

Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California Berkeley

Oral History Center  
The Bancroft Library

University of California  
Berkeley, California

East Bay Regional Park District Oral History Project

John Nicoles:  
East Bay Regional Park District Parkland Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by  
Shanna Farrell  
in 2018

Copyright © 2019 by The Regents of the University of California

Interview sponsored by the East Bay Regional Park District

Since 1954 the Oral History Center of the Bancroft Library, formerly the Regional Oral History Office, has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

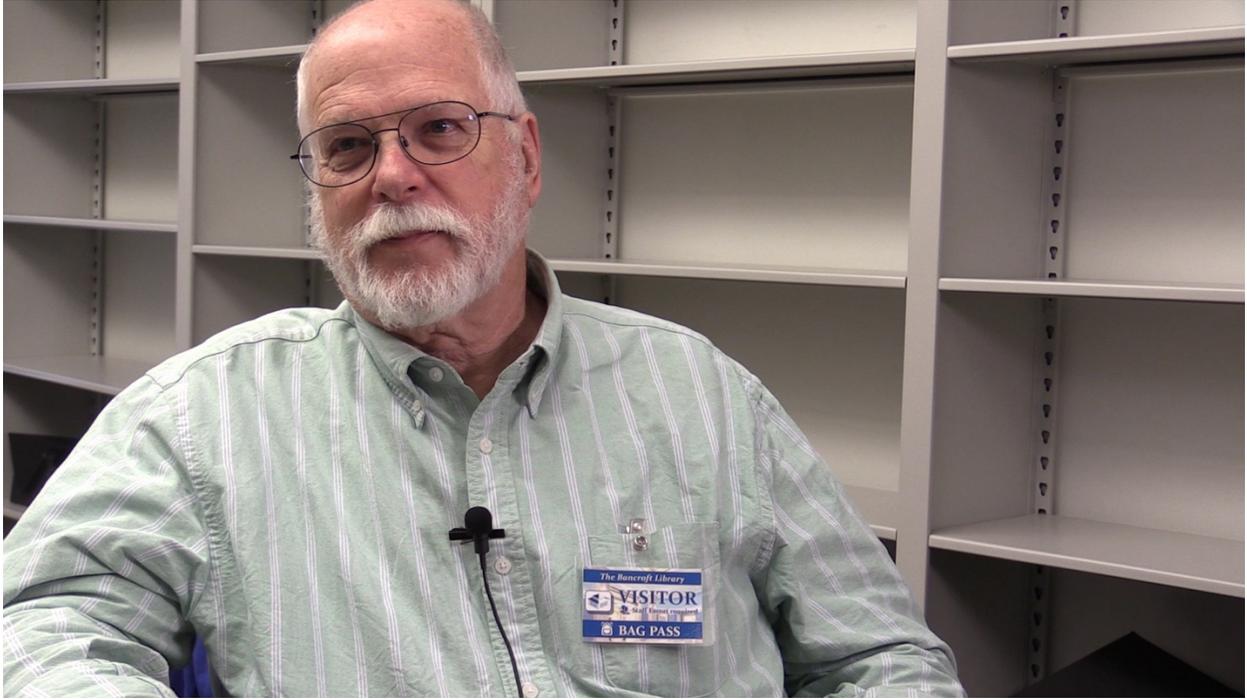
\*\*\*\*\*

All uses of this manuscript are covered by a legal agreement between The Regents of the University of California and John Nicoles dated August 15, 2018. The manuscript is thereby made available for research purposes. All literary rights in the manuscript, including the right to publish, are reserved to The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley. Excerpts up to 1000 words from this interview may be quoted for publication without seeking permission as long as the use is non-commercial and properly cited.

Requests for permission to quote for publication should be addressed to The Bancroft Library, Head of Public Services, Mail Code 6000, University of California, Berkeley, 94720-6000, and should follow instructions available online at <http://ucblib.link/OHC-rights>.

It is recommended that this oral history be cited as follows:

John Nicoles, "John Nicoles: East Bay Regional Park District Parkland Oral History Project" conducted by Shanna Farrell in 2018, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2019.



John Nicoles, 2018  
Photo by Shanna Farrell

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The Oral History Center would like to thank the East Bay Regional Park District for their generous support of this oral history project.

The Parkland Oral History Project is funded by the Interpretive and Recreation Services Department of the East Bay Regional Park District, coordinated by Beverly R. Ortiz, Ph.D., EBRPD Cultural Services Coordinator, and supported by staff at all levels of the Park District.

**John Nicoles** is an East Bay native and was a surveyor for the East Bay Regional Park District employee. In this interview, he discusses his early life growing up in Berkeley, California, family, education, interest in forestry, joining the EBPRD as a surveyor, the eucalyptus freeze in 1972 and its longterm consequences, the district's management of natural resources, and his hopes for the future of the parklands.

As a military veteran and U.C. Berkeley forestry graduate, John Nicoles went to work for the East Bay Regional Park District in 1971, only to discover that despite its vast woodlands of oak, pine, redwood, and eucalyptus, forest management was not an established aspect of the agency mission.

Within two years, however, Nicoles was able to use his forestry background in a crucial role. Following the record-breaking cold winter of 1972-1973, frost had damaged thousands of eucalyptus trees. Nicoles was enlisted by general manager Richard Trudeau to manage removal of the damaged trees, which represented a serious fire hazard; control of stump sprouts was a continuing part of his responsibility. Another forestry-related task was the evaluation of individual tree hazards from falling limbs and the like.

Later in his career with the park district, Nicoles worked to mitigate fire hazards in the monarch butterfly habitat at Point Pinole. He traveled to Dupont corporate headquarters in Delaware to research the history of explosive powder and dynamite manufacturing on the site. This led to the popular Dynamite Days program there.

Drawing upon his contacts in industry, Nicoles played a major role in organizing the Bullwhacker's Jubilee in 1985 and 1986 in Redwood Regional Park. School groups and the public had the opportunity to learn about historic logging methods and see a hundred-year-old steam locomotive, a "steam donkey", and a traction engine.

Nicoles is perhaps best known as the person who undertook an exacting analysis of the tallest trees near Redwood Peak, in an effort to pinpoint the "Blossom Rock Navigation Redwoods" used by sea captains in San Francisco Bay prior to 1850. The site is now California State Landmark #962, thanks to Nicoles' work.

During his twenty years with the park district, Nicoles was recognized as a person who was not reluctant to speak his mind, whether to members of the public or to upper management.

## Table of Contents—John Nicoles

### Project History

Interview 1: August 15, 2018

#### Hour 1

1

Born in 1944 — Raised in Berkeley, CA — Attending school in Berkeley Unified School District — Graduated high school in 1961 — Taking a different career path — Parent's occupations and social structure — Childhood memories in Berkeley Hills — Demographics of residents in Berkeley Hills — Fascination with mathematics — Attending UC Berkeley in the 1960s — Developing an interest in forestry — Confronting challenges in life science — Being deployed to Vietnam in 1970 — Searching for a career in forest management — Becoming a surveyor for EBPD — Thoughts on survey projects — Goals for the bicycle component of the EBPD master plan — Role of and involvement in the citizens' community — Discussing the eucalyptus freeze in 1972

#### Hour 2

17

Making management decisions — Long-term consequences of the eucalyptus freeze — Discussing CETA — Knowing how to address big conflicts — Anticipating fire hazards — How to develop a tree hazard management plan — Confronting the damage caused by the eucalyptus freeze — Mistrust and disagreement amongst colleagues — Reflecting on the strike of 1975 — Significance of John Waters — Reflecting on Dynamite Days — Forming of DuPont, Atlas, and Hercules — Bring remembered at the parks district — Hopes for the future of the parks district

#### Narrator Addendum

39

## **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: August 15, 2018

01-00:00:01

Farrell:

Okay. This is Shanna Farrell with John Nicoles on Wednesday, August 15, 2018. This is an interview for the East Bay Regional Park District Parkland Oral History Project. It's our first session, and we are in Berkeley, California, on the Cal campus. John, can you start by telling me where and when you were born, and a little bit about your early life?

01-00:00:24

Nicoles:

Well, I was born and raised in Berkeley. My parents had a house in the Berkeley Hills. My dad worked for Chevron in Richmond, and my mother was predominately a housewife. Dad was an engineer. I attended Hillside Elementary School, which is a fine, old, nice Tudor building which the Berkeley Unified School District no longer uses because it's not earthquake safe, but the last I knew, somebody's running a Montessori school. So, [laughs] I don't know whether that's still the case or not, but a beautiful structure. And then I attended Garfield Junior High which is now Martin Luther King, on Vine Street, and then to Berkeley High [School]. I graduated from Berkeley High in 1961.

I was pretty good in math as a youngster, and so I was influenced both by my dad's profession and by my teachers that, "You're going to be an engineer. Well, you're good at math; you'll just be an engineer. This is great." That didn't come to pass, but that sort of directed my educational choices. In high school, I took the advanced math courses, and in high school, and those aren't advanced by today's standards—my daughter took calculus in high school; it wasn't offered in high school when I was there—and took physics and chemistry, but interestingly, no life sciences. Later in my career, when I got to Berkeley and I switched into forestry, I found myself way behind the curve because I had taken no life science.

01-00:02:24

Farrell:

I just want to back up a little bit, and can you tell me what year you were born in?

01-00:02:29

Nicoles:

I was born in 1944.

01-00:02:30

Farrell:

Okay. And can you tell me your parents' names, and some of your early memories of them?

01-00:02:36

Nicoles:

Well, my dad's name was Elton William Nicoles. My mother was Meredith Hinton Nicoles. My father grew up in Lompoc, and my mother in Oakland, and they both graduated from Berkeley, my father in engineering and my mother, I think, in French literature. That was just kind of who they were. As I say, my dad worked for Chevron and commuted from the Berkeley Hills to

the plant refinery in a ride pool. I wasn't really involved in that, but that was part of my parent's social structure, was the five guys who were in the ride pool, and each guy drove one day a week, and so then they would get together occasionally for social events. There was a certain culture that went with that, that you would get ride pool stories, or things of that nature out of that.

My dad's position, he was with what? When I was a youngster, California Research, which was a research branch for Chevron, and then they reorganized and became Chevron Research, and he was sort of a general purpose engineer. He was responsible for creating little gizmos that they needed in the laboratory for something or other. I remember he was particularly proud because he had prepared the space for a computer, and the computer was so big they had to take out the windows and lift it with a crane and put it in there, and it was serial number one. I don't know who made that. He laughed. He said, "Well the people that sold it to us said it'd be obsolete by the time we took delivery." I suppose it was, but it was one of those computers that filled a whole room, and that was a project of which he was particularly proud, I think.

We vacationed in—we were generally sort of camp-oriented. We went three years that I recollect to the Berkeley Tuolumne Camp, which is now consumed by the Rim Fire a couple of years ago, and then did some camping on our own at various places. My dad, coming from Lompoc, there were relatives in Southern California. About once every four or five years, we would take a trip down to Southern California and visit with that end of the family.

01-00:05:27

Farrell:

Would you drive?

01-00:05:28

Nicoles:

Yes. Not this kid. [laughter] Well, I did when I was sixteen. The last trip that we took to the southland, I was sixteen and had my license, and I was permitted to drive part of the way. By that time, my two older brothers were off doing other things, and so, it was just my mother, my dad, and myself, and I got to drive. But yes, we took the family car. [laughs]

01-00:05:52

Farrell:

Did your mother work?

01-00:05:55

Nicoles:

She worked intermittently. When we got to be old enough to pretty much take care of ourselves and so on, she would get Christmas jobs. She worked as a temp at a men's store in Berkeley, Smith's, which is now no longer extant, and then she got a job at—this was really kind of fun—she got a job working for a woman who had a little store in Lafayette, but the nature of this store is that they sold children's clothing, door to door, off of a truck. That was shoo-

time shopping, and my mother drove the truck two days a week, and they had routes.

This was out in Contra Costa County, and they had routes, because the inspiration for this was, the owner had found herself with two kids down with the flu or something, and couldn't get new underwear for school or whatever it was, and so she came up with this concept. They were in the various housing developments out there in Contra Costa County. They would drive around in the truck, and they would hit various places on a regular schedule, so people knew they were coming and people would know that they could get some basic things. That was kind of interesting, and she did that for—couldn't tell you how many years—quite a number of years, but throughout the time I was in high school.

01-00:07:25

Farrell:

Okay. How about your older brothers, what are their names, and what are some of your early memories of them?

01-00:07:31

Nicoles:

Well, the oldest of us is Richard, or Dick, and the middle one is Keith. Keith was born in '41 and Dick just turned eighty, so he was born in '38—two very different people. Dick was not a social person, particularly, through high school and college, and ended up in the library business. Keith was the one that was in a social club at high school, and a fraternity at San Jose State, and then dropped out to get married, and ultimately went back and got a degree at Hayward. He worked for Safeway for quite some time, and then he and his wife decided they wanted to move to the mountains, and they got themselves transferred. She worked for the phone company, so they got themselves transferred to Donner Lake area.

But they both kind of got fed up with the routine, and so they quit and ended up buying a liquor store in Quincy, and then the liquor store led to a laundry, because Quincy is kind of a small place, and as my brother observed, he said, "If you don't have two or three businesses, you can't make ends meet." But he ultimately was basically in the dry cleaning and laundry business in Quincy, and in fact, just ultimately, he basically turned it over pretty much to his son. But his son didn't really like it all that much, so, they finally just liquidated the thing, relatively recently, but, oh yeah, that's kind of who they are.

01-00:09:36

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit about some of your memories of Berkeley Hills, what it looked like when you were growing up there, and maybe a little bit about what the community was like?

01-00:09:47

Nicoles:

Where I lived, there weren't any nearby parks, at least not for young kids. We were within walking distance of Lake Anza in Tilden Park, so we'd go over there in the summertime and swim, but that would've been after I was—

certainly fifth or sixth grade. It was pretty free. I think the things I did in fifth and sixth grade that I wouldn't consider letting children do today. The Berkeley Hills at that time was sort of like Brentwood is today. That was as close as a young professional might hope to live to the urban center. When I came to Cal, my assistant professors, they lived in Lafayette and Moraga, and it kept moving outward.

We think today the Berkeley Hills is pretty high-end place, but it wasn't really a high-end place then. My parents bought a house. They bought it in, I think '42, before I was born, paid \$5,000 for the house and lot in the Berkeley Hills, if you can imagine. The property has since sold in excess of a million, and my guess is, it may have sold again since I last was aware. I haven't been on Zillow recently to look at that. But, there were lots of vacant lots, a lot of places that hadn't been built on, so our play field was a vacant lot. One of the things that was kind of interesting, particularly in the context of today's news, is that the vacant lots were considered a fire hazard, and there would be a posting, and in the summer, Berkeley Fire Department would go around and burn off the lots. That was always an exciting time because a fire engine was there and they were setting the fires and burning off the grass, and so on.

Well, those lots have all now long since been built on, so that isn't going on anymore. But, you had your neighbors. We played hide and seek—there were no fences—played hide and seek, and you were just all over the neighborhood. We played football and variations of baseball in the middle of Shasta Road, had to call time-out when cars were going by. The ground rules were that if you were playing football, offense always had to play uphill, and that was kind of one of the rules. Walked to school. Even at elementary school, I walked to Hillside, which was—well, we said it was a mile. I don't know how far it was, but yeah, as an elementary school student, I walked that far to school.

01-00:12:53

Farrell:

What did some of the other people who were your neighbors, do you have a sense of what they did for work?

01-00:13:01

Nicoles:

Our closest friends, neighbors were the Morbys across the street, and he was a professor. He was, Edwin Morby was of Scandinavian origin, but he taught Spanish, and his wife, Elizabeth, was—I can't think of her maiden name now, but there's a dorm named after her father. So they were university people. They had a son who was about the same age as my oldest—of the oldest of the three of us, so that was them.

The lot behind us were the Selvins. David Selvin edited a union newspaper. He had three sons: Steve, last I knew—who was my middle brother's age, roughly—was in biological statistics. He was teaching on this campus. Mike, I'm not sure what Mike actually did. He was roughly my age, maybe six

months older than I am, and he was my age, and his mother commented that he was trying to write the Great American Novel, but I honestly don't know what he did to bring money in the door. The youngest son who was considerably younger was Joel, and he was the rock music critic for the *Chronicle* for many years. You see his name in the paper from time to time. Dave was interesting because he'd been in the military, and he'd been a firing instructor, but what was cool was he had a surplus jeep. That was neat, that somebody had a jeep.

Up on the top of the hill, above us at One Hill Road, was the Newhall family, and Scott Newhall was the editor of the *Chronicle* for many years, and they were fun because he got interested and they'd go out on the desert for vacations. He had a couple of surplus military vehicles which, sometimes on the weekends, we'd go out and play baseball in Tilden Park, and we'd all pile into one of these military vehicles and go tooling around. [laughs]

Another a fellow who became really my good buddy, but later on, high school level, were the Atthowes. Scott's grandfather had been in the barge business on the Bay, then got into trucking, and his father inherited the trucking business at East Bay Drayage which was at Third and Addison. There's a condominium complex there now, I think. Scott got into art, and trucking, so, when this building was being earthquake retrofitted, the books went to the storage facility in Richmond. My friend Scott had all your art. He is in the art transportation storage exhibit setup business, did very well at that.

01-00:16:39

Farrell:

You had mentioned that you had an interest in math, and you were taking some advanced math classes when you were in high school. What did you like about math?

01-00:16:49

Nicoles:

I don't know what I liked about math. I never was a linguist. To my mother's chagrin, I did very poorly in French, [laughs] and I was a horrible speller. It wasn't until eighth grade that I had a teacher that embarrassed me into learning how to spell. She was one of these teachers where you would take a spelling test, and then you pass the test to the person behind you and they'd correct it. She'd say, "Well, how many hundred percents do we have?" Well, everybody knew who had whose paper, and mine was always the poorest grade in the class. I'm sure it would be considered in today's world a very poor teaching strategy, but it basically embarrassed me into learning how to spell. When I got my first hundred percent, the class applauded. [laughter]

But math was something I could do. It appealed to my sense of order and logic and so on, and as I say, advanced mathematics at Berkeley High at that time was trig and solid geometry. That's fine; it's kind of interesting because I use trigonometry almost daily, but there's not enough important trigonometry. If you're not an engineer, if you're not designing structures, there's not enough

important trigonometry to fill a semester. I have had occasion to teach people, and I say, "I can teach you all the trigonometry you really need in about a half an hour, and after you've got that, the kind of stuff the average citizen needs in trigonometry." That was kind of a weird class.

There was one guy, Richard Menken, who taught advanced math at Berkeley High School, and there was a single semester that was trig and solid geometry into one, and even at that, there wasn't really enough to fill the space. There's a lot of people get bored by it, or they start trying to teach you things you don't really need to know.

01-00:19:08

Farrell:

Yeah. While you were at Berkeley High, why did you decide to go to Cal?

01-00:19:16

Nicoles:

Well, my parents had both gone here. I don't know; it was just sort of a given. I'm not sure I understand what motivated my brothers. I think Keith suffered from wanting to get out from under parental control. Dick stayed at home and went to school at SF State. I basically lived at home. I was here five years and lived at home, so that's ten semesters. I lived at home seven semesters of the ten semesters. It was a way of saving money, it was reasonably cheap, and today's students would be aghast, but my university fees when I started here were \$71.50 a semester. By the time I graduated in 1966, I felt ripped off because they were \$121.50. [laughs]

01-00:20:19

Farrell:

So inflation was happening even then too. [laughs]

01-00:20:21

Nicoles:

Oh well, and it's more than inflation. You look at inflationary figures even over fifty years, it doesn't make up the difference, so.

01-00:20:31

Farrell:

Yeah, or I guess, rising tuition, yeah.

01-00:20:34

Nicoles:

Well, I think at that point, there was a lot more state support, state funding coming in, and there's a lot more of the university expense is being born by the student today than was the case back then.

01-00:20:49

Farrell:

What were you studying when you were at Cal?

01-00:20:52

Nicoles:

Well, I set out to be an engineer, and in the lower division, it's a very strict regimen. You take this, this, this, this, and this, and there's room for one elective, and it better be at the time slot, or you're out of here, and the math began to get to me. The kinds of things they were teaching, wanting me to learn, I was not as good at. Ultimately got into what was called advanced integral calculus. Two things about that: One was, they were trying to teach

me how to graph things in four dimension, and that just didn't really appeal. I could visualize three dimensions—four dimensions, I lost it. But the other thing is that integral calculus relies on a bunch of formats. There isn't a method. For a whole lot of things in math, there's a method: you step one, step two, and you multiply by this and you get the answer.

Integral calculus is different, and I'm not even sure where these things came from, but there're like 300 standard formats, and if you have an equation or a mathematical statement, and it meets this format, then this is what that integrates to. But I don't understand why, and nobody could ever explain it to me, and I'm sure there are people out there who can explain it; they just can't explain it to me. That was when I sort of ran aground in the engineering world.

One of my interests that I developed was in railroading. My older brother, the oldest one, was interested in trains, and what he liked was fast passenger trains; that was his gig. He kind of got me interested, but I was more interested in some of the unique equipment that was used in industrial railroading. Specifically, logging and mining railroads were of interest to me, and I began to develop an interest in the hardware for those activities, and also the history of the firms, the companies that used that.

By the time I'd been here now a couple of years at Berkeley, I was thinking, casting around, I got to get out of engineering. [laughs] This is too much. I looked at forestry, and as an elective, while I was still in engineering, I took a lower-division introductory course to forestry to kind of see whether I wanted to get my feet into that, and I did, and I liked that. But, as I mentioned with regard to my high school training, no life science. Forestry is botany, and so, my first round with a five-unit course in botany, I failed that. That could've put me out of business, but I gathered my resolve and said, "No, I'm not going to do this again. I'm not going to take this as a failure."

01-00:24:26

Farrell:

What made you want to keep going with that?

01-00:24:29

Nicoles:

A couple things. I think it was pride. I didn't want to acknowledge that I couldn't do this, and part of it was I felt a little, I won't say cheated, that's not fair, but the guy who taught the course literally spoke Greek as his first language. He was an advanced botanist way over here somewhere, and they dragged him out to teach Botany One, and he'd forgotten more botany than I'll ever know, and the upshot was that for a student who'd never had a life science, this was like being in over your head. I took it again and got a B without any real trouble, but the instructor was a vastly different person, and he spoke English, with an Australian accent, but he really did speak English.

It was one of those things that I just got caught in this moment, and there was a young woman in that class who would occasionally put up her hand and say, “Well, sir, don’t you mean this or don’t you mean that?” and he would say, “Oh well, I’ll look that up and tell you next meeting,” kind of thing, and he would, except, of course, everybody had forgotten what had gone on. But she’d had like botany or a life science in high school, and recognized when there was a discrepancy, and he was making errors not because he didn’t know it once, but because he’d left it so far behind that it was—you know. That’s one of the shortcomings, if you come here for an education is, you can get yourself caught in that. I ultimately had organic chemistry from Melvin Calvin, which was a real treat, but again, you had to run to keep up with him, so.

01-00:26:30

Farrell: We have an oral history with him, actually.

01-00:26:32

Nicoles: Pardon?

01-00:26:32

Farrell: We have an oral history with him, with Melvin Calvin.

01-00:26:35

Nicoles: You have a what?

01-00:26:36

Farrell: An oral history with him. We have an interview with him.

01-00:26:37

Nicoles: Oh yeah, I can imagine, yeah. Well, he gave a class that was just—there was no textbook, and it was two, hour-and-a-half lectures a week, and the fourth lecture that the—hour and a half is three—the sixth hour was an exam once every two weeks. He gave an exam in which the class average was four, and I scored two, but, the final exam wasn’t nearly as bad as the rest [laughs] of the course. But what was really, really worthwhile is, you go into the class, and you had to take notes, and you just wrote like crazy. The last two classes, what he was talking about is how he got his Nobel Prize, and I put my pencil down. I said, “I don’t think this is going to be on the exam!” [laughs] But that was worth the price of admission, it really was.

01-00:27:45

Farrell: At that point, what were your career aspirations?

01-00:27:49

Nicoles: Well, I figured I’d end up in the timber business somewhere, maybe working for the Forest Service, but in timber management. With now fifty years of hindsight, forestry at that time was very relatively narrow in terms of “grow trees, cut them, make lumber, grow more,” and today, forestry is much broader than that, and it was the sort of thing that the profession was forced into. The environmental movement really pushed foresters into having do this

thing. The thing to me that's ironic is that our environmental regulatory structure today is very Balkanized and narrow. You've water people and air people and so on, right? The foresters who are out there trying to write a land management plan have to take all these things into consideration.

From my perspective at least, in today's world, the forester is the holistic manager, when what we started out with in the sixties was all these environmental people, everything's connected to everything kind of thing. Well that's not how the regulatory agencies are thinking.

01-00:29:11

Farrell: Yeah, it's very siloed, yeah. So you graduated from Cal in 1966, is that correct?

01-00:29:18

Nicoles: Yeah.

01-00:29:19

Farrell: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about what you did after that? I know you went into the military.

01-00:29:25

Nicoles: Well, the Vietnam War was hovering over everybody's head. That was the onset; this Free Speech Movement in 1964 was sort of the onset of the student unrest. There may have been other things going on, but that was really the onset. They've now more played a part in that, and in my theory—there are two or three other things—the environmental movement played a part in that. I would contend that the Pill played a part in that. There was a lot of rhetoric around: "I wouldn't send my daughter to that school." I think there were mothers from—well, probably parents of both sexes, from the previous generation who saw an opening up of sexual behavior that they hadn't enjoyed, and there was either moral resentment or jealousy. I'm not sure which.

01-00:30:30

Farrell: Maybe both. [laughs]

01-00:30:30

Nicoles: Yeah. All these things kind of heaped in, but the Vietnam War was clearly the name-brand issue. I was confronting that, so I elected to go into the Peace Corps, but that was not a good match for me. I went to Puerto Rico to do some training, and I was supposed to go to a forestry project in Dominican Republic, and actually as part of the training spent two weeks in Dominican Republic. First, I'm not a linguist. I wasn't doing well in speaking Spanish. I didn't see any real future in really expressing myself or being understood, or understanding what people were saying to me, in a foreign language.

But the other thing was, you got to Dominican Republic and there was a big USAID [United States Agency for International Development] presence there,

and it was widely believed that this was actually a CIA [Central Intelligence Agency] presence, and whether that's true or not, I have no way of knowing. But to a large degree, Peace Corps people were serving as handmaidens to an AID forestry program, and these were old-line Forest Service people, and there was just a cultural gap there. The Peace Corps was idealistic, and these long-term Forest Service people came out of that "grow trees, cut them, make lumber" school, and so that was how it was.

Finally, one guy said, "Well, if you stay here, you can do what you want. Think of the master's degree you could work on." I looked at him [and] I said, "If I wanted a master's degree, I'd have stayed in Berkeley." That was it, just that whole atmosphere. It may have well been that if I'd ended up in a program somewhere else, it would've been a good fit. But it wasn't a good fit, and you couldn't shift from one program to the other. Once you were on track to go to the Dominican Republic in a forestry program, that was it. You were either in or you were out. And so, I came out. Another thing that happened at that point is that a Peace Corps volunteer got drafted out of Africa, and there weren't a lot of those, but I looked and thought, I'd seen this as a shelter and it wasn't.

I came back and confronted the military, and looked at a couple of different things, but ultimately ended up enlisting for an officer candidate school program, so, 1967 was basically a full year of training. I was commissioned a lieutenant in December of '67. I was in Europe for two years, in Germany for two years working for a headquarters there, and then got sent to Vietnam in 1970. And guess what? I'm back in the engineers. [laughs] So, that was what my career looked like there.

01-00:33:53

Farrell:

You came back in December of 1970?

01-00:33:57

Nicoles:

Yes.

01-00:33:57

Farrell:

Okay. What did you do when you came back in 1970? What were you thinking that you would do for work?

01-00:34:05

Nicoles:

I still was kind of on the notion of the timber business track, but there were a couple of realities: One is that the timber business was down right then. The timber business fluctuates, and so there wasn't a lot of hiring going on, and the timber business also tends to hire people temporarily during the summer. The field work is a very summer-oriented thing, so one of the practices in that business is to hire people for a summer, and you get a chance to test drive them before you put them on the payroll permanently.

At that time, I had a wife and child, and I wasn't in a position to take a job like that, and I was kind of casting around. This was kind of funny because it was my friend Scott Atthowe, he'd worked for East Bay MUD (Municipal Utility District) summers as a student, and he said, "Why don't you try East Bay MUD (Municipal Utility District) or the East Bay Park District?" That's how I ended up walking into the East Bay Park District, looking for what I thought would be a logical fit in forest management, but they didn't have anything, and I ended up being a surveyor. [laughs]

01-00:35:23  
Farrell:

Can you tell me about your early memories of walking into the administrative building, what that experience was like for you?

01-00:35:30  
Nicoles:

Well, I've never been a very good job hunter, and I was scared spitless. I had this resume that I thought was pretty good, and so I walked in, and at that point, the main office was the building on Skyline Boulevard, and you walked in the door, and the personnel department was right there. I kind of hemmed and hawed and said, "Well, I was looking for a job, and I have a degree in forestry, and blah, blah, blah." The woman who was there was the assistant personnel director slash secretary, said, "Well, I'll take your resume and we'll put it on file or something." It wasn't, in fact, till later that I realized that they simply didn't hire anybody to manage forests [laughs] in the park district. But in any case, she was scanning my resume, and she said, "Well, I see you've got some surveying experience, and we need a temporary surveyor." That's how I got into the surveying business for the park district.

01-00:36:40  
Farrell:

Can you tell me about your first assignment as a surveyor?

01-00:36:45  
Nicoles:

[laughs] The first assignment was getting to work. When my wife and I went to Germany, I'd bought an Opel. I bought it here and took it to Germany, and for reasons I never could understand, it wouldn't start in the fog. It would start with this much snow on the hood, but it wouldn't start in the fog. When I got out of Vietnam, my wife had an apartment in Richmond, and guess what? There's fog in Richmond. I damned near was fired the first week because I couldn't get the car to start! [laughs] Fortunately, a friend had an old Plymouth Valiant that she said, "Here, you can drive this," and I could get to work. So that was my first [assignment]. [laughter]

The survey crew, there was a survey crew, and we worked on a whole variety of things, whatever was going. At that time—your outline here references Chabot—at that time, one of the projects was to construct a campground in Chabot Park [Anthony Chabot Regional Park], and that was a big project, because at that site, there was no competent water service, so there was a long water line that had to be built from way over here to way over there, and they needed to have sewage, and so there was a long sewer line built. I don't know

if you're familiar with the area, but the campground in Chabot, the sewer line goes down a hill and across an arm of Lake Chabot, and out and comes out in Castro Valley.

We had to survey that, and so on, so forth, and then we surveyed the road and put in, located the campsites, but intermittently, there were other things going on. One thing that really struck me is, and that is there was no sense of continuity. You didn't work on a project till it was done or even until you were through with one definable segment. What we did is, we worked and then, we'd come to work and Billy Walters (head surveyor) would say, "Well, we have to go over here today," and so we'd end up down at Alameda Beach. We'd end up over there, and somebody wanted to do something else, and then you'd come back to Chabot and you're wondering, where were we, where did we leave off?

At one point, I went in and talked to the department head, Lew Crutcher, and I said, "This isn't making any sense to me. See, I'm the engineer. You get a project, you have steps one through a hundred, and you do it, and you go on to something else. Lew Crutcher was an interesting guy and I really liked him, and he was a person who would listen, and talk to you, which is not true of everybody that I've worked with at the park district, but he, I think he was a little in over his head. He was kind of an artist, and not really a strong department leader kind of thing. Ultimately, he left, but that was one of the things, and what he recognized from that experience is that he realized that I wasn't a chainman. A chainman, in surveying terms—today what we use is a steel tape that's graduated, to measure distance, but that guy that does that is a chainman, and that's kind of low man on the totem pole.

Subsequently, in 1972, the park district got into doing a master plan, and that was a big project. The district wanted a tax increase, property tax increase, and you could either go to the electorate, or you could go to the legislature, and the district chose to go to the legislature. And, A. Alan Post, who was the legislative analyst at that time, recommended to the legislature that they allow us the ten-cent tax increase, but only give us five cents, pending completion of a master plan, because the argument was: Population is growing. We need to buy land. We need more money to buy the land, blah, blah, blah, and what A. Alan Post was saying was, "Tell me what you want to buy."

I was working in the planning department, and they had responsibility, leadership responsibility for producing this master plan. I had been drawn off the survey crew and brought into the office to do various odd jobs. Doing the master plan, working on the master plan turned out to be one of the odd jobs. I was active in developing a bicycle trails plan for the district. I worked with Jana Olson and John Olson on that project, and that's in the 1972 master plan, and I'm beginning to see bicycle lanes on the streets today. Pretty incredible, you know?

01-00:42:37

Farrell:

What was your goal for the bicycle component of the master plan?

01-00:42:41

Nicoles:

Well, the that was kind of interesting, but mostly, the land department was, of course, engaged in this, because they were the people who actually acquired, and they were looking at chunks, and John Olson was a—I'm not sure where he came from. I think he was a grad student here or something, at that point, and he's architecture development planning. I'm not really sure. I'm not even sure he's got a degree. He's one of those people who is good at things, and I honestly don't know whether he actually got a college degree, but he came in and he said, "Well, we're talking about Alameda and Contra Costa Counties. There ought to be a trails component here. You ought to be able to get from park to park, and these things ought to be connected."

The consulting firm was called "Overview," and was nominally headed up by Stewart Udall, former Secretary of the Department of the Interior, but I never saw him, and I don't know that he was ever on the property. The local lead was a man named Al Baum. Baum said "we didn't sign up for a trails plan; that wasn't in the original contract to do that." Jana and John Olson—no relation to each other—and I, were all into bicycling and hiking and so on, and so, we basically put that together. That was our piece in the master plan, really. But there were other things that went into it. In doing the process, we had a citizens' committee, and so the citizens' committee had to have a two-day field trip to look at, visit sites, and so I ended up doing most of the work in organizing that field trip.

01-00:44:54

Farrell:

Real quick before we talk about that, for the bicycle trails part of the master plan, were you hoping to just connect the parks through bike trails or just make it more bike accessible?

01-00:45:07

Nicoles:

Well, yes, but we weren't looking at accessibility in the handicapped concept at all. But we were looking, yes, to try and connect the parks, but at this point, of course, we had parks in Livermore, Antioch, and all around the East Bay MUD (Municipal Utility District) lands, and so on. A trail network, whether it was for bicycles—we looked at bicycles and horses and hikers, all right? The bicycle element was, a lot of it, is what's on the city streets. We don't see a lot of horses there. But the idea was to provide a network but by default, that network really covered the whole space. We didn't have eastern Alameda County, so we didn't go out to Tracy yet, and we didn't have eastern Contra Costa County, I don't think. Those were annexed later. Lose a little track of time; it's been a while. [laughs]

01-00:46:19

Farrell:

Totally understandable.

01-00:46:20

Nicoles:

So that the trail, the idea was, yes, to be able to go from park to park, but there were stopping-off places also. That also led to—someone said, “Well, BART [Bay Area Rapid Transit] right-of-way would be a great trails system.” Pardon me, BART, I don’t know whose idea that was—BART right of way is a rotten trail system, because they’re either in tunnel, or they’re fenced in. What are you going to do? But that led to another grant and a BART trails study which, I was involved in that too, but there wasn’t a lot you could do with it. We produced a nice document, but not a good expenditure of resources, in my judgment.

01-00:47:13

Farrell:

For the citizens’ committee, can you tell me a little bit about the role of the citizens’ community, and how you organized it?

01-00:47:21

Nicoles:

Well, I was low enough on the totem pole that I wasn’t really a party to that. The citizens’ committee, I suspect there were nominations of some nature, and certainly people like the Sierra Club, and other organizations that had an interest in the operation of the district, put up names. Glenn Seaborg was on it. Catherine Kerr was on it, a lot of university people. Interestingly enough, the park district, when the park district was formed, there was a plan done in 1928 to evaluate East Bay MUD (Municipal Utility District) lands for possible park use, and they had a citizens’ committee, and you looked down the citizens’ committee, and half the names are dormitory names on the Berkeley campus.

There always had been a big interest on the Berkeley campus for that. There were a lot of people associated with that, name-brand people, of course, Catherine Kerr, and I forget the other two ladies’ names offhand [there were many notable alumni women on the Citizens Action Task Force in 1973, but reference here would be for Save the Bay founders Catherine Kerr, Sylvia McLaughlin and Esther Gulick. Only Catherine Kerr’s participation was specifically noted on the citizens committee]. One’s husband was a scientist, and she was mayor of El Cerrito [Jean Siri was mayor of El Cerrito, and involved with Save the Bay’s efforts – and served as a park district board director – but did not participate on the citizens committee; and her husband was UC Berkeley biophysicist William Siri].

01-00:48:46

Farrell:

We can always add that in, that’s no problem.

01-00:48:48

Nicoles:

There had always been a big interest on the Berkeley campus for that (the original plan). There were a lot of name-brand people associated with the 1972 citizens committee. Catherine Kerr represented Save the Bay, so she had this environmental rooting that brought her into the committee. Various other people, I think probably, city council’s were asked to nominate people, and so it was a busload, so fifty people, give or take.

01-00:49:13

Farrell: How did you manage that?

01-00:49:17

Nicoles: Well, there were, I think there were meetings and committees and so on. The piece that I was actually involved in with this field trip, and that was scheduled and we hired a bus, and Lew Crutcher and I established where we wanted to go, and I laid out a program. I got the bus driver really mad at me, because we went from Nortonville to Somersville, and the Black Diamond Mines, and that's not bus country. He let me know afterwards. [laughs]

01-00:49:52

Farrell: What sites did you select for that field trip, and why?

01-00:49:56

Nicoles: Well, we looked at sites that were where we wanted to augment existing lands or properties that we thought we would look at, and there was an awful lot of emphasis placed on shoreline properties. We went down; we were down in Sunol, and looking at some of the property there. We went out to Livermore. We looked at what's now—can't even think of the name of it, but the quarry swim center, that's out there between Pleasant and—not Pleasant Hill—Pleasanton and Livermore. There's a park out there. We looked at what's now Shadow Cliffs; we didn't own that at the time, I don't think. We looked at potential additions to Del Valle, and we didn't actually go up into what's become known as the Sunol Wilderness—that was a little off the beaten path—came up and looked at shoreline properties along the northern shoreline at various places.

01-00:51:05

Farrell: Were there any other components to the master plan that you were involved in?

01-00:51:11

Nicoles: Not that I recollect. Oh well, early on, early on, and this kind of influenced me, early on, I was asked to put together some historical background for the consultants so they would know who they were dealing with. In the course of that, and so I did, there was this 1928 master plan, and there was this, that, and the other thing, and so on, so forth. Well in the course of that, I came across a master's thesis that was done here like in the 1940s, by a guy who was in public administration, as a student. This was his master's thesis. He did it on the park district, and he was still living.

I got in touch with him. I got permission to reproduce his master's thesis, and distributed that and so on, but there were some very interesting insights, because he was looking at the management structure of the park district, and he didn't like what he found, particularly. The one thing that really sticks with me is that, every Friday or Friday every two weeks, the entire employment would meet in the Brazil Room, and paychecks were handed out like they were prizes. I thought, boy, we've improved since then. I mean, people get

their—even direct deposit, it’s—but at that time, your paycheck wasn’t considered quid pro quo for the work you did. It was considered, “thanks for showing up, and here’s my gift to you” kind of attitude.

Really, really amateurish, and throughout my career, what I’ve seen is that people were sort of trapped in the park district as employees or administrators; they have a great love for parks but they’re not managers. They don’t see these things. They don’t understand that that’s not how you treat people. There are other incidents, experiences that sort of reflect that same issue. I didn’t, in a lot of ways, I never came to grips with that until after I left the district, but what I would say generally is that park organizations are emotionally driven places, and one of the things that resulted in my being in conflict is: I deal with gravity and photosynthesis and stuff like that. Well you can’t argue about that stuff and it’s not a feeling issue. It’s a what’s-going-to-happen issue, so.

01-00:54:20

Farrell:

One of the other things that kind of was really formative for your career, also happened in 1972, and that had to do with the eucalyptus freeze. Can you tell me a little bit about what that was? What happened? What areas were affected?

01-00:54:35

Nicoles:

In 1972 we had a cold spell. I went to attend the big game [annual football game with UC Berkeley and Stanford] in the tail end of November in shirt sleeves, in short-sleeve shirt, and a week later, it was below freezing, for a week. The people that owned the property—Peter Jurs had purchased the property. The Jurs is an old-line Berkeley family, right? Peter Jurs had purchased the property that the Newhalls owned it, at One Hill Road, which is—the corner of Shasta and Grizzly has an elevation monument. It’s a thousand feet, and One Hill Road is probably 150, 200 feet higher. Grizzly Peak itself is, I think, like 1,600, something like that.

Peter Jurs, I went up there to chat with him, and Peter Jurs said he had been keeping temperature, and for a week, it did not go above 14 degrees at that property. It did so suddenly, and nobody had experienced this. One of my professors from Australia said, “We’ve never seen anything like that in Australia.” What happened wasn’t immediately obvious that anything had happened, and then what became apparent was that the foliage had all died. The question is, well what does it mean, and we couldn’t determine what it meant. In July, of ’73, I met with this professor, out on the site, and he said, “Well, I thought the leaves would all have fallen off by now, and there they are. They’re still there.”

What was recognized is, regardless of the condition of the trees, all these dead leaves in the crowns, 200 feet up, were an immense fire hazard, and as they’re all dead and dried out. This led to an incredible turmoil. There were people

who said, “Nothing’s dead.” There were people saying, “They’re all dead.” And there, you turn out, the world’s divided into eucalyptus lovers and eucalyptus haters, which doesn’t help. Very few eucalyptus managers on this side of the Pacific, right? And, so that was baptism by fire in a lot of ways.

What came of that: The general manager said, “We need to do something; we need some help,” and they went to Congress, Washington, DC, and FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency], and my recollection is that FEMA had some other moniker at that point, and I couldn’t swear to that. But, FEMA said, “Well, we can’t get you much money. We can give you money to clean up after you’ve had a fire, but we can’t give you money to prevent a fire.” Basically, it took an order of Congress to free up the money, do that, and then I got tagged to run the project. The project was defined; I didn’t really define the project, because we were getting consults from the Forest Service. Their regional offices were in San Francisco at that time, and California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection, and they said, “Well, here’s kind of what we can do in the time we have,” because of course, today, fire season begins in April. [laughs] But at that time, we were looking at September as being, whatever it is we’re going to do needs to get done by then.

The federal government freed up a bunch of money, and the park district had a grant, and the basic plan was construct a 300-foot-wide fuel break along the ridgeline, from basically the intersection of Grizzly Peak, Spruce Street, and Wildcat Canyon, out there where that reservoir is, if you’re familiar with the area, along the ridgeline, all the way down to where it would tie in to the Chabot Golf Course at Lake Chabot. An awful lot of that property belonged to the park district. Some of it’s private homes, and CDF—that’s what they call CAL FIRE [California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection] this week. Sorry, I’m old school. They’re still CDF. [laughs] CDF got a grant, and they had work crews that worked on private lots and adjacent to private property and so on. The university got a chunk of money, and the university choked. [laughs] A clear difference between the academic community and the managing community is that, confronted with a disaster, the university just goes—they look like a bug on their back, with their legs wa—so, they came to the park district and said, “Can you take this on?”

The fuel break crossed university property up there at the top of near where the little train [Steam Trains/Golden Gate Live Steamers at Tilden Regional Park] is. I ended up getting that. We had to let contracts. I spent better than a million dollars of federal money in three months, never worked so hard in my life. What Lew Crutcher said is that it was the biggest project the district had ever done.

01-01:00:16  
Farrell:

Wow. What was the significance of working on that project for you?

01-01:00:23

Nicoles:

Well, my second child was due and I was supposed to go to Lamaze classes, and I almost never made it. When I did make it, I was filthy dirty and my wife would go, and the other people in the Lamaze class would say, "Who is this twerp you're married to?" [laughs] That was one element, but it was really interesting. The primary contractor on the park district property was a group called Ferma Corporation, which was an acronym for Ferrari and somebody else, but the people I worked with were the four Ferrari brothers, and Roy, Ray, Bruno, and Larry.

But it was interesting. We wrote a contract. I did maps. We had a contractor's tour. I'd never done anything like that. You're just kind of thrown into the hot water to do it. One of the things that was kind of interesting is that we started with a basic Forest Service contract, and worked with that, because there was no way we were going to write all this boilerplate from scratch, and they called for the stumps to be cut twelve inches above the ground. Went out on the contractor's familiarity tour to see what this thing looked like, and they, [sniffs] [makes crying sounds] "We don't want to cut to twelve inches. We've got to get this done, right?" [laughs] What are we going to do? I said, "Well, what'll you live with?" "Eighteen inches."

Now, pardon me, if I'm working a chainsaw, I can't much see the difference between twelve and eighteen, but what the hey, right? I said, "Fine, eighteen it is. I'll issue a change order. Consider it eighteen. You'll all get a change order in the mail." That was fine. Later, Larry Ferrari came to me, and he looked at me and he said, "Now I understand about eighteen inches." I said, "Oh yeah?" He says, "Yeah, we've taken the torque converters out of six Caterpillar tractors. It's cost us a lot of money to cut the stumps eight inches high." Not something I would have thought about. My guess is that may be why it says twelve inches [laughs] in the Forest Service standard contract.

That was a learning experience for everybody, and the name of the game was basically, theoretically, this was supposed to be what we call a fuel break in which you would thin the trees, and blah, blah, blah, but the park district, at that point, there was a lot of anti-eucalyptus feeling, and so we just, wherever there were eucalyptus, we [makes cutting sound] just slicked it off, and you couldn't do that without taking all the brush and so on.

One afternoon I met Robert Stebbins, noted herpetologist to the University of California, and he's out there, and he was ranting and raving, and he says, "Well, there's such and such a bush down there. You can't just take that out!" I looked at all this bare earth and I said, "Doctor Stebbins, I think it's done!" The bush came back, but it was that kind of thing. People either hated or loved it, and one guy in Wildcat Canyon, on Wildcat Canyon Road, called me and say, "What are you going to do? This place looks like hell, blah, blah, blah," and it did, no question about it. I said, "Well, we're going to try and plant some trees," and we did and we plant some redwoods in that area that was

down near, by where the merry-go-round is. Some years later, I got a call from him. He says, "You may not remember me. I called you and gave you a lot of trouble when you cut the eucalyptus." He says, "Can I get you to top the redwoods?" I said, "No." [laughs]

I was one of the few people in the park district that said "no" to people. That, to me is, you make a management decision, and then it's it, and there's an awful lot of waffling and that's part of the emotional part of it. Well, this guy's a voter and he's a citizen and blah, blah, blah. Well, that's it. That's how you have to do it. I grew up fast, believe me.

01-01:05:00

Farrell:

What was it like for you to say "no" to people?

01-01:05:05

Nicoles:

Well, not too bad. With a couple of years of military experiencing saying "no," was probably easier than if you haven't had that. It's not that I didn't consider their concerns.

01-01:05:24

Farrell:

How would people react?

01-01:05:28

Nicoles:

Well, I had a lot of reactions. One of the things that happened, one of the fallouts of that was, we originally put in the contract that the contractor was to treat the stumps with a pesticide to keep them from resprouting, and the pesticide of choice was 2,4-dichlorophenoxyacetic acid, commonly known as 2,4-D, and more importantly in the public perception, 2,4-D was half of what the Army called Agent Orange, and the other half of Agent Orange is 2,4,5-trichlorophenoxyacetic acid. For a variety of reasons, the trichlorophenoxyacetic acid is the bad actor, and not because of trichlorophenoxyacetic acid specifically, but rather in the manufacturing process, you've got these things called dioxins which are recognized as highly toxic. What happened in the Vietnam War is that Dow Chemical, who bore the brunt of the criticism, didn't have the capability of manufacturing the volumes of stuff that the military wanted.

There were a lot of other people manufacturing it, and their manufacturing standards were not as high as Dow Chemical's were. The end result is, there was a lot of dioxin being delivered in Vietnam, which was bad. But, 2,4-D by itself, the two-chlorine version is not nearly as problematic as the three-chlorine version, and you start with a different feed stock and so you don't have the dioxin problem. But needless to say, we got ripped for that, all the time.

01-01:07:24

Farrell:

Were the general public aware that this was happening?

01-01:07:28

Nicoles:

Well, what happened was that the federal government said, “We won’t do that. Sprouting is your next problem; you’ll have to take responsibility for that.” So that we became, if we’d been able to put it all off on the contractor, it probably had just passed under the radar. But the fact is, it wasn’t entirely effective. It was maybe 30 percent effective, and what it takes is multiple treatments. We were going to end up carrying that ball regardless, one way or another, and we ended up getting bit. What happens is, this is an environmentally aware community, so somebody found out, and after that, it was “Katy, bar the door.” It’s an old expression meaning, “Here they come!” And I was featured in a two-issue smear by the *Berkeley Barb*. I’ve got both copies of the *Berkeley Barb*. That’s a memorable experience. [laughs] Not everybody can say that.

01-01:08:27

Farrell:

Yeah. What were the issues about? What—

01-01:08:30

Nicoles:

Well, there were a number of issues.

01-01:08:32

Farrell:

Or that those two issues, you said it was a two-issue spread?

01-01:08:36

Nicoles:

Well, the pesticide issue was the one, and I’m kind of losing track of the time, because there was the—I got interviewed by Sam.; I got interviewed by Evan, Goose, and Zapata, and the *Berkeley Barb* articles came out under “Sam, Evan, Goose and Zapata,” but Sam Silver was the photographer, and Evan, Goose and Zapata interviewed me, individually, independently.

That was an interesting experience. Evan Engber came to a board meeting and alleged that we hadn’t considered the oxygen consumption of the trees that were there. I said, “No we didn’t. We were working under emergency terms,” and by this time, a couple years down the pike, because after we did the fuel breaks, there were a lot of places that FEMA wouldn’t touch. The park district wanted to reduce the fuel hazard, and the eucalyptus in those areas, so we had a second contract in ’74 dealing with that.

This thing carried on for a period of time, and the interviews and the *Barb* articles I don’t think came out till like ’74 or ’75. They weren’t right there on the fuel break, but it was all the same issue, all the same. As I say, this dominated my career for a long time.

01-01:10:14

Farrell:

How many years did it dominate your career for?

01-01:10:17

Nicoles:

Well, we needed to have a crew to handle suckers, and so we had what was known as the Euc-crew. Well, the Euc-crew was approved by the park district

board as a budget item right about the time that affirmative action was coming in, and so the personnel department said, “Well, we’ll have a hiring freeze until we get affirmative action policy.” In order to fill the Euc-crew, they said, “Well, you can take transfers from other parks.” Well, that’s okay except, when you take transfers from other parks, what you get is everybody who’s trying to escape the situation they’re in. I had a lot of prima donna problem causers on that crew, and a couple in particular, but there’s no point naming names. But the fact is that this was an operational problem because of the personalities involved, because these people were already sort of on notice from wherever they were working, that they needed to find someplace else.

That was problematic, and finally that ended up in union issues and complaints, and this, that, and the other thing, and it didn’t help that our management wasn’t as astute as it might be. If you operate a chainsaw six or eight hours a day, you’re subject to what is known as carpal tunnel syndrome. That wasn’t widely grasped, and so, there were a couple of people in the management circles who felt this was practically fraudulent, and somebody would be off work for two days and there would be an insurance claim against the district’s employee insurance and so on, so forth. This wasn’t widely believed, and it’s real, because I had regular loggers talk to me and say, “Oh yeah, I get these sensations (like electric shocks),” but loggers are a different breed, and that wasn’t a problem to them. That’s a little different from being a public employee in a [laughs] park district, right?

That got to be a problem. Finally, the boss said, “Well, we’re just going to close out this crew. We’re going to disappear it.” Suckers started growing back. A few years later, we had CETA [Comprehensive Employment and Training Act] programs, and someone said, “Well, we’ll give Nicoles the CETA program, and he can use these guys to cut suckers.” Well, first thing that happened is the guy that roughed out the program—we didn’t qualify for CETA. That was for general-purpose governments only.

01-01:13:13  
Farrell:

What is CETA?

01-01:13:14  
Nicoles:

It’s Comprehensive Employment, C-E-T-A, Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, I think, and the idea is, it would provide yearlong jobs as a get-people-on-their-feet kind of thing. City of Oakland qualified for more CETA money than they could swallow, so they were looking for subcontractors, and they came to the park district, and they approached somebody, and this guy sketched out a budget and said, “Okay, we can use these workers for sucker treatment,” and turned it over to me.

Well, the first thing that happened is, the CETA law required that these employees had to have all the rights and benefits of any other employee. You couldn’t treat them as second-class citizens. That meant uniforms, that meant

dental care and so on, so this budget that was based on an hourly wage, didn't include all that. This is what the budget really looks like. Now that was a problem. You couldn't hire people under the CETA program to take work that for which you already had somebody in a job description that was supposed to do that.

Well, what happened was, my title at that point was, I think, land management specialist, and nobody thought CETA would work, and I suspect that probably 90 percent of the projects didn't work. But I wanted to get suckers cut, and we selected people; we interviewed twenty-four people for eight jobs, and got pretty good eight players. Then, City of Oakland said, "Well, can you do another crew?" and a personnel director said, "Well, I'm not going to interview again. You have to take the next eight off the list." Those were the second-stringers. Fortunately, I didn't have to deal with the [laughs] third-stringers.

But we got this launched, and then, these were yearlong jobs, and it was an opportunity to give people who were, I think we called them park workers—maybe we called them park rangers at that time—I'm not really sure what the title was, but people in that base entry-level job an opportunity to work for six months as a supervisor, but, it was a temporary position and the union contract said they could only be in a temporary position six months, so we changed supervisors halfway through. Had two crews, four supervisors. Got halfway through and it became apparent that this was going to be effective.

The park operations department came and said, "Well, we don't think Nicoles should be running this. We think that this is an operations issue. We think it ought to be in the operations department." Well, the work they were supposed to be doing was work that the operations department had no way of doing anyway, and what really happened is, they got applied to park jobs that they were not supposed to be doing. Always things like that.

Finally, I basically got out of it. The fire department finally kind of got in a position to have enough credibility to do it, and then again got a crew launched and funded and so on, so forth. But the bottom line was, I was associated with so much of the dirt, that there was just no way that this could be turned over to me and succeed. The fire department made good work out of it, and Rich Aronson and Ed Leong was the supervisor for quite some time, and finally made headway, but this happened. We cut the trees in '73, and when I left in '92, we finally almost had a handle on it.

01-01:17:27

Farrell:

Says a lot right there.

01-01:17:29

Nicoles:

Yeah. Yeah.

01-01:17:31

Farrell:

One thing that you had mentioned before we started recording was, you found that you added a lot of value to where the conflicts were. Can you tell me a little bit about that, about what you meant by that?

01-01:17:45

Nicoles:

Well, I think, yeah, I was kind of a fighter. I would say, “Okay, we’re supposed to do this,” and the suckers are a clear example: “Well, what are you going to do with the suckers? You want to fire this crew? What are you going to do with the suckers?” People had to confront that. I think one of the things that had to be confronted, and I’m not sure it’s really done yet, but it’s a whole lot closer, is that the park district had never thought of the forest land as something to be managed, whether that’s the redwood land or the eucalyptus land or the oak woodland, these were all just permanent fixtures in the landscape. I hadn’t thought of it at the time, but I’ve had occasion to do work in some volunteer programs and do some teaching and so on, so I’ve come up with some things. Photosynthesis is relentless, and that’s something that wasn’t understood, and not ever acknowledged or grasped.

I think out of that came this understanding that there really needed to be some focus on this big piece out there that was—everybody was looking. You look at our master plan of ’72, and it said, “Well, we’ve got this kind of park, and that kind of park, and so on, so forth,” and basically what it says is, 80 percent of the land base is supposed to be open space wild land, but there was no commitment to the 80 percent. It doesn’t take 80 percent of the money, but it probably takes 15, and part of the problem was that we came into this thing, and what the eucalyptus problem, what the fuel problem, and the freeze did, was suddenly it became clear you needed to put money into forest management, but the budget had all been carved up, and each organization, each sector had its piece. Now everybody, what we’re saying is, “Well, you have to move these, and create a new wedge in the pie chart here,” and people resisted that. They had their piece of the pie; they wanted to keep it.

The first go round we did pretty much on federal money. I think the park district actually threw in out of its own budget a couple hundred thousand to do this, that, and the other. Other agencies similarly, but basically, the big bite came out of the federal government. But then the federal government went away, and the problem was still here. You needed to address that somehow, and so, I think, I can’t remember now how long it was, because once the CETA thing was off my desk, I wasn’t really directly involved, but I think that it was certainly ten years, maybe twelve years down the pike before the fire department actually was able to get long-term funding for a program. That long-term funding is now, I think, out there, for a variety of things.

But boy, you talk about a quantum, a tectonic shift in district philosophy and policy. The trees are now part of the district. I remember one occasion, and this goes to, I’ve got my tree hazard thing here. [laughs] I was talking to Jerry

Kent about tree hazards, and he was very dismissive, and I finally looked at him. I said, “Jerry, the trees don’t care about you. They do what they do, and our job is to anticipate that.” It just had never occurred to him, and it’s not that he was alone. That’s the character of the—trees are wonderful. They wouldn’t drop a limb on my head, but indeed, they do.

01-01:21:59

Farrell:

Yeah, can you tell me a little bit more about tree hazards? You just mentioned falling limbs [as] fire hazards. What other kind of hazards [were there]?

01-01:22:10

Nicoles:

The fire hazard I consider sort of in a different realm. There’s an awful lot of forest land in the park district that we don’t need to worry about tree hazards, because a tree hazard is something that potentially will do property damage or injure somebody. Probably 90 percent of the tree limbs, probably 90 percent of the trees could fall over and not inflict any harm.

In fact, one of the groups that I belonged to for a while is International Society of Arboriculture, and they’re more concerned with things like street trees, and trees in developed parks. They had developed an evaluation program for how you evaluate a hazardous tree. It’s a little complex, but basically, it comes down to trying to figure out, in any given tree, what your potential value loss might be, and then, saying, “Am I willing to pay that much money to avoid it, or not?” It has to do with looking and saying, not simply, “What is the potential failure,” but then, “What is the potential for it striking something that’s worth money?” and then, “How much money is that worth?” From there, you evolve sort of a hypothetical value for what the failure of that tree might be, and, it ranges.

Sometimes the trees come uprooted. This is probably now eight or ten years ago now, but a group of students on a river rafting trip on the American River, and they were camped out at Coloma, and an oak tree came uprooted and killed somebody. We don’t have a stethoscope for trees. We can’t take their pulse and so on. You have to make some judgment calls. If you’re within 10 percent, you feel like you did pretty well.

01-01:24:22

Farrell:

How did you go about anticipating those hazards?

01-01:24:26

Nicoles:

Well, first what you’d have to do is outline the areas generally where you’re at risk, and frankly, where you’ve got picnic tables, or campgrounds, or some kind of facility, that’s where you’re at risk. If somebody’s out walking in the woods, and a tree falls over, there’s no way you can evaluate that or attempt to inventory it; that’s just luck of the draw. But where the park district was saying is, “Well, this is a natural situation, so we can’t be held responsible for a natural situation,” and I said, “Well yeah, except you’re telling people that

this picnic table, the implication is that it's safe to sit here at the picnic table, and by the time they heard the crack, it's too late to get out of the way."

01-01:25:18

Farrell:

Did you help them try to develop a tree hazard management plan, or a protocol?

01-01:25:24

Nicoles:

Well, yeah, I did, and there are a number of resources out there. The Forest Service had a guideline or a manual that they used in their campgrounds, and the International Society of Arboriculture had data that they used, and so on, so forth. I would write out a thing and I'd pitch it to Jerry Kent, and Jerry Kent would say, "Well, show me the backup." Then I'd put together, and I'd put all the references and give him the pile of backup, and he said, "You don't expect me to read all this." Chris Nelson, who was my boss for a while, says, "Well, we can't analyze every tree in the district." He was just kind of brushing the issue off. I said, "I've never suggested that, but where we're telling people that 'it's okay to put your tent up and sleep,' we need to look at those trees."

The real problem, when push came to shove, the real problem was that the eucalyptus had been frozen. These down here at West Gate (of the Berkeley campus) were too low. They didn't suffer any freeze damage. The trees in Tilden and along the ridgeline, they did. What we discovered is, ten years down the pike, that some trees just had the foliage killed, and some trees had limbs where the bark was thin, limbs killed back to here. Some trees, the stem was killed down this far. Some trees, the stem was killed almost to the ground but it sprouted. I think I was aware of fewer than a dozen trees that actually died and didn't come back. But they were damaged at various different levels. It began to be apparent that these injury places, these damaged places, were an entry point for decay. Then, that's when the problems began, because you can't really see the decay. You can see the breakage but you can't really see the decay up there somewhere, and you can look up there and say, "Well, a limb broke off up there," but you can't really say, "I know what's going on." You can infer what's going on, but that's as good as it is.

We had a situation in which a limb fell and injured a woman. Well, the first thing is, nobody reported it to me. That, to me, immediately said something. The person that did report it to me, brought it to my attention, was the woman who ran our reservation system, because this was an area where we reserved, and it was a picnic area with a not a very good, but nonetheless a field where you could play soccer or something, out in Tilden Park. I don't know what the extent of this woman's injuries are.

I called the park supervisor and I said, "Well, I'd like to come out and look at it. Can you show me where this is?" He said, "Well, our insurance adjustor is coming out tomorrow, or two other days or whatever, and so why don't you

come out while the insurance adjuster is here?" I went out there while the insurance adjuster was here. There's this limb; it's lying on the ground, and we looked at it. It was a limb, and it was broken off at the end where it had been killed by the freeze, and we know it was damaged by the freeze because we have aerial photographs from 1973 that show that, and then it had sprouted, and it had sprouted from the end of the living tissue. It sprouted, but there was this stub here, and you could look there and you could see that it was decayed. Where it broke off was over here, but this new growth was heavy enough, and the decay reached far enough that there it is.

This guy's looking around and saying, "Oh yeah," kicking the dirt. I said, "Well, here's my recommendation. You need to settle with this lady as fast as you possibly can," I said, "because right here, in this barbecue pit"—and these are some old CCC barbecue pits, the stone barbecue pits. I said, "There's a limb this big around, and ten feet long that somebody was feeding into the barbecue pit and it's still sticking out. We know that nobody brought that from home. Where did it come from? Up here somewhere." Nobody was alert to that, and we know these trees had been frozen, and over there, within fifty feet of where we were standing, there was a limb that recently come down and damaged a picnic table, and it still had green leaves on it.

I said, "Here's the evidence that this is what's going on here." The insurance adjuster said, "Well, what kind of approach do we have to knowing these things?" The park supervisor said, "Well, we have workers in here a couple times a week to empty the garbage and clean the toilets and whatever," and said, "they're responsible for reviewing the site and making some kind of judgment, and then it gets entered in the log book, because they keep a daily log of work they've done." The insurance adjuster said, "Well, how would we find out about that?" "Well you'd have to go back and go through all the logbooks." There's no organized structure and the people who are making the judgment, or looking at it, may or may not log it, and they may or may not have any particular training or expertise in this field.

This dragged on for a while. We had a fellow who was our risk manager, and I go in and talk to him. I said, "Where does this stand?" "Well, our insurance adjuster recommends we don't pay it." Nothing happened and nothing happened and nothing happened. Because I joined the International Society of Arboriculture, I would get this little magazine called *Arbor Age*, which was basically an advertising thing for people who made limb chippers and that kind of stuff. A guy wrote a column about tree hazard risks and liabilities, and he mentioned an incident that had happened in the park district, and he said that "the park district had been found partially liable for that," and this was like two years earlier.

Well, that was kind of an interesting exercise because what had happened was, a team of two guys was hired by the Tilden Park Golf Course to trim some trees, and they get up there, and the guy cuts into it and it's decayed, and it

squashes him against his safety belt, and then breaks the safety belt and throws him to the ground, and the man's a paraplegic. One manager commented in a staff meeting that I attended that, "Ah, these guys are tree experts, and then they get hurt and they want to sue the park district." But, the district was found to be partially liable.

Anyhow, I wrote a little memo, and I thought I'd couched it very well. I wrote a memo and I said, "Here's a copy of this article and I've read about it. I was unaware of this, but if this circumstance is as reported, I think that advises us that we need to look at this issue more closely." I didn't say we hadn't been doing it right or anything, but just that we needed to look at that more closely. And, nothing happened. I thought, boy, I ought to hear from that. "Shut up and go to hell," maybe, but I ought to [laughs] hear from that, right? But nothing happened.

So I went in one day. Our administrator chief was a guy named Bob Owen, and he was a man that had come out of real work, and so I went in and I said, "Bob, this is really interesting, because I wrote this memo, and I sort of thought I would hear something and it's been dead silence." He says, "Oh yeah, that was discussed in the department heads meeting, and Jerry said, 'That isn't what happened,' so everybody just let it drop." I thought, well, that's interesting.

Columbus Day, I was out at Point Pinole. This had fallen in Contra Costa County, so I went by the Contra Costa County Court in Martinez and I inquired as to whether there was a judicial decision, and the clerk said, "Well, the judge isn't here—this is a judicial decision—but the record shows that it was settled out of court, so that the only notation would be in the judge's personal files, so you can't see those today." I said, "Well, can you give me a copy of the filing?" "Yes." It had the plaintiff's attorney for that. I called the plaintiff's attorney for that earlier event, and I said, "Well, I'm looking at this column and this is what it says, and it alleges that the district was found partially liable. Is that substantially what happened?" He says, "It was worse than that."

He said, "The golf course put out a contract and got bids that were very high, and the people who bid the jobs said, 'We have to bring in a boom truck, because we know these trees have been frozen, and we know they're dangerous, and we know they're decayed, and we will not put a man in the tree. It costs this much to do it.' The golf course pulled back the contract, and went hunting for somebody, and these two guys that were doing the work were recent arrivals. They worked actually for Shell and did tree work on the side. They weren't here for the freeze. They didn't know, and they bid low, and the golf course gave them the job."

01-01:37:07

Nicoles:

That's where I went over the edge. The lady who'd been injured in the second event, I called her. I said, "I think your lawyer wants to talk to me," and that was the beginning of the end. But the bottom line is—and it was sort of too bad, because when I made that call, David Pesonen was general manager, and I would have happily nailed him to a cross for any purpose, but he was a bad actor, and the park district gave him his walking papers, and so Pat O'Brien inherited this, [laughs] and I wouldn't have had it fall in his lap, but the die was cast, so.

01-01:37:50

Farrell:

This kind of defined the rest of your career with the district as well.

01-01:37:59

Nicoles:

Yeah, that was kind of laden, but it was very clear that O'Brien didn't trust me.

01-01:38:05

Farrell:

Okay, okay. I want to ask you a couple more things about—

01-01:38:10

Nicoles:

By the way, I was exonerated, okay, not by the park district, but I collected the limb that had fallen, because I said, "This is the evidence," and I wanted it to protect me. I had it outside my office, and there got to be some kind of—I don't know what was going on, and I was going on vacation. I got a call from Ted Radosevich, who was the attorney. He says, "You still have that limb?" I said, "Yeah." Said, "Well, don't let anything happen to it." I said, "You're right, I'm not going to let anything happen to it, because that's my protection, that's my proof that we know what we're talking about." I didn't know this was done, I didn't know until afterwards that they done it: they called in a good arborist and he looked at it, and he gave me a clear bill of health. He said, "Absolutely." I guess they paid the lady and I don't know what they paid her, but probably three or four times what they would have had to pay her if they'd just taken the advice in the first place.

01-01:39:17

Farrell:

I know you retired in 1992, but how long was this until before you left the district?

01-01:39:27

Nicoles:

Well, I couldn't really tell you. That was relatively early in Pat O'Brien's career, because as I say, I made the phone call when David Pesonen was there. I couldn't really tell you, but now Pat O'Brien stayed twenty years, but on the other hand, I've been out of the business for twenty-five, or thirty. It's kind of hard for me to tell. I worked under Pat O'Brien for maybe three years, something like that.

01-01:39:53

Farrell:

How did work change for you after that?

01-01:39:58  
Nicoles:

Well, nothing specific. Nobody really came after me. After the dust settled, I was called into O'Brian's office and I was told that I would, if I was going to behave like that, I couldn't work there, but he wouldn't say what the behavior was. I probably could have sued for creating a hostile working environment, but why would you want to work for somebody who doesn't want you to work there?

A couple other things happened. One was, we had the planning department arrange for some road grading, in violation of an agreement that we had. We were working on a plan for this particular park, and so I went out and looked at it. It was terrible, and I talked to the planner who authorized it, and I said, "We need to go out so I can show you why this is wrong." My tone of voice was elevated because they didn't tell me they were going to do this, and I was talking to somebody else, Nancy Brownfield—has her name come up? She was employed. David Pesonen, I did not care for the man, but bless his heart, he created, what seemed kind of flaky at the time, a stewardship department, and he got Nancy Brownfield in to deal with pesticide management.

It was the best thing that ever happened, because we'd just been going down a rat hole on that issue, and Nancy Brownfield came in and she had a degree in chemistry, and she's this nice, white-haired lady, and carried all the credibility in the world, and really got the district out from under a hard place on that one. That was great, but I was talking to Nancy Brownfield and she said, "Well, they were out treating artichoke thistles in this area," and I said, "I'm supposed to go out there. I said I would look at that road and I haven't done it yet." She said, "Well, you better get out there because there's a bulldozer working there right now." And I said, "What's going on?"

It got put off and it got put off and it got put off, and then the end result is, we had a field trip with eight people, go look at this thing, and it's a rather remote site, and the chief of planning at that time, Tom Mickelson, said, "I don't think this is a problem." We hadn't even gotten to the worst of it yet. It had been arranged that we would leave the property by walking across some private land, and that private owner was really paranoid about the park district. The next thing I know, Bob Doyle's calling me, and he was chief of land acquisition at that time. He said, "I got a call from so and so. What were you doing out there?" I said, "I was walking along with these people, but that's what was nominally arranged and I didn't arrange it."

It was pretty obvious that I wasn't going to make any headway in the planning and stewardship department, and then, after the fire in '91, there were some meetings held and I wasn't invited to the meetings, and I was one of two people at the park district who had some qualification there. I said, "It's over."

01-01:43:29  
Farrell:

Yeah, yeah.

01-01:43:31

Nicoles:

Maxine Turner asked me to come in and explain why I was leaving and I thought, you don't get it, do you? [laughs]

01-01:43:40

Farrell:

But, I guess before we get to kind of the end of your career, I do want to ask you a little bit about, if you have any memories of the strike that happened.

01-01:43:50

Nicoles:

Well, [laughs] I have one really fun memory. I was, at the time the strike started—and that was like '75, right?

01-01:44:00

Farrell:

Mm-hmm.

01-01:44:01

Nicoles:

I had been working in this category that where I was paying union dues, but I'd really been elevated to sort of a quasi-management level, because the fuel breaks and all that other stuff, when they put me into that slot, that. One of the things that precipitated the strike was, there were a number of positions that management wanted to withdraw from the union, and mine was one of them, and I didn't even know it was being discussed. Nobody discussed it with me. That was just part of the union negotiation, and I guess, they were doing me a favor. I would have thought it was a favor. It represented a status change for me.

When the strike went down, the management said, "Okay, you're on this side," or at least I was sort of in a position to choose, and I went with management, and I worked during the strike. There were a lot of really tense moments, and there, employees would park out in front of the building, and somebody put a bunch of roofing nails out there so that folks were going and driving away and discovering they had four flat tires, that kind of stuff. I was driving a district car with two or three other people in it, and the strikers were blocking the driveway, so I just kind of kept nosing up, and nosing up, and nosing up, and I kind of gunned the engine, and nosed up and then came into the parking lot.

I got inside the office building, and one of our police officers who was out there was Harry Brizzee. Harry Brizzee was really a cool guy, and he had instituted doing horse patrols on the trails, and so on, so forth. He came in and he grabbed me by the arm, "If I ever see you do something like that again, I'll"—and it was kind of a wakeup call, but Harry Brizzee was the kind of guy that could pull that off, and he had walked Telegraph Avenue for the Berkeley Police Department during hard times, so, he'd been there, done that.

Years later, he left the park district, and he moved up to Bend, Oregon, and he had a job with the sheriff up there, and my wife and I were going up into Washington. I called Harry Brizzee, and he was on duty that evening, and I said, "Well, we're in this campground. Why don't you come by and say 'hi'?"

He didn't really remember me, but he came by, and Harry Brizzee was always a cowboy—he grew up ranching in the Eastern part of the District—I said, “How are you?” and so on, so he sat down and chatted, had a coffee and a piece of pie and so on. He says, “Well, I lost the end of my little finger roping steers. My wife won't let me do that anymore until I retire and have my retirement in place.” He was so proud of the fact that he'd lose his fingertip roping cattle! Love that man; he's great.

01-01:47:23

Farrell:

I don't want to put words in your mouth, but another person that you appreciated was John Waters, and can you tell me a little bit about him, and what you appreciated about him?

01-01:47:40

Nicoles:

Well, John Waters was had a degree in mining engineering. He'd gone to school in Colorado. I don't know how he got lashed up with the park district, but he did, and he was one of a number of people who brought to the district, in my judgment, professional standards. There was a way you did mining. There were safety rules. This was how you did it. The district acquired that property, and John was promoting opening the mine as a historic, and as sort of a technological exhibit, but he had absolute standards, that this was how it was going to be, and that, he and I think alike in a lot of ways. He was a professional specialist in that, in his area, and he didn't have any trouble telling people “no,” and that, to my way of thinking, was—he and I were on the same wavelength. We didn't interact very much, but yeah, we were on the same wavelength.

01-01:49:14

Farrell:

He kind of pushed some of the history through at Black Diamond, is that correct?

01-01:49:19

Nicoles:

Well, Black Diamond, yeah. I was interested in the history of Point Pinole. That goes back to when I was still in the planning department under Lew Crutcher early on, and we acquired Point Pinole. We acquired that. I forget when we actually acquired it, but we acquired it about the same time as that master planning effort was going down, or maybe a little after, and yeah, it would have been; we acquired it earlier. Because I'll tell you a surveying story. We were getting to ready to open the property for public access, so we had a safety consultant come out, and Lew Crutcher asked me to go down, escort him around, and take some notes and find out.

Well, a munitions plant, a dynamite manufacturing plant, which is what this had been, qualified as industrial archeology, and that's a vocabulary term that's big in Europe, but not so big here. I found that fascinating, and all the little components. When you make explosives, you do it in small batches here and there so that one mistake doesn't ruin the whole program, and these things were all connected by little railways. There was a whole little railway system

out there, so that appealed to my railway sense. I got involved in that, and then, we did the safety and the safety inspector recommended a lot of things be demolished, which just broke my heart.

But then, Bryan Mortenson got to be supervisor out there, and he was kind of a go-getter, and so he said, “We ought to do something with this dynamite history thing.” We decided to have Dynamite Days, and you talk about a conflict with the interpretive department, because they were sort of a bugs and flowers group, and we had a big meeting and I remember one of the interpretive people said, “Dynamite Days,” they says, “that’s kind of bombastic.” [laughs] That was kind of what the relationship looked like, and I acquired some paraphernalia and showed people a little bit about dynamite and how it works, and so on, and I gave some tours of the property, and the interpretive department was dealing with the coastline stuff, fishing, and stuff like that.

That was kind of fun, and as part of the effort to try and gather some of this history, Bryan had determined that whatever was left—because the site was originally developed by Giant Powder, and Giant Powder was interesting because they had an exclusive from Alfred Nobel to make dynamite, and that ended up in a lawsuit because Alfred Nobel’s definition of dynamite was, it was nitroglycerin soaked up on a powder, and he defined the powder. Other people discovered you could use other things as the powder, and so Giant sued and said, “They’re encroaching our patent,” and the judge said, “No, because Nobel said this powder has to be this, and these people are using that, so that’s not dynamite.” They can’t call it dynamite, but it’s the same.

That led to some rather interesting exercises, but one of the things that went on is that Bryan managed to hustle the district to send somebody to look at Giant records, because the Giant was purchased by Atlas Powder. I’m thinking it was 1917 that DuPont Powder was broken up by the Sherman Antitrust Act, and three companies were formed: DuPont, Atlas, and Hercules, and the resources (plants) were divided among them. Well, the stockholders were all named DuPont, for all three companies, and they all did business on different floors of the DuPont Building in Wilmington, Delaware, and the DuPont Building is still there, and the DuPont Hotel next door. In any case, the earliest DuPont facility for making black powder was converted to a museum for what was known as Central Atlantic industrial history. Giant was always a West Coast entity, but Atlas bought that because they needed a West Coast facility, and in the shakeout, they didn’t get one, so they bought Giant, but all the early Giant records went to this museum.

The name of the game was, send somebody to Hagley museum to look at this. I was a visiting scholar. I’d never been a visiting scholar before, [laughs] and I think they said, “Well, we haven’t curated any of these documents. We don’t know what’s here, but I’ll bring up box number one, and [blows air] blow the dust off.” My guess is that Bancroft probably has some boxes like that.

01-01:55:13

Farrell: Probably. [laughter] Yeah!

01-01:55:15

Nicoles:

I'm going through this, and so there were all these early records, and one of them was that DuPont could manufacture a dynamite-like product, a nitroglycerin product, but they basically had a monopoly in the black powder market. There were this correspondence from Giant Powder people seeking either somebody who would partner with them and make black powder, or would sell them black powder manufacturing equipment, because what DuPont was doing is saying, "Well, any particular blasting job requires a little of this and a little of that, so if you merge your order with us, we'll give you a deal."

What Giant needed was a black powder source to match that. In fact, they ended up building their own black powder plant at Clipper Gap, and if you get off Highway 80 at Clipper Gap, you can see the remains, really pretty cool. Going through that stuff, I found a letter I couldn't read, because it was in Danish, [speaks emotionally] "A. Nobel," across the bottom. I'd never been a library guy, but I said to myself, "Now I get it. This is what people do this for." I mean, it just shook me to my core, you can tell, but it just—absolutely incredible.

[speaks normally] Anyhow, then Bryan got the Hercules half of it, because just down the way at what is now Hercules, California Powder Company, which had been located in Santa Cruz, but they had a plant there, and when that got closed out, a machine called a black powder press was left, and Bryan started hustling people in that area to get that machine on our property. And ultimately succeeded, and because I knew my way around Point Pinole, I was able to say, "Well, we did it as safety work. We filled this foundation, but this is where the black powder press was, so if you dig out there with a shovel, you'll find the foundation. You'll be able to put the black powder press on the site." I don't think it was until after I retired that that was actually installed, and an historic landmark gotten for it, and so on, so forth.

01-01:57:52

Farrell:

Yeah. So we are running short on time, but I do want to ask you one more question before we kind of start to wrap up. I had heard that you were one of the people who were a proponent of adopting a computer system in the district.

01-01:58:08

Nicoles:

Well, no, not really. David Eakin was behind that. He was really the advanced crew. I didn't understand computers, but he wanted them gotten in, and used spreadsheets, and so on, so forth, and the district's first response was to buy word processors, which were automated typewriters, which is a step up but, again, very slow to respond to the curve.

01-01:58:41

Farrell:

Okay, okay. I do want to ask you a couple of reflective questions. You left the district in 1992, and then, can you just tell me briefly what you did after that?

01-01:58:56

Nicoles:

Well, I thought I might be a consultant, but there's not a lot of forestry consulting in the Bay Area. I got active in two or three things. I'm a member of the Society of American Foresters, and the local, the Northern California group that had a couple of programs. One was called Forest Conservation Days, which was a program in Santa Clara County that we did in a park for fifth-grade youngsters to come in and introduce them to what a forest was, and what that was all about, and what some of the opportunities are, and gave them a little walk through the woods, and my job there was to operate a steam donkey engine, which is a steam logging machine. I operated the donkey engine from '93 to 2011, probably spoke to 50,000 kids.

The other is Forestry Institute for Teachers, which is a weeklong training program for teachers in which they are sort of given a walk around the woods. It's done in the forest and it's weeklong, and they get to see a logging project, and they get to talk to land owners and they get to talk to so on, so forth. But they also get curriculum material for age related that's been—I think I can say this fairly. I'm not a curriculum specialist, but this stuff has been pretty well vetted by the education community, so it's not a biased kind of thing. It's an effort to try and equate urban teachers with what goes on in the forests in California.

I did that for twenty years, and I gave that up. It's time to do something else, and there's another program out there now called California Forestry Challenge, which was privately developed. This is for high school students, so this is a little different cut, and the idea is, these students come on a Wednesday, and they're given a problem, and by Saturday, they have to give a fifteen-minute presentation. It's scored, and then there's a test on certain forestry skills, and measurement skills, and so on, and that's scored, and there's some field work that has to be done and so on, so forth. Somebody wins each one, and I'll be doing four sessions of that this year, and I've done five sessions in some years, but San Bernardino is just too far away. [laughs]

01-02:01:45

Farrell:

I know that your time with the district wasn't always rosy, but what did it mean to you, or what was the significance to you to have had worked for the park district for twenty years?

01-02:02:00

Nicoles:

Well, I think a number of things, because I think I did this when we started the tape, but I talked about the kind of narrow focus of forestry in the sixties. I used to hitchhike to and from school, and I lived not too far from David Brower, and they would give me a ride when I was an engineering student, and when I said I was switching to forestry, they stopped giving me a ride.

[laughter] It was, it was very timber-focused technology, and I think working at the park district gave me a broader sense, and brought me into contact with a different set of values. Certainly, the regulatory process has put timber management into a much broader realm than it was. But interestingly enough, weird things keep happening.

There was a Cal forester who basically went to work for the Sierra Club. His name was Gordy Robinson, and in the forestry profession, he was considered kind of a turncoat, but he was probably very instrumental in planting the seeds for where forestry is today. When he passed away, I got a call and said—well, I was chairing the California Alumni Foresters—“Will you come and say a few words about Gordy Robinson?” I figured yeah, I can find some things to say about Gordy Robinson. I don’t have to say he’s an enemy of the people, but then I got a call back and I got disinvited. [laughs]

01-02:03:47

Farrell:

Oh, no.

01-02:03:50

Nicoles:

So it’s kind of fun. One of the things that’s ongoing, because this came up just recently, back in February or March, I actually did a presentation on this, was, identifying and getting a state landmark for some trees [the “Navigation Redwood Trees” in Roberts Regional Recreation Area], on a ridge top, that were used as navigational aids. Of course, the original stem got harvested, but redwood like eucalyptus sprouts, so what we’ve got are the clones growing on the ridge, and now, 120 years later, give or take, you can identify those trees, and that was something that was real rewarding.

I was the first person at the park district to secure landmark status for anything. E Clampus Vitus got landmark status for Black Diamond Mines. Now that wasn’t the park district’s doing. I was the first person to get landmark status for something in the park district, and now the site of rainbow trout, the type locality for rainbow trout is marked, and Point Pinole is marked, and maybe some other things that I don’t know about. I liked that. That’s something I can point to and say, “I did that.”

01-02:05:12

Farrell:

Yeah. What do you hope, aside from that, or in addition to that, how do you hope that people remember your work with the district?

01-02:05:26

Nicoles:

Well, I think what I’m going to have to settle for, [laughs] is Jerry Kent saying, “John could have told us that.”

01-02:05:36

Farrell:

In the retirees’ meetings?

01-02:05:37

Nicoles:

Yeah. There's nothing out there that really defines me, I don't think. I worked on a road grading manual. I don't think it ever got adopted by the park district, although the equipment department said, "Well, we use that, because we don't have anything else." But there persists a certain amount of oblivion. There's grazing in Chabot Park. It was extended because when Neil Havlik established that, and he was our grazing manager for a while, he said, "Well, let's see if cattle grazing will have an impact on the eucalyptus." We extended this unit so it went into the eucalyptus, came down, and in fencing it, fenced off the upstream end of a culvert. He said, "That culvert never gets cleaned." Not that they clean the culverts anyway.

I'll tell you one of the greatest compliments I ever had, and that is Joe Rubini—Joe Rubini ultimately ascended to fire chief and was working in the public safety department, and we (the District) hired a new public safety chief, and the guy looked at Rubini and said that—at least this is what Rubini tells me—looked at Rubini and says, "Who's this John Nicoles guy?" Rubini said, "He's the guy who taught me to clean culverts in the rain." But neither of us worked there anymore. [laughs] Well, it's yeah, those. If people went out and cleaned culverts in the rain, I'd feel pretty pleased.

01-02:07:31

Farrell:

Well this is a good place to start, too. Now that we have the interview, hopefully people will take cues from that.

01-02:07:38

Nicoles:

Yeah, maybe.

01-02:07:39

Farrell:

Yeah. My last question for you is, what are your hopes for the future of the park?

01-02:07:47

Nicoles:

Well, I guess I'd say I'm quite hopeful. I think that the period of time I was there, the focus was on land acquisition, and that was still true when I left. They've reached a point at which there's not anything of substance left to acquire. That emphasis has kind of faded, and I think the board of directors that occurred out of the sixties and was dominant during my period were environmental wishful thinkers. I think the people who are on the board now are probably a little better grounded.

One thing: I almost brought a piece, a wood sample with me to show you, because I could put it up here and show it like this. The park district has somehow developed a lash-up with the Save the Redwoods League, and the Save the Redwoods League has always, in my mind, been a rather credible agency, because they raised money from their own membership to acquire the land they wanted, as opposed to simply leaning on the federal government to set this aside. But they've gone through a metamorphosis, a change.

01-02:09:24

Farrell: A change, yeah. [laughter]

01-02:09:28

Nicoles: Because they used to buy land and then give it to the state park system, to be a state park, and finally the state park system said, "We can't take anymore." But the Save the Redwoods League still wanted to acquire land, but now they've become a land owner, and one of my former professors, Bill Libby, who's a real redwood expert and started out as a geneticist, but redwood management expert, got on the board of directors of the Save the Redwoods League. There's been a certain amount of influence, and the Save the Redwoods League is now looking at how we can improve the redwood stand in Redwood Park, and it's going to be a real hard hurdle to leap for the park district, because, what you need to do is thin the stand, and that means cutting trees, and that's going to be problematic.

The Regional Parks Foundation, which is a fundraising 501(c)(3), sent out a newsletter that had a little interview from Save the Redwoods League, and they said, in that publication, it said, "We want to see if we can grow these trees bigger, faster." I went to a Regional Parks Association, which is an enthusiastic group as opposed to a fundraising group, meeting, saw Bob Doyle there, and he said, "Well, things have changed since the Save the Redwoods League decided they were going to have to cut trees."

What I have at home is a sample about this big, that's a cutoff of a beam, a redwood beam, and about half of it represents roughly 150 years; the other half represents twelve, and what happened is, somebody thinned the trees. I had the opportunity to speak to a trails patrol group that's sponsored by the park district, and they wanted to talk about forestry, and I showed them that, and I said, "This is what the Save the Redwoods League is talking about. You want big trees? You can have big trees, but you have to pay the price." I don't know whether the district's going to be able to jump through that hoop or not, but at least, at least they're thinking and they're talking about the kinds of things that need to be done.

01-02:12:23

Farrell: Yeah. Absolutely, yeah.

01-02:12:25

Nicoles: I'd like to think that's my heritage. I don't know how many seeds I planted, but I think a couple of them began to grow.

01-02:12:37

Farrell: I think that's a good place to leave it, unless there's anything else you want to add?

01-02:12:41

Nicoles: Not that I think of right hand. I said I'd tell you a funny, oh, a funny surveying story with respect to Point Pinole. We bought that property, then we were

going to buy the property, and Bethlehem Steel, who owned it, said, "We'll sell you 500 acres for this much money. You can have any 500 acres you want. You go out and survey the perimeter, and don't ever come and talk to us again." [laughs]

We were out there, and the land department representative was there and he's saying, "Well, here's where we want the line." I said, "Well, how are people going to get into the park?" He said, "Well, they'll just walk in right here," and I said, "That means they will cross the Southern Pacific Mainline Railroad at grade." I said, "I don't think so." I said, "I think what you want to do is, you want to go up here, to where there was a cut, and you can build a bridge across, and get the people across without them having to do that." That's what was done.

01-02:13:41

Farrell: Oh, cool.

01-02:13:44

Nicoles: The bridge says "Paul Badger Bridge" on it. [laughter]

01-02:13:49

Farrell: One day, one day that'll change.

01-02:13:51

Nicoles: One day.

01-02:13:52

Farrell: Well, thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it.

01-02:13:54

Nicoles: Well, thank you. I've enjoyed this. I spend time thinking about these things, and there are days when I don't feel as good as today. I don't go to the parks very often. Occasionally I go because I want to go see this or that or see something, but I still feel kind of depressed about what might have been and wasn't, but it's nice to know, I think the corner's being turned.

01-02:14:25

Farrell: I hope so, yeah.

01-02:14:26

Nicoles: It's a steep hill to climb, but I think the whole environmental community is changing. I think it's beginning to be recognized since the Rim Fire two, three years ago, that forest management needs to look different from what it's been, and this preservation concept doesn't work.

01-02:14:47

Farrell: Yeah. Well, hopefully, that'll start to change too, with having these interviews. Thank you so much.

[End of Interview]

## **Narrator Addendum**

### **The “Eucalyptus Freeze” of 1972-1973**

The freeze occurred in late November of 1972, nearly two years after I hired on. Few Eucalyptus trees were actually killed; a dozen or so were at the Grizzly Peak/Fish Ranch intersection, where the air flow was extreme. The damage became apparent in about February, 1973.

Richard Trudeau sought Federal funding. Meanwhile, representatives of the US Forest Service (State and Private Forestry, a sort of Forest Service co-op extension) and California Division of Forestry developed the scheme for the fuel breaks.

Gary Tate of the Land Department, also a forestry graduate, was pretty much leading the on-the-ground activity for the District, but departed to take a position in Monterey County. So, I got called up. Trudeau said I could have the job if I shaved off my beard...I think he thought that that would be a big deal for me but facial hair has always been a "meh" thing with me. I'd long since had a couple of go-rounds with my mustache in the Army. That would have been about May 1973.

My job was to write the contract. I worked with Forest Service (FS) people to adapt a FS timber harvest contract, bid the job and get 'er done. The initial District assignment, all on park district land, was broken into a half-dozen smaller units to ensure that small contractors would have a chance at the federal money. None bid. (I assume that a copy of the contract is in the archives, maps and all.)

On bid opening day I read out the bids, and there was a mix of high and low on each segment. I announced that we would consider all bids and make our decision. A representative from Cleveland Wrecking remonstrated, but I told him we would do it our way. We elected to go with Ferma Corp on all segments. There was a federal project deadline of Sept 15, I think, and we got started in June. I never worked so hard in my life!

Some of the fuel break was on private land, and that work was being handled by the California Division of Forestry (CDF) with in-house crews. However, there was one segment that crossed University land, and they were supposed to take care of that. The University asked if the District could pick up their share, and we did. I tweaked the contract a bit, but nothing would do but the UC lawyers had to go over it with a fine-tooth comb, so we were significantly delayed, but got it done.

Ferma had their hands full and didn't bid on the university tract. The project went to Archie Coley. Archie was basically a tree service man. We didn't quite make the deadline, but the Feds felt we'd met the intent of the grant and let us go a few days over. The contracts came to something over a million dollars, and we got paid all but about \$200. I had claimed the loss of one squashed chemical toilet, and the Feds said I should have gotten that out of the contractor; we wrote it off.

*Some funny stories:*

When we held a field trip for prospective bidders, there was complaint that we had specified stumps no higher than 12". We had to get the job going, so I asked, "How high works?" I think they were just whimpering because nobody had an immediate answer. We settled on 18", and I sent out a change order. About halfway through, Larry Ferrari of Ferma said to me "I think I understand about the 12" stumps." "Oh?" "Yeah, we've taken the torque converters out of five Cats on the 18"stumps." Peterson Cat did very well, but I think Ferma came out OK in spite of it!

One of the grants was for a burn site (in the quarry south of the Caldecott Tunnel) for limbs and tops. The FS provided an "air curtain destructor" for this site. This device was a T-shaped tube made of culvert pipe. One dug a trench to contain the burning material. A large blower was located at the base of the T. The top of the T lay alongside of the trench; it had a slot in it that would direct the force-fed air slightly downward across the top of the ditch. The air flow, catching on the far side of the ditch would curl down into the fire. The effect was to force-feed oxygen to the fire while the curtain of air across the top would capture cinders and cycle them back into the blaze. If one didn't mind the heat, one could keep filling the trench from the side opposite the "destructor." It worked great, but it had nowhere near the capacity to handle all the debris, so every now and then the storage pile would catch fire and accelerate the process. The air quality folks were livid.

One day I had an irate inspector wanting to know what I was going to do. I said, in effect, "I'm busy here, take it up with the contractor." The contractor said, in effect, "Shit happens." I don't think anybody ever got cited...what could they do? It would have been like going up to the fire area in Paradise, California and complaining that they were fouling the air in Alameda County!

The burn site was run by Ferma, but it was an independent unit of the overall project. I asked Larry why they had bid on the penny-ante burn site contract, and he replied that they had to have the burn site in order to do their other contract work, and so they had to bid to be sure it existed. Once he 'splained it, it made sense.

There was supposed to be a diameter limit on the material that went into the trench, but weren't nobody takin' any measurements. I don't know how many trucks an hour they had pulling into the site, but there wasn't time (or inclination) to try to measure the diameters. I'm sure that this upset the air people too.

All contractors, including Archie Coley, had access to the burn site. Archie brought in some oversized material, and it must have been really oversized, because nobody was checking for an inch or two. Ferma turned his truck away, and Archie complained to me. He said that Ferma was bringing in oversized material, why shouldn't he? I talked to Larry. His position was that Ferma had the responsibility for cleaning up the site at the end, and so it was their problem if they brought in oversized material, but they didn't want to pick up Coley's problem as well. Of course, it was all going into the fire, so it made no never minds. I told Larry "September 15 approaches, I haven't got time for this BS, just eat it." And I told Archie "be more careful of what you take to the burn site." I didn't hear anything more about it.

The federal grant specified that any economic value of the logs was to be taken into account, and that value deducted from the cost. I didn't want that accounting problem, so we required bidders to make that adjustment in their bids. At the time, there was a paper mill in Antioch that would

take the logs. LP, owner of the mill, bided its time, and when it became apparent that the Feds were going to underwrite the work, they dropped the price they'd pay for logs by half. I wasn't too happy, but there was nothing to do. So, the bids reflected this lower price. Logs flowed from the Oakland hills to Antioch at well below market value.

The Friday before the contracts were to end, representatives from LP showed up at District headquarters and told me that they were raising the price for logs as of Monday. I told them to get out of my office, we weren't interested in doing any further business with them. (In fact, we did the following year, but not directly.) Unbeknownst to either me or LP was that Ferma had run short of trucking capability and had been stockpiling in the logs in the far corner of the burn site quarry; logs that they happily delivered to LP after their contract ran out at the higher rate. The District didn't get a dime out of the deal, but I got a good laugh.

We used to see, along Skyline Blvd and Grizzly Peak, a gentleman who dressed all in white, with a big, floppy brim white hat, driving a white Cadillac convertible. I don't know what his business was, but I can guess. Late in the exercise, Joe Rubini (my right hand, and later District fire chief) and I were sitting on one of the rock walls along Grizzly Peak contemplating our next move when this guy comes roaring by. Moments later, Archie Coley, the tree contractor, drives up in his pickup, brandishing a revolver. "That blankety-blank just sped through our work area...coulda killed somebody. I'm going to get him!" And off he went. By this time, of course, the man in the white hat was long gone. I figured Joe and I saved his life. Although, I must admit, I don't think I've seen him since, so maybe not.

### **Becoming a Licensed Forester**

The Forestry Licensing Act was enacted during summer of 1973, so it didn't exist when I started at the District. There was a grandfather clause and established foresters got licensed simply upon application. Some recommended that I apply but I was too busy, and I didn't feel that I'd had sufficient experience to qualify. As it turns out, I was among the first to get my license by taking a test, and I passed first time out. I'm glad, however, that I don't have to take the test today. The Z'berg-Nejedly Forest Practice Act was also enacted in 1973, the result of which was that the composition of the Board of Forestry was changed, timber harvesting rules became more onerous, and the licensing test far more difficult. I'd never pass today!

### **The "Bombastic" History of Point Pinole**

My first job at the District was on the survey crew. Land acquisition chief Hulet Hornbeck had badgered US Steel to sell us Point Pinole. Finally, they said "We'll sell you 500 acres. You draw the line; we'll sell you the land. Don't ever darken our doorstep again."

So, the survey crew was out there with Gary Tate to draw the line around what we were going to purchase. We already owned some of the land on the land side of the Southern Pacific (SP) tracks, although I no longer recall just how much. Gary was laying out a line that followed the old existing road into the Atlas plant, which crossed the railroad at grade. I asked "How are people going to get into the park?" He replied that folks would just walk cross, right here. I told him that the SP would never allow it; that we would have to have a bridge, one suitable for vehicles. I pointed out that, if we included a strip of land parallel to the railroad, on the land side,

that would put us at the top of a cut, and that it would be far easier and cheaper to build a bridge across the gap between the two sides of the cut than to build one up and over the RR where we were standing. The process was adjourned, and, I presume, behind-closed-doors meetings took place. The upshot was that the strip of land was included in the purchase, and the bridge was built where I said it should be; it's the Paul Badger Bridge. And people wonder why I am such a cantankerous S.O.B.

My role in the Dynamite Days was somewhat limited. Bryan Mortensen, the park supervisor, advocated for that event, and the Interpretive Department went along. The park district interpreters were never really comfortable with the topic of Industrial Archaeology. During a planning meeting one of them said sarcastically that Dynamite Days sounded rather bombastic. They preferred to spend their time doing fish prints and talking about monarch butterflies.

Bryan had unearthed some information: that there was a black powder press still resident in Hercules, and that the remaining Atlas Powder Company records were in the Hagley library/museum in Delaware. He recommended that I go and look into the records. The District brass - happy to have me out of their hair, I think - OK'ed the trip.

That was an interesting assignment. I found that DuPont Powder, Hercules Powder and Atlas Powder all did business on different floors of the DuPont Building, adjacent to the DuPont Hotel and across from DuPont Square in Wilmington, although Atlas, by that time, was no longer extant.

In going through box #1 of uncatalogued Atlas documents, I came upon a letter in a foreign language that I could not read...but I recognized Mr. Nobel's signature! I think that, for the first time, I really recognized the fascination of hanging out in a library! I brought back some history, but there is much more there to find.

Hagley Museum and Library in Wilmington is on the original DuPont black powder factory site, and a tour gave me an understanding of the process. Bryan wanted the Hercules press for Point Pinole. I called the Hercules city planning department, and asked about their plans for it; they said that they planned to put it out front of the high school. I suggested that that was a poor idea; the machine might get vandalized.

Bryan went to work on the problem with a local service club. Between us we got the press for the park. Atlas had a black powder line at Point Pinole, and it was shown on the maps the District got when it bought the land from Bethlehem Steel. When we took over the property virtually all of the foundations had been plowed under in the name of safety, but I had been involved in that operation early on, and knew where the black powder press had been located and what the foundation looked like. The foundation was all subterranean, so I figured it had probably survived. I told Bryan "Dig here," he did, the foundation was intact, and the Hercules press sits on it this very day. But that all happened after Dynamite Days.

*Funny story, if you are a forester:*

We had fire problems at Pt. Pinole. Various causes were alleged, the courteous one is that people fishing along the shore at night would light warming fires, leave them unextinguished, and the

next day's afternoon wind would awaken them and blow them into the grassland, and hence into the Eucalyptus forest.

Fire chief Rich Aronson and I wanted to establish a sequence of prescribed burns in the forested area to reduce the fire impact. The interpreters and Director Mary Jefferds were concerned: "There are monarch butterflies out there! You'll destroy the habitat!" Nothing would do but we had to have an expert look over the situation.

Tom Lindenmeyer and I had had some conversations with entomologists at Stanford, a couple of whom were butterfly experts. But they wouldn't do. Ron Russo was detailed to secure an expert, who dutifully arrived for a tour with Jerry Kent, Russo and me. The expert was from Santa Cruz County, and looked like a character from a Gary Larson cartoon: he was short and pudgy, and affected khaki pants and shirt, and a ball cap that was a bit too small. He waved a butterfly net around as if he were dowsing for water. It was hard to keep a straight face.

There were two areas where monarchs had been observed, but first I had us stop at a site that had been burned and the damaged trees removed. I asked the expert about the suitability of the site for monarchs. There was an acre or so without trees, so it wasn't suitable, and he identified that fact right away. I asked what it would take to make it suitable, how many trees? He was unsure, but I pressed him..." You know. 50 trees per acre? 100?" He thought perhaps 50.

So, I pointed out to him - and, incidentally to Kent and Russo - that there were about 200-300 seedling trees on the site as we spoke. They were about 1/2" in diameter and three feet tall, but you just didn't notice them there in the grass. I said that we actually needed to reduce the number of seedlings, and we had the opportunity to tailor the site to meet some monarch standard, if we knew what that was. He avoided the question, saying "Yeah, but there's no water." The water table at Pt. Pinole is such that, if we dug a modest hole, there would be water in it when the butterflies were in residence. No response.

The next stop was one of the known butterfly sites: the south edge of the western forest adjacent to the grassland and above the fishing beach. It had burned several times, and still hosted butterflies, but it looked to me like it might be on its last legs. I told the expert that I feared losing the site, and that, if we took some management actions, we might buy ourselves some insurance. He expressed concern. I told him that we could expect more fires, and the site would likely be ruined. And he said "Yes, but that wouldn't be our fault." I found that statement to be a good deal more insightful than I think he intended. Proactive management does, indeed, entail responsibility for the outcome. What many in the environmental community believe is that the "no action" alternative is free of responsibility. I think they deceive themselves, but at least I understand their motive better than I did before.

### **The Bullwhackers' Jubilee**

The year 1984 was the District's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary, and all sorts of special events were planned, but I was really surprised when my boss, Chris Nelson, called me in and asked if I would put together something in Redwood Park. The interpreters had studiously avoided Redwood; I think it was too far from the nature center in Tilden. I took it on.

I got free rail and ties from the Union Pacific Railroad, built a short railroad line, and exhibited a hundred-year-old steam locomotive. We had a bull team, a steam donkey engine and a steam traction engine. A fellow from Petaluma made apple cider. The exercise was deemed a success, and was repeated in 1985 and 1986, although there was a name change to Redwood Forest Festival. I think “Bullwhackers’ Jubilee” was too “bombastic.”

*There are lots of tales from the Bullwhackers’ Jubilee. Here are two:*

In 1986 Janet Cobb of the District Public Affairs (PA) department came to me and asked if we could offer the Festival on Friday, as well as over the weekend, to allow the District busing program to engage a school group. All of our other special events were scheduled while school was out. I set about trying to figure out how we were going to do that.

The PA people put out the word and we had a whole school subscribed within minutes. I said, “That’s enough,” and we closed the books. I solicited an array of volunteer professionals to lead tours on a selected route, and then allowed some free time. On leaving, the kids got a free Dryers ice cream cup. We had a couple of hundred students, led by foresters in groups of 20 more or less. The Interpretive Department standard was no more than ten students per interpreter. Still, they recruited Director Jefferds, she complained to Jerry Kent, and the program was mostly shut down. It was repeated a couple of times later, under Interpretive Department leadership, and then left to fade away.

At one of the later events I was freed up to do something outrageous, and I arranged to rent a portable sawmill from a fellow in Plumas County. I drove up there in a District truck and hauled it down to Redwood Park. I had salvaged a number of wind-thrown redwood logs, using lots of pulleys to avoid squashing a *Trillium ovatum* that the park staff held dear.

Tom Lindenmeyer and I cut boards. We actually provided the event a significant service: I had told the organizers to put us at the far end of the event, since the sawmill would be noisy, and they were glad to do so. The upshot was that the noise was an attraction, and I think every attendee came to see what was going on, thus traversing the entire event. I know we consistently had the biggest crowds. Ron Russo came by and wouldn’t talk to me. But he asked Tom why we were throwing away the white wood on the outside of the log. Tom explained that that was sap wood, and did not have the rot resistance of the red interior; since the logs had been on the ground for a couple of years, it was already shot.

We would cut off some of the outside (slabbings) and toss them aside, then cut a board or two, then stop and explain the process. At one point a lady asked what we did with the slabbings. I explained that, in the early years, they were cut up for fuel for the mill boilers, for locomotives, and for donkey engines. For a period in the 1950’s they were marketed as rustic siding for folks who wanted their run-of-the-mill plywood house to look like a log cabin. We were just going to throw them away...then the light dawned...would you like a piece? Well, yes, she would. So, I grabbed our chain saw, and started bucking off 18-inch lengths. Everybody wanted one, and we got rid of a lot of crap. And, even better, they each walked back through the entire exhibit carrying a chunk of slabbing. Yes! But nobody ever said a word.

Back to 1986. Having got the student tours launched, I was at loose ends and waiting near the Dryers cart when the first student came walking out. He had a pencil. I asked where he had gotten it. "From the pencil man." Pencil man? I hadn't arranged for a pencil man. Better check this out. Walking into the exhibit area, I encountered Tad Mason of Pacific (I think) Cedar Company, which produced 4x4 blocks for pencil making. I had talked to his boss about supporting the event at some time or other, and he said he would consider it, but I never heard back. Tad showed up while we were launching tours, wandered in, found himself a picnic table, and set up shop. I found out that the pencil making process is very popular with youngsters, and made a new friend.

Some years later (1991) Tad was undergoing prolonged medical treatment at Stanford, and living at his mother-in-law's house in Santa Clara. In his slack time, he got the idea of doing a field day event for youngsters in the San Jose area, targeting east San Jose, where the students were largely unfamiliar with trees.

He and a colleague in Redding, Gary Nakamura, used the umbrella of the California Society of American Foresters Education Committee to launch the project, called Forest Conservation Days, in 1992, and it ran (in Santa Clara County) through 2012. The first year the program ran for a week, then it was upped to two weeks, and then, due to busing costs and complexities, back to one week. The program was modeled on Bullwhackers' Jubilee, with volunteer professionals leading groups of students on a forest tour, supplemented with various static exhibits.

We did school groups during the week and scout groups and the general public on the weekend. I participated virtually every day. By 2001 I had provided forestry interpretation to over 30,000 students of varying ages; after the 2012 event, I was probably up to 50,000. I generally ran a steam donkey engine, explaining the history, physics, and uses of the machine. The last year the machine was out of service, and I gave a spiel on a plant succession on a ¼ ac. site. Although I enjoyed (and continue to enjoy) operating the donkey engine, I think my finest hour was when in 2012, I had a group of Daisy Scouts (these young ladies come up to my waist) giving cogent answers to questions of land management decisions, much to the amazement of their doting parents.

As a result of this, and other volunteer activities, I was awarded the Board of Forestry's Francis H. Raymond Award for contributing to "increased awareness of California's forest resources." I have to give some credit to the District for this award. If it had not given me the opportunity to put on the Bullwhackers' Jubilee, and thereby create the model for Forest Conservation Days, and if it had not driven me into extra early retirement, I would not have received the award.

### **The Blossom Rock Navigation Trees**

Prior to coming to the Park District, I had never heard of these trees, used by mariners to locate, and thereby avoid, the submerged Blossom Rock located in the Bay between San Francisco's Fishermen's Wharf and Alcatraz Island. From time to time I would hear some reference, and one day I encountered a plaque in Joaquin Miller Park that claimed that such trees had been located in the area. The plaque was dedicated as part of the United States 1976 Bicentennial.<sup>1</sup> Fred

---

<sup>1</sup> The plaque was sponsored by the Daughters of the American Revolution (DAR), under the

Monteagle, the District's PR man, wrote a history of Redwood Park wherein he mentioned the trees.<sup>2</sup> Generally, I considered the reports fantastic, and wrote them off as "lore." One day, however, as I was driving up Skyline Boulevard from its intersection with Joaquin Miller Road, I happened to glance out the top of the windshield as I went by the water tank and noticed a huge redwood crown sticking up maybe half again as tall as its cohorts. Suddenly, the notion of trees as navigation aids became very real.

Locating the one big crown in the Roberts Recreation Area was relatively simple; it is, in fact, the combined crowns of three stems, clearly sprouts from one former stump, and is rather obvious from within the picnic area. There was a second tree, but I have never conclusively identified its stem from within the grove. Virtually all of the trees in the Roberts picnic area are sprouts from trees harvested by around 1850. Being sprouts, they are clones of their predecessors, and thus enjoy both the predecessors' genetic characteristics and their growing sites, the two things that would govern their height. That being the case, where there was an exceptionally tall tree before, there should be a tall tree now.

Having become convinced that the potential for (what were to me) rumored tall trees on the ridge, and recognizing the implications of the present-day redwoods' clonal character, I started looking for solid references to their existence and their exact location. Monteagle referred to several sources, among them a report in 1893 by William P. Gibbons, M. D. describing the redwood groves in the Roberts area over a series of visits starting in 1855. Gibbons stated that "Our older citizens remember when lofty trees of redwood...served as a landmark to vessels at sea about to enter the Golden Gate." He gives no more specific information as to where these trees were located. Gibbons also makes reference to an extremely large stump, which I describe below.

Sherwood D. Burgess wrote of "The Forgotten Redwoods of the East Bay" in the *California Historical Quarterly* of March, 1951. He cites the 1826 journal of Captain F. W. Beechey of the Royal Navy, stating "that a ship upon entering the bay should, in order to miss the treacherous Blossom Rock, line up the north tip of Yerba Buena Island with ...two trees (nearly the last of the straggling [sic] ones) south of the Palos Colorados...situated on the top of the hill...too conspicuous to be overlooked." (Captain Beechey's ship was named *The Blossom*; while many have wondered whether he located the rock the hard way, it seems that the captain and his mapmaker discovered it while taking soundings from a barge.<sup>1</sup>)

Burgess' reference is in the Bancroft Library, and I went there to confirm the citation; however, I was unable to locate the specific citation. Burgess' research seems solid, and is well documented, so I took it as valid. In 1852 Cadwalader Ringgold of the U. S. Navy published a map depicting the location of the trees, but I was unable to locate the Ringgold reference.

---

leadership of Drusilla Strehlow of Alameda. The DAR erected historic plaques at sites throughout the country for the 1976 Bicentennial. The one in Joaquin Miller Park commemorating the Navigation Tress was dedicated on March 14, 1977.

<sup>2</sup> *A Yankee Trader in the California Redwoods* by Frederick JC Monteagle; published by the East Bay Regional Park District, Oakland, California; 1976.

Gibbons' article refers to "older citizens," whom he would presumably have known, remembering the trees. By the time of his first visit, however, the trees already been cut. Beechey gives a qualitative description of the trees' location as seen from the bay, but evidently, he never actually visited the site. I tried to locate the trees from the bay, first cajoling my way onto the roof of the ten-story Mercy Manor, located on the corner of Foothill Boulevard and 35<sup>th</sup> Avenue, and later visiting Treasure Island. I was unable to make any definitive identification. Still, the only place that matched Beechey's description is the southern limit of the Roberts picnic area. This marks the end of the visible redwood grove. The topography drops off steeply to the Trudeau Center (the old District headquarters at 11500 Skyline Boulevard), and, although there are redwoods to the east, they are in the drainage behind the Center and are not visible from the west. As the topography climbs up towards Skyline High School, there are no redwoods on the west side of the ridge. (An exception is "Old Survivor", a noted old growth tree in a canyon below Merritt Campus<sup>3</sup>, but it is far below the ridge line.)

Enter Gibbons' stump. Gibbons described a site clearly identifiable as Redwood Bowl, north of the main recreation area, close to Chabot Science Center. He then stated "a half-mile to the southwestward of [the Redwood Bowl grove of trees], on the brow of the hill which overlooks the Golden Gate" there was an immense stump (32' in diameter). At this location, Gibbons said, "we have many living trees, not only of redwood, but of other Coast Range arborescent and shrubby plants." This gives both qualitative and measurable descriptions of the site...of the stump. The relationship between girth and height is not uniform over the range of any tree species, but locally the ratio tends to be consistent; thus, it is reasonable to conclude that this large stump would have supported the locally tallest tree.

While Gibbons' qualitative descriptors ("brow of the hill," "many living trees, not only of redwood") accurately describe the site at the southern end of the Roberts picnic area, but his measurements also leave something to be desired. The distance is a little fuzzy because Redwood Bowl is over 500 feet long, running roughly north-south; from what point should one measure? Still, if one strikes a half-mile arc from the center of the bowl on a current topographic map, the line passes very close to the large triple crown. The direction is more troublesome: if one goes southwest from the bowl, the arc passes 100 vertical feet below the ridge top; for a tree in this location to be seen on the skyline it would have to be 100 feet taller than anything on the ridge, plus enough to stick up conspicuously, an unlikely circumstance. In evaluating this conflict, I realized that Gibbons had probably made an error that many of us make today: he assumed that the ridge ran north-south when, in fact, it runs northwest-southeast. Leaving Redwood Bowl, he would have crossed over to the western side of the ridge, giving him the impression that he was going southwest when he was actually going almost due south. With this analysis, all the pieces match; the character of the site, the distance and the direction all put the stump (which is to say, the tall tree) at the site of the present-day triple crown.

Backing up for a moment, one day, before I had seen the tall tree in Roberts, I received a telephone call from Barbara Fritz. Ms. Fritz was daughter and caretaker of Emanuel Fritz, forestry professor at U. C. since 1919. She explained that her father recalled taking students to Redwood Park to see a big stump, and would like to revisit the site. The only place I knew of at that time where there were large stumps was Redwood Bowl, so I took them to that site. Dr. Fritz

---

<sup>3</sup> Old Survivor is located in the city of Oakland Leona Heights Park. It is about 500 years old.

shook his head and said, “This is not the place.” They went home. Later, after I had found what I had identified as the stump site, I called Ms. Fritz, told her that I had found another site, and asked if she and her father would like to try again. She declined; her father was in his nineties and not up to the effort. In retrospect, Fritz’ recollection of the stump supported Gibbons’ report, but I had missed the opportunity to confirm the actual site. Fritz died in 1988 at the age of 102, so this sequence of events was probably around 1980. We dedicated the site during the years when David Pesonen was general manager, which was 1985-1988; that date can likely be confirmed in the District archives.

With all the above analysis, I was authorized to put together an application to the State Parks Department for an historical landmark designation. The case I had formulated was a bit of a house-of-cards, depending on a number of technical and conceptual assumptions. The landmark designation folks, like those at the District, had little appreciation of the forestry aspects of the matter, and no understanding of the orientation of the Oakland hills. Our application was denied. But we could appeal, and we did. We were given a place on the agenda for the next meeting of the California Historical Resources Commission, to be held in Hollywood.

Meanwhile, my colleague Tom Lindenmeyer went to have some dental work done. There on the wall of the dentist’s office was displayed a copy of the Ringgold map. Recognizing its significance to the District generally, if not to the landmark application, he arranged to get a copy made. The Ringgold map was critical because it illustrated the lineal relationship of the trees, Yerba Buena, and Blossom Rock. It showed an archipelago of rocks extending outward from the northern edge of Yerba Buena, now obliterated by Treasure Island, which defined Beechey’s sight line. With Tom’s map in hand, I headed for Hollywood.

I got smart-alecky, and nearly blew it! Most of the board members were architects, and most of the items on the agenda were structures. All were less than 125 years old, and most had been moved and/or altered; many required ongoing maintenance commitments. At my turn, I noted that our trees were the oldest item on the agenda, that they had never been moved or altered, and that I did not expect to have any maintenance requirements for another hundred years at least. The architects, who are accustomed to dealing with trees only after they have been sawn into lumber, were not amused. The next problem was that the board members had before them the original house-of-cards application, and were as befuddled by it as their staff had been before them. I had to get them switched over to the map, not an easy task. Then came the key question: “Are these the actual original trees?” I had to admit that they were not the original sticks of wood poking up. Almost lost it. Fortunately, one of the board members was former East Bay State Senator John Nejedly, a long-time supporter of the District. He asked if we would settle for a “site of” designation. It was time to cut my losses; I said “sure.”

And so the site at the Manzanita picnic area in Roberts Park was designated California State Landmark #962, but that has not been the end of the story. The landmarks program had only limited funds for the production of the custom landmark plaques; since we were a big, rich public agency, we should pay for our own. That took some arranging, but finally Jerry Kent agreed to pay for the plaque out of his discretionary funds. The plaque arrived, and the next issue was to get the customary stone pillar erected. Perhaps I just didn’t know what to do, but, although this was the first state landmark designation secured by the District (an earlier one at Black Diamond was erected by E Clampus Vitas), the second got erected before the Blossom

Rock plaque. I found that irksome. When it came time for the dedication event, I attended, but I had not been specifically invited, nor was I given any opportunity to speak. General Manager David Pesonen and Director Mary Jefferds were on hand to take credit. I did get a piece of the inevitable commemorative cake, depicting a large stump.

Both within and without the District, people have tended to focus on the record-setting stump, which is not relevant to the historic characteristic of the trees - their height. In addition to the plaque and its pillar, an interpretive sign was designed (not by me) which featured an immense stump with sprouts rising out of it. It was installed. Also included was the Ringgold map. This was supposed to be a copy of Lindenmeyer's copy of the dentist's copy, but for some reason, Lindenmeyer's copy was actually incorporated into the sign. The sign has since weathered beyond repair and been replaced with a more suitable one, but the original map has been lost. Burgess gives a reference to Ringgold's work, and I assume one could get a copy from the Library of Congress, but it appears that the District does not have a copy in its files.

At the plaque dedication in 1986 the guest speaker was John B. DeWitt, then executive of the Save the Redwoods League. The League had invested a lot of time searching for the record-setting redwoods, in both height and girth. The League height record was beaten by the National Geographic Society, when it discovered the so called "Libby Tree" at 364'+/-. That tree no longer holds the record, having been surpassed by several other discoveries. Needless to say, DeWitt, having lost out on the height, was somewhat touchy on the topic of the girth of the Gibbons' record stump. He stated that the League had searched where all "the best redwoods grow" and had never found anything over about 25' in diameter. He spent most of his talk debunking the Gibbons report, and ignoring the trees' historic navigational role. Ironically, the "best" places searched by the League were areas considered "best" by the timber industry. Industrialists seek trees that are tall and straight with little taper; these trees define (for them) the best sites. In fact, foresters define site quality by the average height of dominant trees at a particular age. The Roberts ridge-top site is not good by those standards; the soil is shallow and has little water-holding capacity. The bedrock peeks out over much of the area. On such sites, the girth tends to be greater in proportion to the height than on "better" sites. DeWitt, the holder of a degree in forestry, had been looking in the wrong place for a tree of great girth.

From time to time I am asked two questions. First, aren't (implying weren't) there taller trees in the East Bay grove? Second, what about the trees at the site of the 1976 plaque in Joaquin Miller Park? The answer to both questions is substantially the same. As in other real estate evaluations, location is everything. I have no doubt that there are (and were) trees taller than the Blossom Rock trees in the East Bay, perhaps even at the site of the 1976 plaque. Down the face of the hill the soil gets deeper, the water supply and holding capacity get greater, and protection from wind damage is greater. Such sites -and the 1976 site shares some of these characteristics - would be expected to produce taller trees. However, these trees are sufficiently below the ridge that they do not show up on the skyline when viewed from near the Golden Gate. In the case of the 1976 plaque site, those trees are backed up by Redwood Peak, which is about 200' higher than the plaque site. While the designated Roberts site is also considerably lower than Redwood Peak, the topography drops into a drainage to the east of the site, and so nothing blocks the trees' silhouettes against the sky. If one were viewing from near the foot of the hill, a tall tree might stand out at that viewing angle, but, from near the Golden Gate, 15+ miles away, the sight line is

nearly horizontal, and a tall tree standing at the 1976 plaque site would get lost in its background against Redwood Peak.

Whenever I am driving along the Oakland or San Francisco waterfront, I sneak peeks at the ridge to see if I can pick out the Blossom Rock trees. I have yet to be convinced that I have actually succeeded. Perhaps if I went back to Treasure Island, I could pick them out; they are, after all about thirty per cent older now than when I did my earlier research, and, being dominant trees, should have grown considerably. However, if one looks at the Roberts site from the south, say from the intersection of Redwood Road and Skyline Boulevard, or from the viewing deck in the serpentine prairie south of the Trudeau Center, there can be no doubt that there are two trees there, standing above the grove, “too conspicuous to be overlooked.”

---

<sup>i</sup> *East Bay Hills: A Brief History* by Amelia S. Marshall; published by The History Press; 2017.