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.

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George Allison, 2018
Photo by Shanna Farrell
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George Allison is a longtime East Bay Regional Park District employee who retired in 2002. He worked as a supplier for the district and oversaw operations at Crown Beach and Lake Chabot, as well as working in the EBRPD Fire Department and living on-site at Roberts Park. In this interview, Allison discusses his early life, including his childhood in Pennsylvania before moving to Southern California with his family in 1954, his time in the Navy, his time with the EBRPD, and reflections on his career.
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The East Bay Regional Park District Oral History Project

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

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

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

The interviews in this collection reflect the diverse yet interconnected ecology of individuals and places that have helped shape and define the East Bay Regional Park District and East Bay local history.
Interview 1: December 19, 2018

01-00:00:07 Farrell: Okay, this is Shanna Farrell with George Allison on Wednesday, December 19, 2018 and we are in Antioch, California. This is an interview for the East Bay Regional Park District Parkland Oral History Project. George, can you start by telling me where and when you were born and a little bit about your early life?

01-00:00:27 Allison: Well, I was born in Newcastle, Pennsylvania, which is a small town, and my dad owned a gas station there at the time. I’m the sixth of nine kids that lived. My mother had some kids that passed away after they were born. But anyway, and I grew up there, went to, I think, the sixth grade. In Newcastle, they didn’t have kindergarten. I started out in the first grade whenever I started school. And, it was fun. It was snowy and slushy in the winter and nice in the summer. But, we had a good life.

My dad always made sure we had a place to live and food on the table, and that was important to him. And, actually, the house that we were all raised in back there, all nine of us, is still owned by one of my nephews. My sister bought it when she got married after we moved to California. She moved from California back there. She got it, and it’s been in the family for, gosh, since 1935, something like that. It’s still there, still in the family. It’ll probably stay in the family.

01-00:01:43 Farrell: What year were you born?

01-00:01:45 Allison: 1943.

01-00:01:48 Farrell: Can you tell me about some of your early memories of Newcastle and what it was like when you were a kid?

01-00:01:54 Allison: It was always doing something. We were always doing something. My dad was a lay pastor, too, so we did a lot of stuff with the church. We always had something. Christmastime, we’d always carol. During the summertime we’d have church hay rides that were actually horse-drawn hay rides. We did a lot of fun things when I was growing up and a lot of hunting and fishing. My dad never hunted and fished, but my two older brothers loved it. So, I got to go, too. They took me under their wing and my other brothers, too. We’d all go fishing and hunting together and that was a big part of my life in Pennsylvania. For only eleven years, it was a lot of fun. We enjoyed it.
We did ice skating. We did swimming in the creek. I almost drowned one time. My older sister seen me out there moving around and come out and got me. Things like that happened.

Farrell: So you spent a lot of time outside when you were growing up?

Allison: As much as we could. In the evenings, we would come in, and my dad had one of the first radios, actually one of the first TV's, too. We’d all come in in the evening and listen to radio, all of us. We always ate at the table, meat and potatoes. I didn’t know what a salad was, really, until I come to California. I ate fresh vegetables and raw vegetables, but I never, ever had a real salad.

Farrell: I’m from the East Coast, too, and had a similar experience of that, too. Can you tell me your dad’s name and some of your early memories about him?

Allison: Yeah. My dad’s name is Oscar Noel Allison. His grandmother raised him in Chicago. He had a lot of experiences in Chicago that he told us about with gangsters. He used to hang out at pool halls and stuff like that while he was going to school for electronics. A lot of people took him under their wings, but they were the wrong people. They protected him. He said one time he was in a pool hall, and the owner told him, “Oscar, you’ve got to leave now. Just go. I don’t want you here anymore.” Two nights later, the place was all shot up. So, that’s kind of protecting him.

His dad was a conductor for the railroad and my dad said he had a girlfriend at every stop. We still have his hat, his watch he got when he retired, and I think his nametag. We still have it.

Farrell: What brought your dad to Pennsylvania?

Allison: I really don’t know, unless it was my mother because her family is from Pennsylvania. She’s from Washington, Pennsylvania. It’s the Donston family. And they were all there. But I imagine that’s what brought him.

Farrell: Can you tell me your mother’s name and some of your early memories of her?

Allison: Dorothy.

Farrell: Dorothy?
Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California Berkeley

01-00:05:02
Allison: Dorothy, right. She was a stay-at-home mom. She never drove. She was a typical mom. Wait until your father gets home. We could do anything all day long, and nothing would happen until my dad got home. He wasn’t really too strict sometimes, too, depending on what it was. But there was time he would tell me, “Go out in the back and get a switch.” That’s the way it was back then.

01-00:05:30
Farrell: What brought your family to California in 1954 when you moved here?

01-00:05:35
Allison: Well, we came out on vacation in ‘53, and then my dad went back and he said, “I like the weather out there.” We’d come out in June of ‘53.” He said, “I like the weather and everything out there.” He’d just finished building a three-bedroom block house for us. He said, “Let’s just sell it, take all the money and buy a new car and go out there.” And that’s what we did. ‘54, we moved out here. Let me see. There was, like, eleven of us in a 1954 Plymouth going across country. It took us seven days, and pulling a trailer, too, not a house trailer, a trailer.

Some nights we would camp out in the desert or something like that. Some nights we would stay in a motel. But it took seven days to get out here. We stayed with my aunt in Compton, California for, I don’t know, six or seven months. And then we moved to our own house he was renting on Greenleaf Boulevard in Compton.

01-00:06:40
Farrell: Did your dad sell the gas station as well?

01-00:06:44
Allison: I don’t really know. I just know it’s still there. It’s not being used. But it’s still there. I don’t know whether he sold it or not, because we actually moved to a place called Greenville from Newcastle. He must have sold it or something. Or maybe he lost—back then the gas station part was owned by the gas company. The repair part was owned by him. But he did the pumping of the gas and everything, too. I could tell you a lot more stories.

01-00:07:24
Farrell: What kind of impressions did the cross-country road trip leave on you? Because you spent a lot of time outdoors, and then you’re driving through this crazy landscape.

01-00:07:34
Allison: All of us kids thought it was fun. We stopped out in the middle of the desert. We never seen lava, and come through the mountains. We’d never seen real high mountains like that. We had a lot of fun. We saw a lot of animals. I don’t think I saw my first lizard until we started coming across the desert and seeing horned toads and things like that when we were out, because he would stop at
lunchtime and we’d have two or three hours that we would just relax, because we were all cramped in a little car. It was hard then.

Farrell: What was it like for you to transition from the East Coast to Southern California?

Allison: I didn’t like it.

Farrell: No?

Allison: No. When I was twelve, I ran away from home. I was going to go back to Pennsylvania.

Farrell: Why didn’t you like it?

Allison: It just didn’t suit me. I didn’t like the schools, didn’t like the people. I can’t give you a definite reason, but I just know. It wasn’t like what I was doing in Pennsylvania, so I just thought, well, I’ll just run away from home. I got about twelve miles and then came back home. My dad was waiting at the door for me.

Farrell: What made you decide to come back home?

Allison: It was cold. I was in a culvert, and it was cold. I didn’t take anything with me, no heavy jacket or anything. I just thought I’m stupid. I’ve got a warm bed at home. What am I doing here? I thought I could sneak back in, but my dad knew I wasn’t in the house. This was about 2:00 in the morning, so he knew. He was waiting at the door.

Farrell: Was there a point that you started to like it?

Allison: Yeah, when we started doing things. My dad would take us out to the desert and take us places, gold panning and places like that. Then we started to like it. And then, I got into fishing real hard down at Pierpoint, which is in Long Beach. We’d go down there on weekends. When school was out we’d go down and spent a lot of time there with the boats. I began to pick it up.

When I was twelve, where we lived, right across the street was all truck farms. They grew beans, radishes, stuff like that. We met this guy named Ted Diaz who owned property. He was a Filipino man. He asked us at twelve if we
wanted a job. We could pick beans. We started picking beans. We’d get three cents a pound the first of the year and two cents a pound after the glut.

After that we were good at it. My older brother, just older than I, was good at it. He asked us if we wanted to—before the summer started, we could come on Saturdays and put beans in and actually put the poles in, string them and everything. He paid us a dollar an hour for that. We said, of course. We didn’t have a lot of money. My parents didn’t have a lot of money. We started doing that.

Driving truck, that’s where I learned how to drive. When I was thirteen, I could drive a truck out there. No one could say anything about it. We’d hunt on the property. We’d hunt jackrabbits and pheasants. We began to enjoy it.

F：Yeah, the more you spend outside—
A：It had its down times, but it was fun, too. Work wasn’t as much fun, but the stuff we did afterwards and the things he would let us do on the farm was good. We helped him, and he helped us. He was a nice man. He was really great. There was things I did that shouldn’t have been done. I’d break something, and he’d get real mad. But he never fired me. He’ll say, “Okay, come back tomorrow, but you’re going to work harder to make up for what you did.”

F：How about school? Where did you go to school? Did you have any subjects that you particularly liked?
A：No, I really didn’t like school. I went to school and just barely passed. Junior high, I did real well. Senior high, I just barely passed. Actually, I have never graduated from high school. I never got the certificate of graduation. When I was in eleventh grade I joined the navy instead.

F：Oh, so you joined when you were a junior in high school.
A：Yeah. I was seventeen.

F：What was your reason for joining?
A：I didn’t like school. I was getting in a lot of trouble. My dad and I talked about it, and he said, well, why don’t you go in the navy or go in the army? My best friend in crime, Bill Hahn, he went in the army and I went in the navy. We
actually went before a judge, and the judge gave us a choice. But it was good. It was good. It was good for me.

01-00:12:39 Farrell: Yeah, can you tell me a little bit about your experience in the navy?

01-00:12:43 Allison: I started out as a storekeeper, and that’s taking care of all the supplies. I worked my way up to third class. There was a lot of nice people there that took me under their arm, made sure I knew everything that was going right, doing things. And then, after I was in, I was aboard the USS Midway for four years. I enjoyed it. We went to Japan after I was on it about four months, and that was a good experience, Japan, Hong Kong, places like that. It just set me off.

And then, I met my wife. Actually, I didn’t meet her. I knew her. She lived down the street from us. We started going together, and then in 1961 we got married.

01-00:13:40 Farrell: What’s your wife’s name?

01-00:13:41 Allison: Treva, T-R-E-V-A.

01-00:13:43 Farrell: You decided to get married while you were still in the navy?

01-00:13:46 Allison: Yes. I was only eighteen. She was sixteen. But we’ve been married fifty-seven years.

01-00:13:55 Farrell: You had mentioned when we talked before that you were in Alameda for a little while?

01-00:14:01 Allison: Well, that’s where the ship was, in Alameda. We lived in Alameda.

01-00:14:04 Farrell: Oh, you did?

01-00:14:05 Allison: Yeah, we lived in Alameda. We used to go to Crown Beach before it was Crown Beach. We’d go down and walk on the beach and had bonfires down there with all of my navy buddies. We’d go down and have bonfires, which you can’t do anymore. You can’t do things like that. We really enjoyed Alameda. It was a nice place to live. Then, we moved after I started for the park district because my son was born. We needed a bigger place. It was nice, but I love Alameda. I’d live there now if I could. But I can’t afford it.
Farrell: What were some of your aspirations that you were thinking you wanted to do when you were wrapping up your time with the navy?

Allison: I wanted to do something in purchasing or something like that because I enjoyed it, because when you’re in the navy you get to do a lot of things. I went to schools for purchasing and stuff like that in the navy. I went to San Diego a couple of times for school, which really helped me set in my mind what I wanted to be. I wanted to do something in that line, even in a grocery store or something, purchasing for something like that.

Farrell: What about purchasing did you like?

Allison: Just being able to talk to people, being able to make decisions on your own. You didn’t have to go to someone to find out if you could do this or couldn’t or could buy this or couldn’t buy this. You do it on your own. You’re independent. Of course, you have to report to someone, but it’s an independence.

Farrell: When you were done with the navy in 1964, how did you get involved with the park district?

Allison: I went to an agency that had some jobs open, and actually you had to pay for it. But I went to this agency, and they said they had this good job. It was starting out setting up a warehouse or something for the park district. I thought, well, that would be good. They set me up. It cost me fifty bucks. But, they set me up with it, and I went up to the main office, which is the Trudeau Center now, and saw a man called Bob Herman, who was, I think, the comptroller then or the finance director or something. That wasn’t where I was supposed to go. I was supposed to go to the corps yard in the middle of a golf course. He sent me over there, and I talked to a man named Frank Bonetti, who was my boss, and Bob Clark, who was the equipment superintendent at the time. They both liked me and that was on the first or second of January. They said they’ll call me back. On the tenth they called me back and said I could come to work on the thirteenth. The tenth was the day my son was born. I did go, go to work for them on the thirteenth.

The nice part about it, when I told them I had to pay for the job, they were upset. Bob Herman and the rest had put it with an agency instead of just putting it out there. So actually, after they talked to Bob Herman or something I got my fifty dollars back. I don’t know why, but I guess they talked it over and said you shouldn’t have had to pay that. But back then you did buy jobs.
You can do it now, probably, go to an agency that deals in whatever your career is, and they charge you to write up a resumé and find a job.

Farrell: Yeah. I feel like that’s what headhunters do or something now.

Allison: Right. That’s true.

Farrell: When you got hired in 1964, were you working out of the warehouse in the Trudeau Center?

Allison: No. It was over in the middle of the corporation yard that’s now the driving range.

Farrell: Where actually was that located?

Allison: In the middle of the golf course, right in the middle.

Farrell: But, which park?

Allison: Tilden. Oh, I’m sorry, Tilden Park.

Farrell: What were some of the things that were your roles that you were doing at that point?

Allison: The very first thing I did was go to every park we had and take an inventory of all their equipment. That took, I don’t know, five or six months to do that. I put numbers on everything. No one kept track of anything. Vehicles they did, but chainsaws, stuff like that, no one knew what was where. So, I did all of that. After that was done, then in the actual corporation yard they had a small warehouse, maybe as big as this house.

I went through it and cataloged everything because no one had a catalog. If you wanted something, you’d just ask, “Do you have this?” Frank or I would say, “No, we don’t,” or “Yes, we do.” I made a catalog of everything we had in there and gave it a number and sent it out to every park we had, which was five at the time. They would know what we had. So, before they come over, they could tell us what they wanted or even call us, and we could have it ready when it was there.
Actually, they gave me a commendation for that up at the board meeting about eight months later for setting it up. It was fun. It was fun to do. We just kept adding everything, and then eventually we moved up to the old Nike site, which is up by the little railroad on Grizzly Peak. When we moved up there, we could enlarge everything. Where we’d just have a few things, we sent out a—I don’t know whether it was a memo or something—to everyone to ask them what they thought we should stock or what they used a lot of. We would get that back, and if three or four people wanted it, then we would put it into stock and buy it. Frank was doing that at the time, Frank Bonetti. I was just a stock clerk then.

When you were working out of Tilden, what are some of your early memories of what Tilden was like then?

It was slow. It was slow. Even when people come in, because we had a gas pump there, I would go pump gas for them so they wouldn’t have to, check their oil and stuff. I didn’t have to, but there was nothing else to do, and we did it. We all helped each other. It’s like the equipment department was there, too, and if they needed help changing a tire, or if they were up under a car and wanted me to put the switch on to try to start it or something, we’d do that. We had a lot of working together. There was times we didn’t get along, but we all worked together. Everyone did everything. Even though you had a specific job, as a mechanic or something, everyone did anything.

And then, that is when—because Bob Clark was the fire chief, too. I got involved in the fire department then, as a volunteer. It used to be all volunteer, no paid. They were volunteer employees.

This was in the ‘60s?

Yeah.

Can you tell me a little bit about Bob Clark?

He was a guy. He had never been out of the state of California except once to Nevada. Where did he live? Albany, I think. He was just a great guy. If you had a question or you wanted to know something about the park district, you go to Bob. He knew everything. He’s like Jerry Kent is now. That’s the way Bob Clark was. He knew everything, knew when it started, who started it, every person there. He knew them all, and he could tell you. He helped me to learn a lot of things about vehicles and about buying stuff downtown, how to do it, how to get the best price for it, things like that. Frank Bonetti did, too.
He was a good person. They were all good. They were just nice people. Everyone wanted to help everyone else, so things ran smoothly. That’s the way it was.

Farrell: What made you want to join the fire department?

Allison: It was just something to do. Bob Clark kind of talked me into it. He said, “We have a volunteer fire department where you could get involved,” and I did. For the first year, I would just do the communications. If we had a fire at night, I would go up to the corp yard and operate the radio to the fire trucks. If they needed something, I could make a phone call or something like that. I did that for two or three years.

After that, they got the communications up at the Trudeau Center, which was the main office then. So, they put someone up there. Actually, I think it’s probably about the time public safety took over the radios. They didn’t take over the fire department, but they took over the operation of the radios.

Farrell: After that, did you continue at the fire department?

Allison: Yeah, I continued. I fought fires. I was a lieutenant for a long time, until, I guess, it must have been 1978 or ’79. It just got to be too much, and I wanted out. I had three kids. And I actually lived in a park. I lived in Roberts. We moved up there, I think, in ’72. To take your kids anywhere from up there, it’s a long trip. We were trying to negotiate soccer and baseball and school. We had to drive them to school every morning, pick them up every evening, things like that. It just got to be too much. It was fun. It was a great time. We did a lot of good things together. That was back when, after a good fire, we’d all sit down and buy a case of beer and have a couple of beers before we’d go home. It’s different. But it was fun.

Farrell: Were you a volunteer the entire time when you were working there?

Allison: No. We got paid if I went out on a fire. But, like our training, we’d train on Saturdays and Sundays. We never got paid for that. We wouldn’t get paid for that.

Farrell: Was it always if you had gone out to a fire, even when you started, that you would get paid?

Allison: I think so. I think they had to pay you. That was part of the law or something. But for the training, you more or less did that on your own. When a new park
would come in, we’d all get together on a Saturday, all the firemen, and drive around to see what it was like. That was the interesting part. There’s a lot of things, knick-knacks like that mug, that container up there I got at a dump at Black Diamond. It was from a pharmacy with the cross on it, and the milk can out front came from there. It was in the dump.

Farrell: You were with the park department and working with the fire department at a time when the park was starting to expand?

Allison: Expand, oh yeah.

Farrell: What are some of your memories of how the park expanded?

Allison: I don’t remember a lot, but I can remember Crown Beach, when we took that over. Everyone went down there. I was passing out Black Jack gum and stuff like that. It was a historical thing, and passing out pamphlets on what we were going to do down there and everything. I spent two days down there, Saturday and Sunday, and that was all volunteer. We didn’t get paid for it. But it was fun. My wife came down, too, wife and kids. We’d all get down there. It was fun. It was enjoyable. We all did something to help.

Same with Lake Chabot. When Lake Chabot opened, there were three of us—me, Ron Emanuelson, and someone else I can’t remember. They had boats, and we were taking all the dignitaries out. We had fished two or three days before, so we knew where the best fishing was. We would take them out so they could all catch some fish. That was fun. We took a lot of people out.

Farrell: Who were some of the people that you took out?

Allison: Board members. I can’t remember. I think Senator Bort, or one of those from Sacramento. I forget his name, but it began with a B. We took him out. We took some not national but state park people out because they were interested in it, and take them out fishing just around the lake. We did that for two days. I spent the night out there Friday night so we could get up early Saturday morning and do it.

When we opened Cull Canyon, that was a lagoon. We all got out there. We had sand that had to be spread out and leveled, and we didn’t have the equipment they have now. We had an old tractor, and they spread it out as close as they could. Then we’d rake it so there wasn’t any big lumps for people when they went swimming. We did that for a week and a half, getting the lagoon all set up. That was the week, I’m not sure of the week, maybe the week before, that I got a call that I had to go up on Highway 80 and bail out
Jerry Kent and all the guys that went up to pick up the olive trees for Cull Canyon. They planted olive trees in there. Somehow they got them donated.

They were up there, but they didn’t get any permits to move them. The highway patrol had pulled them over, and they were all sitting up alongside the freeway. I had to go up to the main office, get some money, get the permit stuff, go up to the highway patrol in Sacramento, get the permits to come back and give to them so we could take the trees down to Cull Canyon. It’s one of those things they didn’t know they needed. You just do it. It was free. We had the manpower. We had the vehicles, so pick up those trees. It’d be nice. They’re big trees, already grown and easy to transplant, olive trees that big.

You had to drive up to Sacramento, get the permit and go get them? The whole time they were sitting on the side of the road?

They were sitting there, sitting alongside the road, right.

That had to be for hours.

On the way up I did stop on the way up, I think, and got them some soft drinks and stuff so that they would have it, and then got the permits, and we come back.

So they must have been sitting there for hours.

They were. We didn’t know if we were going to be able to get the permits, that they might not have to go to a motel that night to stay. But we did. We got them in time, and they drove them to the park.

What kind of permits did you need? Do you remember?

For moving trees on a highway, you need a permit when you’re oversized and things like that. We thought, being the park district, that’s the way we thought back then. We would just do it. We did a lot of things like that and got away with it. But the highway patrol just said, “No, you can’t do that. You have to be like everyone else and get a permit and be legal.”

Do you remember where the trees were being moved from?
Allison: No, I don’t. It might have been as far away as Carmichael that they were being moved from. Jerry would know, Jerry Kent. He knows. He would be able to tell you.

Farrell: That’s funny.

Allison: Because he was there. He was sitting there.

Farrell: That’s funny. Also, you mentioned taking dignitaries out to go fishing and fishing with people that you worked with. What were some of your favorite fishing spots in the district?

Allison: My favorite is Temescal, because they used to plant trout there, and it was close. I could take the kids down there, and we could catch fish. It was easy. But Lake Chabot was okay. My thing right now, and even back then, was ocean fish—sturgeon, salmon, stripers, things like that.

Farrell: Was working with the park district and taking your kids out to fish a good way to kind of pass on your love for the outdoors to your kids?

Allison: Well, my kids, even living the park, my kids, none of them liked living in the city. My oldest son is living just outside of Yosemite in a town called North Fork. He’s got 160 acres there that him and three other people called Three Springs. My daughter was in Utah until she adopted her son, and then she had to come closer to schools and better schools. She went to move to Reno. She works for the Bureau of Land Management. My youngest son, he lives in San Leandro right now, but he worked for NASCAR for a long time. He worked for Darrell Waltrip, all of the big guys, even—what’s his name—I can’t think of him right now. He doesn’t race anymore, but a lot of them. He worked for a lot of them. He liked it, but he was gone thirty-six weeks out of the year, and that’s what caused his divorce and everything. But even him, he moved to North Carolina when he got that job, and it was out in the country. They like the country. They like fishing. They like camping. All of them like camping. It’s born in them.

Being raised in Roberts Park, they had 2,500 acres they could go out and play in, and they did every summer and on Saturdays and Sundays. We’d have a lot of kids up to the park. Their friends would come up because it was up there. We would camp out in the park for the night and get away with it. Other people couldn’t, but we could.
Farrell: What prompted your move to Roberts?

Allison: Just, we were renting anyway, and it came open. Actually, it and Sibley residence came open. We put in for either one, and they gave us Roberts. You have to put in for it.

Farrell: Where were you living before Roberts?

Allison: Castro Valley. We lived there for two years.

Farrell: What year did you move into the residence at Roberts?

Allison: Gosh, I think it was, like, 1971, I think. But I’m not sure.

Farrell: How long did you stay there for?

Allison: Twenty-seven years. We moved out of there in 1995.

Farrell: Yeah, that’s a long time.

Allison: It’s a long time, yeah.

Farrell: What was that residence like?

Allison: It was nice. It was hard at times. There was a lot of people. A lot of things happened. Just one thing is like Sonny Barger from the Hell’s Angels, him and his motorcycle group come up during the winter one winter and parked out in front of the swimming pool, jumped over the fence and went swimming. Well, I didn’t know who he was, so I went down and I explained to him that if they stayed there I was going to get in trouble for letting them there. I said, “You guys are going to have to leave, or I’m going to call public safety, and then they’ll come up and remove you.” But I didn’t know who it was at the time.

All of a sudden my wife says, “You know who that is?” I said no. She said, “Well, that’s Sonny Barger.” He was nice. You know what he told me? He said, “Okay, we’re going to take a dip, and I’ll make sure they all leave.” I said, “Hey, that’s fine with me. No hassle, no anything. That was great.”

About four years later, maybe five years later, my wife was doing child care at
Roberts, and the treasurer of the Hell’s Angels, his girlfriend brought his daughter up there for day care. His name was Foo, I think.

Farrell: That’s so interesting.

Allison: Yeah, it was. But there was other things that happened up there that was like that. Just before we left, there was a shooting up there. We went out to this young girl who was sitting out there by the gate. She looked like she was hurt. I asked her if she wanted any help, and she said, “No, this happens all the time. This is just normal for us.” But when the shooting started, there was two guys that went over the spikes and got flat tires. They never even stopped. They just kept going down the highway. They were older black people. They just wanted to get out of there.

There was a girl murdered out at the front gate one year. One interesting thing I just thought of is this woman on horseback who we knew—she’d come by a couple of times—come riding up real fast in a huff and she says, “George,” she says, “There’s someone out there just beating the living dickens out of his wife. We can hear him. It spooked my horse and everything.” At the time I had a horse, so I saddled up the horse and went out. Sure enough, he was.

I called public safety, and public safety went out there. What it was, was this guy beating on a sleeping bag. Him and his wife were getting a divorce, and he said he wanted to kill her. His psychiatrist told him, “You know what you do? Just go to someplace way out of the way and just beat the hell out of her without her being there. Just take a pillow, sleeping bag,” and that’s what he was doing.

Farrell: So it wasn’t actually his wife?

Allison: No, it wasn’t actually his wife. It was funny after we heard it, but his psychiatrist had told him to go do something like that, so he picked out in the wilderness to do it. Isn’t that funny?

Farrell: That is interesting advice. So you were able to have a horse when you were living there?

Allison: Yeah, for about a year, for about a year.

Farrell: Did you have a stable or anything on the property?
Allison: No, we just kept him right beside the house. I built a little corral.

Farrell: How did you learn to ride?

Allison: I’ve always ridden. I’ve always ridden horses. I rented them. I didn’t have any. But I’ve always ridden horses. Treva and I always did go horseback riding. We had a chance to get this horse. It didn’t cost me anything.

Farrell: Do you ride English or Western?

Allison: Western.

Farrell: Were there other places around the park that you rode ever?

Allison: I rode all over the park. That’s when I was drinking, and I’d put a six-pack of beer in the saddle bags, and I’d ride out for three and then come back for three. We named her Skyline Lady. She was a good horse. But she loved women and didn’t really care for men. She threw me a couple of times and come running back to the house.

Farrell: The residence at Roberts, can you describe it, like how big it was and what it looked like?

Allison: It’s about a three-bedroom, nice house, nice big kitchen, big living room, small bedrooms, two-bedroom. It was great living there. It’s just super. We had a lot of fun experiences. We had a big half-wolf, half—what was it?—half golden retriever, I think, for about ten years, a really good dog named Choctaw. He was protective of the house. You could hear him at night. He’d go around and check everything and then go to sleep.

One night, we were looking out the front, and there was this big buck standing out front. I thought, “Well, Choctaw, I’ll just let you go chase him out.” He was eating our apples. I opened the door. I said, “Go get him, Choctaw.” Him and the deer looked at each other like they knew each other, probably through the window. It didn’t scare that deer a bit, not a bit. I thought it would take off running as soon as I opened the door, but it never did a thing.

Farrell: They were friends.

Allison: They were friends, yeah, friends through the window.
Farrell: That’s funny. What prompted your move out of Roberts?

Allison: They changed the rules, so we could only live there three years. We moved before the three years were up. We wanted to anyway. We wanted to get away from there. We moved to this house, and there was nothing here when we moved here. All these houses you see over there and over there, none of them was there. Brentwood was hardly any housing. It was nice. It was a nice little community. People were friendly. All the orchards, I like to go out and pick fruit and can and stuff like that. It was really nice. But it’s grown up.

Farrell: Yeah, it’s definitely, the past twenty years, it seems like it’s just exploded.

Allison: We were going to move before we started remodeling the kitchen and everything. We were going to sell and move. We thought, where are we going to move to? I’m seventy-five. Treva’s seventy-three. It’d be too hard to move. We decided we’d just remodel. We’re going to fix up the back, do everything we want and stay.

Farrell: Yeah, that’ll be nice. As far as your work in purchasing for the department, so you were at Tilden, and then you moved to Nike. You said that you could—

Allison: Right. That’s still in Tilden.

Farrell: The corp yard?

Allison: Right.

Farrell: Okay. It was just you that moved to the Nike site?

Allison: No, it was the equipment shop. Everything moved to the Nike site. It expanded. We’d stock probably 250, 300,000 dollars’ worth of supplies for the park district. And that would turn over four times a year. It was a big job. We hired two more people to help me so I could do more of the purchasing and less of the daily stuff. But even then, it was slow sometimes because when you’re doing purchasing you’re waiting for people to give you bids. You’re waiting always waiting for something.

The computers come in, and that helped do a little bit of stuff. It was nice. When we were moving up there, an interesting thing happened. I don’t know if anything told you about Ron Day. He was our first public safety leader. He
had two or three people working for him, but he come up there while we were working on it and fixing it up, and he found .22 shell, spent .22 shell casings up there. We knew what they were for. They were for a stud gun because we were putting studs in. But he didn’t.

He says, “I’m going to have to check on that and see who’s up here at night firing these .22.” We just let him go on for about four days, and he sent people up there at night and everything. And then finally we told him. We said, “You know, Ron, you ought to check into that. I think it’s just the stud gun we’re using.”

01-00:43:27
Farrell: That’s funny.

01-00:43:27
Allison: Yeah. He went on to, I think, Sacramento and started his own day-and-night security service.

01-00:43:42
Farrell: You were also in the district during Vietnam. Did that change the workforce at all, like the people that you were working with? Were you seeing the war affect anything?

01-00:43:55
Allison: It just affected what you talked about. I didn’t talk to too many people about it because when I was in the navy, the Vietnam War wasn’t going on. But we were sending airplanes from our ship to Cambodia and bombing and stuff like that. I was just a young kid. An airplane would come back with holes in it. I thought, well, for practice, because they told us they were just going out to practice. It wasn’t. Then, once a plane got shot down, then we knew that we were doing something that probably wasn’t authorized by the government. I didn’t want to get into any arguing with people about Vietnam or anything, just like I wouldn’t now.

01-00:44:43
Farrell: Yeah, I just didn’t know if the draft had affected anything, so if people you were working with were getting drafted.

01-00:44:49
Allison: I don’t think so. Most of the people were older or past the draft age too. There might have been some young kids we had during the summer that got drafted, because we hired a lot of summer help back then. I don’t think it affected too many regular people that were working there.

01-00:45:10
Farrell: That makes sense. How long were you working out of the Nike site for?

01-00:45:15
Allison: Until I retired.
Farrell: Until you retired? Okay. How did your job kind of grow or expand or change?

Allison: It grew from, I don’t know, two or three hundred items to we probably had a thousand items that we stocked, and different items. We had to change it all the time. You get different cars in. We carried all the spark plugs, all the filters, maintenance and everything, everything for the parks, toilet paper, all that stuff. We bought it because we could buy it cheaper. We would deliver it. We started a delivery service, and we’d send out a schedule every month on what day we were going to deliver to what park so that they would know and could send their requisitions in or call us, and we’d write them up for them, things like that.

It just expanded overwhelmingly from probably $10,000 in the warehouse to 250,000, sometimes 300,000, depending on the time of the year. If it was getting close to budget time, we would buy more chainsaws and stuff like that because people would want them. They were just waiting for the budget to start. We can buy them a whole lot cheaper. There were people that didn’t like that. People want to go out and buy their own. I’m sure they do it now because they’ve started giving them all credit cards. I don’t know if that’s good or bad. You see a lot of them around at Lowe’s and places like that. They like to shop for themselves.

Farrell: Were you seeing the amount of supplies that you needed, because you said it went from a couple hundred to a thousand, was that expanding with the park?

Allison: Yeah, sure.

Farrell: So as more parks were coming online, you were buying more stuff?

Allison: Sure. Normally, this is just an example. If we had twenty cases of toilet paper for the six or seven parks we had, well, now they probably have a hundred cases or two hundred cases of toilet paper, and different types, too, two or three different types, because everyone wants a different type in their park. When they’re building the park, they’re putting it in the restroom, they want to install what they want. So, that really expanded. It really expanded. Lumber, plywood, all that, pipe, pipe fittings, it just blew up.

We were like a Lowe’s or Home Depot. We had a little bit of everything, and special stuff like for chemical toilets. You have to have stuff that’s approved by East Bay Mud and everyone. When we’d change, we’d have to go to East Bay Mud, let them test it and make sure it was biodegradable or whatever for their sewage treatment plants, because that’s where we dumped all the
chemicals from the toilets. We would have to get that approved by them. There was a lot of stuff like that that we would have to get approved.

Did you also have to stay up on a lot of the new technology as far as equipment goes? So when equipment would get upgraded, you’d kind of need to know about it?

No, because the equipment department would do that. They would just give us a list. They wouldn’t know what was coming. They do their own purchasing of vehicles. They would figure out, okay, we’re going to get twenty new Fords this year, and Ford would probably send them what you’re going to need in maintenance. Every 7,000 miles or something you’re going to need a new filter and everything. They would give us that list. We would go out and get quotes or something for whatever they needed. That was a big job.

Would it take you a long time, when you got a list, to go get bids? From the time you got a list to the time you’re actually delivering equipment, how long would that usually take?

Usually about three or four weeks, not long, because people out there, there’s big warehouses, and they all want to get your business. They promise you everything. They do. One thing I never did was, they would promise, they would say, “If you buy from me, I’ll give you this.” I would never do that. I didn’t want to compromise myself. Even one time there was this guy that was real persistent. He wanted to give me some type of a silver set or something. He sold chemicals, as a matter of fact. He wanted me to give that to him. I said, “No, I can’t take it.” I said, “I’ll tell you what, though. I’m not doing the purchasing of chemicals anymore. Go down and see Ed Loss. He’s doing it.” That was my boss.

He went down and saw my boss. My boss called up and said, “What is this?” I said, “I sent him down there. I was tired of listening to him.” You had to tell him no. That was one way of getting around it. But I never wanted to take anything because I didn’t want to be compromised. That’s one thing that Bob Clark and Frank Bonetti always taught me, is don’t be compromised. Do what you have to do to do a good job. I think they instilled that in me.

At one point, you also had mentioned, when we talked before, that you were able to interact with the public a lot. You saw how important the Bay Area parks were to people.

Right. That was when I was at Cull Canyon, when we opened it. I didn’t do Del Valle, but Chabot, people get so excited when there’s a new park in their
area, something new to do. It’s preserved, and it’s not going to be used for housing or anything else. That really impressed me. We were actually doing it for the public. We weren’t doing it for self-gratification. The public was really the people we were doing it for. And I liked that. I like to hear things like that. Even now I like to hear things like that.

I think the park district’s done an outstanding job keeping land open and everything. It’s just, it’s amazing. You go places like LA and all that. There’s very little land that they’ve kept open. The land they’re getting now, they’re tearing down houses to make parks. Just wait until they’re derelict and tear them down. I think we’ve done an outstanding job. I think they deserve a lot of credit, the founders of it. Back in the ‘30s it was unheard of, and they did it.

01-00:52:17
Farrell: Is that one of the things that kept you in the job for thirty-seven years?

01-00:52:21
Allison: No. It was partially the money and the retirement, too. I started out there making $400 a month, and I think when I left in ‘95 I was making, like, $4,500 a month, and a good retirement. I had a good retirement. It was worth it. That was important to me.

01-00:52:46
Farrell: At one point as well, you were balancing going to school at night as well?

01-00:52:52
Allison: Right. When I first started working for the district, I was going to Chabot College three nights a week to try to get a degree in business. I was taking other courses, too, supervisory courses and things like that. I took some other courses. My wife and I would take them together. We’d hire a babysitter, and we took some together. I took a creative writing class from Chabot one time just for the heck of it. But it was all good credit. If I wanted to get my high school diploma, I could get an AA. But they won’t give you an AA until you’ve had your high school diploma. Someday in the future I may do that. I don’t know, because I can get mine.

01-00:53:48
Farrell: Did those business classes that you were taking help with your work in purchasing?

01-00:53:51
Allison: Oh yeah, sure they did. Sure they did, because there was a lot of people there that were doing the same thing. One of the guys that impressed me was a guy that worked for World Airways back then. He was doing the purchasing for them. I’m talking millions and millions of dollars. He gave me probably some good ideas on how to do it, how to write it, how to word it, so that you get the best thing for your buck.
Farrell: During the course of your career, you were working with so many different people and so many different parks. How did you see things evolve during your time there?

Allison: They just blew up. It’s just evolved to lots of people, lots of parks. I think there was five parks and sixty-four employees when I started here. Now what’s there, eight hundred employees and thirty parks and open spaces? More than that, probably.

Farrell: How did you see things change administratively?

Allison: You never knew what administrative, what they were going to do. You didn’t get to talk to them. When I first started there, Bill Mott was the general manager. I could go up and talk to him and everything. Once it got so big, you couldn’t talk to people anymore. I could talk to people, but it wasn’t like it was. It just wasn’t free and easy. The camaraderie isn’t there. People started wanting—everyone wants money, but they started wanting money, the union. I was union president three times, but it’s just, that’s an ego trip from the way. I’d sit into negotiations, and to me it was an ego trip between management and our business agent.

I had a business agent once when we were doing negotiations. Everyone was mad, fighting back, not fighting but arguing. He says, “Well, I guess we’ll have to start all over.” I got him out in the hall, and I says, “Hey, look, there’s no way we’re starting all over.” I said, “We’re at this point, and we’re going to finish it.” But it’s an ego trip. That’s just my opinion.

Farrell: What union were you a part of?

Allison: 24 whatever it is now. I don’t know.

Farrell: Do you remember what years you were president?

Allison: Gosh, no. It was in the ‘80s. I was treasurer once, too. That was a long time ago.

Farrell: What were your reasons for joining the union?

Allison: We had to.
Farrell: Oh, you did?

Allison: Yeah. It’s not like it is now. You had to join it. There was no choice. You had to join it.

Farrell: What was your reason for wanting to be treasurer and then president?

Allison: Who knows? Who knows? Treasurer was just to have something to do and help out. That was when it was small and everything. For president, people asked me to do it, so I did it. I ran twice.

Farrell: Has the role of the union changed at all since the ‘80s?

Allison: No, it hasn’t, I don’t think. From the time I started working, I don’t think it’s changed. They always want more and more. I guess that’s okay, but more and more means more taxes for you and I. And, I always thought what a fair market is, is the job you’re doing. Even when I was union president, there was a lot of things that went on that I didn’t agree with. But, if that’s what they wanted, that’s what they got. The best thing I ever did as union president was instigated, when we did negotiations, is balloting instead of going to a meeting where everyone’s there.

It’s usually the same people. You go out into each park and send them ballots and have them vote on it individually, because when I did it, the last time I did it, everyone hated me at the time. I don’t think they do now. But, seventy-six percent of the actual union members voted for the contract. That’s unusual because usually you had a meeting. There would be forty or fifty people. That’s the forty or fifty people that decided on whether it was okay or not.

You can look into it. I resigned as president after that, and I shouldn’t have, after I thought about it. But it was too late. But, they went to board members’ houses and everything after we had already approved it. But it was a ballot, and everyone got to vote. I had just as many people come up and tell me how they liked that rather than going into a union meeting and try to get up and say something and then get shouted down, because that happens at union meetings all the time.

Farrell: Yeah, and then also there’s so many people that work there that their schedules are all different, and their commitments after work are so different that it’s hard to make it to some of those meetings sometimes. If you’re making it easy for people to participate, it really is representing everybody.
Allison: That’s what I thought. If you’re going to be democratic about it, get everyone to vote that you can. We did it on a ballot, so no one had to put their name on it, which worked out. I feel good about that the whole time I was in there. But I would have never, ever let anyone while I was president vote for a strike and have a strike. I would have never done that. I’d have somehow got around it. I just don’t believe in that. They all make good money. I don’t care. They all make good money.

Farrell: Yeah, and good benefits.

Allison: Good benefits. My kids, except for my daughter, my kids, my two boys pay for everything themselves—their medical, their dental, everything. It all comes out of their pocket. That’s a lot of money, a lot of money.

Farrell: You ended up retiring in 1995?

Allison: Yeah.

Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit—


Farrell: Can you tell me a little bit about your decision to retire?

Allison: Yeah. I was just tired of the politics of the park district. The supervisor that I was going to get, him and I didn’t see eye to eye. I didn’t feel that some of the stuff he was going to do was right. I had plenty of time in, and I could get a good retirement, so I just figured—we’d bought the house, and I figured I could come out here. I did some stuff afterwards. After I retired I worked at Martinez Bait Shop for a while for a couple of years. I started my own courier business delivering papers for mortgage companies and stuff like that.

When the drop in the market for all of that, you could fax everything—legally, you could fax stuff—that business went under. The past eight years—actually, nine years—I’ve worked for a mortuary company, carriage corporation. I deliver, pick up, do first calls, pick up, not locally. I do their long-distance stuff. Like, I’ll drive to LA or drive to Reno and pick up corpses and bring them in or caskets. I do their long-haul services, like if they have someone up here that has to go to LA, I’ll take them down, do their service, and then come back. I still do that a little bit, but not a lot, not a lot.
Farrell: What was it like for you, or what did it mean to you, to spend your career, thirty-seven years, with the district?

Allison: Well, I think it gave me a good insight on people, good insight on the ecology of the world. I think it helps me to be a better servant of the world. There’s a lot of things I don’t agree with, but I think we should all save. I think we should protect everything we have. I think to flaunt stuff is bad. I try not to. Sometimes it’s hard, but I try not to. I believe in putting people before animals. It’s like I have a dog, and I’ll take care of that dog, make sure it gets everything. But, the dog doesn’t own me. I love her, but she doesn’t own me.

Farrell: She enriches your life.

Allison: She does. She does, yes, and my wife’s life. It took my wife ten years for me to get that dog after our other one passed away, and I just love her. But I think just my open-mindedness about ecology, and I think it’s a good thing. I think we’re doing a lot of the right things to help the world, to help our country. I think, growing up in the park district, you learn that, because you get to hear a diverse—some people think it’s terrible. Some people, some of the stuff they do—but in the end, the final thing is, we have the park district. We have all of this. We should protect it. We should take care of it. We should keep plastic bags and cigarette butts and all that stuff out of it if we can, protect it and don’t abuse it. That’s my philosophy, and I think the park district helped me with that.

Farrell: How do you think the park district helps improve the quality of life in the Bay Area?

Allison: Because it gives people a place to go where they can be themselves. If you like just walking or just like sleeping in the park, you can go do it. As long as you abide by the rules, you can just go do it. I know people that used to come to the park up there would just come up there just to sit, sit and meditate and things like that. We had a lot of groups that come into the park up to the playground. They go up there and meditate at night until the park closed, and groups, big groups, lots of women, things like that.

Treva had a group. I was gone, and she had a group of women up there screaming and yelling. She went up to see what they were doing, and they were celebrating the summer solstice. We had a wading pool up there. They all took off their clothes and got in the wading pool. We never reported stuff like that. That was just good fun.
Farrell: Yeah, that’s harmless.

Allison: Yeah. There was a lot of things like that that happened, like people would come up to the gate and be so tired and everything with their camper or something and say, “We’re just looking for a place. Can you tell me?” We’d just open the gate, let them park in the parking lot, lock the gate back up and tell them, “We open the gates at 8:00. You should be ready to go by then.” They would. They appreciated it. But that park district’s like that. I think they do a lot of things like that, a lot of forgiving, a lot of forgiveness in the park.

Farrell: What are your hopes for the future of the park district?

Allison: I hope they keep up what they’re doing. I hope they find a way that they can open up parks, even during fire season and places like that, to get people out of the city, into the parks. I don’t know how you can do it, but I’ve always thought that during heavy fire season, they close the parks. But then what do those people downtown have to do? They’re hot. They’re miserable, so they fight with each other. Find a way to get them into the parks to where they can take advantage of what we have and what they’re paying for.

They’re paying for it. Why should it be closed to them? They should find a way. If you have to put a fire truck in each park, so what? We’re spending millions and millions of dollars on firefighting. That’s not a bad idea, millions of dollars.

Farrell: Is there anything else that you’d like to add?

Allison: I don’t think so. I’ll probably think of something. But, working for the park district has just been one of the highlights of my life. It really has. And, just this trip to Arkansas, they don’t do things like this back there, park district. People don’t want to give up their property. They’ll fight hand and fist to keep it. It takes a lot of money back there. It’s just different. When you see back there, I wouldn’t live back there, even though my in-laws did. I wouldn’t live back there. It’s too hard, too cold, people.

The little town that our farm’s in is 630 people. Well, they wanted to build a new school because the old school is, like, 110 years old. So they put up a tax. Two people voted for it. Everyone else voted no. If you look at the school, it is. It does need something.

Farrell: Definitely different out here.
Allison: Oh yeah. Back there, in this little town, if you want to be a policeman, you have to go to the school and everything. They send you down to Little Rock. But you buy your own uniforms. They give you a car, and I think they give you your gun now. Used to be you had to buy your own gear. But you have to buy your own uniforms.

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

Allison: Thank you.

Farrell: This has been great.

Allison: Thank you. I hope I’ve given you something that you can use.

Farrell: No, it’s great. It was great, yeah. Thank you.

[End of interview]