got to work on a lot of different projects that put me in contact with people in other departments within the district, so that expanded my work horizon and my understanding and appreciation of what the job really involved.

There are people who stay in one park for twenty years or more. They're happy. They don't get exposed to a lot of different things, but they don't seem to mind. It works for them, and that's fine. I got to the point where I felt like I would reach plateaus where I would learn all I could learn in a place. It was okay to move on because I wanted to learn more and I wanted to advance.

Over time, I felt like I wanted to have what I called a seat at the table, where decisions were made or people talked about projects or what they were going to do or how to do things. I suppose I also wanted to have one less person from whom I had to ask permission to make things happen. I felt that my experience gave me the ability to contribute, and so I wanted to do that. The way to do that is to move up. It's hard to do that when you're at the lowest levels. Your job doesn't really allow you to do that. It's not that you can't

absolutely, but it's just not part of your job to go to meetings and to be a part of decision-making and planning processes.

Also, in 1981, I believe—I think it was '81; it could have been '82, but I think it was in November of '81—I joined the park district fire department. I stayed in the fire department for about twenty-five years, until I went into management. Being in the fire department is another way to meet a lot of people in the district and to see a lot more of the district lands, because in responding to things you could go anywhere within the park district. I ended up going to a lot of parks that I had never been to in the course of training and responding to emergencies and fires.

01-00:32:43

Farrell:

At what point did you decide that you wanted a seat at the table?

01-00:32:52

Miller:

Probably towards the end of my tenure at Contra Loma and maybe when I went to Martinez. I had a supervisor there who—really nice guy, Dick Mauler, who was willing to share information and some of the administrative duties and to show me how to do things and to let me participate. I had the occasion to act in his absence for a while, so I was an acting supervisor. I got to learn and be responsible for what some of the administrative duties of the position were.

I found it interesting, somewhat challenging until I mastered the different things that we had to do. The district was slowly moving into computers at that point, and I found that I could work with the computers and become more efficient and turn out a good work product. As I got good feedback, it sort of encouraged me and inspired me to want to keep going.

When I saw that there were interesting things, different projects that were happening in other parks and Departments that I could be a part of I was motivated. I knew I had more to contribute.

01-00:34:25

Farrell:

You did mention the fire department, and this is before you went to Martinez that you joined the fire department.

01-00:34:30

Miller:

Yes.

01-00:34:31

Farrell:

What drew you to the fire department originally?

01-00:34:35

Miller:

Well, it was exciting. Some of the people that I worked with were interested in doing it, too, so a number of us joined.

01-00:34:45

Farrell:

What was the training like when you joined?

01-00:34:50

Miller:

We used to do live fire exercises in those days—I don't think they do as much now—where we'd go out and we'd burn off vegetation in some of the parks, just prescriptive burning for safety reasons which also provided training opportunities. We'd burn off the vegetation along the interface with the neighborhoods so that if a fire started there would be a buffer.

We took advantage of that. Then, the district actually put a bunch of us through Firefighter I certification, which is a state-level certification, type of training which provides you a lot more experience in fighting all kinds of fire, both vegetation and structural fires as well as medical training. It was all interesting to me. I liked the training. I liked learning new skills. We ended up having really good training. We learned about search and rescue, mine rescue, Code 3 driving skills 4wd, winch and hazmat training and of course how to “put the wet stuff on the red stuff” as our instructors would say. It was all good. I had a lot of fun with the people that I worked with. I found the work exciting. It was a little thrilling. It was rewarding because people would say, “Hey, that's great. You're a firefighter.” You got a lot of positive reinforcement. More importantly of course was the fact that we were saving lives and property. As First Responders we were the first on scene at many emergencies in the parks and I believe we were well respected for the job we did.

01-00:36:13

Farrell:

What was the time commitment like for you?

01-00:36:18

Miller:

Well, they would do trainings in the winter in those days. The winters were fairly quiet, so they'd do some trainings in the winter, medical trainings and other equipment trainings. You would be assigned to a training company where one day a month you would participate in trainings. Training would take you away from your worksite and possibly happen on your days off. A lot of the responding was based upon what and where your job was. For example, if I was working in Contra Loma, and there was a fire was in Tilden or at some other place maybe in the southern part of the district, if it would be too far for me to reasonably go, to drop everything and leave your park you didn't. If you're the only one working there, you can't just abandon your job and leave.

A lot of the time was spent responding during off-duty hours. I responded to many calls in the middle of the night. Because of the nature of the kind of firefighting we did and our familiarity with operating in the parks we would be called upon first to respond on district lands and some areas for which we were under contract. Wildland fire fighting was not something that

surrounding local agencies were as familiar with nor were they as familiar with our territory.

I did a lot of late-night runs up to our fire station in Tilden where I'd drive up there in the middle of the night and jump in a fire engine and then drive to wherever the fire was and then be on it all night and go to work the next morning. But I was young, and I had energy, and I could do it.

It could be as much or as little as you wanted. If you didn't call in when there was a response, then it didn't cost you any time at all. But, I called in as much as I could because I was committed and wanted to respond. I put in a lot of time. It was harder after I got married and had kids, but I still did it. I enjoyed it so much, and I didn't want to stop doing it. I had a lot of training, and I was committed to it. My kids were proud that their dad was a firefighter and that meant a lot to me.

01-00:38:44

Farrell:

Did you ever have to travel to another fire in a different county? I know sometimes people have gone to Southern California to help fight fires, but did you ever do that?

01-00:38:52

Miller:

I did. I went to a fire up around Clear Lake. It was a big, what they call campaign fire. It was about 130,000 acres. I spent a fair amount of time there. You really feel like you're making a difference when the locals come out and show their appreciation for what you are doing. They would stand by the side of the road and hold up signs thanking us for being there. I remember we were taken to a local casino for dinner one night and when we came in all the people there stood up and gave us a standing ovation. I will never forget how that made me feel. I fought the Oakland Hills fire, and that was three days away from home fighting that fire. But I never went to Southern California. I did some backfilling, which is where the CDF—Cal Fire—firefighters would be drawn away to a fire somewhere else in the state, and we would go to their station and sit there and respond to their calls if need be.

01-00:39:30

Farrell:

What did it mean to you to have worked with the district fire department for twenty-five years?

01-00:39:36

Miller:

Oh, it was great. I didn't want to stop. They had a policy, although I never found out where it was written down or whose idea it was, that managers could not be in the fire department. I think part of it had to do with the fact that managers were salaried and not hourly. There were issues around how you would get paid, and there were other issues around how you might potentially be working on the fire line for somebody who could be your subordinate in the parks. Joining the management team was of more

importance to my career so in the end it was not a hard choice just an unfortunate one. That's why I stopped.

But I enjoyed working for the district and over time becoming more a part of the district. Being in the fire department was just another facet of it, an extra extraordinary part of being in the district. I felt it was a great job. It suited my interests, and I really enjoyed doing it. I felt I was doing a good service.

01-00:40:46

Farrell:

Did it help you get to know other parks or other parts of the district better?

01-00:40:52

Miller:

Yes.

01-00:40:54

Farrell:

Was that helpful to you when you were kind of moving around a little bit?

01-00:41:00

Miller:

To a certain extent. When you're responding to an emergency, especially in the middle of the night, you don't see much. Daytime responses, I could see more.

After a time I transferred from Martinez to the Tilden Nature Area/
Environmental Education Center.

01-00:41:32

Farrell:

Was that Martinez or Tilden?

01-00:41:33

Miller:

Tilden at the Environmental Education Center. I went from Martinez to there. I transferred to Martinez, in February of '85. I never went back to Loma after my fourth season. I went to the EEC in March of '86. From there I went to Roads and Trails, which is our roads and trails crew. That job was where I really got a greater appreciation for the district.

01-00:42:17

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit more about that?

01-00:42:20

Miller:

The district maintains a roads and trails crew that is responsible for building roads and trails, maintaining culverts, supporting the Trades crews and building a lot of the infrastructure in the parks. Consequently, that took me all over the district, doing many different jobs. I got additional training there working with heavy equipment, and it was all interesting. I would go to all these different parks, and see people that I knew. I would also meet more people that I didn't know.

I met the supervisors in these parks. It really expanded my district horizons. It gave me an excellent grounding in the construction and maintenance of

different district facilities that I wouldn't ordinarily have gotten just as a ranger.

01-00:43:16

Farrell: Were you full-time at this point?

01-00:43:18

Miller: Yes. When I worked at the Environmental Education Center I was a nine-month Park Ranger. When I left there to go to Roads and Trails, that's when I became a twelve-month Ranger, yes.

01-00:43:34

Farrell: Do you feel like, because you were now twelve months, you were a twelve-month employee, that because you had the continuity there, that that also helped change your perspective?

01-00:43:45

Miller: No, I think that I was coming around to that before. A nine-month ranger was more or less a permanent employee in those days, even though you had three months off but I worked almost every off season anyway.

01-00:43:56

Farrell: What kind of projects when you were on roads and trails did you work on?

01-00:44:02

Miller: It was really varied. We constructed asphalt paths and roadways and a lot of fire trails in the parks. We worked on the reconstruction of Nimitz Way up in Tilden Wildcat Park, I helped to rebuild parts of that trail. I put in a lot of culverts in different parks, some out in the middle of nowhere. Operating heavy equipment in different environments—I learned to operate a backhoe and an excavator and driving big trucks, and it was all different and interesting. It was something that was an additional part of the job of being a Ranger. It interested me, although I quickly came to the conclusion that I did not want to operate heavy equipment out in the middle of nowhere because that seemed extremely dangerous to me, some of the things that I watched other people do. I said, "No, I don't want to do that."

But, I got a lot of experience. We dredged ponds, and I moved a lot of dirt, and I moved a lot of equipment. I got a Class A, which is a truck driver's license. I learned how to drive a big truck and trailer and move equipment around. All that was excellent experience for being a Ranger, going back to the parks. Actually, if somebody asked me now, I'd tell them that the district should have an apprenticeship for rangers on that crew so that people could get exposure to that type of work because I thought it was essential and invaluable to me, especially later on when I was responsible for putting projects together as a Supervisor and a Manager. I was aware of what that crew could do, and that helped me in planning and completing projects.

01-00:46:05

Farrell:

What was it like to learn how to operate heavy equipment, heavy machines like a backhoe?

01-00:46:12

Miller:

You know when you're a kid, you get to play with Tonka toys? Well, you get to play with the real thing. You're just a big kid. It was thrilling. It was exciting. You have to learn your limits. Again, you can get hurt badly or worse when you're operating heavy equipment. But, I remember one of the first jobs I was given was at the controls of an excavator, which is a really big backhoe. It doesn't have a front loader bucket on it. It just has a big bucket on an arm. I spent all day turning a pile of dirt over. It had been excavated from where a fuel tank had been. It was contaminated soil, and you have to turn it over.

I remember they showed me how to operate it, and they said, "We want you to take this dirt from here and move it over there and just keep doing that. When you finish putting it over there, we want you to take it and put it back over here, by way of aerating it, moving the dirt around." Consequently, I was high up in the air and moving these controls and this big thing was responding to my controls. I remember the first time it hit the ground, and the whole earth shook, and I went, "Whoa." It was larger than life for me. The equipment operators, when you see them operate it, they're sitting there casually, moving their fingers, and these things happen. Equipment moves. It's like nothing to them because it's their every day job, they're trained and experienced and really good at it.

But for me, it was like, gee whiz, this is cool. It was different. I enjoyed it. Of course, it's a job, and you have to treat it like a job. There were mundane parts of the job. There was a lot of driving. But, you drive out in the middle of nowhere and put a culvert in on a trail, and you stop and look around, and it's a beautiful environment, and it's quiet and peaceful. You're putting in infrastructure. You dig a hole, you put it in, you cover it up, smooth it over, and it's like you were never there but you know that's how it got there.

Subsequently, when I worked in the parks and I would see something like that, I would have a better understanding of how to maintain it, where it came from, how it got there, and what to do about it, by way of maintaining it. That was a lot of what the job was about. There was some variation. I remember we went over to San Francisco and picked up an art sculpture once. We had to disassemble it and load it on the trucks and move it over to Martin Luther King Shoreline.

That was interesting. That was different. We left the district, which was a big thing, to leave the district and to do this thing. There were a lot of us involved, so it was group effort. One of the other jobs on Roads and Trails was trail grading. It's a bit mundane, but it's interesting in its own way. Your job

would be to go in front of a road grader and prune the vegetation on the sides of the trails so that the grader could come through. You'd be driving on these trails all day long. You'd be just driving on a trail, cutting branches and clearing vegetation. You're out there in the environment. It's definitely work, hot and dirty. But on the other hand you're out there in a beautiful environment.

Other times you'd be following behind the grader, which was kind of dull and boring. You're sitting in your truck and just following behind in case something happens or they need something. That was a little mundane, but again, you're driving on a trail out in the middle of nowhere. As long as you weren't eating their dust, it was okay. I can't think of anything else offhand. That covers a lot of it. There was a lot of digging and building things and tearing them out.

01-00:49:24

Farrell:

Who were your supervisors on that crew?

01-00:49:28

Miller:

My supervisor was a fellow named Stephen Gehrett, who has since retired from the park district. He was a friend. He actually ended up working concerts as well, so I knew him from Bill Graham. He also had studied Marine Biology in college, so we had something in common. But, he was a friend of mine, which was great. He hired me. Working for him was a pleasure because he was a good supervisor. He treated you right—it made for a healthier work environment. I've had bosses where they're more oppressive, and it's definitely not the same. It's more formal, structured and rigid, and it's not convivial.

Stephen was the supervisor and there was a lead person named Don Goodenow, very skilled—taught me asphalt and rock work and a lot of other things. I learned all these different skills that I might not have had the opportunity to do as a Ranger. It helped me throughout my career as a ranger, supervisor and manager, giving me a better understanding of park maintenance.

01-00:50:48

Farrell:

How did you see Stephen as being an effective supervisor?

01-00:50:55

Farrell:

Well, somebody who motivated you and made you want to come to work every day and promoted a healthy work environment, structured the job so that it was livable, doable. The Park District has odd schedules any day of the week, potentially very early in the morning until very late at night. It's hard to build your life around a schedule like that. I have to work weekends. I have to work at night. I have to work holidays. And so, that's hard. A Supervisor who's fair about things like that and takes that into consideration as much as

they can and shows you that they're trying, that's a good thing because you realize you're a member of a team rather than somebody who's just being told you will do this. There are many ways to supervise.

There's some supervisors who believe in divide in conquer. Keep the crew on edge. There are some who build cohesive units and give you responsibility. Some will give you no responsibility. There are others who give you a lot of responsibility. If you don't want it, you're happy to not be given any responsibility. If you're looking to be upwardly mobile you want to learn about the environment you're working in, even if you just want to stay as a Park Ranger you want to learn what is involved in being a Park Ranger. It's important that they share with you knowledge about how things came to be, why this is here and why we put that there and why we took that out.

Learning to watch the public and see how they use things and developing the facilities around that, and talking to the supervisor and saying, "Hey, I saw this. I'd like to build this. Can I do this?" They say, "Yes," or sometimes they say, "No" and don't even explain it. Just like any position, there's a variety of skills and abilities, but promoting a healthy work environment and everything that goes along with it is an important part of being an effective Supervisor.

01-00:53:06

Farrell:

From there, did you end up moving into a management position? Or was there something in between that I missed?

01-00:53:13

Miller:

There was something in between. When I left Roads and Trails, I went to work again at Briones Regional Park, which is a roughly 6,000-acre, open-space park in between Orinda, Lafayette and Martinez. As I mentioned previously I quickly came to learn that that was more the kind of environment that I liked. Honestly, I didn't have to deal with people the way I had to deal with them at Contra Loma or Martinez or the Environmental Education Center. Not all the public is bad. I'm sure my employers will be happy to hear me say that if they read this. But, a lot of the public can be challenging. If you're not happy on the job because the public is getting you down, it's quite possible you're not going to do a good job.

It really depends on what suits your nature and your abilities and your interests. Briones was that kind of park for me. It was a large, open-space park. The routine was driving around the park, and there was only a minimum amount of cleanup necessary because we didn't have that many people. Its different because you learned how to maintain trails and open space and you're out in nature all day long. You learn to build and repair fences too. I did a lot of that but I enjoyed it, I really did.

When I moved from Roads and Trails to Briones I went to work for a supervisor who was very supportive of my interest in promoting up. He was

happy to teach me and share administrative duties. Not everybody was willing to do that. He'd tell me to do something, give me an assignment, and I'd produce it. He would go over it and submit it. I got good feedback. They wouldn't necessarily know that I did it, and I didn't care. I was learning about process.

01-00:56:36

Farrell: What was his name, your supervisor?

01-00:56:37

Miller: John Sofios. he recently passed away, unfortunately. He was a good man, very fair, easygoing, had been around for a long time, so he knew a lot about the Park District, knew a lot of people. It was good to work with him and to get an appreciation for how the district worked through his eyes.

01-00:57:00

Farrell: Did you feel comfortable enough with him to discuss that you wanted to move up to a manager's position?

01-00:57:05

Miller: Oh, yeah, not management yet but being a supervisor, yes. Management was still a little far out there. In those days, there weren't that many management positions. The district was growing, but it was still fairly small. In operations, I think there were six managers, and there might have been 150 rangers and maybe thirty supervisors. The pyramid got kind of pointy at the top in terms of job promotion. It's still not all that big. At that time I was just doing it incrementally, interested in moving up. The next step would be a supervisor.

01-00:57:45

Farrell: Did you have to apply for the supervisor job?

01-00:57:47

Miller: Yes.

01-00:57:48

Farrell: What was that application process like for you?

01-00:57:51

Miller: It was pretty much like a ranger position. They asked you different questions. They'd give you scenarios. Beforehand, they gave you a scenario, and you were supposed to write something up. You went into the interview and they'd read it, and they'd ask you questions about it. They were looking for an understanding of what it took to run a park. Were you really aware of what the job entailed? In doing this written exercise, depending on the level of detail that you put in there, how you answered the questions, you showed whether or not you understood the nature of the job.

01-00:58:32

Farrell: At that point, when you're applying for a supervisor role, what would have been your ideal park to work at or to run?

01-00:58:39

Miller:

Well, I still had somewhat limited experience actually working in other parks. When you're on Roads and Trails you're doing a job in a park, but you're not working at that park. You're working in the park. I didn't really know. I can't say that I knew all that the district had to offer by way of parks. Also while I was at Briones, and this is where I must also give credit to John, he allowed me to undertake a number of resource analysts, acting positions.

The district will fill positions with acting people. They have limited funds on an annual basis for different departments to hire help. They like to hire from within. The first one I had was working as an acting resource analyst, for the vegetation manager. John was very supportive. He just said, "Hey, you want to do it? Go. It's cool." It was tough on him and on the park staff, so it was a commitment for him to let me do it. But he knew I wanted to do it, and he was that kind of guy. He was willing to let me go.

Let's see. That was April '92 to October '92. I worked for a fellow named Ray Budzynski, who was the park district vegetation manager at the time. That was in the stewardship department. Again, I want to mention these jobs because I felt that there was a great deal of value in working outside of your normal position because one of the things that I came to appreciate later on, especially as a manager, when I was able to speak with potential managers at the managers academy that the district puts on, that's one of the things that I would share with them, is that having an understanding of what other people in the district do makes your job that much—well, it makes you that much more effective as a supervisor and a manager because you would learn who to go to for what, who to consult if you want to do things or who to consult if you have to do things.

The district is rich in extraordinarily talented people. Working outside of my normal job brought me into contact with a lot of those people. I thought that experience was invaluable. That was the first acting stint I did. Some people in management have a little more narrow-minded view. They say, "Why are you moving around so much? You're moving out of operations. You're doing these other jobs. Don't you want to work here? If you want to be a supervisor—." And I would talk to them about, "Well, look, this is what I'm learning to do, and I'm bringing this back to the park. We all work for the district with the same goal in mind. It's just how we approach it, what our daily duties are." The vegetation manager brought me into contact with the grazing program and a lot of the support structures that are developed to support the grazing program, like water infrastructure and fencing, things like that.

My boss was excellent. He would send me out to survey properties and fence lines, and then I would do fence line contracts, which is really valuable later on when you're a supervisor or manager, to learn how to do contracting. Then, from there I did two seasons acting in fisheries for the fisheries manager. I did

that, let's see, in '95, from June to November of '95, and then again from June to October, or August, of '96. I worked for a fellow named Pete Alexander, another really talented person dedicated to the district and doing great work to support the district's fisheries program.

Both of those jobs brought me more into contact with work that was closer to my background in science and biological sciences, especially the fisheries. That's probably what helped me get those jobs, to be competitive to because you did have to compete to get them. I just again found it invaluable because I worked throughout the district. I worked on projects that I wouldn't ordinarily work on. I gained a lot of experience. At the end of that second assignment with the fisheries but let me back up a little bit. To give credit to John again, he let me go each time. I swear it wasn't because he wanted to get rid of me. He just was that kind of guy. He supported my interest in advancement.

He didn't have a problem with it. Other supervisors have a problem with it, you ask them why, and they don't know or won't say. They just say no. I never wanted to be that kind of supervisor. That's one of the things I learned about a healthy environment. If you have to say no, you say no and explain it. If you say no arbitrarily because you don't want to think about it, you don't want to deal with hiring a backfill, that's not really a good enough reason to hold somebody back for something that benefits them and benefits the district as a whole.

As a manager, I really broadened my horizons, I understood we all work for the park district, for the betterment of the park district and to protect the land for the benefit of the public now and for the future. We have our job, but the context of the job was within supporting the mission of the park district.

01-01:04:31

Farrell:

Yeah, and that's your common goal.

01-01:04:33

Miller:

It should be. At the end of the second assignment, at the end of August, beginning of September, I was promoted to park supervisor at Roberts Regional Park. I had done a number of acting assignments in the interim, which was great, acting supervisor assignments, going back to, as I said, Briones. I did one there. I backfilled behind a supervisor at Temescal who was off on medical leave for a couple of months, a more valuable experience because I was the supervisor, and I was supervising staff, and in those days the lifeguard staff as well. We don't do that anymore, but we used to. That was sort of being thrown into the mix pretty significantly, to have to do all these things. That was great training. I promoted in '96, September 1, '96, to Roberts Park. I stayed there until I became a manager in February of 2008.

01-01:05:45

Farrell:

Okay. When you were first starting out, September 1, 1996, given that you've seen a lot of parks, you were given the opportunity to help with learning

contracts and learning how to do different [things, like] write reports. What was it like for you to transition into a supervisor role?

01-01:06:06

Miller:

It was exciting and scary and maddening all at the same time, every day. I was given responsibility for running a pool in a high-use park. I'd come from Briones, where there was very little or no water and very few people. And suddenly I was supervising a park that was very busy with a lot of people and a swimming pool. While I had some experience with the chemistry and with the equipment, I was just sort of thrown into it kind of cold turkey. I had to learn the job on the fly. The person I was replacing, I was supposed to shadow them for a week. I'm not sure how much time we actually spent together, at the end of the week he was gone and I was on my own. But, that was okay. It was the job, and I was ready, willing and able. I just went at it.

The staff was challenging. There were issues in those days. As I came to learn, and I would share with other people, the hardest part of the job is not the physical work. The hardest part is personnel issues. To my mind, it's the hardest part of the job because that's a moving target, working with people.

01-01:07:32

Farrell:

Were there any ways that you went about developing your strategy for dealing with personnel or kind of a philosophy that you have about managing people, supervising people?

01-01:07:45

Miller:

Well, working with people, it's fairly dynamic because, as I said, it's a moving target. People come to work every day with a different attitude sometimes and different issues that affect them. You don't know what they are. You just see the end result of it. Sometimes they're happy, and sometimes they're miserable. You've got to tell them to go out and do something. Sometimes they're effective, and sometimes they're not, and you have to deal with that because you need them to be effective.

So, you develop strategies and skills. Hopefully you've been paying attention to supervisors you've known and can utilize techniques that they employed. You also have other supervisors, your manager and the HR department to rely on for advice and support. You try things out to see what works. You have to follow the union contract and district policies and procedures.

There are procedures for dealing with personnel, expectations for getting jobs done. You have to follow all these. You're caught between following the rules of the road and dealing with the hand you're dealt on any given day when it comes to staff.

Now, over time, when you're able to select your staff, if possible, and select people based on your experience and the way they present themselves, who will work together with the other staff and work well for you, suddenly the job

becomes so much easier because that part of the equation gets taken off the table. You don't need to worry about that because they come in and they're ready to go, and they take care of business.

But, before that happens, it's a challenge. I woke up in the middle of the night many nights, and my eyes would pop open, and I'd be thinking about a personnel issue or problem at work. It just drove me crazy. I thought, I was sleeping, why am I thinking about this? But I knew its because it was weighing on my mind, and you'd go into work, and you never know what was going to happen the next day with some employees. Thankfully, those employees get weeded out over time, but sometimes you just don't know. And sometimes good employees just go south for reasons unbeknownst to you.

01-01:09:56

Farrell:

What was your ideal employee like?

01-01:10:02

Miller:

Well, someone who would come to work on time and enthusiastic and ready to get to work and to do the job, someone who was self-motivated, someone who communicated. When they needed help, they asked for it. Someone who worked well with the other staff, because that was really important, and someone who understood the nature of the job or would come to understand it. And someone who understands that we are working for the public and can work well around them. When you have a new employee you have to teach them that. Someone who comes to appreciate what the mission of the park district is, which makes it a lot easier because you're all on the same page and you're all moving forward together.

01-01:10:43

Farrell:

And, I guess for you personally, you're at Roberts. There's water. What was it like for you to be back near water, given your background with marine biology?

01-01:10:53

Miller:

Well, it was chlorinated water, and there were no organisms living in it except in the wintertime when the equipment was down, and then the newts liked the pool a lot, which I found rather amusing. There was no connection. But the connection was more to science. I had a lot of background in chemistry, and I was mechanically inclined, and I was interested in equipment. I liked solving problems, and that's perfect for running a pool because you have all those things and more. That was one facet of the job.

01-01:11:28

Farrell:

Were there any special projects that you worked on during your time there?

01-01:11:33

Miller:

There were a number of special projects. We built a barrier-free playground. I believe it was purported to be the largest or second-largest playground of its

kind, with no barriers to people in wheelchairs or people with varying disabilities. That was exciting. It was exhilarating. It was meaningful.

I did a lot of infrastructure projects—rebuilding picnic areas, taking out old ones, putting in new ones, working on large-scale irrigation projects because we have a couple of large lawns there at Roberts, renovation of bath houses and restroom facilities. It was a little bit of everything. It was a microcosm of the park district. But it was very active for a small park. It was somewhere between eighty and a hundred acres. But there was a lot going on within there, within those acres.

There was a high-use area of the park, but then it actually had some open space. It's adjacent to Redwood Regional Park, and so it's a redwood forest. And, that was very different. It's unique. Redwood and Roberts essentially are unique as far as having redwood forests within them. Most of the park district is either grassland or oak bay woodland, a lot of it, and that's very different. So, learning that environment was different.

I did a lot of projects developing new infrastructure and revitalizing the old infrastructure. It's an older park. It was dedicated in '52, I think. It might have been the fifth. It was one of the earlier parks in the park district. A lot of the infrastructure when I got there was actually original, so, there were things we had to take out. They were worn out, or they were outdated. They were poor designs that we just had to replace. I also worked on the redesign and rebuilding of the park office and workshop. And a disabled accessible path on the upper lawn connecting the parking lot, playground, picnic areas and restrooms together and in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. We also installed one of the first automated fee machines in the District for collecting fees when the kiosk was not staffed. I worked on the design installation and protocols for its use. After installing the machine I learned how to program it and with translation from a friend added Spanish language instructions along with the English to better serve our park users. I was pretty proud of having accomplished that.

Also, at the time, the Chabot Space and Science Center was constructed. That was a very big project. It was being built essentially by the City of Oakland, but it was actually being developed under a Joint Powers Agreement with the Park District. It was being built right on the edge of Roberts Park on park district and school district land. This was a huge project with a significant impact on park property, and it required a lot of my time to sort of keep the beast at bay. They gave the district a lot of grief during construction. I worked on that a great deal. It was a high profile project and I ended up serving as a point person for the park district because I was on the ground right there while it was happening.

The renovation of the pool, the complete renovation of the pool at the time when I was there, I also worked on that. I worked closely with the designers

on the mechanical and chemical feed systems, and that was awesome because I got to provide a lot of input on that, which was rewarding for me. But also, I'd like to think that in the end I was a part of helping it turn out to be a better project. That gets back to working with other people and other departments. That's one of the things I really came to appreciate. As I said, I did a little bit of that work along the way in my career, and I met a lot of people. I really tried to become involved with the details of any of the projects that came my way. Rather than just saying, "Well, tell me what you want to do and when you're going to be here," I would look at the plans. I would analyze them and work with the people who were developing the plans and talk about what I thought might work and what might not work.

When you're working in the park and you see how the public uses the park, you learn from that. You have a better understanding of what's going to work. Someone might say, "Well, in a perfect world this is what you do." You say, "Yeah, but it's not a perfect world out there, so you have to appreciate that you can't put it here. It'd be better if you put it there," whatever it is

01-01:16:26

Farrell:

Is there anything that you're most proud of from your time at Roberts?

01-01:16:34

Miller:

Well, I'm proud of all of it, but the playground was a big one. I was not the designer of the playground, but I was involved in the details and choosing of its design and with the construction. I was on the ground there working with the people involved. There was a construction inspector. It was his job to deal with the contractors, but I worked closely with everybody on that project. In the end, that was a very rewarding project, still is.

01-01:17:07

Farrell:

Did you see the demographics or the use of the park change a little bit? Did you see more people using the park?

01-01:17:17

Miller:

There were more people using the park. During the time I was there, it was interesting. I don't know that the district had an accurate understanding of just how the park was being used. When I say that, I don't want to mean to say that the district was naïve about anything. That's not my point. But they would do surveys, or they'd ask people for numbers about park use. They'd ask the people on the ground. They'd say, "Well, what do you see?" And sometimes the numbers wouldn't actually match with reality.

When I got there, I applied a little logic to it. We had an entrance fee. If it's \$3 per car, and you know how much revenue you've got, you divide the total by 3 and you have the number of cars. Now you know that there was at least one person in every car, and you know from experience that maybe on an average it's more like three people. You take that, and you extrapolate out,

and you imagine walk-ins. You say, “Well, I think this is how many people are using the park.”

When I got there, I came up with a number, based on the revenue. Every year that I was there, the revenue started to grow. It seemed like the park use started to grow. The demographics did change. One of the things that helps the demographics is the way the park is maintained and a certain amount of control that you exercise over how the park is used. If its broken you fix it, if its old you replace it. If there is graffiti or a safety hazard you deal with it immediately. And if you deal with bad behavior early and often its going to have a positive impact. We started to see more families with children coming to use the park for picnics, and to use the pool and playground. It’s about people feeling safe and comfortable in the park.

And, with the help of staff there, we kept the park clean. We kept all the infrastructure in good repair and functional. I’d like to think that what happens over time is people come up and say, “Hey, there’s a great facility here. There’s a swimming pool. It’s clean. The bathrooms are clean. Everything works. They have all these great picnic areas. We can have a party here.” People come to you with ideas. “Hey, I want to have a wedding here.” And you support it.

We started getting weddings in the summertime, which was crazy. We set areas aside, and then we’d work with the people who wanted to have the weddings, and we’d encourage them and give them ideas. They’d get excited about it, and that kind of thing just spreads, and it grows. Now I understand they have weddings all the time there, which is great, sort of. No, it’s a good thing.

You want people to feel good about it, and by word of mouth, more people will come. The control part of it comes in if you see people behaving badly, you can’t ignore it. If you get on it, and you deal with it, and you shut that type of activity down, the people who are sort of sitting sheepishly off to the side, they see like, wow, this is okay. I feel safer here. I’m enjoying—I can bring my kids here. And, that just grew until today. It’s a very active park almost year-round, lots of reservations, a lot of weddings, as I say. The pool is extremely active. Revenue has continued to increase every year.

I used to like to tell my managers, I’d point out the revenue because I was always asking for more help, more staff. We were doing a lot of what we were doing with a pretty limited staff. I’d say, “People don’t just drive by and throw money out the window, and we pick it up and put it in the box. They come in, and they use the park. So, it takes a toll on the park. We need this because people are really using and loving the park.” We had a saying about them loving it to death.

Over time, I did see the change. It became more family-oriented, with all kinds of users and user groups. People were traveling further. A lot of people were coming up and going, "I never knew this was here." I'd say, "Where do you live?" "Well, I just live down on 35th Street." I think it still happens. It's kind of sad in a way, but it was funny at the time. Kids would come up and say, "Are there any bears up here?" If you know where Roberts is, I'd love to see a bear up there. I'm happy if I see a deer or a raccoon, even a skunk. But, these animals are smarter than we are. They tend to stay away. They come out at night.

So, yeah, I did see the change. I would say that I'm pleased about that. I think that my successor, who was someone I hired and took over after me—I actually hired him as the supervisor after me because when I promoted up I promoted up to be manager of that unit that the park was in. He's just carried that ball and ran with it. It's a clean, highly-used park. Everything functions, great facilities. You can tell I'm a booster of the park. But, if you went there, I think you'd see what I was talking about. It's a quality operation. I think the public shows us that they think so, too.

It gets a little bit to my personal philosophy that I sort of developed there about how I wanted to maintain the park and I tried to share this with staff. It's a little hard to articulate, but I tried. I wanted the park facilities to kind of be invisible in the sense that everything there should enhance the user experience without detracting from it. If you walk into a restroom and it's dirty, and the fixtures don't work, and it doesn't look like it's been cleaned, and there's graffiti on the walls and stuff, it's not very inviting. It sticks in your head.

If you walk in, you do your business, you wash your hands, there's soap, there's paper towels, everything functions, it's clean, you walk in, you do whatever you're there for, and you turn around and walk out, it really has no effect on you except a positive effect because you don't think about it. There's nothing negative that stuck in your mind like, wow, this is really funky here. That doesn't happen.

The same thing with the picnic facilities, the drinking fountains and the picnic tables. If there's carving on it, you flip the boards. If it needs to be painted, you paint them. People had a tendency to do things like they'd have their mini-Weber or Hibachi, and they'd set it up on the table, and then they'd cook their meal and they'd wonder what that black spot was underneath. Well, they'd start a fire on the table. The next person who comes, that's what they're going to see unless you fix it asap

And then litter is the same thing. Litter breeds like graffiti. If you leave it, there's just going to be more of it. You go out there every day, and you clean up the graffiti, and you pick up the litter. And somebody comes in. They don't see graffiti. It doesn't register. The picnic table that they sit at, there's a picnic

table there, and it's clean. There's no obnoxious graffiti carved into the top of it, if you can help it. There's no litter around. They come into the park, and it's like the only thing that they leave with is the feeling that they wanted to leave with, that they came expecting. They wanted to come there and have a birthday party for their kid or have a barbecue, and that's what they did. They had a good time. They look up, and they see the trees and the grass is cut on the lawn, and they run around and they play games or whatever. And then they pack up their stuff and they go.

That's sort of what I mean by I wanted the park facilities and infrastructure to be invisible. I just wanted it to be there. I wanted it to be what people wanted it to be. That's the philosophy that I developed. As I moved up and became a manager—as a supervisor I could do that at Roberts. I couldn't affect the greater district world, but I could do that there. But when I became a manager, I suddenly had a number of parks. I tried to put that forward to my staff. I said, "This is what I expect, and this is why." I'm a believer in education, and I don't just say "Do it because I said so." I'd say, "We should do it, and this is why I think so. It serves the greater need and the greater good of the public, our user public, and the mission of the park district. It serves the park district well."

The district's very big on making sure that we have public support, not necessarily for my reasons on the ground but for the larger issue of the health of the district. Essentially when there's a bond measure put forth and we want the public to vote for it, you don't want them to have a bad experience. So, all the good experiences they have, so much the better because they say, "Oh yeah, I'll support the parks. I like what they're doing."

01-01:26:35

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit about moving into being a unit manager in 2008, what that was like for you?

01-01:26:43

Miller:

Well, I was ready. I'd applied a few times, and again there are not that many positions, but I was fortunate. My manager retired. He was responsible for multiple swimming facilities so when I applied that time I had the experience of running a park with a swim facility which gave me something of an advantage in applying for that position.

01-01:27:33

Farrell:

What it was like for you to move into it, be a unit manager?

01-01:27:40

Miller:

As a unit manager, I was dealing with similar issues that I had been dealing with at the park level. But I suddenly had an expanded role, and it was multiplied by quite a bit. I started out essentially sharing my philosophy of how I ran Roberts Park and what I expected of them. But at the same time I

had my eyes open. You have to learn a new demographic, new user group, in some of these parks. It was fairly far-flung, my unit.

But as it so happens, I was charged with taking care of all the aquatic facilities—lucky me, I guess. I learned how to take care of a swimming pool. Roberts' pool is 88,000 gallons, and the one at Don Castro was close to two million gallons. More water, bigger pumps more chemicals and more people. Just more of the same, a lot more!

But that was okay because I was comfortable that I had learned it, so I just jumped in. That pun was unintentional. I could support my staff because I had experience in dealing with issues. I wasn't somebody who was just telling them what to do. I had experienced it. They understood that. These were also people that I knew or had known casually or as friends, people that I'd come to know over the years.

I could share my experiences with them, and it was important to be engaged, visit my parks, talk to people, ask them what's going on, show that you have an understanding or appreciation of what they're going through, what kind of issues they have, what kind of problems that they face. That your trying to make things happen, trying to support them, getting them material support that they might need and financial support that they might need, supporting them with the projects that come down the pike.

As a Supervisor you deal with crew dynamics and personnel issues in your park. One park ,one crew. As a manager its multiplied by the number of parks in your unit. You provide support for the supervisor in dealing with issues in their park and while sometimes you have to get involved directly in personnel issues its really more of a role of support and guidance based on your experience.

Sometimes there are things that are just handed to us, "We're going to build this here in your park." And we might say, wait a minute, I'm not ready. But that's not the answer. The answer is, "okay." And then you have to figure out how to do it. I support my staff on how to do that. The other part of being a manager, though, was being able to attend meetings and engage at a higher level of planning and decision making. You have a certain amount of credibility but when you're sitting in a meeting at a table full of people, it can be somewhat intimidating. So you just have to learn to speak up. What's the worst thing that can happen? I tortured myself plenty over things I said or didn't say so I know the answer to that question!

But, when you have something to say and you have something of value, people go, okay, we didn't know that. That tends to enrich the project that might be undertaken in your parks because it's done with a better appreciation and understanding of how it might work how it might fail if you approach it

from the wrong direction. I got to do a lot of that. I would get plans on a regular basis for projects that they wanted to do in these parks, and I would look at the plans, and I would comment on them.

I'm not going to hold myself up as being special or any different than anybody else, but if somebody hands me something and says, "Review this," I'm going to review it because I know that if I don't, I can't say anything about it after the fact. Why didn't you tell us before we built the thing? I don't know. I forgot or I was too busy. You shouldn't say things like that. It's not professional, and it doesn't make any sense.

I ended up developing a habit of reviewing all the plans that came my way and going to all the meetings, the planning meetings. It takes time. But, again, over the course of all these years, the district became more efficient at communication and administration which in my view tended to make things easier and improve the flow of information and increase productivity. Some people might argue with that. One consequence of improved technology is a greater expectation of productivity. High speed works both ways. You get it fast and the sender expects it back fast.

Some might say we have too much administration, because I've heard people say they just have too much computer time now or too many meetings and not enough time in the field. As a supervisor, the tendency when I first started was to have more time to be out in the field working alongside your staff and not so much time in front of the computer or doing paperwork. I tried to maintain a good balance. I viewed the administrative work like homework. Nobody likes to do homework. Well, there might be some strange people out there who do. But, it's just like homework. You never like to do it, but you've got to do it. The sooner you do it, the happier you are. If you wait until the last minute you're not going to be happy because you're going to get jammed up, because three other things came in while you were doing this last thing you should have done yesterday or the day before.

The administrative stuff, I got a handle on pretty quick. Again, the district became networked, both through the computer networks and the phone networks, and so you can communicate a lot faster. It was easier to get stuff done. You could do more research. You could find out things you needed to know to complete assignments. I didn't find the administrative work to be hard. I think the challenge is just to learn how to do it efficiently, how to manage your time and learn to delegate if possible. As a manager you have an assistant and in my case I was fortunate to have very talented ones with whom I could share the load. They were very supportive and helped me immensely. Also, you pick up the phone, call somebody and get an answer to a question, and then move on. And then you can spend more time on other things.

I didn't love meetings, but because I was a participant. I was able to have input and to make a difference. And that, of course, is very enriching for me.

It made me or helped me enjoy the job that much more because I was making a difference. I didn't know everything, but if I sat at a table and somebody said, "That's not going to work," I'd say, "Okay, well, I didn't think of that, and I'm glad you told me, because now I understand" that didn't happen as much as people just taking some of the things that I put forward and incorporating them into these projects. That was very rewarding. I liked that a lot.

01-01:34:09

Farrell:

How did you help others coming up after you to have their own seat at the table?

01-01:34:15

Miller:

Well, I would encourage them. Sometimes you have to drag them along kicking and screaming, but I would just tell them. I would share with them that fact that you can't complain if you didn't say anything. But if you go, if you take the time to be involved, you'll appreciate it. I'd like to think they'd appreciate it in the end because it made a difference.

What I would share with staff was how important it was to learn what other people do, because if you call somebody up and you say, "I need this now," and they're just as busy or busier than you are, working on a half a dozen different things that are completely unrelated to your project, and you say, "I need this now," they're going to go, "Well, I'll get back to you when I can."

But if you approach somebody from the point of view, say, "Look, this is what's going on. This is what I need. I know you're probably busy. I don't expect it tomorrow, but when you can, and just give me a realistic expectation of when I might be able to expect this from you, if you can help me." I'd say what I have found, and this is just me, but I'd like to think that everybody would, that one day something will show up like a couple days later, because they had a moment of time. They knew what your project was. They knew what you wanted and what you needed. They would just do it. They'd get it done. They'd help you out. They'd send you a piece of information or they'd do something for you that you need to get done because of the way you approached them, because you approached them with an understanding of how busy they might be and what their job is.

But if you don't respect somebody, if you don't respect his or her job and what they do, what do you expect in return? There's always the thinking that if a particular supervisor or crew didn't like you, and you were on the list, you somehow kind of drifted lower down in that list instead of rising to the top of the list. No one would ever admit that, but let's just face it. Somebody said, "Well, my staff likes working here, and they don't like this guy at all. This guy buys us donuts, and this guy doesn't." Not so.

But, in a certain way, you make people feel welcome, and they say, “Oh, I remember that place.” They had a good experience. There’s all kinds in the park district. There are people who treat people with respect, and there are people who—it’s just the microcosm of society as a whole. Anyway, so I would share that with staff. I would just say, “Look, you want to be effective. There’s a lot of talent out there in the park district. Work with them, not against them. Don’t make their lives harder or miserable. They want to help you if they can.”

It served me in good stead anyway. I’m not saying that I got help all the time as fast as I needed it, but I like to think that I developed a lot of personal relationships. What that goes counter to—this sort of gets back to my point about growing up in the district when it was small—that sort of helps the district to not be like a silo kind of organization, which I think maybe is more the norm for a large organization and maybe is closer to the norm in the district now. I don’t know.

But I have heard that comment from people who came into the district from outside the district. They were surprised at how much autonomy and responsibility the field staff had, because we are far-flung. There’s nobody there watching us on a regular basis. There are rangers who might be working by themselves all day long or a couple days in a row with nobody, including a supervisor, around. There’s a supervisor who should be around at least 40 hours in the week. They’re minding the store in the district’s eyes, hopefully.

There’s the manager who has—at the end of my career I had 70,000 acres, and I knew I had, I think, eight direct reports and then forty or so people under them. But I stopped to think about it, and I realized those eight direct reports, they each had two or three or four parks under them. In reality, I had twenty-two or twenty-three parks—I can’t remember now—that were my responsibility in the end. And so, the district expects a lot.

01-01:40:03

Farrell: Your microphone just fell.

01-01:40:05

Miller: Where did it go? Oh, here it is. Sorry.

01-01:40:10

Farrell: No, no.

01-01:40:11

Miller: You can edit that out.

01-01:40:13

Farrell: Yeah, I will.

01-01:40:16

Miller:

As the district got bigger, maybe it's hard to avoid the silo effect. But, I remember one person telling me, he says, "You guys are so touchy-feely, and I'm surprised at how much responsibility is given to the park supervisors." I said, "Well, it works for us. Most people say that we're successful, and the public seems to like us. They support us." I think that part of the reason, is because we don't have somebody who never sees what they're managing, micromanaging that facility, and telling them, do this. You think, well, that's not going to work. But they all know. They're the boss. You will do it because they said so, or you're afraid to tell them no.

The field staff, the rangers, are trusted with a lot. They're given the keys to the kingdom, literally. They're given keys to equipment. They're given the keys to the facility. They're expected to open it in the morning and close it at night. They have all this equipment at their disposal, expensive equipment. They can wander around. Often there's nobody watching them, looking over their shoulder, saying, "You spent too much time on this. You need to go over here." So, people need to be self-motivated and disciplined.

The supervisor, again, is given responsibility of the budget. They have a lot of money, in some cases hundreds of thousands of dollars. They're given at least first-line responsibility for how that money gets spent. I don't know how common that is out in the real world. Managers, again, I had all that land and something like a \$12 million budget. Some of that was capital monies, but at least the operating budgets were somewhere in the neighborhood of six million, something like that.

I didn't think about it because it just was. I sort of grew up with the job, so I didn't think about it. As my job grew, I just accepted it. But, when I sit here talking about \$6 million, I wish I had that in my pocket. It's a lot of money. People coming in from the outside would look at it and go, "Wow." But, I think as time went on they realized that it's a model that somehow developed sort of organically, that really works. I don't know how, going forward, it will work only because when you become big enough, maybe you can't be that way.

01-01:42:45

Farrell:

In the end, how many parks were you responsible for?

01-01:42:50

Miller:

Well, again, I really have to sit down and think about it, but the number like twenty-two or twenty-three sticks in my mind, but I'm not sure. It was a lot of land that wasn't even open to the public but land banked parkland that I was responsible for through the Park Supervisors. We buy land, and it hasn't been turned into a park yet, but it's parkland that we have to at least oversee. There's no public allowed on it.

01-01:43:13

Farrell: Which were the parks, the active parks that you were managing?

01-01:43:19

Miller: In the end or when I first became a manager?

01-01:43:22

Farrell: In the end.

01-01:43:30

Miller: Sunol-Ohlone was an active park, although there's a lot of land there. Still there were a lot of people who came there. And Mission Peak, if you Google it, it'll kind of blow your mind all the things that come up and all the pictures. It's a very small place that became extraordinarily popular, so much so that we're struggling with carrying capacity, and a number of issues around the use of that park. That's a high-use park, I mean, thousands of people in any given day, and it's not that big. It's just essentially a trail up to a peak. There's, like, forty parking spaces, and you're talking about thousands of people. I'm not exaggerating. That's part of the Sunol-Ohlone Park complex.

Pleasanton Ridge is another popular park. Some of these parks are most popular on the weekends because people come out to hike and mountain bike and do whatever. More people come out on the weekends and do that. That's a very popular park. Black Diamond Mines is another one that's seasonally very popular, and the mining operation there.

01-01:44:48

Farrell: You were also in charge of Roberts and Briones. Is that right?

01-01:44:52

Miller: Not at the same time. When I first became a manager of the recreation unit, I had Temescal, Roberts, Don Castro, Cull Canyon, Little Hills, Castle Rock, Diablo Foothills, and Contra Loma was part of that, as well. Actually, did I have Briones then? I have to think about that. No, I don't think I had Briones then. But, the district used to be divided up into zones where the manager had, a zone that they were responsible for. It didn't matter what type of park it was. If it was within that zone, you had it. And then, at a certain point, they changed to functional units. So, that's why I got all the aquatic facilities.

01-01:45:50

Farrell: Do you remember what year they changed to functional facilities?

01-01:45:54

Miller: I think it was roughly '88. There's the Shoreline Unit, Interpretive Parklands, the Recreation Unit, Parklands Unit, Trails Unit and Lakes Unit. They were closer to functional types. They weren't perfect, because I think I had Coyote Hills when I had the recreation unit. There are no swimming facilities there. I also had Contra Loma, my original park. That was part of the Rec, my unit. These are pretty far-flung and they were all high-use parks.

In the Interpretive Parklands, the high use, as I was saying, was more weekend-oriented. Mission Peak was tough. That was an aberration. That was pretty much every day. If you saw it, it would just blow your mind. I call it linear recreation. It's like they're going to some shrine on the mount to talk to an oracle or something. It's just a high peak. It's a challenging height because you gain a lot of altitude in a short amount of time. It's a big wide gravel road. It's got some open space around it, but most people don't use that.

They just use this road. They hike up this road. People of all shapes and sizes, a lot of people doing exercise, some people mountain biking. They go up to the very top. Beautiful view from up there, but there's this pole up there that some misguided person put up there in, like, the late '70s. They stand on this pole, and they have their picture taken. When you Google it, that's what you'll see. You'll see hundreds of people. I've seen aerial photos that the helicopter would take on a daily basis of people lined up waiting to have their picture taken up there on this peak.

At the bottom there's this little forty-two-car parking lot, and it's in a neighborhood. The park was there first. We had tremendous parking problems because literally thousands of people would come, and they'd park a mile away and walk just to get started. They hike up a couple of miles up to the peak, have their picture taken, turn around and come back down and then go. They caused all kinds of problems in the neighborhoods. That was huge when I left. I'm not sure they've even solved that yet.

That was a high-use park. The other ones were mainly weekend. And then some of it was land banked, and it was open-space territory that was closed to the public, like in the Vasco Corridor, out that way. I had a number of open-space parks, gorgeous land. People have no idea how much fantastic land is preserved out there. At some point in the future it'll be opened up for public use, but in the interim, at least, it's preserved and we never get rid of land. When we get it, we hold onto it. That's our mission.

01-01:48:38

Farrell:

What are some of the things that you're most proud of from your time as a unit manager?

01-01:48:44

Miller:

Well, I did a number of renovation projects in the aquatic facilities during my tenure as a unit manager, as the recreation unit manager. We upgraded a number of those facilities. One of the things I'm most proud of is bringing the district swim facilities into compliance with the Federal Americans with Disabilities Act.

I took on the project of trying to bring our facilities up to code in a timely manner, and I managed to do that ahead of schedule so that when the deadline came we were well-positioned. We were in compliance with the federal

guidelines. There were also other federal guidelines we had to meet. It's called the Virginia Graeme Baker Act. It was a very sad story about a child who had been held down to a drain in, I think it was a hot tub, actually by her hair.

And, because of the nature of the way facilities are constructed, there were no emergency relief valves. When you get stuck on one of these things, you stay stuck. If it's your hair or, in some cases kids like to swim down, and cover up the drain with their bodies because it's something to do. Then they can't get off because of the suction power of the recirculation pumps.

Unfortunately, this politician's daughter, I think, it was either a daughter or granddaughter—I can't remember now—got killed. He spearheaded this regulation. Consequently, all swimming facilities had to be retrofitted to meet the requirements, the safety requirements. Put in additional drains so that if you cover one, the other one is still functional. Even if you covered both of them, there are relief valves on the sides that will open up and release the vacuum so that it allows you to get off the drain. In some cases it shuts the equipment down as a safety feature. I brought all required district facilities into compliance with the Act.

I was also given responsibility for the development of a budget for utilization of funds acquired through the Habitat Conservation Program. This is a County level program that provides funding to the District for land acquisition and maintenance of purchased lands within the covered area. I believe we have received something on the order of \$30 million dollars for acquisition projects since its inception. Revenue generated by cell towers and wind turbines on these lands may be used for maintenance and these are the funds I was charged with administering. It required the building of an entire park budget, Vasco Caves, from scratch and funding of program related projects on HCP acquired lands. I worked with some very talented District staff on this and am proud of how it turned out.

01-01:50:58

Farrell:

That's a big deal. We are running a little short on time, so I want to ask you a few reflective questions, one of which is about your decision to retire in 2015. Was it just it was time to retire?

01-01:51:17

Miller:

Well, that's a little tough. I think I retired because I could. My daughter graduated from college in May 2015, and that wasn't really a deciding factor because, as most people know, you're not done paying for that for quite a few years. I'm not sure I'm done paying for it yet. Actually, I know I'm not done paying for it yet. It wasn't that so much. But, I started in the district at a time when we were smaller. They were hiring a lot of people of my age group. We're talking thirty-four plus years. So, in thirty-four years a lot of people started to retire.

A lot of the people that I grew up with in the district had retired or were retiring. I'm looking around going, "Wow, where did everybody go?" And, you tend to start running the numbers a little more often. As time goes on you say, "Okay, how much would I make if I retired? Can I afford to do this?" I got to a point where I felt like I could do it. It was in the spring, and I remember my friends who have actually been my bosses. They said, "Well, you know, you're getting onto budget season. Do you really want to do another budget? You're not going to be around to spend it, or you don't need to be around to spend it. Why don't you just pull the plug?" I thought about it, and I said, "Yeah, I think so."

But then the other thing I realized when I retired was that, although I loved my job and I probably could still keep doing it because I think I was good at it—I mean, I felt comfortable with it. Let's put it that way. It was challenging intellectually, and I liked that challenge. I was involved more and more with the land department in those days. I was constantly going out and looking at new lands that they wanted to acquire because they were mostly in my unit.

That was really interesting. It was exciting. I was a part of furthering the mission of the park district. And, I liked doing that. But, what I came to realize after I retired was that I was tired, physically tired. Being a ranger takes its toll on you. Your body parts tend to wear out—knees, backs, shoulders. It's a physically demanding job. When you're management, you don't do that stuff anymore, but nonetheless the damage is kind of done when you're younger.

I realize that there's a certain amount of stress associated with the job—and again, this is just for me—that even if you love your job you don't notice. But going to a meeting, having to go to meetings, going to look at projects, visiting parks and park staff, having to drive so far to do almost anything, dealing with traffic—because as a manager you tend to drive around a lot. The District is pretty big, so you do a lot of driving. Just having to do all these things, it takes its toll, physically and mentally. But you don't know it because you like your job, and you're just doing it. Every day you get up, you put on your uniform and you go.

After I retired and I was able to stop doing that, I realized, oh, I feel a little calmer, a little less stressed, and I'm not as tired, and I'm not as physically challenged as I was. It was probably a good thing. I was of retirement age, and I could keep working if I wanted to, but I could retire if I wanted to also. That's what I decided to do.

01-01:55:20
Farrell:

You've been active in the retirees' association since. Is that right, or no, not really?

01-01:55:25

Miller:

No, not really. What I do now is I'm active in the park district archives. We meet every Wednesday.

01-01:55:30

Farrell:

Oh, okay. Sorry about that, yes, okay. What's it like for you to work in the archives in that capacity?

01-01:55:38

Miller:

It's great. It's great because I stay connected. There are a number of other retirees who are friends of mine from the park district, and I really enjoy working with them. There are a number of non-district folks there. They're so nice. They never worked for the park district. They volunteer their time, and they're doing great work to help document the work, the history of the park district.

I'm working with a woman who she's a great person to work with. There's no stress involved. You can come and go as you want. But we sit around looking at photos and documents associated with the history of the park district, and because of our age group, I cover a certain span. I know people who worked there possibly in the sixties but more likely in the '70s, '80s, '90s, 2000s.

The oldest person in terms of when he started used to be an assistant general manager for the park district, Jerry Kent has studied the history of the district. He knows people going back to the beginning. But he started in '62, so he knows people who were there in the forties and fifties. We look at these pictures, and we say, "Who's this?" He looks at it, and he tells us. They have a picture from a later era, and they show it to me, and they say, "Who's this?" I say, "Oh, that's so-and-so." Or we look at documents, and it's like these documents represent the genesis of a policy that became part of the district's mission and operating guidelines.

It's really interesting that way. So, wow, look at this. This is how this came to be. Jerry has so much district knowledge. He'll look at a picture or document and he'll start telling you the backstory. I'm still learning things about the park district that I never knew. It's great. It fills in a lot of blanks, and it's still of interest to me. Some people, I think, when they're done with the district they're done. They just say, "See you." They don't look back.

But I live in the area, and I know a lot of these people. These people are my friends, and I like staying involved. It's really still interesting to me.

01-01:57:46

Farrell:

Since you've had this long career and you've continued working with the district in this capacity, how do you see the role of parks in the larger world? What do you think parks offer to people?

01-01:58:02

Miller:

Well, I think we do a pretty good job of fulfilling the mission. We're preserving the land, but we're providing recreational opportunities. The nature of the way people recreate has changed during the time that I was there. There are a lot more people coming out to the park. I understand the value of it because I'm no different than anybody else. If I want to go to a national park or some other public lands, and go out and enjoy myself, it's there because somebody is doing the job that I did.

In the Bay Area, we're doing that job for our citizens and the larger Bay Area. We get people coming from all over the place. They come to park district lands because of the way we run the parks, for the opportunities that we provide. I think it's invaluable. There's a lot of talk about health and well-being—healthy parks, healthy people. I don't think that that's overstated, because I see people every day who go out to the parks, even if it's just for a walk. They can walk there because it's there. They can walk on that trail because we put that trail there. We maintain that trail for them to do that.

There's economic value associated with residential neighborhoods that are built around parks. It's true, because somebody gets home from work and they either hop on their mountain bike and go riding off into the parks, or they just want to take a walk, or they walk the dog, and it's there. I know the value of downtime because I know what the other side looks like. If you never get any downtime, it's not a healthy thing.

01-01:59:44

Farrell:

What has it meant to you to have such a long career with the district?

01-01:59:50

Miller:

Well, I'm really proud of my career with the district. I'm proud of the work that I did. I met innumerable extraordinary people, very talented, dedicated people over the years, and people who became close friends. I got to do so many different things. I think about it from time to time—equipment I learned to operate, jobs that I got to do, extraordinary things that I was exposed to or that I experienced. I wasn't supposed to do this, but a rancher put me on a horse, and I helped round up cattle in a park that I worked at. I can say that now, but I'm sorry. It's too late. We can't do anything about it.

But, there's just stuff like that. It's just stuff that I was able to do. And being able to walk through the hills, and going through a gate, I mean, my job, I used to kid about it, but it really was true. In later years, my job was to—I had the keys to the kingdom myself. I had a key to a gate where public wasn't supposed to go. I could go through that gate, and I could drive out in the middle of nowhere, up to the top of the tallest peak in the area, and park my vehicle and look around and make sure that everything was still there. That was part of my job.

I joke about it, and my boss might say, “What?” But no, they get it, because they did it themselves. What it means is you’re making sure that everything everything’s in good shape and everything is being preserved, because that’s part of our mission, to preserve this going forward into the foreseeable and unforeseeable future. That’s our mission. I thought that was great. I was so lucky and so fortunate to be able to do that. Again, all the other experiences I had, the firefighting was so exciting. Kids look up to firefighters. My kids were proud that I was a firefighter. How cool is it, that I was able to do that?

01-02:01:46

Farrell:

My last question for you is, what are your hopes for the future of the district? How do you hope it grows and continues?

01-02:01:55

Miller:

Well, I hope that it continues on the path that it’s on now. I hope that the funding stays stable. There are extraordinary people, the people who manage the district and the finances of the district and help to secure the funding that we have now. We are fortunate and a model, perhaps, for other agencies throughout the country about how things are done.

I hope that that continues and that the public continues to support us and appreciate us for what we provide, and that within the district I hope that we never lose sight of what our mission is, and that the staff is encouraged to understand and appreciate that mission and become a part of it because the more people become a part of the whole—and when I say “a part,” they’re working with the district, not against the district. They don’t just see it as a place where they go on the certain time and then they go home at a certain time, and that’s it. They invest in it.

That’s where the strength in the district is because the staff knocks themselves out to really do a good job, on the whole. They really do. That’s why I think the people, public, appreciates us. I hope that doesn’t stop and that within the district they appreciate that, and they foster that, and that outside the district the people support us because we’re doing a good thing.

01-02:03:25

Farrell:

Is there anything else that you want to add?

01-02:03:29

Miller:

No, I don’t think so. I think we covered most of it.

01-02:03:36

Farrell:

We did, yeah. All right, well thank you so much for your time. I appreciate it.

01-02:03:41

Miller:

Sure. Thank you for your interest.

[End of interview]