Rick Laubscher

Rick Laubscher: Forty Years of Giving Back to San Francisco,
From KRON to Market Street Railway

Interviews conducted by
Todd Holmes
in 2016

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Rick Laubscher is an award-winning journalist, public relations executive, and founder of Market Street Railway in San Francisco. A fourth generation San Franciscan, Rick’s long career in journalism, business, and civic activism has centered on his beloved city. In this oral history, he discusses the Laubscher family business and his childhood in San Francisco; his years as a television reporter in the city; his public relations career at the Bechtel Corporation; and the many civic activities he undertook, principally the founding of Market Street Railway.
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[End of Interview]
Introduction by Todd Holmes

San Francisco newspaper columnist Herb Caen once wrote, “A city is not gauged by its length and width, but by the broadness of its vision and the height of its dreams.” In just one sentence, Caen poetically captured the essence of what has always made San Francisco one of America’s most iconic cities: its people. From bohemian writers and Chinese merchants, to pioneering industrialists and smooth-talking politicians, to Irish strongmen and free-spirited hippies, the people who came to call San Francisco home over the last 150 years intrinsically shaped the city through their visions and dreams. Rick Laubscher stands among those notable residents.

Born in 1949, Rick came of age amid the bustle of Market Street at the family’s business, Laubschers’ Delicatessen. It was in these early years that he developed a fascination in transportation, and a special love of streetcars; the “iron monsters” that rumbled through the streets of San Francisco and past the family’s delicatessen. While no one knows exactly when Rick became a “foamer”—the nickname often ascribed to rail fans whose excitement causes a near foaming at the mouth—the signs were certainly there. He spent countless hours as a child drawing city maps (to scale) for his collection of Matchbox trams and buses. And during the age of lava lamps and flower power, his dorm room walls at U.C. Santa Cruz were adorned with transportation maps. Indeed, Rick had what he called “the transportation bug,” a condition that would only grow in time.

On the campus of U.C. Santa Cruz, however, Rick also developed an interest in journalism. He created the University’s first radio station, albeit unregistered with the FCC, and upon graduation headed to New York to study at the Columbia School of Journalism, where he was awarded the Pulitzer Fellowship. Returning to California, he started his career as a broadcast journalist with KGTV in San Diego. Here he helped pioneer live reporting in the Southern California market, and won two “Golden Mike” awards for his work. In 1977, Rick returned home to San Francisco as a reporter for KRON-TV. If Herb Caen was the voice of San Francisco, Rick Laubscher was certainly seen by some as the dandy of the city’s television news. Immaculately dressed in a three-piece suit, Rick reported on a number of historic events, most notably the assassination of Mayor George Moscone and Supervisor Harvey Milk. Rick knew both the victims and the killer, and his coverage of the tragedy won him an Emmy Award.

In 1980, Rick left broadcast journalism to embark on a new career as a public-relations executive with the Bechtel Group in San Francisco. Over the next two decades, he worked around the world on behalf of Bechtel, crafting communication programs for both the company and their international clients. In the process, he helped mend relations between San Francisco and its business community, fostering a network of associates that would open the door for a dual career in civic service.

Rick’s affinity for streetcars is matched only by his love for San Francisco. And for nearly forty years, while working for Bechtel and later in private practice, he undertook numerous projects to give back to the City by the Bay. He served on the executive boards of the Chamber of Commerce, SPUR, and the JASON Foundation for Education, and was the founding Chairman of the City Club of San Francisco, one of the first fully open business and civic organizations in the City’s financial district. Above all, he revamped Market Street Railway, the nonprofit that brought vintage streetcars back to San Francisco. What started as an idea among likeminded
enthusiasts—Rick calls it a “Mickey Rooney / Julie Garland Moment” (“Why don’t we get the kids together and put on a show!”)—finally took root in the summer of 1983 with San Francisco’s Historic Trolley Festival. Its popularity and international acclaim quickly made the festival an annual event. And by 1995, streetcars once again became permanent fixtures on the City streets. As President and CEO of Market Street Railway, Rick guided this effort with unrelenting energy. He assembled a diverse cast of supporters, searched around the world to secure additional streetcars, and navigated San Francisco’s bureaucracy to make his vision of permanent streetcar lines a reality. For the fourth-generation San Franciscan who excitedly watched the “iron monsters” rumble down Market Street as a kid, it was simply a labor of love.

This oral history offers a look at San Francisco through the eyes of one of its remarkable residents. From journalism to business and an astonishing array of civic endeavors, Rick Laubscher helped shape the City he called home. Indeed, many residents hope that his contributions to San Francisco are far from over. But when they are, I’m sure he will echo the words of Herb Caen: “I hope I go to Heaven, and when I do, I'm going to do what every San Franciscan does when he gets there. He looks around and says, ‘It ain't bad, but it ain't San Francisco’.”
Interview 1: June 21, 2016

01-00:00:02
Holmes: This is Todd Holmes, historian and interviewer with the Bancroft Library’s Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. Today is Wednesday, June 22, 2016, and I have the privilege to sit here with Rick Laubscher, principal owner and operator of Message Smith Communications Consultants and president and CEO of the San Francisco nonprofit Market Street Railway. Rick, thank you for sitting down with me this morning. This is the first of many sessions to discuss your life, your experiences, and certainly your many achievements, all of which, in one way or another, seem to center around the great city of San Francisco. And so I thought that would be a great place to begin. Can you tell us a bit about your family history and its connection to San Francisco?

01-00:00:50
Laubscher: Well, my father’s grandparents came to San Francisco from Karlsruhe, Germany in 1890. My mother’s father came from the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland, I believe, in roughly the same timeframe. My paternal great-grandfather, whose name was Louis Laubscher, started a delicatessen in a market that is now disappeared, where Market Street and Van Ness met. Right now that area is the intersection of Market and South Van Ness, because the street was cut through after the earthquake. So that space has vanished. I have an old photograph of him behind his counter. He was a man with a big handlebar mustache. Not a tall man. And the one thing about the Laubscher men, they all look the same. I don’t, because I’m adopted, but we’ll get to that later. My great-grandparents ran this delicatessen and lived in various parts of the city, including on Clementina Street, which is an alley south of Market. They later moved out to the Richmond District. That probably meant they were coming up a little bit in the world, because that was a nicer part of town than the back alleys of what we now call SOMA.

In 1912, my mother, whose birth name was Myrtle Bazzini, was born on Utah Street, 530 Utah Street, a house that still exists, on what was then the western slope of Potrero Hill. It’s now half a block from US 101 that cuts right through the hill. She was one of several siblings, one of the oldest ones. There may have been seven or eight kids at one time but a couple of them died in infancy and my grandmother, her mother, died in childbirth when my mother was six, and she helped take care of her younger siblings. My mother once told me that her father, whose name was Genesio Bazzini, was killed by a streetcar, of all things, on Potrero Avenue, which would have been the H line that Muni ran near their home. But I’ve never seen that independently corroborated. My mother was 24 when he died.

I was much closer to my father’s family because they had the family business, the delicatessen. The delicatessen grew, opened different branches. For years it was in the old Crystal Palace Market, which was at 8th and Market, and that
was one of the biggest markets downtown, if not the biggest. And in those days, each counter was independent. Now, today we have things like the Ferry Building Marketplace, which everybody thinks is, wow, that’s cool. Each stall is owned by an individual proprietor. Well, of course, that’s not new. It’s just people think about supermarkets and that’s all they remember. But for centuries, in Europe and here, this is the way markets have always been run and it still is the way they’re run in most of the world. So they were in the Crystal Palace and then in 1927 they moved to a new market called the Grant Market, which was at, not surprisingly, Market and Grant Avenue. That’s where they stayed until they closed and that’s where I worked. We had a second shop at 36 Fifth Street, right across from what is now Nordstrom’s. And it was then next to JC Penney’s, which is now the Lurie Building and Nordstrom Rack.

When I first started working I was twelve years old. I was given a box cutter, which was probably risky on my father’s part, and told to open boxes of groceries, cutting off the things. I took a metal ink stamper and I would stamp the price on there and I’d put them on the shelves in the little grocery department we had in the Grant Market. Soon after that, I was enlisted in clean up, especially during holidays, because the Christmas season was make or break for a business like ours. There were parties to cater, there were other things to do, and we went through a lot of stainless steel pans and I was in charge of washing them and also prepping food. I would boil and peel twelve dozen eggs at a time and have to have them, pop the yolks, so that my uncle could make this special mixture that I would then squeeze back onto the eggs with a pastry squeezer. It was pretty basic work and it wasn’t easy, especially when your uncle gets mad at you for putting the pimento trim in the wrong place on the egg. But I learned a lot from that.

I was born April 26, 1949, at Saint Francis Hospital at Hyde and Bush Streets. I was born, so my adopted mother later told me, to a very young single woman whose name I never did learn. My adopted mother told me that my adoption at birth was arranged by her family doctor, who was also the doctor for this young woman. That’s what I was told. Never had independent verification of that. It’s something else I’d like to check. And my parents took me to the place they were living at the time, which was my grandmother’s house in Millbrae. By this time my father’s father had died. He died in 1947 of some sort of brain problem but I am not sure what it was because my father’s family converted to Christian Science around that time and so these things were not talked about. That’s something I can get into later if there’s any interest in it.

But I spent my first couple of years in Millbrae and then my parents, for some reason, moved around a lot. We were living with my grandmother, and I can understand why that wasn’t going to work long term. And then we moved to
San Francisco to the Sunset District, where we lived at 1515 32nd Avenue near Kirkham. Then we moved to Lafayette. I may have these flopped, for a few months. My father clearly wanted to get into the suburbs. We moved to Lafayette. And I have old photographs of him physically building the fence and things like that, so I presume it was a new house. But for some reason we didn’t keep that house. I believe I heard that the commute through the then teeny Caldecott Tunnel was too onerous, even in the early 1950s, or too long. The food business, especially when you’re prepping the food every morning and you’ve got to be open till 6:00 p. m., and then clean up, makes for very long days, and my father worked exceptionally long days most of his life.

Holmes: And he took over the family business?

Laubscher: He took over the family business with his older brother. My father was one of three siblings that survived. He had a sister who died at the age of five, I believe. And his older brother, who was another Louis Laubscher—let’s see. Louis. Trying to remember this and get it right. He was the third Louis Laubscher, I’m pretty—yeah, because my great-grandfather was Louis, my grandfather was Louis, L-O-U-I-S, my uncle was Louis, and I now have a cousin who’s Louis, as well. My Uncle Louis’ son. But my father and Louis, his brother, basically ran the business together along with their uncle, my grandfather’s brother, whose name was Carl, who was like the baby brother. Carl’s older brother, my great uncle, was also named Fred. This gets very confusing. Because Uncle Fred was basically the accountant and the business side guy but he died when I was very young and I barely remember him. I just remember him wearing austere suits in our commissary, which was behind the market on Stevenson Street, right next to what’s now the contemporary Jewish Museum and right behind what is now the motor court for the Four Seasons Hotel. So our old place has kind of come up in the world. In those days it was an unreinforced brick building that had been a livery stable at one time. And it was pretty atmospheric, we’ll say. I have a clock in my kitchen that came off the wall there and the kitchen table, the cutting board table I use came out of there, as well.

Holmes: And was it named—

Laubscher: I have a photograph with my great-grandfather that said, “Delicatessen, Louis Laubscher, Prop.” Then later it became, when my grandfather and his two brothers ran it, it was called Laubscher Brothers. Then that remained the official name, but when my father and his brother took over, all the signage said just Laubschers’ with a possessive. And our slogan was “The West’s Leading Delicatessen.” Is that true? I don’t know but we said so. And it’s true. It was a good business in the thirties. These are all family lore stories. I have
no idea of the veracity of them. But I was told that in 1935 PanAm came to, I guess, my grandfather and his brothers and said, “Would you cater meals for us on this new flight?” The airplanes were about to start flying from San Francisco to Honolulu and beyond. Those were the China Clippers, of course. It’s not clear to me whether we actually did that or not but if we did it didn’t last very long. Our stores were downtown. People came to them, riding the cable car down O’Farrell Street, a lot of the wealthy customers, because in those days the neighborhoods, as they called them, did not have good food stores, high-end food stores, just the corner markets for convenience stuff. So very well-off women, and I remember as a kid they would still come in, some of them wearing furs or mink around their neck, would come in and buy cold cuts and salads and things like that. Many of them took the cable car down O’Farrell Street, which I have a photograph of on my living room wall here because it reminds me of that era in San Francisco history. When that ended in 1954 that made some impact on the business and then other changes made a big impact, the biggest one of which my family did not see and should have seen. They were anxious to move out of the city.

I mentioned before we had a sequence of places, you know, Millbrae, Lafayette, then we moved to the Sunset District and then we moved to San Mateo for 6 months and then we moved back to Sunset Heights at 329 Quintara Street for 6 months, where I went to first grade at West Portal School. There was no kindergarten in San Francisco at that time. They didn’t offer it. So after that we moved. My uncle and his wife, my aunt Dorothea (or “Aunty Dot,” as we always called her) had three kids, and in 1955 they and my grandmother all moved together from their home on Carl Street, right next to the portal of the Sunset streetcar tunnel, to this new development built by a man named Joseph Eichler in Terra Linda. My father and mother bought a house four doors up the street from them at 655 Wakerobin Lane in Terra Linda, which is now part of San Rafael. It was really quite a change to go from the fog belt of San Francisco into this beautiful valley with oaks on the hill and cattle grazing and big lizards and salamanders in the creeks and all sorts of boy stuff.

Holmes: So in some ways you got the best of both worlds. When they would talk about the California experience of the suburbs and the city.

Laubscher: Oh, yeah, absolutely. But to correlate that to the business, much of our customer base was moving to the suburbs like we did. But somehow my father and his brother didn’t make the connection that, “Hey, our customer base is moving out of the city.” They were offered, the family story goes, a prime location in the Stonestown shopping center, an anchor location, by the developer, Mr. Stoneson. I think Petri’s market was another one that was in there. That sort of made me think, well, they must have had a name in the city
if that was going to be offered. But as the story goes, my uncle said, “No. We’d have to drive our truck all the way across Twin Peaks twice a day to drop off and pick up the food. That’s too much trouble.” Another story goes that we were offered a location in Tiburon, and passed that up too.

01-00:17:33
Holmes: And what year did the family deli finally close?

01-00:17:37
Laubscher: Fold?

01-00:17:37
Holmes: Yes.

01-00:17:39
Laubscher: Well, it teetered for years. We were a union shop. Retail Clerks Local 648, and I was a proud union member at the age of something like 16 or 15. Proud overstates it. I was a clueless union member. I signed up, I got my card. It’s just the way things were. Even small businesses were unionized in San Francisco at the time if they were food or retail. And because of that, I worked my way up under the union rules through an apprenticeship program, making more money, until I was making something like $3.17 an hour, which ended up being more than I made in my first broadcast job after college. And because it was a family business that was struggling, when employees left us my father would do everything he could to give work to my sister, my mother, myself, so we could take the money home instead of someone else. He basically got what was left over to live on. It got to the point where I was making more money in a week than he could take home because there wasn’t enough left over. He was management. But it put me through college because I worked every summer. I worked every holiday season, over Thanksgiving break, I worked over Christmas, and spring break. Whenever I could get a week in I would work. It was hard work but it was good. You learned a whole lot the hard way about dealing with people, serving people. So that was a very valuable lesson. So there we were.

I was ensconced in San Rafael, going to very good public schools, right through high school. I had my work. We would commute to the city in a green Volkswagen panel truck, which was the business truck. And I got fascinated by the city. Now, I mentioned streetcars a couple of times in this. People have asked me, “How did you get interested in this?” I can’t say for sure but I remember a couple of things.

01-00:20:37
Meeker: You know, before we start on that, what year did the delicatessen finally shutdown?
The delicatessen went out of business in 1972, if I remember correctly. I had graduated from college in 1970. It was really struggling. The final blow, I think, at least my father believed this, and I think he was right, was the BART construction. Now, on Market Street the BART construction wreaked havoc where the stations were because between the stations the tubes were bored underground but in the stations they had to open the whole street up and it made it very hard for buses and streetcars to get around. They had to keep Muni running but it was dirty and it was hard to get there. We were not next to a station but we were almost on an island.

And many people, when they visit the city today, may not realize that, as you’ve written in your book, Market Street was San Francisco’s main street.

Oh, yes. Market Street, if you go back and look at old photos of Market, as I have done, way before my time, you can see its growth almost from the beginning. The background of the street—when the little village of Yerba Buena was centered around Portsmouth Square and the businesses were there, up at Kearny and Washington, when Jasper O’Farrell laid out the city before California was even a state, before the Gold Rush, he laid out this 125-foot wide diagonal street, diagonal to the street grid north of it, parallel to the new street grid south of it, that kind of pointed directly at Twin Peaks. It was more or less following the mission trail that led to Mission Dolores. But Mission Dolores in those days was nothing. It was already an irrelevant artifact. So it’s never been real clear to me what that purpose was when traditionally there was no geographical reason for it. You would be laying out all your streets in a regular grid. Maybe one would be wider, like State Street or Michigan Avenue Chicago, but he had an idea that this would be a grand street, which he named after Market Street in Philadelphia. And sure enough, because the street divided two grids, it was the natural funnel for all the transit lines when they grew up, and it was the transit lines, as much as anything else, that made Market Street really not just the main street of San Francisco but the main street of the West. Until the 1906 earthquake, there was no other city west of Saint Louis that had anywhere near the reach or power of San Francisco, which completely dominated California. Los Angeles as a city didn’t matter politically, economically, financially, until really 1920 or beyond.

What I knew about Market Street as a kid was it was a cool, busy street. I would look out from behind our delicatessen counter, which was set up in a classic market fashion. There were the doors on Market Street. There was a creamery, as they called it. There was the florist on the other side as you walked in from Market, and then there was the poultry counter across the way from us and then our delicatessen. And in the back was a huge butcher shop owned by the Bercut family, a French family, French-American family, which
also owned the building. So we were their tenants. Then there was a fish department and vegetables in the back. When you walked in you were coming down almost a gauntlet of different departments. And I could look down that aisle through the glass doors and watch the city go by on Market Street. My view, because we were right opposite Grant, was of the banking temples on Grant Avenue and Market, which were beautiful pieces of classical—still are—classical architecture. Then whatever the flow that went by, almost like you’re looking at a television screen today. That flow included streetcars, buses, pedestrians. No bicycles in those days. But it was a real, literally, a window on the world and it was the big world to me because when I would leave the market, whether I was a five-year-old visitor coming downtown with my mother, or a worker, a teenaged worker, I was coming from a little house into this huge downtown. It just made an enormous impression on me. It must be like what people in New York felt the first time they went to Manhattan.

01-00:26:15
Holmes: I wanted to ask you. Your sister—

01-00:26:19
Laubscher: Yeah, Gail.

01-00:26:20
Holmes: Yeah, Gail also worked in the deli. And she was telling me stories in our conversations about some of the notable patrons that she got to wait on over the years working there during the holidays and during the summers. I wanted to ask you, what were some of the most notable patrons?

01-00:26:39
Laubscher: Well, the most famous person I remembered to come in was Alfred Hitchcock, the director, who was exactly the same in person as on TV. I don’t recall that I ever waited on him, but I was there when he came in. Of course, you couldn’t miss that rotund figure because his profile, it was on television every week, because by that time he was hosting the television anthology. The whole place would stop. He spoke exactly like he did on television. He was a normal guy with a little bit of an English accent because that’s where he was from. The place would buzz afterward because we were just a little market with working-class people and, my gosh, here comes this Mr. Big. There were a lot of society figures who came in but I didn’t really know who they were at the time. I’m sure if I had been a reader of Herb Caen’s column early in those years, and, of course, if you had pictures of them I could probably tell. I do remember one notable customer. I think her name was Amelia Gallo, who was Ernest Gallo’s wife, the winemakers, and, of course, they were huge in terms of volume. She would come in from Modesto and she would come in to buy smoked salmon. I never wanted to wait on her because it had to be sliced exactly right and if you screwed it up, you had to pay for it yourself and then you’d take home the messed up salmon and eat it. But I didn’t even like smoked salmon at the time [laughter] so I tried to avoid that.
One of the great aspects about working there was the girls. They were called “the girls.” These were employees, women, some of whom had been with us—I remember we had two women in particular who had been with us since 1940. This would have been the mid-1960s. And they stayed with us just about until the end. Alice Roy, R-O-Y, and Ann Anderson. Ann lived to be almost a hundred. If she’s still alive now she’d be 105 or so, so I doubt she is. But I saw her maybe 10 years ago. She was in Mill Valley. I learned a lot. They were like surrogate moms to me. And my aunt, Dorothea, my Uncle Louis’s wife and late widow, because he died very young, was a surrogate work-mom who instructed me. So I was in this cocoon of maternal influences trying to keep me from doing things wrong. Anyway, that was—

Holmes: Well, they seemed to do a good job.

Laubscher: Well, a lot of it didn’t stick, but now I can look back and say, “I should have remembered what Auntie Dot told me about this or that.”

Holmes: You mentioned as you worked behind the meat counter that you could look out onto Market Street, the big city, the world going by. People who have that experience, the big city seems to affect them in different ways. There are those who develop passions and interests opposite of the city. More focused on the country, if you will. And then there are others who really embrace the city. Their passions and interests very much follow suit. Friends and family say that you very much fit within this second category, as especially seen in your love for San Francisco, your love for its baseball team, the San Francisco Giants, and, of course, as we’ll cover in a lot of detail in our later sessions, your love for streetcars, cable cars, and transportation. I wanted to see if you could talk a little bit on each of those in order. What really captivated you about San Francisco?

Laubscher: Well, I guess just its vibrancy. There was so much going on. It was exciting. It was compact. But I want to say that I think really at the end of the day my life has been more about a blend of the urban environment and what you either call suburban or even rural environment. I ended up going to college at UC Santa Cruz, which was about as bucolic back then as you could possibly want for a college campus. And I loved it. I absolutely loved it. I think coming back to the city on a regular basis maybe gave me a fix or reacquainted me with it.

Holmes: In some ways just like how you grew up, right? Living in the suburbs but then working also in the city.
Laubscher: Yeah. Even today I live where I live in this neighborhood called Little Hollywood at the very southern edge inside the city, almost to Brisbane. I bought this house because I still have a daughter in high school, in Woodside, and I wanted to be close to her. But I also wanted to be back in the city proper. The environment I’m in now is almost suburban for San Francisco. It’s reminiscent in some ways of the Sunset District or places like that. And I have an extra big yard and a lot of trees, and I really like it that way. I don’t know that I could be a high-rise apartment liver or something like that. I don’t know. Maybe I’ve still got that in me at some point. But the love for the city, maybe it has something to do with my circumstances of birth. I know I was born in San Francisco. I know my adoptive family has deep roots in San Francisco on both my mother’s and father’s side. I know that we were a working class family and had some modest success in the delicatessen business, which then waned. And when I would hang out with my mother’s friends growing up, she had a couple of friends who were girlfriends, as they would call each other, from youth. She went to Commerce High, which is now the school district headquarters on Van Ness Avenue. My father went to Polytechnic, up by Kezar Stadium, which was originally Poly’s football field. And so all of these ties were known to me.

When we were living in the city, before we moved—now, remember, I was only 6 when we moved but I still remember a lot of this stuff vividly—we would go over to my uncle and aunt’s house on Carl Street and they were four doors from where the N-line streetcar went into the Sunset Tunnel to go downtown. And this was, to a little kid, something. My cousin Louis, who was 5 years older than me, had a Flexi, one of these little things you rode on your belly and steered. He would go down the steep sidewalk of Carl Street and make a 135 degree turn, or try to, into the sidewalk that led to the streetcar stop at the edge of the tunnel. If you got it wrong and a streetcar was coming, that’s a good recipe for disaster. But I was amazed, impressed with his bravery, and that somehow sticks in my mind. Mostly I remember these big machines that rumbled and rolled and then went into the tunnel and you’d hear the echo in the tunnel and the bells ringing. This was right next to my uncle and aunt’s house. This all seemed terribly exciting to me, as opposed to what I later got used to, of the crickets and birds chirping in the suburbs, which had a beauty of its own but it was two very, very different scenes.

Laubscher: So in a sense, the best of both worlds in a lot of ways.

Laubscher: Yeah, I kind of thought so. I kind of thought so. You mentioned the Giants. I was not an athletic kid. My father was certainly not athletic. He worked very, very long hours and then his hobby was amateur radio. He was a ham radio operator. I think this caused some friction at home because he would buy new
components for his rig, as they called it. The rig was your array of transmitters and other paraphernalia that helped you do the signal. Struck me as a little weird because here we were living in this row of almost identical Eichler homes. There were two roof styles and there were three colors and they just went up and down the street in rotation. Shortly after we moved in my father erected this huge crank-up antennae with an enormous array of pipes coming out of it to form the antennae. I cannot imagine in today’s world how a homeowner could do that without being drawn and quartered. I’m sure there were some complaints from neighbors but I never became aware of them. So we had this weird house with this gargantuan thing sticking up on it and my father would come home from work and immediately, barely saying hi, never stopping to play with us, get on his rig and talk to people who he would never meet who were far away. And these conversations, which we could hear because they were in the next room and these Eichler homes don’t have any real doors or anything like that, would be so prosaic. “How’s the weather there?” And then they would have these code terms. I remember if you didn’t have a wife you had an XYL, which stands for former young lady. If she was just a YL, that was a girlfriend. It was all very different. It was sort of the Internet of the day, I guess. So I was exposed to this on the one hand. But none of the other kids were and it seemed kind of like, “Gee, I want to be a guy. I want to be a boy. I want to do boy things.” My friends like baseball. Well, I was terrible at it as a player but I got fascinated with it.

Holmes: And what age was this that you started really getting into it?

Laubscher: Now, this gets a little vague. I know I went to Seals Stadium to see a Seals game their last year, which was 1957, when I would have been eight.

Holmes: And that was the minor league team?

Laubscher: That was the minor league team, the Pacific Coast League team. And then the next year, 1958, I went to another game, but this time—same place, Seals Stadium—but it was the Giants because they were new in town. I must have gone with my father but I don’t remember who I went with. I just remember seeing the games. And my father was not a baseball fan, a sports fan. He may have taken me as a father/son kind of thing. I wish I could pinpoint that. But I remember thinking, “Wow, this is really cool.” Pretty soon I was following the Giants in the newspaper every day and I remember vividly listening to Russ Hodges and Lon Simmons, who were the Giants announcers, talking about broadcasting the game, creating colorful descriptions about what was going on on the radio. In those days, for a while, there was no TV at all, and then the only TV were nine games a year from Los Angeles. The only games that were ever televised were the road games with the Dodgers. And you
looked forward to that because, oh, my gosh, I could see them. But pretty soon I was really interested enough that I started going to the games before I could even drive. I had friends in high school—this is by the time I was at Terra Linda High, in high school. By this time I was studying the games. I had put up charts on my wall with team standing. I had a big blackboard that had the team standings on it that I would copy out of the paper and I’d erase it and change it if the team moved up or down in the standings. I had batting averages, kind of a mini scoreboard with stick on letters that I would cut out of paper. Who knows. It was just some sort of Asperger Syndrome or something. I don’t know. It was a fixation.

Holmes: Well, baseball is one of those games where you have two types of fans. You have the fans who like to watch and follow the team and then you have those who follow the game and their favorite team studiously. Many friends and family say that you were very much in that latter camp.

Laubscher: Oh, I was very studious. We would go, my friends and I—I think this probably happened in the most concentrated area when I was 14 or 15. It blows my mind that my parents would have allowed this. On Friday nights during the season my mother would drop me off at the Greyhound bus stop on US 101, at the Terra Linda interchange, and we would wait for the Greyhound bus. This would be at 5:00pm, something like that. We’d take the bus into town. We’d get off at the old Greyhound bus depot at 7th and Mission, which was one of the most frightening kind of places in town. There were people there whose successors are still wandering around that part of town. We would walk down Market Street three blocks to 4th Street and then we would catch the ballpark express, the 30X ballpark express, which was a bus that would take you directly to Candlestick. It was an extra fare. I think it was 50 cents instead of a quarter, or whatever, something like that. And so then we’d watch the game, walk around a lot. I remember reserved seats cost $2.50 at the time. Box seats, which we never bought because they were too expensive, were $3.50. We would mostly just walk around, eat a hotdog. At some point there was a belief that we might meet girls there but this never materialized. And then we would do the whole thing in reverse. But when you came back, if the game ended at 10:00pm, it was a long way back. I remember my mother, rest her soul, would meet us at the bus stop and so we must have had a deal where you must be on this bus coming back from San Francisco because I’m going to be down there to pick you up. And we did this quite a few times. I marvel when I look back at what I went through to go see a baseball game. But I saw some of the greatest players in the history of Major League Baseball play and there were some legendary games at Candlestick. I would do the same thing on Saturdays and Sundays, which were a lot easier than the night game. So, yeah, I got really fixated.
Then in high school I met a boy, classmate named Tom Nelson, who changed my life in a lot of ways. Tom came from New York. His family had moved from Long Island. His dad, Mike Nelson, was an executive with a mining company, which was exotic to me. And his mother, Dorothy, was a stay-at-home mom. Tom was her only child. Tom was a teenager and he was about as wholesome, gee whiz kind of guy as you could find. He loved baseball like I did, except he was better than I was at playing it. I wanted to play. I had already struck out literally in little league and really not done very well at all. So I had not played any organized baseball. I was just kind of a fan kid. But Tom played on an American legion team where the talent was far beyond mine, but they let me coach, like third base coach, or first base coach, or something like that. So I got to wear the uniform, which was really exciting. And that’s because Tom’s dad was the manager of the team, if I remember correctly. The two of us would go out to a schoolyard near his home, which was further up the valley in Terra Linda. He had a very nice Eichler home with a pool. When I wasn’t working I spent as much of my time there as I could in the summers. It was idyllic. We would swim. There was a baseball game that used cards that replicated player performance in numbers. It was called APBA and this was a nerd’s delight. It is a precursor of so many of these games today that are all electronic now. But we would play this for hours at a time and you could even buy classic teams. So we could have the 1927 Yankees, say, playing the 1951 Giants or things like that. Boy, if there are any artifacts from my childhood I wish I had kept it would be the baseball cards, both that game, which I had a lot of stuff for, and then the baseball cards, as well. So I was really very fascinated by it. And, by the way, and we’ll get to this later, I’m sure, but the Giants dictated my first search for employment outside of our delicatessen in radio because the first station I thought of was KSFO, which broadcast the Giants games.

That’s right. So another, even more famous aspect of the city, which you’ve already touched on, is, of course, its historic transportation: the cable cars and the streetcars. How did your fascination with streetcars develop?

Well, I have two memories. The one I relayed about the streetcars going into the tunnel next to my cousin’s, uncle’s and aunt’s house on Carl Street. But the one that really sticks in my mind was the time my mother came to West Portal School to pick me up. And I was only there for six months. This would have been in the beginning of 1955. She picked me up and we were going to the circus, which was at the Civic Auditorium. Ringling Brothers. I had heard, or more accurately felt, from my first floor classroom at West Portal Elementary this rumbling under the classroom but I wasn’t quite sure what it was and then somebody told me, “Well, it’s the streetcars in the tunnel.” I said, “Really?” She walked me out of the classroom. We walked down the hill there and we came to West Portal, which literally was this big archway that
led to this streetcar only tunnel, which had been built under Twin Peaks in 1918 and was, although I didn’t know it at the time, then the longest streetcar tunnel in the world. In San Francisco you take whatever distinctions you can get, [laughter] however small. We boarded one of the streetcars that at the time were called the iron monsters. They were the original streetcar fleet that Muni bought in the teens and early 1920s. They had open platforms. They had a conductor on the back. They were in the process of replacing these with the more modern, streamlined PCC streetcars that still run on the F-line today. But this was the old car and the big car.

I just remember as a little kid climbing up the steps, and it was huge and my mother giving the money to the conductor and sitting on these hard wooden seats and listening to the roar of the car as we shimmied through the Twin Peaks Tunnel, kind of rocking back and forth and seeming like we were going a hundred miles an hour when we were probably going 25 or 30, tops, and then coming out into the light at Castro and Market and proceeding all the way down Market Street, which was a quiet street in those days on the outer part of it, from Castro to Van Ness. And getting off and going to the circus. I like to say that I don’t remember a thing about the circus but I remember the streetcar ride, which is the opposite of what you would sort of think a kid would do. So, yeah, I thought, “Wow, this is really cool.” And then kind of like baseball, I got a little obsessive about the streetcar lines.

Holmes: Well, you mentioned in our earlier conversation that you caught what you call the transportation bug rather quick.

Laubscher: I did. I remember a couple things. We didn’t have much discretionary income and much of what we had my father spent on ham radio gear over there in San Rafael. I remember vividly we had a piece of scrap lumber. It was plywood and it was maybe, I don’t know, it might have been a piece of four by eight feet. So it was probably eight feet long but it was very thin so it wasn’t heavy. I remember taping butcher paper on it. I don’t know how old I was. I must have been 10 or something like that. I remember taping butcher paper on it and then getting a ruler and pencils and recreating Market Street. And all you could get in, because it was a skinny piece, it wasn’t any wider than this. So all you could get in would be a quarter of a block going off here. So you’d have Sutter and then you’d have Post and you’d have Geary and then you’d have Montgomery on the other side. And I remember drawing in the streetcar tracks.

The other thing I loved, which fit in with the transportation thing, was that there was these things called matchbox toys, which were die cast, made in England, exotic. They came in these little boxes and they were 49 cents at the Terra Linda variety store and they were always issuing new ones. They ended
up with something like 75. Is that right? I can’t remember. But I had the whole collection. I saved my allowance and I would go down and I occasionally had a paper route and I had other things I could do to make little bits of money. And I spent it on these things. Particularly what I got excited about was they had a couple of double-decker London trams, which had gone out of service then. Well, they didn’t have real streetcar models. But these were really small, so you could scale my little piece of plywood, you’d get more streets on it because the things you were using were small. Then I remember they came out with a modern looking bus, unlike most of the London route masters, the big red double-decker buses, which I had those, too, but you couldn’t really run those on your San Francisco board. So they had one that kind of looked like a modern American bus and I think I bought four of those so I’d have enough to kind of make this go. It was really an imagination game for me, trying to figure out how to make that work.

In school, if I would get bored, which happened, I would take road intersections and figure out how to make them into freeway interchanges. My rail friends would be shooting me if they heard me say this, but in those days the idea that, “Oh, we’re building these freeways and no traffic signals.” Growing up in Marin County, I watched, experienced the sequential removal of signals on Highway 101 and the replacement with overpasses in Mill Valley, Corte Madera, San Rafael. It was a big deal. This is the modern world. The automobile is going to free us all. So, yeah, this is another juxtaposition. It was the automobile there and it was the transit in San Francisco. And I loved them both. There’s no question about it.

That’s a good transition to your college years there at UC Santa Cruz. I was talking to your college roommate and he mentioned that here we are in the 1960s, we’re in Santa Cruz. This is the era, particularly in those four years when you were there, of the rise of lava lamps and flower power. And here’s Rick Laubscher in his dorm room, he has transportation maps on his walls.

Well, this is my friend Clint Taylor, my best friend, and we actually weren’t roommates together but we were on the same dorm floor and we were constantly spending time together. Somewhere I had gotten a big map. This was not for the public but the public could get them. We all know what a typical road map looks like that you get at a gas station. But this was different. This was big, it was on shiny paper, and it was rolled up and you could pin it up on the wall and it was an official map of what we now call CalTrans, was then the Division of Highways. It was a big map of the state with cutouts for LA and San Francisco and maybe Sacramento. It showed you where existing freeways were, where freeways were under construction, where they were planned, budgeted, and then where they were dreaming about them. It was red, green, yellow, and blue, I remember. And I was kind of excited by this. It
was like, “Wow, they’re going to build a freeway right down from Half Moon Bay on Highway 1. That’s all going to be a freeway.” And it started to dawn on me very quickly, as I was thinking about that: “Well, wait a minute. There’s nothing there. There’s just farmland and it’s beautiful and I drive it when I go up to my parents’ house from Santa Cruz. Why would we put a freeway there?” I sort of self-educated myself a little bit about what goes on. I remember vividly this mentality, we got to build it because people are coming. You got to remember that we had populated in the Bay Area pristine and serene locations with tract housing and there was not a second thought given to it because we had all these people. We had veterans coming back from World War II who were having lots of kids. There were people who had migrated here, sailors and soldiers who had come through here in World War II, the port of embarkation at Fort Mason, where my parents met, by the way. And they came back. They said, “I want a piece of this. It’s beautiful out here.”

I have a friend who I worked with at Channel 4 named Robin Chapman, a reporter who now lives in the house she grew up in, her parent’s house. They passed on. She’s in Los Altos. And we’ve compared notes. She’s written a book about the days when apricots dominated the whole scene. She just finished a successful battle to keep the city of Los Altos from tearing out the last big apricot grove on city property to build some building. I remember this area fairly vividly because, as I mentioned earlier, my mother had a couple of high school friends who had moved south, whereas we moved north. One of them was Clara Henkel and her husband was named Curt, a very dark, kind of swarthy guy. European. He was a carpenter and they had a house in Los Altos because that was the suburban place that they went to. Her other friend was Mae King, whose husband Doran was a pipefitter at Hunters Point. I remember vividly, because my parents didn’t smoke, but he smoked like a chimney and he worked around asbestos his whole life and he died young. But nobody understood the dangers at the time. They lived in Palo Alto. The house they lived in, which was a modest rancher, both these people lived in modest ranch homes. The properties they lived on are easily worth in excess of $2 million apiece, even if there was nothing on them today. But in those days people just spread out of the city and you didn’t have to be rich. In fact, rich people didn’t move into places like that.

I mention that because the way you connected all this stuff up was with freeways and of course you would want to have freeways. But—

Holmes: There were drawbacks, as well.

Laubscher: There were drawbacks. And I would think about it, and I think about it today. Terra Linda, the little valley that I grew up in, had been the ranch of Manuel
Freitas, a Portuguese immigrant family. They were dairy [farmers]. He was a
dairyman. They sold off the land in the early 1950s. It built out over maybe 15
years, kind of crawling up the sides of the bowl. Luckily some of the hills
were really too steep to build on easily and that sort of stayed as cattle ranches
and stuff like that. Subsequently agricultural trusts bought them and preserved
those lands. We could have ended up with something much worse there than
we did. But when you think about how idyllic the country was, when you
think about the California that Wallace Stegner portrayed and Steinbeck
portrayed, it really was a Valhalla or a Shangri-La, almost. And the things we
did with freeways made a tremendous mark on the Bay Area. Not for the
better. But as I’ve said to many people, they don’t understand it, the thing to
understand about San Francisco and its environs is the city, until the last 10
years, had not substantially increased in population since about 1920. It got
almost 100 years with about the same number of people. The composition had
changed. You used to have a lot of Irish and Italian families with households
that might be seven people. Now you have many more households that are
much smaller. But in the meantime, the population of the suburbs has
certainly more than doubled in my lifetime.

Holmes: I wanted to ask you, growing up you referenced how living in what is now
San Rafael, going into the city, it was the best of both worlds. You got to
experience the city but you also got to experience, as you were also just
explaining, the beautiful environment and surroundings that are adjacent to
San Francisco. Was that the reason, say, in 1966 why you chose UC Santa
Cruz over other more established universities? Because Santa Cruz was just
created the year before, right?

Laubscher: Yeah. And I would like to say that I had some conscious decision-making
process, but I really didn’t. Nobody in my family had gone to college before.
My father didn’t, my mother went to San Mateo Junior College, as they called
it then, for a semester or two. And my parents were very proud of me because
I made good grades and followed not only transportation and baseball, but I
followed politics very closely, and current affairs. I asked my parents to get
me a subscription to Time magazine. My goodness. I was constantly probing
and reading and trying to learn more about the world around me. And when
the time came for college there really wasn’t much guidance. I wouldn’t be
telling you the truth if I told you I had a plan. I didn’t have a plan. My father
did want me to apply to Stanford because his younger brother, Walt, had gone
to Stanford. This was in the early 1950s and these were the days when
Stanford was what they called “the farm” and it was almost literally true. It
was a local college. It was certainly considered the best private school on the
West Coast but it was on the West Coast and we were a much smaller piece of
the American pie in the 1950s when he went there than when I went there. I
remember my uncle being a fairly impressive guy because he had an MG in
1953 and drove it around. And he also had one of the first Volkswagens before that. So he was kind of the cool kid. He was also 15 years younger than my father, so he was like the baby of the family and was babied. But because my father idolized him, and my father would often call me Walt by mistake, which I used to hate until I started miscalling my own children by other children’s names. He wanted me to go because his brother had gone and because my great-uncle’s son, who I didn’t know, had gone. So there were two Laubschers that had gone to Stanford and this was something I should do.

All my cousins on my father’s side, my Uncle Louis and Aunt Dot’s kids, that whole family was very strong Christian Scientists. So was my father. My father insisted that we go to Christian Science Sunday school, which my sister and I both really disliked and by the time I was 13 I said, “I don’t think this is going to work.” I had watched my grandmother contract lung cancer—was it lung cancer? She didn’t smoke. Some kind of cancer, I’m not sure what it was, when I was 8 or 9. And I remember her vividly. They wouldn’t really talk about it. “Grandma just isn’t feeling well.” Now, these Eichler homes were tiny and our houses—my uncle’s four doors down the street, and ours—were identical. The exact same room layout. You knew where everything was. They were even the same color. So she was back in the back bedroom, which in our house my parents occupied and my uncle and aunt had converted the family room into a bedroom for them. And they had all sent their kids to Principia, which was a Christian Science high school and separate college in Saint Louis. I remember going over with my uncle and my parents to see my cousin off on the train from Richmond in the mid-1950s, late 1950s because it was too expensive to fly then. I thought, “Wow, that’s cool.” My father really wanted me to go to Prin, as they called it, and I said, “Absolutely not.” My sister and I rebelled against it.

My mother was not a Christian Scientist. She was raised a Catholic but she lapsed. She would sit next to him in church but she never bought into it and continued to go to the doctor because she had high blood pressure problems and other problems. My father was always very dismissive of doctors and told my mother that he didn’t want us to go to the doctor but she took us anyway on the sly. He did forbid us from getting polio vaccine when it was done. I didn’t even take high school biology because I had to turn in this little card saying for religious reasons I wasn’t going to learn biology. Would have been helpful had I taken biology but that’s a different story. When you’re a kid you don’t want to be different than anybody else and it was terribly embarrassing. “Yeah, how come you're not in biology this year?” “I don’t know.” And I ended up going back, getting the Sabin oral vaccine on my own after I just basically stopped going to the church. But it was a real source of friction in my house.
When my grandmother died, this was a very impactful moment in my life. I remember my mother begging my father to let her doctor come over and see my grandmother. And it happened one evening and we didn’t go down there. Although I had been down there and I wasn’t allowed to see Grandma but I could smell that something was different in the house. I don’t know how else to describe that. It did smell like disease or something odd that I had never smelled down there before. I remember being in my room and my parents coming in the door, not knowing that I could hear them, and my father was just furious because the doctor had examined my grandmother and he said, “There’s really nothing I can do. This is terminal.” And my father erupted at my mother as they came through the door saying, “That’s your goddamn sawbones. That’s all they’re good for. They don’t know anything.”

This all became terribly ironic years later, decades later, when my father contracted colon cancer and went through abandonment of his own religion in the face of imminent death, an operation which ended up being palliative more than anything else. The trauma associated with this was really palpable. I’m sorry I got off on this tangent but that was something that struck me as just very—kind of like this. It was because my parents had this conflict and tension between them, I didn’t think this at the time, but it pushed me away from that kind of family connection, the ability to connect. I didn’t have any trouble at all talking to my mother, who was wonderful and lovely and just loved. We loved each other. That was very simple. But my father had drunk this Kool-Aid by the gallon and it was all he had to cling to. He had the brother and sister-in-law who raised their kids as Christian Scientists, who sent them to the right school. My uncle, his younger brother, Walt, married a Christian Science woman, wonderful woman who’s still alive, lives in Lucas Valley in Marin and I see her all the time. They had four kids. They raised them all as Christian Scientists and they all went to Principia, as well. So we were the anomaly. We were the—what do you call them?

01:01:12:58
Holmes: Black sheep?

01:01:12:59
Laubscher: Black sheep.

01:01:13:01
Meeker: Apostate.

01:01:13:03
Laubscher: Yeah. Apostates. I don’t know.

01:01:13:05
Holmes: Apostate. There we go.

01:01:13:06
Meeker: Apostate.
Laubscher: Whatever it was. And I think it really bothered my father. This is all a run-up—

Holmes: Was he okay with UC Santa Cruz?

Laubscher: Yes, I think he was. It was a UC school and it wasn’t Stanford. I mention all this because this was the run-up to the environment in which I made the college decision. And because my father really wanted me to go to Stanford I was determined not to apply to Stanford. My GPA in high school was something like 3.43, which isn’t that good. I tested very well, if I remember, on the—it’s now the SATs. I don’t know if I would have gotten into Stanford at the time, but it didn’t matter, I was determined not to go. Now, I did figure I needed to apply to some other colleges. And to show you how unprepared I was for this I looked around and said, “Well, where else can I go?” I put my application into UC. I had heard the University of the Pacific in Stockton was good as a private school, so I applied there. Applying to a Catholic school like Santa Clara would have been verboten because my father did not think much of Catholics. Interestingly, he married a Catholic but then repressed that. And then the other college I applied to was totally random. It was Colgate in Hamilton, New York. I don’t know whether I was influenced by the toothpaste or what. It was not an Ivy League school. Maybe I was confusing it with Cornell. But I just thought, “Okay.” So those were the three colleges I applied to. I got into Santa Cruz. To answer the question you asked three or four hours ago, I do believe that the experimental nature of it was what moved me.

Holmes: Well, it was a very liberal-arts-focused school—

Laubscher: It’s a very liberal arts school.

Holmes: Just like Colgate.

Laubscher: Just like Colgate. I was really interested in history. I had no idea of anything that had to do with practical knowledge. Maybe because I didn’t take biology I wasn’t fully grounded in the sciences. Yeah, I took chemistry and I took physics, but they weren’t my favorite classes. I did fine at math but, again, that’s not where my brain was oriented. So when it came up I went. And you know what? It was an absolutely fabulous experience.
Holmes: That leads me to a question I had for you on that front. Because of the liberal arts focus of Santa Cruz—I know you walked into college with the transportation bug. Did you think about, at that time, of pursuing a career in that? But they wouldn’t have also had the sciences or engineering.

Laubscher: No, I didn’t. That was an interest of mine. I didn’t know what it was I wanted to do. I just wanted to study and learn and sort of see what evolved. What I knew I didn’t want to do was go into the delicatessen business. And luckily, and I don’t mean this in a harsh way, the business failed before I could have taken it over. My cousins had all said, “Oh, no, no, no.” My sister and I were the last ones who could have taken it over. But we already knew what that was like.

Holmes: I wanted to ask you, too, in regards to your studies and your time there at Santa Cruz—in earlier conversations you talked about having the transportation bug but you also mention that you caught the journalism bug? Did that occur in college or before?

Laubscher: Yes. It was really pretty much in high school. Another vivid memory I have of my childhood was being in 10th grade Latin class. The teacher’s name was Blair Groven and he was a young man with glasses. He looked really erudite. And I took Latin, I don’t know why, I guess because I wanted to use words better. Because I would learn something about word structure and the basis of our language and things like that. Anyway we’re struggling along with Caesar and crossing the Rubicon and things like this. A voice comes over the intercom, which almost never got used in our school, saying, “I regret to tell you President Kennedy has been shot. We are awaiting further word.” And the place just went dead silent. The teacher, Mr. Groven, had said, “This is awful. It’s awful. Well, we should probably continue the lesson,” and he starts talking again and a few minutes later it comes on again. Of course nobody’s paying any attention by this point. And it says, “I regret to tell you President Kennedy has died. We will be dismissing school.” And I had to walk home, which I did a lot anyway. It was a long walk from the school but everybody was just totally—I remember walking into my room. I was kind of an isolated guy. And my parents spoiled me a little bit. I had a television in my room, black and white television. I remember turning on the television to NBC and coming out about three days later. I asked my mother, “Can I have my dinner on a tray?” Now, I remember my father was not a Kennedy fan, partly because he was Catholic. He was a Nixon man. But we didn’t talk much politics in our house. But I just watched it. I watched the journalists gathering the facts, trying to make some sense out of this, pulling this snippet there, pulling that snippet there. This was in a day when television didn’t do live broadcasting and they were setting up these huge cameras, studio cameras in the basement.
of the Dallas County jail and these other locations and all over Washington and I remember vividly watching the entire funeral cortege and every moment of it, which was covered live, and crying my eyes out and just amazed at how these journalists had the presence of mind to be able to describe this. I’m choking up now thinking about it. I know on the 50th anniversary, which was three years ago, I think it was MSNBC—yeah, it was MSNBC actually just racked up the tape and played it in real time. And I watched a lot of that and it was so vivid. It brought it all back to me.

Well, and this is something that, of course, you emulated later in your career as a journalist.

Well, I ended up doing that, yes. But I think I had the bug. So when I got to Santa Cruz, I was already a fan of journalism and a fan of news. But it was very inchoate. I didn’t have a frame for it or a drive. And then my first year, when I got there, they hadn’t finished the dorms in our college. Only two colleges then. Santa Cruz was and still is built around this concept of manageable-size physical entities, which they called colleges. In the initial concept each one of these had a real purpose, a real focus. The first college was named Cowell, C-O-W-E-L-L, and it was named for the family that owned the ranch, the 2,000 acres that they gave to the university. I went to the second college, [Adlai E.] Stevenson College. The two colleges opened simultaneously in terms of their physical plant. The first year everything was in trailers down on what became the athletic fields overlooking Monterey Bay. Classrooms, dorms, everything. There were a couple of central buildings that had been done that were used for classrooms, as well. But the college infrastructure was not completed until the summer of 1966 when I started. And my college, which was the second college to open, they couldn’t get a benefactor for it, to cough up dough, so they named it after Adlai E. Stevenson, who was the political hero of the campus chancellor, Dean McHenry. This was where good liberals went. And it was to have a social science bent, whereas Cal was more focused on the humanities and arts at that time.

Since the campus was brand new, my first quarter I lived in a trailer because the dorms weren’t ready yet. Then we moved up at Christmas time, holiday break, at the end of first quarter, to the new dorms. Brand new dorms. And I realized pretty quickly that what we needed was a radio station, because we didn’t have a radio station.

And that was KRUZ?
Laubscher: Well, we named it ourselves. Those weren’t official FCC call letters, which is sort of a funny story. We wanted to do this station but it was the 1960s. We didn’t listen to authority. We would just do this. Everybody was pretty loosey-goosey. I remember vaguely that we had had some conversation with the administration that we wanted to do this and sort of got an informal, “Okay, go do it.” It was kind of like the old Humphrey Bogart Treasures of Sierra Madre. “We don’t need to show you no stinking badges.” We don’t need no stinking license from the FCC. What we did—and I give my father a lot of credit for this. I think maybe my departure from the home made him think, “Gee, I didn’t spend any time with my kid,” or something. He wanted to help. I mentioned this to him. He brought down a little ham radio transmitter and had a special crystal made so that you could broadcast on the AM band, which is not legal for ham radio operators, and it’s not even technically set up that way, most transmitters, but he somehow got this one done so we could do it. right at the top of the AM band. 1580 was the frequency. He came down. We climbed up to the top of my dorm, got onto the roof, and put up just a whip antenna, you call it, just a pole, and tried to adjust the output of the transmitter to be just enough to cover the dorms on these two adjacent colleges. Once we did that we went down and bought a little audio board, cheap audio board. Not like today where you do all this off a laptop with an app, with a bunch of apps. And then we added a couple of turntables.

We set up and people wanted to be disc jockeys. I was more interested in the news part of it. We contacted record distributors to get free records and nobody would give us any, so you’d bring your own albums. This all was kind of fun for a not very long period of time, maybe a few months, until one day a man knocked on my door, dorm door, and announced he was from the FCC, [laughter] and “Did I know I was violating federal law?” We were violating federal law by broadcasting on a frequency that was not licensed, number one, and number two, adjacent to a frequency used by another station, it was either San Jose or Monterey. I hear different things. And we had to stop right now. So we did. They had built the dorms with cable conduits, which was advanced for the 1960s, and they pulled the cable for cable TV and other things. You could send the FM signal through there. So we did that. And that’s what the campus station ended up being. But I was interested in kind of doing news stuff.

Holmes: Did you come up with the format or was there a group?

Laubscher: Well, there were several of us. We had one fellow named Larry Johnson who was besotted with top 40 Radio and could do the best, what do you call them, countdowns. You’d start the instrumental. You’d say, “Well, this is a boss sound from the Flying Strawberries,” and the idea was you’d do this talkover
so that you would finish what you were saying a millisecond before the vocals started. So you’d talk over the instrumental intro. And this was thing that all the Top 40 DJs did and Larry was just about as good at it as any professional. He later became a professional disc jockey. And then we had other people of various kinds, including a fellow named Michael Zwerling, who now owns KSCO, the Santa Cruz radio station, and has owned it for 30 years. The actual town radio station. There was this kind of small group of us that worked on it and we had fun. It was another case of me getting myself into something thinking that it wasn’t going to be that big a deal and then it ended up being a very big deal in terms of the amount of effort it took to accomplish what you want to do. But once I would start these things I’d say, “No, I got to see it through. I got to finish it.”

01:29:44 Holmes: That is what some of your college friends have said. This was a good example of your can-do kind of spirit. A lot of people sat around or stood around talking about the idea, and Clint especially referenced how it was Rick Laubscher who actually got it done. At least took the steps to help get it done.

01:30:04 Laubscher: Yeah. And Clint also, as a good friend, helped guide me because he would be very encouraging about things I would write. Not class papers. We had a softball team. We played intramurals and our dorm, they were so creative. Cal named its dorms after great historians and other important people, Parkman and all these others. Our dorms were named one, two, three, four through eight and we were dorm four. Well, we thought we needed a name like those fancy Cal names. So we named ourselves Broth, B-R-O-T-H, Broth Hall. [laughter] And so I decided that’s going to be what our jerseys say. Dorm three named itself Animal Farm. That was the party dorm. I got a stencil and I made jerseys for everybody and I gave everybody on the team nicknames. And then after the games I would write something and mimeograph, literally mimeograph it. But we did a little game summary that we would hand out that was kind of a narrative, like a sports story. And Clint always thought these were great.

01:31:36 Holmes: Surely an early sign of the journalist career.

01:31:38 Laubscher: So he taught me. He said, “You should do this.” Another early sign was in—it had to have been 1967. I don’t know if it was spring or fall of ’67. UC regents had a meeting on campus and that meeting was attended by Ronald Reagan as the governor and ex officio president of the regents or whatever the title was that the governor had. And Bob Finch, lieutenant governor, was there. Reagan’s chief of staff, H.R. Haldeman, was there. I have a photograph of me somewhere with a ludicrous mustache and a very bad corduroy jacket for dress-up, putting my microphone out on my little portable tape recorder to
Governor [Ronald] Reagan. I still have the tape somewhere, too. That was the first interview I’d ever done of anybody, and asked him about the campus and what he thought. It was no doubt issue free. I don’t think I pressed him about, “When are you going to stop raising our tuition?” or “What about that Vietnam War?” I don’t think I asked him about that. It was just, “Governor Reagan, how are you enjoying Santa Cruz?” something like that. But there I was with the governor of California, who was, in his own right, a movie star before that. He was well known. I realized that he wasn’t anything different than anybody else you’d run into. I remember when I was walking up to him, a thing he said to Haldeman, who was standing next to him, was, “I got to go to the sandbox,” which I took to mean the bathroom. And I thought, “Sandbox. Well, that’s quaint.” This encounter later became a story which we can tell when we get into the television career, of how I thought I would use this story the next time I interviewed Reagan as a TV reporter, to really break down the barriers and catch him cold, which worked about as well as you might imagine it ended up working. But that was my very first interview.

Interestingly to me, in retrospect, I always gravitated toward the broadcast media. Somebody else started the campus paper. Santa Cruz, because this was the great day, the idealistic 1960s, Dean McHenry, the chancellor, and the other university officials called Santa Cruz the shining city on the hill up above Monterey Bay. So the newspaper was called City on a Hill Press and I remember the people who were involved in running it. I certainly could have done that but I really didn’t have any interest. I was a broadcast guy. That much I knew.

Absolutely. Before we finish up on this section, you were at Santa Cruz from 1966 to 1970?

Right.

We think about this time, particularly as historians of the 1960s, these are very powerful years that almost become that quintessential ’60s era, from the summer of love in ’67, even before that the activism on many campuses, especially, say, UC Berkeley to the Democratic National Convention in ’68 in Chicago, later on the more violent turn, the Days of Rage in ’69. How was the activism there at UC Santa Cruz and what part did the radio station perhaps play?

The radio station essentially played no role at all. We had a lot of technical struggles to keep the signal on, to deal with this sort of stuff. Individual disk jockeys would say what they wanted to say. We weren’t on the air anymore. We weren’t licensed. I don’t recall any cases of censorship or people saying
things that were outrageous or anything else. The listenership was not very big, frankly. We had a signal that was sporadic and intermittent. We were talking but we didn’t know who was listening. I don’t remember going on any diatribes myself or getting off on what later became the standard format for talk radio. I think people just mostly sort of played music at that point. There was activism, but this was obviously a pre-internet era and the university had created these campuses, these college campuses, two my first year. By the time we got to 1970, my last year, we had five. But they were all kind of inward-facing. Literally. That’s the way the architecture was designed. So you had what amounted to town squares and locations where people would gather and talk in coffee rooms and things like that. There was a surrounding community, Santa Cruz, but in those days it was a senior citizens community primarily and it was down the hill several miles. Unless you had a car it was a bit of a go on the bike. So a lot of campus life centered around these places where people would meet until late at night and they would formulate demonstrations and things like that. But because we were so isolated from the city, unlike Berkeley, for example, where the university is the city in many ways. They were literally across the street from each other. We didn’t have the kind of intense demonstrations except when the regents came and then we had a couple of occasions where the campus was shut down for strikes. I remember the administration building was taken over once. We reported on that on the radio. I remember doing those reports. And it was a pretty heady time. We thought we were going to change the world. But I remember everybody sitting around the dorm lounge affixed to the TV when Bobby Kennedy was shot, when Dr. King was shot before that, kind of wondering what the hell’s going to happen. Then in the summer, that same summer, course we weren’t on campus, but the Democratic Convention made people further upset about the direction of the country. It was a very interesting time. But I do think that Santa Cruz was rather less immersed in that than some of the Ivies or certainly than UC Berkeley was.

Holmes: But this was also very important times of, I would imagine for one who has the journalist bug, you have a radio station, it is in the ‘60s. What effect did this experience have on you becoming a journalist and then going off after 1970 to the renowned journalism school at Columbia?

Laubscher: The 1960s and early 1970s created more news of consequence than any period since World War II. Now we have more modern tools. World War II, people would go to theaters, including those on Market Street. There was a place called Telenews that ran nothing but newsreels and if you wanted to see combat footage you would see heavily censored combat footage, no blood, none of our people getting all gored up. But you would see these things shot weeks before. It had to be hauled over and processed and put together and things like that. There was no immediacy to it. Now, with radio and television,
especially after JFK’s assassination, when the medium understood, “Oh, my God, we can cover this live,” you had a tremendous change. My recollection is you had a more intensely curated body of news that reached the thinking members of the public.

That reminds me of that old Adlai Stevenson joke, that after a particularly good speech somebody came up to him and said, “Governor, that’ll win you the vote of every thinking person in America.” And he said, “That’s not good enough. I need a majority.” That was in the 1950s. So, yes, there was a lot of anti-intellectualism and things like that. But I think even working-class people, by and large, in those days understood. And when I say working-class people, I mean white people. There was an entire parallel universe in the African American community in the United States in those days with a robust network of black newspapers in major cities. I’m not quite sure how all this got handled on a rural basis but there was no concomitant black news television network at the time. So they got what the white-controlled mass media wanted to feed them. There were only three networks and PBS wasn’t doing a news show at the time, if I remember correctly. So it was an environment where being able to tell people stories, to relate what happened and to explain and try to add some interpretation to it or tell people what it means or what you thought it meant, that all very much appealed to me. And the stories that were out there were huge. You didn’t have, that I can recall, as much celebrity culture. There was no People magazine until sometime in the 1970s, if I’m not mistaken. You had Playboy, which actually had some pretty good articles in it.

01:43:27 Holmes: That is the word around the campfire.

01:43:29 Laubscher: But you had thoughtful monthly magazines and a lot of them. They would represent left, right, center but it seemed to me that the percentage of discourse in the print and broadcast media that made an effort to be thoughtful, even if it was within those parentheses that say “white” inside and “male” inside and “straight” inside, the percentage of discourse that attempted to be thoughtful was much higher, I think, than now because there are no barriers to publishing anymore. There is no curation in the sense of: is this worth spending the money on the newspaper and newsprint to put in? Am I going to lose my broadcast license if I do this? Or more saliently, I’ve got thirty minutes to do an entire national newscast and that’s all I have until tomorrow at the same time. So what do I put in and what do I leave out? These were the selection processes that sort of fascinated me. So yeah, I wanted to be part of that. Today you don’t need really a publisher, a TV station, or anything else. But then, the only way to do it was through the established media. And that’s what I set out to do.
You know what? Can I ask a question? If you don’t mind following up on what you were just talking about.

Yeah.

This sort of idea that you’re presenting of journalism at the time and being attracted to thoughtful journalism, that being one of the main reasons that you’ve moved into this. And, of course, that means that a journalist has an opinion based on the evidence and is interested in sharing it with the public. But I’m wondering where you kind of fit on the perspective—what am I saying? Sort of the—

Political spectrum?

We can kind of get there, I think, but really just on the spectrum from you wanting to be an objective journalist who is presenting as broad and as balanced a picture as possible with the idea that then the people you’re communicating with will form their own opinions versus you seeing yourself as an expert and wanting to influence those opinions as they are being formed. In essence, kind of telling people how it really is from more of an advocacy perspective.

I was much more fact-based. I thought if you present the facts—I later learned everyone has their own facts. Facts are very fungible to many people. I didn’t see it that way at the time. And I do think there are discernable quantifiable things that people should be able to agree on. Conspiracy theories weren’t running as rampant, other than the grassy knoll and the extra shooters and stuff like that in the JFK assassination. I don’t remember much about my instruction in college at all, but I do remember one of my professors, American history professor named Laurence Veysey, who, in a total coincidence, I decades later found out was a foaming rail fan. We never discussed transit attraction or anything at all. I had two or three American history classes from him over the period. I remember we’re trying to go through these kinds of factual things. And I remember him going off one day onto this soliloquy about how it ought to be in terms of solving the racial problem in America. His solution, which had nothing to do with history—I can’t remember what possible context there was to this—was that the government should buy up every tenth home everywhere, whether it was in Pacific Heights or Bay View, Hunter’s Point, or Omaha or Bangor, Maine, anywhere, the federal government should buy up every tenth home and give it to an African American family and that’s the way we were going to force
integration. And I thought, “What? Are you kidding me? How’s that going to work?” There was not even a hint of—doesn’t class have something to do with it as well as race? Doesn’t educational level have something to do with it? What about all these other factors? It was so simplistic and so dumb, frankly, in my opinion, I thought, “That’s not what teaching is. That’s not how you’re supposed to do things.” I don’t want to be an editorializer. I want to be a relater of facts. I don’t think I reached that conclusion in my brain instantly at the time but I did come to believe then, and I do believe now, that if you enthusiastically but somewhat dispassionately set out facts and let people make decisions and say, This is what will happen. These are the benefits of doing this, and here’s the drawbacks over here, that you can carry most arguments that you make on most subjects. At least I still think that idealistically. What we’re finding today, of course, is that the sky isn’t blue. Water isn’t wet. And that’s just your liberal bias that makes it that way. It’s pretty crazy.

Well, then what about where you fit on the political spectrum, say, at this point in time when you’re at Santa Cruz?

I clearly was a mainstream or left Democrat. We had people who were espousing communists, Marxists, Leninists at campus and I didn’t quite think that was going to work. I took a class on Soviet history early on from a professor named Peter Kenez who I think was Hungarian, which would give him an interesting perspective on teaching Soviet history. It seemed pretty clear that that wasn’t working so well. At the same time, I remember when my dad decided he was a Goldwater supporter, I thought, “Are you kidding me?” Of course, some of that had to do with Barry Goldwater being a ham radio operator, too, I’m sure, but that’s another whole story. [laughter] He even knew Barry Goldwater’s call letters. It was a funny time. A much different world than we live in today. And I have to say that I just feel astonishingly lucky to have lived in this timeframe that I’ve lived in. When I think about, and you bring it back talking about it here. When I think about the idyllic nature of the Bay Area, and by extension America at a time of that population level, yes, when you were white, when you were growing up with a home made possible by the GI Bill, with unions to give a kid wages that a lot of adults would have liked to have had and all those special circumstances, which were largely borne out of World War II, that was such a dramatically different period than now.

As many commentators have noted, especially Barack Obama, to people of color, there’s no nostalgia for those days. We were in California, which was comparatively a pretty open state. There was racial prejudice. My best friend when I was a little kid was a Chinese boy and they were never called Chinese Americans. They were just Chinese. His name was Franklin Chang. And I
think my parents thought it was a big deal that it was okay for me to play with a Chinese boy. There were no black kids in our neighborhood. There were no black kids in the schools where I went to. And when I went to Terra Linda, it was all white. When I got to high school I did meet a few black kids but they were, I think almost every one of them, the children of Air Force officers and serviceman at Hamilton Air Force Base. As such they were military kids and they had instilled in them the values and demeanor that you would expect as military kids. To me, I didn’t quite understand what all the fuss was about because I had never really been around people of different socioeconomic classes. As a kid we had a few friends who had more money than we did, maybe in my father’s church. My friend Tom, his father was a successful executive. But they still had an Eichler home. It was bigger than ours. And they had a pool and we didn’t. They took me to the 1964 World’s Fair and they paid for my jet ticket back to New York, and I saw all of Tom’s relatives and friends on Long Island and I heard people talk like they talk. Tom talked that way but everybody talked that way. The Irish Catholics who had emigrated just like we had immigrated out to Marin County. They had immigrated to Long Island from Brooklyn. And it was a very different world than it is now.

When I tell my daughters that it was a tremendously controversial thing for John Kennedy to run for President in 1960 because he was a Catholic and he could be controlled by the Pope in Rome and all this stuff, it’s like, “What?” My kids have transgender friends in their age group and Muslim friends. People, at least in the circles my kids run in, judge other people the way Dr. King wanted it to be. Not the color of their skin, the content of their character. If you're a jerk you can be a white jerk, you can be a straight jerk, you can be a gay jerk, you can be anything and you're still a jerk because you don’t have the right values vis-à-vis your friends and stuff like that. If that’s not progress then I don’t really know what is. And that’s all in my lifetime. So anyway, I got off on that.

01-01:56:39
Meeker: No, that’s great. Thank you.

01-01:56:43
Laubscher: You’re welcome.

01-01:56:43
Holmes: Yes, very good. Thanks so much Rick.

[End of Audio File 1]
Interview 2: July 14, 2016

Holmes: All right. This is Todd Holmes from the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley sitting down once again with Rick Laubscher. Today is Thursday, July 14, 2016 and we are here at Rick’s beautiful house in the great city of San Francisco. Rick, thanks so much for sitting down with me again for another session in this oral history interview. I wanted to start and pick up where we left off, based mainly on your transition from your studies in history at UC Santa Cruz to the start of your award winning career as a journalist. You graduated with honors from UC Santa Cruz in 1970, is that correct?

Laubscher: Correct yes. Adlai E. Stevenson College, one of the first two colleges at Santa Cruz.

Holmes: And then after a year, which I believe you worked in radio for a time period, you entered Columbia School of Journalism in the fall of 1971.

Laubscher: Right.

Holmes: That’s quite an achievement. What was the view of your family and others of not just being accepted into one of the top journalism schools in the nation, but particularly of embarking on this new career as a journalist?

Laubscher: Well, my parents were very proud to hear my name bandied about. I wasn’t on the air when I started in radio but my name would get mentioned occasionally and my mother particularly was very proud of that. I don’t recall much of a reaction to going to Columbia. They were proud, certainly. They knew Columbia was a very good school. They hadn’t gone to college and so there was that kind of pride. But I wasn’t going to go into the family delicatessen business so I guess they figured it was honest work, at least.

Holmes: And so the move to New York. Was that your first time back east?

Laubscher: No. We took a manic two-week cross-country vacation in 1960 where I had the Rand McNally Road Atlas. I was 11 years old. I had the Rand McNally Road Atlas in the back seat with my sister, and my father and mother were in the front seat, and we just drove and drove to see his brother, to see other folks and we ended up in New York. I asked to ride the subway and we went all the way to the end of the line in The Bronx, with me choosing the route from the map. On reflection, my parents were very indulgent.
We went to Washington. We did the sort of circuit that Californians do when they get out of state. But it was all by car. And that was quite an eye-opener for me to see the other parts of the country. Then, when I was in high school my best friend was a boy named Tom Nelson whose dad was a mining executive and they had money. We really didn’t, not the kind of discretionary income to travel like that. They were from New York, Long Island, and they offered me a plane ticket to go with them to the World’s Fair in 1964. So I flew all the way across the country on a real jet. This would have been, yeah, 1964. It was just astonishing. That was really the last great World’s Fair, I think, of that ilk and it was on the same site as the 1939 World’s Fair. It was magical. It was really magical. Almost in a literal sense because Disney designed some of the things like Small World and things like that. And it was kind of amazing to realize, hey, five hours of flying and I’m where it took us five days to get to before. Experiencing that kind of shrinking of distance was really good.

But those were the two times I had been to New York and I really liked New York. And, of course, for somebody who was a journalism junkie at my age, New York was the journalism capital of America, if not the world.

02:00:05:28 Holmes: Well, you entered journalism, too, in 1971 really at a critical stage in American history. You have the Vietnam War, social protest, anti-war protest, as well as, certainly by this time, a rising distrust of the government.

02:00:05:47 Laubscher: Right. It was very interesting because if we go back to 1970, my transition from college to journalism was exceedingly brief. It was twenty-four hours. I graduated on a Sunday from UC Santa Cruz in June of 1970 and the following day I started at KSFO radio. Not because of any great skill, it was just dumb luck. I had written letters to three stations, I don’t remember the other two, in San Francisco and said, “Hey, I’m this kid who helped start the campus radio station at UC Santa Cruz and, gee, I’d like a job in your newsroom. I’ll do anything.” And in retrospect, reflecting on it, it was just insane to even think that that was going to work. But they actually had a reporting vacancy and the news director, who was a man named Chet Casselman, called me up and I listened to him all the time. It was like not quite Edward R. Murrow calling, but a voice you knew and a voice of authority, and said, “Why don’t you come down and audition for the job?” And I did. I wrote my own newscast off the AP wires and at the end of the audition he said, “Your voice just is never going to be good enough for radio but I like the way you write. Would you be interested in being a vacation relief writer for ten weeks? We have this employee who’s going out to Europe on a sabbatical. I can pay a hundred dollars a week.” Well, a hundred dollars a week, that’s $2.50 an hour.
So I took that and started the day after college and got thrown right into writing a five-minute newscast every hour for a news reader to read. Several members of our staff were on-air journalists. They wrote their own, or I would help them write. I would take certain stories. Others we had were still staff announcers left over from the old days, the really old days. There were a couple of fellows, wonderful guys with voices that I wanted to steal so badly. But they weren’t lifeline news guys and when they asked for help, it was wonderful to work with them. And that was a magical place because that was the top-rated station in the Bay Area. It really was like having the Giants come to your little league game and picking you up as a bat boy or something. And that’s an apt analogy because we had the Giants broadcast. It was astonishing to be a 21 year-old college graduate and watch Russ Hodges, now a Hall of Famer, and Lon Simmons, another Hall of Fame announcer, come in after the baseball games. I learned to help Russ write his Sunday sports show. I got overtime for that, so it was $3.75 an hour. Just watched these people who had taken this medium, radio, which was shapeless. It was mature by then, of course. It was actually declining, starting its decline. But the medium was still only less than 50 years old.

To see how polished these people had made it and how slick and professional this was. When I was at KFSO at that point, it was a hiatus, one of several that the famous disc jockey Don Sherwood had. Sherwood was the unquestioned king of the radio waves in San Francisco, but he was kind of a bad boy and he would get himself in trouble and he would up stakes and go to Hawaii for a year and work there and then he’d come back. When I was there he wasn’t there. So we had a young guy named Terry McGovern, who was the morning guy, and we had disc jockeys like Dan Sorkin and Jack Carney. These people are all still very well known to people of my age because at that time KSFO so dominated the airwaves that a few years before I joined, during the Sherwood era, one of every two radios during the morning drive was tuned to KSFO in the entire Bay Area, out of 50 stations. A 50 share! When I tell people this who are in the industry in other cities, they say, “No, that’s not possible.” I don’t know of any other radio station of the era that dominated its market the way KFSO did. But that made it great fun to work for.

And they would do things like have a charity fundraiser softball game, and they would play this at the Cow Palace and they would fill the Cow Palace for a bunch of radio disc jockeys playing another team of celebrities. I remember Herb Caen played first base for the other team.

02-00:11:10
Holmes:

02-00:11:11
Laubscher:

Oh, wow.

And Willie McCovey came out one time. I played first base for the KSFO team and it really was remarkable, especially given what a bad baseball player
I was. But it was astonishing to see this media outlet, and all of these people were so devoted that they would come out to watch people they had never seen, because it was radio, play a softball game. That kind of got into my veins. It was the power of the medium but it came to have a bit of a dark side for me, too, which when we get to that I’ll talk about it. But in these first couple of years I was just sitting there writing. The first year I was just writing the news. I don’t know if I got on the air at all. If I did it might have been some late night fire when there was nobody else to do it. But I do remember, and this goes to your question about the times, the difficulty of the times. There was something going on in Chicago. Excuse me. This obviously was not 1968. But it was some civil disobedience or something else.

Well, they had the riots in ’69, as well.

Yeah, but this would have been 1970 or early ’71. One of my jobs was to get “actuality,” as they call it. Call people on the phone, interview them, tape them, edit the tape. I interviewed a woman who was working at WBBM at that time, the CBS-owned-and-operated radio station, who had previously worked at KSFO and whom I knew and whom I knew to be a reliable good reporter. And she said something that was not favorable to Mayor [Richard] Daley, that was probably left in its slant. The copy I wrote around that probably reinforced its slant. And I remember the news director, this fellow Chet Casselman, calling me into his office and reading me the riot act. In a precursor of Fox News, it wasn’t fair and balanced. And he had a point. He was a stickler for what he considered objective reporting.

Of course, as we all know now, looking back in retrospect, objective reporting excluded huge chunks of the population, ignored them all together, or treated them as marginal, and deferred way too much to elected officials, power centers, and things like that. I still remember that incident today because it was a lesson for me that, hey, this world is pretty constrained and they don’t really want a lot of dialogue. I was not a fire breather. I was not a person who said, we’re going to start the revolution, we’re going to infiltrate from inside. I would have discussions with friends sometimes, my more liberal friends who would say, “You’ve got this forum and you’ve got to slip the messages in. You’ve got to do this kind of stuff.” But I really wanted to learn the profession. And what I had learned was that I didn’t know a whole lot of things because I’d gone straight from college to this radio station kind of counting on my writing ability to carry me along.

So after, well, I guess it was the spring of 1971, maybe it was the fall of 1970, I don’t remember, I applied to Columbia. Part of the reason for that was that I’d only been guaranteed ten weeks. At the end of ten weeks the news director basically said, “Well, this other woman’s coming back. You’re going to have
to go.” And the number two in the news department, a man named Jeff Skov, who was already established in a very good news career and went on to do a lot of very good corporate PR in the Bay Area, Jeff was my mentor and he did not want me to go and somehow, behind the scenes, he got me extended through the election of 1970. Then I think the woman actually left who had gone away for the summer. I think that’s how I got the job full-time. But I realized how fragile employment could be and so I thought, “Well, I’d better get some training.” So I applied and they accepted me.

Holmes:

I wanted to pick up on that. It’s interesting that not only your radio career helped you get the tools to go into graduate study in journalism but also at this time the different types of reporting that were developing, right. Politics was very volatile at this time and even what Richard Nixon would begin to label as the liberal media. I want to have you talk a little bit more about your experience at Columbia. Did these current events begin to influence both the teaching, as well as the study of the craft?

Laubscher:

Oh, absolutely. As you mentioned, Todd, it was a very frothy time to be in journalism. I got to Columbia in September of 1971 and found an interesting school. What I mean by that is that it had some very big name professors: Fred Friendly, head of the broadcast framework; Norman Isaacs, who had been the editor, a famous editor at the Louisville Courier-Journal for years, headed the print. And even though I was one of the youngest members of the class, I had a year of professional work under my belt, which some students didn’t. I remember going into a radio seminar, I think it was like the first day or first week of class, and we had to write a five-minute newscast. Well, I had done this. And they gave us 2½ hours to do it or something. So I had mine done in thirty minutes and was kind of sitting around, and all these other people were really struggling with it because they were where I had been more than a year before. I remember the teacher, John Patterson, saying to people—the clock ticked down on the wall and there was a booth. It wasn’t broadcasting, of course. There were people, the red light went on and they were still at their desk. And he’s saying, “You’re on the air, you’re on the air.” I was amazed. I was also kind of surprised actually. But that’s how it started. What we did was we wrote a ton. We wrote a ton about everything. We studied style, we studied libel.

One of the electives was statistics, which I took, and I’m really glad to this day that I took it because it really helps you discern valuable information from dross. Whenever I see a presidential poll today, yesterday, whatever, and it’ll say, “Well, Trump and Clinton are tied,” and the margin of error is 11 points, no, they’re probably not tied. He could be way ahead or she could be way ahead. This whole exercise is worthless. But that’s never reported. It’s all in the fine print. I’m digressing here, but I don’t think there’s nearly enough
rigor in mainstream media now around polling. But I learned all that kind of stuff at Columbia.

Holmes: I’d like to pick up on that for a minute. Back in those days, was it taught that you don’t report statistics when you have such a wide margin of error or that you should at least include those details about the margin of error?

Laubscher: Well, in those days polling was—fewer people did it. Polling was generally considered, I think, more reliable in the sense that—everybody had a landline so you could reach people in their homes. They were more willing than they are today to give time to phone callers. I’m sure there were junk phone calls going out back then but certainly not like today. I remember if we ever got a call at our house when I was a kid it was kind of like, “Oh, they’re asking my opinion.” Well, now it’s almost impossible to correct for people who lie, people who don’t have landlines, and now they try to do it by internet, they try to do it online. I wouldn’t want to be a pollster today. It’s extremely difficult. But what that does is it’s put way too much weight on focus groups. There’s a fellow I worked with in corporate work in a couple of places named Frank Luntz, who is one of the leading Republican pollsters, and he and I have talked about this. It’s quite clear that he makes his money doing focus groups because that’s what the TV wants to broadcast and work from because it’s all about sound bites now. When I learned to do “man on the street” work, I always felt it was bogus. It was not real journalism. We’ve all seen the stories on TV. You go out and something has happened. The Google buses are taking over the streets of San Francisco. Let’s find out what people say. And assignment desks and television, at least, would say, “Make sure you show both sides.” Well, first of all, if you’re just doing a rough sample, if you’re honest you’ll disclaim it by saying this isn’t a scientific sample and you’ll get one person saying, “Oh, these are a good thing,” and you’ll get one person saying “it’s a bad thing.” You’ll wrap it up and you’ll put a bow on it and that’s the story. Well, I don’t think it’s the real story. But that’s the formula. It’s the recipe. And at Columbia they tried to teach us to be skeptical of that kind of thing, but that was like, in some ways, spitting into a hurricane, because if your bosses back in the real world wanted you to do that, that’s kind of what you had to do.

Holmes: So there was an emphasis on rigor, objectivity? What we used to associate with the core principles of good journalism?

Laubscher: Yeah. There were two schools of thought back then, or two ways of teaching. And I’m not going to get these right because it’s been so many years. One was called chi-squared. It was a formula. It was data-driven. Something similar to what we have now. And then there was what they called “green-eyeshade
journalism,” from the editor who used to sit there, edit and correct and shape a
story at the desk. That was the “tell-me-a-story journalism.” Grab my
attention. Make a difference. Those two schools of thought have competed
and still compete. But I think we’ve learned over the years that the emotive
always outweighs the factual in terms of clicks. Ratings, clicks, whatever you
want to call it. Today everything is driven with advertising dollars, having
shipped into digital and shrunk. If you can’t get the eyeballs, you lose.

I wanted to ask you, during this time and entering into journalism, who were
the journalists that really influenced you professionally?

I think the one who influenced me the most was actually David Brinkley of
NBC. Brinkley was a little acerbic. He was sardonic. He was a brilliant writer
and could just turn a phrase, say something in the simplest way possible so
that you couldn’t fail to understand what the story was. And say it with wit. I
wanted to be like David Brinkley. The other broadcast journalist—we all
revered Ed Murrow but he was really before my time. I would love to say that
when I was five years old I was absorbed by the Army-McCarthy hearings
and all those famous exposes, but I came to revere Murrow like others of my
generation—in retrospect. And I still think that if you listen to him today with
his live reports from London during World War II, I mean, it’s some of the
great—oh, Buchenwald. Oh, my God. Some of the greatest broadcast
journalism ever achieved was by Murrow. But he wasn’t active on the air
when I was doing that. But Charles Kuralt was, and there was another very
graceful writer who could take a story and make you really understand the
beauty of the story.

During your time, as well, there was the rise of what they called the new
journalism, right?

Yeah.

Joan Didion.

Tom Wolfe.

Tom Wolfe. [Truman] Capote. As well as the rise of more activist journalists.
Some would say Seymour Hersh, as well as a few others, might be in that
camp. What was your opinion at this time as a young professional trying to
climb the ladder in journalism? Did those resonate with you or what was your
view?
They all resonated with me. But they were print folks and my commitment was to broadcast. I didn’t think much about it. Maybe I should have thought more about it. I felt more comfortable in the broadcast realm. I’d learned to write for the ear rather than the eye. In those days print style was pretty constrained. If you went back today and looked at a copy of the New York Times from 1971-72, it was really dry. I’m not saying there wasn’t great reporting in there but it considered itself the newspaper of record. And that’s why, by the way, in the couple of years that followed, the Washington Post pulled up shoulder to shoulder with it nationally, because the Post was always a better written newspaper by far. But during that time at Columbia, Nixon outraged the country with Cambodia and all this other stuff. And in the spring, shortly before the end, the campus shut down. There was a strike. The second semester at Columbia was a focus semester, and you either went on the print or the broadcast stream. You had an emphasis. And Fred Friendly led the broadcast. I went to one session and saw that they were using archaic movie cameras, and I didn’t feel like I was really going to learn very much there. I thought, “I need to get into the basics.” So I shifted over, along with a friend of mine there, Richard Roth, who, interestingly, went to work for CBS News the day after graduation and stayed there for 40 years. Richard and I both went to the print side and worked with Norman Isaacs. When the strike hit, we were futzing around with something. We were going to do some kind of bogus paper, a newspaper or something. I can’t remember what the thing was.

Regarding the strike?

Not regarding the strike. It was just some kind of methodical, this is the course, this is what we do. I remember Professor Isaacs said—and he was the quintessential green-eyeshade guy. It looked like he had one on even if he didn’t. He just looked like an editor. And he said, “Well, we got real news here now. Let’s go cover it. We’re going to do a tabloid. We’re going to do this. Who wants to be the editor?” [laughter] So very funny. “Everybody step forward if you want this job,” and, of course, everybody else stepped back and somehow I got that job. I really don’t remember how I got it. But I was the editor of the paper and we put together a team and I used my statistical class to do a poll of the students about what they felt about the strike and what they felt about the activities. I’ve still got copies downstairs. That little thing I think is what won me a Pulitzer Fellowship, really, because it was an enterprise piece done under deadline pressure and it actually covered something that mattered.

I was going to get to that. By the end of spring, the end of the second semester—it was only a one-year master’s program there at the journalism school—you graduated first in your class. Is that correct?
Laubscher: Yes. I was shocked. I had no idea.

Holmes: And then won the Pulitzer Fellowship. Can you tell us a little about the fellowship? Now, this gave you an opportunity for another year afterwards. I think that’s right.

Laubscher: Yeah. One of the proudest possessions I have, somewhere down, it’s not framed but it’s somewhere, was the letter signed by the dean, Elie Abel, who had been an NBC diplomatic reporter for many years and was a very East-Coast kind of—different than me. He was elegant, he was very precise in the things he said. Somebody to aspire to in many ways. Anyway, so he gave me the letter about the fellowship and I was really kind of blown away. They gave three, all with the same stipend and, as I recall, it was something like $2,500. It was nothing, I mean, certainly by today’s standards. The stipend had not changed since 1948. There was no requirement for it. “Here, we’re giving you this money. Go somewhere outside the country,” that was the deal, “and report.” Freelance. You could be with someone. It didn’t matter.

Holmes: And would you report to a paper or a radio station?

Laubscher: Anything you wanted. You didn’t really have to do anything at all. If I remember correctly, the other two recipients, one of whom, Jeff Perlman, had a great career at the LA Times, is still a friend of mine, I think they got on a plane to Europe and spent a month in Italy or something like that and did some work and poked around and freelanced some stuff and then that was it. I kind of thought, “Hey, this is an opportunity.” So I wanted to really make something of myself with this. Use this as a real learning opportunity. And I had the travel bug. So I came back to KFSO in an only slightly elevated role from what I had. I still wasn’t on the air that much. And I saved every dime I could. After a year, oh it was about 15 months, I took off on this fellowship. I had saved enough money and I had managed to catch a couple of deals. I remember getting a set of airline tickets on Japan Airlines, non-transferable, non-refundable, through Holiday magazine and I was supposed to write several pieces for Holiday magazine in exchange for this. But after I got the tickets, and before I could write the pieces, Holiday magazine went under. So I didn’t have to do that.

But what I did do was I cut a deal with KFSO where I would file a two-minute radio piece every morning, five days a week, from the road, wherever I was. I never heard them because you can’t tune in. Today you just go on the internet and it would be there. When I made them I had to produce them in the field with two little Sony tape recorders, one for the interview, the actuality. I
would interview people, kind of like a Charles Kuralt. It was a slice of life, it was what I saw, reporter’s notebook, whatever you want to call it. And then I would mix that with my voice on the other tape and I would literally mail the cassettes back to San Francisco with the scripts. I still have all the scripts. I still have all the cassettes. I intend, by the way, to repeat this trip on its 50th anniversary in 2023, ’24.

Holmes: Oh, wow. Where did you go?

Laubscher: Stop-by-stop. I took off and I went west. From here I went through Hawaii to Tahiti, American Samoa, Western Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, New Zealand, Australia, Papua New Guinea, and then up to Taiwan, Japan, Hong Kong. Couldn’t go to China in those days. Thailand, India, Iran, Egypt. All of that took me six months. And then I went up into Europe and spent four or five months there.

When I was done with that, in that interim, my mentor, Jeff Skov, had moved to Washington. KSFO was owned by Golden West Broadcasting, which had four stations up and down the coast and its owner was Gene Autry, the singer and movie star. So they were very serious about news on all their stations. This was really before all-news radio. And while they only did five minutes of news on the hour and three minutes on the half hour, they also did blocks of news around drive time, afternoon drive time especially. They were very serious about this and they had some very good journalists. So Jeff had been sent to be the White House correspondent for the chain, for all stations. And he was ensconced at the White House during the Watergate crisis.

Holmes: Oh, wow.

Laubscher: While I was overseas I had learned so much about the way other people view America. The dominant theme at the time was how can you, America, be throwing away the talents of this man Richard Nixon, who is so wise in foreign policy. That’s how most people thought, the ones I talked to. And I would read in Time magazine—again, it was so well before the internet. There was no such thing as instant news. If you got to Europe or maybe in Asia, you might get a copy of the International Herald Tribune or you get a very slimmed down international edition of Time or Newsweek. But there really wasn’t a lot of ways to keep current, especially for somebody who was hopscotching around on a college budget.

So when I got to Washington, Jeff said, “Look, things are really hot here. I can’t pay you, but would you help me? I’ll get you a White House press pass.”
Holmes: Oh, wow.

Laubscher: So for the last two weeks of the Richard Nixon administration I was a White House correspondent, using the term very broadly. But I saw some amazing things. I literally had the audio feed in my ear when Richard Nixon prepared for his resignation speech. I remember vividly I thought, “Gosh, why didn’t I tape this?” It was illegal to do, it but I should have. He was sitting at the desk where he gave the speech and they were doing mic check and things like that and I remember him saying, you’d hear this voice, “Say a few words,” and then he said, “Well, I guess I’m ready.” And then he says, “You?” “Who?” “You over there,” “Yes, Mr. President?” “Out. Get out.” And he says, “I’m sorry, Sir, I can’t do that.” And then he’s off mic. Then Nixon says, “Oh. Are you Secret Service?” “Yes, Sir.” “Oh, I was just joking. Ah-ha-ha.” You could hear an almost unhinged voice dealing with this incredible crisis. I don’t know how many people actually heard that other than me. I guess others did but I’ve never seen it written or commented on. It was all strictly off the record and you were never supposed to talk about it. And so then I walked out on the South Lawn with everybody else and I have slides, color slides of the famous pictures that all the press photographers took of the—

Holmes: The double V sign.

Laubscher: Nixon at the helicopter. Then I remember, I can’t remember why I did this, but I guess I figured out that there was a pool only of reporters, and these were all very senior people, to go in to see Ford’s swearing-in in the East Room. But there was no restriction on photographers and I had a camera. So I put my Pentax around my neck and kind of ducked down, because my pass wasn’t a photographer’s pass, and I kind of hunched down and I kind of snuck in there and I was standing on the risers with this piece of history about to take place in front of me. And I reached down and I realized I didn’t have any film in my camera. [laughter]

Holmes: Oh, wow.

Laubscher: So I turned to the next guy, the next guy over, who was David Kennerly, who the next day would be named Ford’s personal photographer, and I said, “Can I borrow a roll of film?” [laughter] And he was very gracious. I have photographs of that, too, but the same photographs that 30 other photographers got. But it was a chance to witness history. It was a heady thing. But I also started to get the feeling that you’re a spectator. If you’re Scotty Reston, to name the most influential columnist in Washington at the
time, or someone like that, or Joe Alsop before him, you could shape things in Washington. But somehow I wanted to be more active than that. And maybe that goes a little bit to the Tom Wolfe thing, but I never really picked up on that kind of involvement.

Holmes: I wanted to ask you, which is a very interesting perspective of how Richard Nixon, for example, was viewed during your travels by other citizens. What other issues did you come across during these travels and, also, what was the general view of America at this time? The Cold War is going on, and also America being embroiled in a war in Southeast Asia that had lost favor with not just those inside the United States but certainly those abroad.

Laubscher: I always tried to guide discussions back to their country. I was more interested and tried to shape things about what was going on in their world rather than my world. And I’m sure we had those discussions. I’m sure we talked about these kinds of things. I don’t remember, other than the Nixon discussions, because they would keep coming up, what other kinds of things were talked about. I was very concerned about the Vietnam War. We were right near the end at that point. I actually wanted to go to Vietnam but couldn’t quite fit it into the itinerary. In retrospect I regret that. I’ve still never been to Vietnam and I would very much like to go. But being a freelancer and not having an immediate outlet for my stuff, it didn’t seem to make a lot of sense. Maybe things would have been different if I had gone. I would have run into Morley Safer or somebody. He was gone from there by then.

Holmes: But you were also able to go to Iran. That’s really within the very slim window when Western visitors could enter. Later in the decade, very few people were able to travel there.

Laubscher: Oh, yeah. The Iranians were very friendly. In general, I found people to be friendly to Americans. And I had some interesting times. I was going to say fun but some of them weren’t particularly fun. I remember, for example, on the bus coming from the New Delhi airport into town, I was sitting next to two Iraqi soldiers who were on their way back, I’m not quite sure why they were going through New Delhi, from, I think it was Hood Air Force Base in Texas, where they had been on a six-month training program with the United States. I assume they were Muslim but it never occurred to me because what they wanted to do was drink a lot of very bad state-made-Indian vodka in a 105 degree hotel room without any air conditioning.

Holmes: Oh, man. That sounds like a recipe for disaster.
Laubscher: I know I had never been that drunk before. I doubt I’ve ever been that drunk since, except maybe once. It was quite an occasion. But they were so affable. They were so friendly. They loved America. They loved everything about America. And yes, it’s a sample of two, and that’s not very many people. But I remember when all the problems came up in Gulf War I thinking, “I wonder if those guys are still in the military. I wonder if they’re fighting. I wonder what they think of Saddam. I wonder what they think of America today.” Your asking the question, Todd, kind of brings back some of these memories to me and I think that, on balance, and I don’t think people were just being polite; there was a lot of admiration for America. If you’re in other countries, most other countries know that there’s a war going on. Certainly they knew we were fighting in Vietnam. But, other than perhaps in the immediate vicinity, I don’t think there was a lot of animosity toward the United States for being there. Colonial wars were not a new thing. America certainly wasn’t the only country that did it. The Australians were there. I spent a month in Australia and a month in New Zealand before that and didn’t want to leave either place, really. They were every bit as much into it as we were. They had a fear of the Chinese and the Indonesians and others. You might argue, whether it was justified or not, but they were certainly closer to it than we were. And communism, as defined back then, was fearful to them. If you go through the South Pacific, for example, all those countries—I was very young. A lot of the people I interviewed were older. They were young during World War II. We were only 25 years out of World War II at that point. And these people remember, in a number of these countries, what it was like when the Japanese occupied them, and they remember being liberated by Americans. In Papua New Guinea the Americans were saviors. Those were all positive memories.

Holmes: That’s very interesting. So after your travels and, of course, historic experiences there in Washington, DC, you did get a chance to then officially being your journalist career in television. I know you recounted in our last conversation how the television coverage of John F. Kennedy’s assassination really moved you into wanting to work in broadcast. And so you finally had that opportunity. Why don’t we discuss that a bit—your first opportunity.

Laubscher: I was kind of lost when I got back from the fellowship. The fellowship was a really heady experience. I had the discipline of a deadline every day or every week, to send in those next five stories, and it really put a focus on the travel, which was great. It wasn’t just kind of lollygagging around. Even if I only made eight dollars per story, it was a focus. When it ended, I did not do a good job of marketing myself. I probably never have done a good job of marketing myself, to be honest. I’ve just kind of fallen into things. I can say that now with the benefit of hindsight. I don’t sell myself very well and I don’t
promote myself very well. At least people tell me that. So when I got back, here I was back in San Francisco with no job and no home. So I went back to my parents’ house in San Rafael and went to look for work. It was not methodical. KSFO by this time had withered a little bit. They weren’t as robust in the news area as they had been before and there wasn’t any spot for me. And I knew very well at this point that I had to move on from there. I wasn’t going to be a radio guy all my life. What I should have done was sent out a hundred letters with audio samples, and probably should have paid somebody to get me some kind of TV piece.

But one of the things that happened, and, again, it was a fluke, after several months on the beach I got a call from a man named Ron Mires, who had been the news director of Channel 5 in San Francisco and I had sat next to him at some industry luncheon or event. We’d had a very good conversation. This was my earlier stint at KSFO. He had remembered me and he called me up and said, “Would you be interested in one-week of vacation relief television reporting here in San Diego at the NBC affiliate?” And I said, “Sure. When?” I don’t know if it was a Wednesday or Thursday but he said, “Starting Monday.” So I borrowed my sister’s beat up Karmann Ghia convertible, which was bright orange—I’ll never forget that car—and drove down to San Diego for what I thought was a one-week gig. And I thought, “Well, I’ll get a tape out of it. I’ll get something I can use.” And this was kind of an interesting thing because I—I just lost my train of thought. Oh, yes, that’s what it was. I had left out that on my way back, during the fellowship—I don’t want to make it sound like I was a complete doofus—I did try to use a couple of connections to make some connections.

02:00:53:45 Holmes: Well, you had great experiences.

02:00:54:38 Laubscher: I had Fred Friendly. I had people whose names I could use. So, for example, when I was in London I got an audience, and that is the correct word, with Charles Collingwood, who was then the CBS bureau chief in London. Collingwood was one of Murrow’s boys, who I learned later was referred to as the Duke of Collingwood at CBS because he had bespoke suits, shoes from Savile Row. This guy, I don’t know if you’ve ever seen a photograph of him or saw him on TV, but he had this incredible wavy silver hair and this sharp Scandinavian type face. He looked somewhat like Eric Sevareid, the other CBS correspondent, another one of Murrow’s boys. And I was sitting there in their bureau, which had been their bureau since World War II, a historic site across from Harrod’s, and he had beautiful custom made shirt and tie and pinstripe, chalk stripe pants. Oh, my gosh. This is a reporter. He put his feet up on the desk and sat back and we just talked. I don’t remember what we talked about. Current events. He asked me what I had seen and done and stuff like that. And I thought, “Oh, yeah, that’s what I want to do.” Then when I got
to New York, he suggested that I go to CBS and take a writing test. So I did when I was in New York on the way back to San Francisco. I took the writer’s test, which was a way in, and typically heard nothing from them for like—I guess it must have been nine or ten months after I took the test. And so I thought, “Well, that’s gone.”

So when I got to San Diego, after one week they said, “Can you do another week?” They were really stringing me along. I said, “Sure, of course.” And it might have been during the second week that I’m going out on a story and I get a call and I remember taking it by the front desk of the station. We were way in the back in the newsroom. We almost never went out the front door. But I said, “Well, can I take it later?” And they said, “Well, it’s CBS News in New York.” So I remember taking this thing at the front desk. Whoever it was said, “Well, we would like you to become a news writer for CBS radio.” I said, “So it’s a radio only thing?” I said, “When would it start?” He said, “Well, it’s actually going to start next week and we need your answer now.” “Literally now?”

02:00:56:56Holmes: Not much notice. Yeah.

02:00:56:57Laubscher: “After nine months you need it now?” And he said, “Well, you know.” I had no promise of any television work beyond that week and it was kind of seminal. I remember just sitting there saying, “If you need the answer now then I’m sorry but the answer’s going to have to be no because I have this television job, which I’ve just started in San Diego.” And he, whoever it was, said, “You know this is CBS News.” That went like a knife into me. I knew it was CBS News because my friend from Columbia, Dick Roth, was working there.

02:00:57:50Holmes: And it’s in New York, which you knew.

02:00:57:51Laubscher: And it was in New York. But you know what? I’ll tell you what. I have never really regretted this. A decision I made at the time was to pass up New York. I would be a liar if I told you that the editor of the *New York Times* rang me up and said, “Come work for us,” because he didn’t. But it was well-known at the time that top graduates of Columbia could get an entry-level job at the *Times* or the *Journal*. They really, really pushed. But I didn’t. I was not really interested in doing it because I didn’t want to be on the print side. I wasn’t accomplished enough, from a presentation standpoint or anything like that, to break in in New York on the on-air news side locally or certainly not network. If I look back, if I had been more aggressive at that time, I’m sure something would have popped up. A door would have opened that I would have gone through and my entire life from that moment would have been very different.
But what I really wanted to do was come back to San Francisco. San Francisco has always been home no matter where I’ve lived. I’ve thought about this an awful lot. I know I was born here in this town. I don’t know who my birth parents were. I know that my adoptive parents have a history in this city. And I just feel this affinity for it, which is really not hard to do because it’s a beautiful city and a complex city and it’s all those other things. But I never got the big bug to be in New York. And it’s kind of interesting because my oldest daughter, who went to college in Los Angeles, her godfather is a shoe magnate, entrepreneur, and fashion guy of some note. She interned in New York and lived with him and his family between her junior and senior year. He offered her a job coming out of college and it was a good job and she—eighteen months was all she could do in New York. She had two different places in Manhattan, and they’re both a hell of a lot better than the places I lived in when I was in graduate school. She’s a California girl. I am, too. And when I got to San Diego that was a great experience. It was a great team. I made some great friends there, who we’re still friends today.

02-01:01:03
Holmes: Eventually turned out into a permanent job.

02-01:01:10
Laubscher: Yeah, sort of. It was interesting because I was focused on doing the job day-to-day and I had a lot to learn.

02-01:01:28
Holmes: Television’s a lot different than radio.

02-01:01:31
Laubscher: It is a lot different than radio. I remember fairly early on being at the supermarket on Saturday morning in flip-flops and t-shirt, unshaved, and some woman walking up to me and said, “I’ve seen you on TV. Aren’t you—?” And I said, “Yes.” And she said, “Well, you look much better on TV.” That was my introduction to being public property. Because in radio that doesn’t happen. It was the start of a little bit of souring for me on the whole celebrity side, which I had never really dealt with.

02-01:02:26
Holmes: You mentioned in your résumé that you pioneered live field reporting. Can you talk a little bit about that type of reporting?

02-01:02:35
Laubscher: Oh, yeah. That was fun. Well, television was going through a bit transition in those days. Television news pieces, stories, had always been done on film. You had a cameraman, and it was almost always a man. We were starting to get women into the profession at that point. But you went out with your shooter, your cameraman, and you would shoot the story on film and you would do the interview and you would bring it all back to the station. The reporter would write a script while the film was going through the bath, being
processed, and then in San Diego the shooter, the photographer, was the editor also. In San Francisco and most large markets you had a separate person to do that. So you would try to remember in your head, “Okay, what did we shoot? What are the images we have? How do I write to those and tell the story and get the facts in?” I always wanted the pictures to come first. There were a lot of reporters who just wrote what they wanted to write and it was not their problem to make the pictures match. But you can’t craft a good story that way. But this was all literally canned. The film came in cans and there were some very funny moments, in retrospect, not at the time, of desperately trying to get the last few splices down to make air. And you literally did put the film together with glue and you had to hold the heat on the splice for x-seconds and if you didn’t it would come apart in the project and you’d go to white on the screen. You had to know how to do the absolute minimum number of seconds because if you didn’t you weren’t going to get it on at all. So those were all kind of crafty things. And I don’t know why I worried about it because my part was done. But I felt responsibility for the piece.

Holmes: But then you started doing live—

Laubscher: But then we started doing live, which was an entirely different thing. And our station, Channel 10, was the first in the market to get live cameras. Today this is so commonplace. Everybody is seeing the television truck with the tower, the dish, and all that stuff. But then it wasn’t. And because we had this and ratings counted, there was a huge premium put on doing live stories. Like any new format, you weren’t quite sure what it was. It sort of started with, “I’m here in front of this store where such and such just happened.” It was a talking head. You didn’t have necessarily what they call B-roll, which is film or footage taken previously and then sent in. Not initially. What you wanted to do, and where you got the most advantage, was actually covering something that was happening at that moment.

I remember two of these things that I did live early on. It became pretty clear that not just the station I worked at, but all stations, it was a complete resorting of journalists and reporters. There were people who could do live and there were people who couldn’t. You’ve all seen blooper reels where people do stand-ups and they’re fumbling. I certainly did more than my share of those.

Holmes: There’s no room for error, it seems, in live broadcast.

Laubscher: Right, there is no room for error. You can’t recue. You can’t start over. You’ve got to keep moving even if you fumble and things like that. And the pressure was really too much for some reporters. They had to be able to
rehearse and do it all this other way. Some of them were excellent reporters but they didn’t do well in the live medium. On the other hand, people like me, who could just blather, were the ones they turned to because you wouldn’t fumble the words. Whether you actually had any content in the report seemed to be secondary. You had the camera and it had a picture of something and if it was something happening, golden if you could get a demonstration or something like that. But this was San Diego and we didn’t have a lot of those. Not then anyway.

I remember two that we did that were fun in their own different ways. See, I was at Channel 10 from ’75 to ’77. So this would have been during the 1976 campaign and Jimmy Carter arrived. Carter flew in and it happened during the news hour, between 6:00 and 7:00. So we’re going to go live because nobody else can go live. And so here’s the picture of the plane and here’s the plane rolling up and here’s the plane still rolling up and somebody’s got to talk about all of this. So I got dispatched and I gave a running commentary of what was going on in the election, where Carter stood in California. To me it was just very typical but later they said, “How did you know all that stuff?” I said, “I looked it up.” But there was this moment where, I didn’t mention this before, but our station, in that era, was actually the model for the Anchorman movies. Ron Burgundy was almost certainly based on our station’s anchorman, Harold Greene.

02:01:09:03
Holmes:
Oh, really? Did he really use the line, “Stay classy, San Diego.”

02:01:09:09
Laubscher:
It was close. No, he didn’t use that line. Harold looked like Ron Burgundy. He was not an amiable doofus like Ron Burgundy. He was actually a pretty hard-edged guy and not really a journalist. He was in that way an anchorman. At any rate, several of the people, like the weatherman and the other people are very recognizable from their prototypes at San Diego. I was not captured as far as I know in there but that’s a good thing. Harold’s partner, the other anchorman who was really amiable and very nice guy named Jack White, was one of those guys who didn’t do well off-script. And, of course, not only does the reporter in the field with a live shot have to be extemporaneous, so does the anchor. Now, later everybody figured out how to script all this and make it all seem spontaneous but it really wasn’t because, by gosh, we couldn’t take the risk of something candid coming out. We’ve got to control as much as we can. So I remember there was a line of people, receiving line down there as Carter came down, and I was starting to name them as they went by there. Alan Cranston was the senator. There were a couple of people and I knew these people by sight. Jack, who clearly had been instructed, “Now, you’ve got to participate, Jack. It’s back and forth so you’ve got to do this.” So he said, “Oh, and I believe I see Mayor Tom Bradley sitting there, Rick.” And, in fact, it was an African American man but we were in San Diego, not Los
Angeles, and it wasn’t Tom Bradley, it was a local councilman who was about a foot shorter than Tom Bradley. And he said something like, “Well, what is Mayor Bradley doing here, Rick?” I said, “Well, Jack, I think from your angle there, the camera angle, that might look like Tom Bradley but it’s actually Councilman Leon Williams.” And he said, “Oh, of course, of course.” I said, “But that’s understandable from that angle.” [laughter] It was very heady. It became very routine to me. But when you first started doing them, and nobody knows what it’s supposed to be and how it’s going to be, it was very nerve-wracking.

My reward for this was being sent out to the same airport, Lindbergh Field, some months later to chronicle the arrival of Emperor Hirohito, who was making a private visit because he was actually quite a renowned marine biologist and was visiting Scripps. And he flew in. Not the kind of thing you would cover live but we could, and nobody else could, so we did. Go out there and just give some color and stuff like this. Well, this was all supposed to be wham, bang, door opens, he comes down, goes right into a limo, he’s gone—a two-minute live shot except the door on the airplane got stuck. And it was stuck for 15 minutes and nobody knew when it would be unstuck and they didn’t dare cut away. I said, “You want to take it back in the studio?” “No.” [laughter]

They wanted the shot.

It was the money shot. You had to see him, right. You can’t cut away because you also didn’t have like all the instant replay stuff we have now where if you lost the shot, that you could come back and rerack it and play it again 30 seconds later. So I just vamped and we talked about this. It got a little bit legendary back there because I had a press kit with me and luckily the camera was not on me. It was on the door of the plane. So it was like doing radio. So I just opened the press kit and I said, “Hirohito’s been emperor since blah, blah, 1939,” or whatever it was and blah, blah, blah. “X emperor in the Chrysanthemum throne,” and all this other stuff. And I got back to the station. This was a little different for San Diego because they weren’t used to this kind of stuff, or at least our station wasn’t. They said, “How’d you do that? How’d you know all that stuff?” I said, “I had the press kit.” [laughter] And people have often said, “Never admit how the magic happens. Don’t ever cop to it. When they say it, you just say, ‘Well, I knew.’” But I always kind of felt it was better just to say, “Anybody could do this. Anybody could do this.”

Sure, sure. Now, you actually got the chance to take over the anchor chair during your time, as well. Correct?
Laubscher: I did some weekend fill-in anchoring. I did weekend sports, which was on the set. Like any other station, when you have vacations and you have people moving around. The one thing I really remember, and I was just reminded of it the other day because it was 40 years ago on July 4th, I anchored the bicentennial show.

Holmes: Oh, wow.

Laubscher: And I can only imagine doing that because everybody else was on vacation. If you look at any of the network newscasts, the morning shows or anything like that around this time of year, especially around the Fourth of July, there’s nobody you recognize in the chairs unless you’re a real fanatic of the network because the networks—

Holmes: You’re off doing other things.

Laubscher: —use it as an opportunity to test non-anchor people and see if they have some kind of pizzazz or spark. The biggest shortcoming, I think, I had in my broadcast career was I was very dismissive of my own on-camera persona. I didn’t pay enough attention to refining it because I was full of pomposity in the sense of—or maybe that’s not the right word. Maybe it was the Columbia thing, maybe it was something else. But it’s like, “I’m here to do the news. I’m not here to look good.”

Holmes: Or be a personality.

Laubscher: Or be smooth or be a personality. I mean, I was very passionate about my delivery and I tried to be as clear as I could in my writing. But I wanted the story to tell itself. I didn’t want to kind of get in the way. But the conventions of television news then, and now, require personality stuff. And now it’s more participative than ever. We called them stand-ups because that’s what you did. Typically at the end of the piece, but sometimes you could do it in the beginning and sometimes you could do it in the middle depending on how the flow went. You were the authoritative person on the air, looking into the camera at the end of the piece, wrapping it up, putting a bow on it, and finishing the piece from the field. I was never very comfortable with that. I’m probably much shyer than most people think I am and I was never very good at making eye contact with people. Now I had to look into this piece of glass and pretend it was somebody’s eyes and I wasn’t used to looking into people’s eyes. So I would have benefited a lot from rigorous coaching, training, the kind of stuff they put reporters through as a matter of course today, and the
thing a lot of young reporters do now on their own and pay for out of their own pocket to try to improve their stuff. But I wanted to be a journalist, not a personality.

And your talents as a journalist were recognized in San Diego when you were there. I believe, what is it, two Golden Mic awards?

Yeah, I won a couple Golden Mics. I can’t remember what for. One of them was a live shot, oddly enough. Yeah, I won a live shot for Carter, for the Carter piece. They’re down in the basement somewhere. And I can’t remember what the other one was for but it was a wonderful two years. A lot of great memories and there were a lot of great stories that actually got done during that period. I learned some other things that were very important to me. Because I had a political bent I ended up doing a lot of political reporting. And the mayor of San Diego at the time was Pete Wilson.

Pete Wilson, yes.

I had no idea. In San Francisco things weren’t very efficient, things took forever to happen. And in the limited amount of political reporting I’d done at KFSO, it was kind of a sclerotic bureaucracy and I kind of thought that’s the way government always was. San Diego was much leaner, much more efficient. It was a smaller town, to be fair, but it also had a more nimble government. Pete’s press secretary, Larry Thomas, went on to become one of my very best friends and actually got me my job at Bechtel later. It was very broadening to me to spend a couple of years in a different American city, even if it’s also in California. It was certainly a Republican city then, as much as San Francisco was a Democratic city then and now. So it was a different way of looking at things and I really enjoyed that.

I did want to ask you before we transition to your move back to San Francisco, about covering Pete Wilson. He was in the assembly before and then of course he would later become governor after his mayorship there in San Diego. What were some of the issues or something that really struck you and resonated with you in covering some of Wilson’s mayorship?

I would like to be able to enumerate some stuff specifically, Todd, but that’s a little difficult, because it wasn’t that there weren’t problems. There were racial problems. Southeast San Diego was African American and there were real concerns about unfairness and prejudice—
Holmes: Civil right concerns, yeah.

Laubscher: Yes, civil rights violations and the cops. Not much different than here now, not much different than today. Obviously there had always been a substantial Hispanic population and they were becoming much more active. The part that fascinated me was handling the growth. See, the Bay Area is different. The Bay Area has I don’t know how many cities, dozens and dozens of incorporated cities, each of which is responsible for its own fate. The greater Bay Area is nine counties, the core Bay Area is six. And so you’ve got all these overlays and all this complication just in this area. San Diego, the city kept annexing land and kept getting bigger and bigger and they had a very methodical build-out program. Even the freeways, it’s as though—and I seem to remember this was true, that I actually researched it—that CalTrans had kind of fallen behind in Los Angeles and to a lesser extent in the Bay Area. In other words, growth took place faster than they could build the freeways, caused all this congestion. So in San Diego there were these freeways being built all over the area.

Holmes: It’s like a maze.

Laubscher: And I am transportation guy. I love freeways. I’ll cop to it. These were beautiful brand new freeways. I-5, I-805, Highway 94, all these freeways. And these other freeways were being built and there was all this open land around them. But there were plans and you would watch these developments march up the corridors and it was astonishing to me because it all seemed so orderly. It was all so new compared to the Bay Area. That’s the part about San Diego that impressed me the most. And the fact that it was a very laidback kind of relaxed place. Even though we have some nice beaches here in northern California, we don’t have beach culture like they have in Southern California.

Holmes: No.

Laubscher: It’s not warm enough. Or at least it wasn’t. Probably is now. As somebody who’s always been kind of tightly wound myself, that was a very different environment, different place to be. It was very laidback. Always has been.

Holmes: Well, actually, before we move on again, I did want to ask—

Laubscher: About—
Those who knew Pete Wilson before he became mayor state that he was a very renowned and very highly respected moderate Republican.

Yes, until Proposition 187.

And then when he was mayor, particularly those who were active in the Coastal Commission during that time, which was forming—they say that Pete Wilson really began to develop relationships with those very development interests that later then would play a role during his governorship. Did you have any recollection or opinion on that?

No, I don’t. I really don’t recall. I can understand, looking back from today—this is not something I covered as a reporter, or at least can remember covering. I’m sure I did cover some fights over this development or that development. But basically San Diego was not, in those days, an anti-development city.

Certainly there were environmental people. But you got to remember that if you look at San Diego, the Navy controlled most of the coastline from almost the border, certainly the whole Coronado strip and the area around Point Loma. So that was all kind of off limits anyway. The airport was on the water. A lot of the land around what’s now Sea World and stuff like that was all tidal and had been filled. And that was made land. It wasn’t like you were dealing with pristine beaches. The beaches themselves, Mission Beach, Pacific Beach, Ocean Beach, that whole string of beaches, had all been fully developed for years and they were very much like—well, Manhattan Beach would probably make them too nice. But they were like Venice Beach and that kind of whole strip of LA. Like Redondo Beach. And so for people in Southern California, I don’t think the Coastal Commission and the developers, it was that much of a fight back then. But I could be really wrong on that.

Well, surely it’s much different when you have the space. The opposition to growth was not like what was beginning to develop surely in San Francisco during this same time.

Well, certainly if you look at the battle for the Marin County coast and the San Mateo County coast, which are triumphs of environmental activism and something that generations for a thousand years should be grateful for, you
just didn’t have that, let’s say, for Malibu South because it was all developed. It was in private hands. Right up to the edge of the sand was all private property and always had been. It had been chopped up a long time before. I thought Pete Wilson as mayor kept a very moderate hand. Yes, encouraged growth. But, remember, there was a tremendous demand for growth and it was believed—

Holmes: And they had the space, as well.

Laubscher: And they had the space. Most of the growth took place in areas that were not appreciated for their natural beauty. These canyons were all dun colored scrub brush. It’s not like the hills of Marin County or the Santa Cruz mountains, the ridge, the peninsula, and stuff like that. As one who grew up in that kind of environment and really felt that to be tremendously beautiful, I mean, I’m a real Northern Californian, I got down there, I looked at these canyons, I said, “What? What’s up with this?” There’s no vegetation or what it was was scrub.

Holmes: It’s desert.

Laubscher: Well, it is. Because that’s what it was. And I’ve grown to find the desert to be every bit as beautiful and appreciate it much more now as I’ve gotten more acquainted with it. It’s not a mistake that in San Diego a lot of places are called “Such and such mesa” because that’s what they are. The topography of San Diego kind of lends itself to these expansive flat areas with canyons intertwined. That just made it that much easier to develop. And that’s what they did. You can’t increase population without building more housing and in those days the fight was for more jobs. San Diego had a lot of defense contracting then and a lot of Navy related stuff, and they were going to do everything they can to capitalize on it. Even then there was significant pushback against housing and expansion in Northern California, in the Bay Area. So it had to go somewhere unless you’re going to shut the door altogether. I think, by the way, that the way San Diego did it, if you go look at San Diego now versus Los Angeles and how Los Angeles expanded in the same time frame, I’d pick San Diego any day.

Holmes: That’s a good point. Well, you were able then to return back to San Francisco?

Laubscher: Yeah.

Holmes: Why don’t you talk a little bit about that, at KRON?
Just a brief personal note. I had started dating a woman who ironically had sort of filled my reporting slot at Channel 10 and had left, and they moved a part-time person into that slot. She had gone to work for the chairman of the county board of supervisors, a guy named Jack Walsh. Her name is Judith Woodard. We were seriously involved by, I guess, certainly the middle of 1976. So it’s 1977 now, spring, and I guess I was too pliant and too affable. I never went to the news director and said, “It’s time to put me on permanent staff.” A lot of reporters would have what was called personal services contracts, where you would make a slight amount extra. It wasn’t a big bump but you would make a certain amount over the union scale, the minimum. And if you had a personal services contract you had a little bit more job security. You got a contract for a year, unless you had serious malfeasance they wouldn’t fire you, you knew you’d be there for a year or as long as the contract ran. I was still technically week-to-week. It wasn’t where they would come in at the end of every week and said, “Okay, you can come back next week.” But they had never formalized that, never offered me a contract or anything like that. I was probably too pliant about this great gig. I’m enjoying it. And I also kind of had this thought of maybe I don’t want to be tied down. What happens if something better comes back? I was thinking about San Francisco.

And I was monitoring San Francisco. At the time, San Francisco, and this was mid-1970s, the dominant station was KPIX and News 5, the CBS station. Channel 7, KGO, was right there with it or maybe had already pulled ahead of it. I sort of forgot. Later, Channel 7 certainly was the dominant station in the city. I guess it had probably already pulled past Channel 5. And then there was KRON, Channel 4, the NBC station, which was owned by the same family that owned the Chronicle and was very stodgy, very dull, and way back in the ratings. Channel 2 was doing their 10:00 news then, if I remember correctly, but they didn’t have an early program to compete, so they were kind of a parallel operation. I wanted to get to San Francisco but I didn’t have contacts then. And, frankly, I was enjoying what I was doing. I had a girlfriend. We were seriously considering getting married, which we did, and I thought, “Well, life is good.”

I can’t remember whether I called. I guess what I heard was that there had been some big shakeup at Channel 4 and the news director had been bounced. They were going to turn the place over. So I called a friend of mine. I found out that a friend of mine who had been a sales guy at KSFO had moved over to KRON in sales and was the sales manager or something like that. He wasn’t the station GM by any means. But I called him up and I said, “Jim, do you have any insight in to what’s going on there? Who would I talk to if I wanted to try to get a job there?” He said, “You talk to me because in the interim I’m overseeing the news department—”
Holmes: Wow, that’s helpful!

Laubscher: Yeah, and very odd to have a sales guy doing it. But Jim was a very smart guy and well-balanced and all that stuff. So he said, “Are you really interested in coming up here?” I said, “You bet.” I mean, it was home. And so he said, “Great. I want you to meet with our consultant, a guy named Mitch Farris. Can you come up and meet with Mitch?” And I said, “Okay.” So I came up and this guy worked for Magid, the big consulting company, the news consulting company. He actually knew my work in San Diego because his job is to know everybody’s work. Next thing I know I’ve got a job. And this fellow Mitch Farris is the new news director.

Now, Mitch was a wild man. He had a machete in his office and he one time actually cut a phone receiver in half with a mighty swing of this thing. I can’t remember whether he was enraged or amused or something. But he was one of these guys, and this was not good for me, believe me, who just acted out. It was like a movie. It is true that the stresses in TV newsrooms or any newsroom on deadline can be enormous. The pressures are huge and people will try to release those pressures in different ways. Not all of those ways are healthy or beneficial to your mental health in general. He brought in a bunch of new people, completely revamped the place.

So I had to ask Judith. We were not married at the time but we were living together. I said, “What do you think about going to San Francisco?” And she said, “I’d love it. Let’s go.” She knew I wanted to go home. She had grown up in Newhall, which then was a bucolic northern outpost just north of the San Fernando Valley, and by this time it had been totally suburbanized. Her mother still lived there but she didn’t feel like that was home. She had had a very interesting time in San Diego but she didn’t feel like that was home. She had had a very interesting time in San Diego but she’d also had some tragedy. I don’t think she was actually engaged to Jim, but she was dating this fellow who was this rising young politician and they were very serious. This was just before I got to San Diego. He was killed in a motorcycle accident at the age of 28 or something like that. It was tremendously traumatic for her. She had had a couple of other bad experiences. And I think even though she was very well liked, and again, had been a TV reporter, she was ready to move.

So we moved up to San Francisco and I started at KRON. And it was very interesting because it was almost immediately apparent that we had two camps of reporters. We had the old guard, and I don’t mean this in any negative way whatsoever, but they were the veterans and they had been there for a long time and they did things the way KRON had done them, which was very bland, almost colorless. There was not much pizzazz and the story selection was pretty prosaic. But there were some awfully good journalists and people in that group. One of them, Melba Beals, had been one of the Little
Rock Nine. The first kids to be escorted in to Central High School. And she was a pioneering African American journalist. But she was also heavy in build and that was—and still is—a cause of discrimination in TV news. So she got marginalized. It did not work well as far as the new news director was concerned. He was a Magid guy and it was all these things that they wanted to do. They were going to pizzazz it up.

He brought in an anchorman, a Texan, who became a good friend, and I still have great admiration for, John Hambrick. He had anchored in several other—he had two brothers who were also anchormen. I don’t know of anybody else who had three in the family. He had a very distinctive style. He would lean into the desk and he was very—big, heavy, dark eyebrows, dark hair, square jaw. This guy looked like the quintessential Texan and he still had a little bit of the drawl. He was absolutely compelling in person. There is something about on-camera presence. I don’t know what it is. But if you’re discerning in your evaluation of talent, some people have it and some people don’t.
these blazes, which were the most God awful thing I’d ever seen. Not because they were inherently bad but because the station never paid to replace them. Nobody in their right mind would wear it except at work, which meant it never got cleaned. So it looked fine on camera but if you’d run into the reporters from Channel 7 in the field it was kind of like “ugh.”

Holmes: Is that like the ABC sports blazers they used to wear?

Laubscher: Yeah, exactly. They had a little 7. They still use it. It’s a famous logo. It’s the circle with the 7 inside and the blazer was blue. There was nothing wrong with it but I kind of thought, “Wearing a uniform. Ew.” I had never had to do that. And I think I had some inflated notion of individuality and I’m not some cookie cutter guy. As sort of part of this, I think I got affected. I don’t know if this had anything to do with having been so impressed with Charles Collingwood in the CBS news bureau but I started dressing up for work and I dressed up in ways that no other field reporter that I knew of in the city ever did. I didn’t think about it except that, well, they’re not dressed. They’re sloppy, even if they weren’t. But I would wear three-piece suits in the ’70s to do field reporting, which seems ludicrous to me now. I don’t know why I did it, except it seemed this is an important job and I’m an important guy. I’m interviewing important people and so I should look the part. It’s all pretty silly now.

Holmes: But I wanted to ask you about some of the topics. As an on-air lead reporter covering politics and urban affairs, there was a lot to cover here in San Francisco. This was the time where we think about the Zodiac killer, the zebra murders, Patty Hearst, Jim Jones.

Laubscher: Yeah. Those all happened before I got back. Not Jim Jones but the others—Zebra, Zodiac. I’d have to go back and look at the years. But, yeah, that was very much in everybody’s mind. This was a crazy place. You go back to ’67, the Summer of Love, and ever since then you have this kind of continuum of weird things.

Holmes: I wanted to get to some of the issues that stand out in your mind which you covered during this time. This is your city, this is your home. When you returned to San Francisco during this time in the 1970s, what was your impression, particularly as one who used to marvel at the city from behind the meat counter at your family’s deli, to even visiting during the 1960s. Now you are returning from laid back San Diego to the City by the Bay.
Laubscher: I was back in the city. I wasn’t in a beach town anymore. No disrespect to San Diego, but at the time it was something like the 22nd market, 25th market in size in television. San Francisco was 5th or 6th, somewhere in there. And it was a big deal and I felt like even though our station trailed badly in the ratings we had momentum and we had the owners of the Chronicle behind us and if they’re really willing to spend money on this, my gosh, we could climb right up there. They did make a commitment. “To Hell with Happy Talk” was not just a slogan. It was a very pleasant surprise to see Mitch Farris. Magid was all about creating ratings. That’s what they did as a consulting, as the premiere news consulting company. They encouraged happy talk. They formalized things that had been done in other places. I’m going to flash back really quickly to San Diego. One thing I did that was a little bit groundbreaking at the time—you have ratings sweeps twice a year. And when you have sweeps, sweeps month, every station will load its news shows with promotable special reports, at least back then. You don’t want to miss this. We’re going to have hard hitting or very interesting special reports on this, that, or the other. And they would promote them. And in San Diego, by the way, I should mention that I regularly appeared in full page TV Guide ads when TV Guide mattered because I had sort of become one of the two lead field reporters on a staff of maybe ten field reporters.

Holmes: Is that how they recognized you at the grocery store?

Laubscher: Well, that and being on TV. And so anyway, I learned very quickly that if you didn’t enterprise a series you were going to get stuck with whatever they told you to do. And assignment desks loved enterprising reporters because it was one less thing they had to think about. There were always reporters on any stuff who would kind of come in and say, “What do you want me to do today?” and then they would hand out this press conference or that press conference. They weren’t really good stories but they might have to be covered. And so it was sort of a self-selection process. I can’t remember which one I did first and which one I did second, but the Mexican government had completed the highway that ran all the way down the Baja Peninsula, which, believe it or not, was not continuous. So I hooked up with a Spanish-speaking cameraman at the station and we drove the whole thing and it was all on film. So no live shots and no tape. But we did like a five-part series on it. I loved that. That was like Charles Kuralt. That was like being on the road. That’s what those pieces were like. I love that kind of piece. And it went over very well, too. I got to do some more softer stuff. People tended to see me, maybe because of the way I acted and talked about politics and my interest in current affairs and things like that, they sort of saw me as the hard news guy. But I actually really preferred to do the softer stuff, at least some of it. I wanted actually to do it all. If you were to tell me, for example, “Well,
you can either be on the election set every election night and have a key role in extemporizing about what’s going on or you can do soft features but you can’t do both,” I would have taken the hard news. This is pertinent because it came up again at KRON.

But the other thing I did in San Diego was I said, “Let’s do five pieces on restaurants in San Diego. Let’s talk about the evolution of dining here. It’ll be like restaurant reviews.” This was great because I was on the night shift anyway at that time. And you would be stuck doing all kinds of arcane stuff if you didn’t come up with something you could do. So we did, I think, five pieces with two restaurants each or three. I don’t remember what it was. And they told me, “Nobody’s going to watch that. That’s going to be silly. Why do people want to watch that?” I said, “Because they eat out.” And it was kind of like, “Huh?” That was a five-part series and it was just before I left. And they handed that over to this wonderful anchorman, Jack White, to do after that. I was not a savage reviewer because I grew up in a delicatessen family and I was not going to savage some family’s business. Even if the food wasn’t very good I would finesse that. But I wouldn’t lie about it either. So if I had a really bad meal I just wouldn’t do those people. But we did all the old-school places, the revered places, and then some of the new places, the new cuisines. This ended up being a huge thing for the station and Jack for years to come because they had done it first. The irony was they didn’t want to do it. And then this thing spread all over the country because the consultants picked it up and said, “Hey, this works.”

Holmes: And you still see it today.

Laubscher: And I take some pride in that. But now it’s mostly co-ops with the restaurant and you’re not going to say anything bad, and that’s another whole deal. So I’m sorry. I digressed. But this came up at KRON because I wanted to do more soft stuff and feature stuff and they did not. Mitch, who was a consultant in his past life, said he really wanted me to kick ass and take names. “You’re our political guy. We want you to really hit these people hard.” I still managed to do some features, but I learned. And it was not a good experience for me. There is no such thing as a renaissance person in television. You are slotted. You do this, you do this, you do this, but you don’t do this. Because they’re convinced that viewers get confused if someone tries to present too many personas, too many faces. I still think this is silly but I think it’s become even more the case now than it was. And that kind of gets us up to—

Holmes: There was a lot of hard politics and a lot of serious things to be covering in San Francisco.
There was a lot of hard news. I did a lot of transportation stuff because that was my passion. And some pretty incisive stuff, too. I really whaled on Muni a few times for very bad operations, very bad management, credible delays in getting this Market Street subway open years after BART was running and the physical subway was finished. Muni couldn’t even decide what kind of streetcars they wanted to put in it and I was poking them. One of my very best friends today, Anne Halsted, who I think you may have talked to. Ann met me when I was a reporter at Channel 4 and I went in and did a piece on Pier 39 and the controversy, the people who lived up on Telegraph Hill, including Anne, who looked down on this derelict pier and didn’t want it to become what it became. I guess she felt that I was too negative about so-called preservation. My response would be preservation of what? The pier was falling down. There was no maritime industry anymore. I had become very skeptical of the inability of the city to move forward. The Longshoreman’s Union, led by Harry Bridges, had fought mechanization to a standstill for years, and did not want the traditional way of loading and unloading ships to change. And San Francisco was not very well situated for containerized cargo anyway because you need a huge space, landside space to be able to warehouse and do all this stuff and we didn’t have that.

Especially in comparison to Oakland.

But Oakland didn’t have a deep enough port. Once they dredged, it was game over. Now, you can go back and say, and I do say, that this should have happened anyway because if you’re going to transfer stuff onto trucks or railroad cars from the port, it’s much smarter to do it in Oakland than it is in San Francisco, because in San Francisco the only place you can take it is down the Peninsula. But this long battle had turned our port sclerotic. This was about the time they were making the series The Streets of San Francisco with Karl Malden and Michael Douglas, which is still a wonderful thing to watch just for the outside shots. But when you see them, you would reach the conclusion that 90 percent of the crime in San Francisco took place on the waterfront because that’s where they were always finding dead bodies and doing stuff like that. The reality was that the port was derelict and the best way the port could make money was to rent it out for television.

That’s a good lead in to having you talk a little bit, before we end, on the violence that you covered as a journalist. As you were saying, San Francisco was seen at this time to be a crazy city. This became really the backdrop for, say, Clint Eastwood’s movies, Dirty Harry. And a lot of the tragedies happened before you got there. But could you tell me a little bit about your perception of the violence and the changing of the city by the time you came back.
Laubscher: I don’t recall ever being personally fearful in San Francisco but I know that crime was certainly on the rise. We’re sitting now in a far corner of the city, a little place called Little Hollywood, which is next to Visitacion Valley. Some people say it’s part of Visitacion Valley. And this part of town, when I bought this house three years ago, there were bars on every window. They were remnants of an earlier time. It was a single woman I bought the house from and she was afraid to be in this house without metal bars over every window. Before I bought the house I did all my homework and realized that one mile from here was the old Geneva Towers development, which was public housing, was extremely unsafe. There’s still housing down there in the Sunnydale area which is about a mile and a half from here that’s not particularly—you wouldn’t want to walk around there at night. But those areas were spreading outward in those days. Now they’re compressing in. And if you go down this street very few houses have iron bars on them. About twenty years ago they all would have. And those that still have them are just remnants because nobody’s gotten around to taking them down.

The city had changed. You had gone from a heavily Catholic city, Irish and Italian, with large families in the 1940s and early 1950s and you had replaced that. A lot of those people had migrated to the suburbs. You could get more house for your money. You got a modern house instead of something with antiquated plumbing and things like that, and a real backyard. All these kind of things that was what the suburban diaspora was about all over the country in the 1950s. And who moved in? Latinos moved into the Mission and they didn’t all speak fluent English. Who are these people and where are they from? When people now talk about we’ve got to retain the Mission’s Latino heritage, well, I think that’s a very valid and laudable goal but—

Holmes: That heritage is very young.

Laubscher: —it’s a very new heritage. The Mission was Irish for a very long time.

Holmes: You also had the changing demographics because of the wave of in-migration throughout the 1960s, particularly to the Haight district.

Laubscher: Well, you had people sort of pursuing alternative lifestyles. People who felt that they didn’t want to be hassled for using drugs and a criminal element came with that, especially hard drugs. I’m not talking about grass. You had an LGBT incursion into the Castro particularly, famously represented by Harvey Milk. And that had happened late ’60s. A lot of it came out of the many, many different kinds of people who came through here in World War II and said, “This is kind of a cool town. You get out. Why would I stay in wherever,
Paduca? I can go to San Francisco.” So it was a very heterogeneous city all of a sudden, where it had been very homogeneous before that. And that is what led to the election of George Moscone and the great divide that created the greatest political tragedy in San Francisco history. There’s a tease.

02-02:03:28
Holmes: That’s a good place to stop.

02-02:03:31
Meeker: All right.

[End of Audio File 2]
All right. Well, this is Todd Holmes with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. I’m sitting down once again with Rick Laubscher at his beautiful home in the great city of San Francisco. Today is August 9, 2016. Rick, thanks a lot for sitting down once again for this third session in your oral history. I’d like to pick up where we left off. In our last session we discussed your entrance into a journalism career, your pioneering role of live television reporting in San Diego. And for that you won two Golden Mic awards for your reporting there. But you also had a unique opportunity to interview high-profile political figures, especially Ronald Reagan. I think that would be your second. You told us about the first one when you were there at UC Santa Cruz. But you got to sit down with Ronald Reagan once again there in San Diego.

Yes. I was the night beat reporter, which meant just scouring the city for whatever possible news existed in San Diego between 6:00 and 11:00. And in those days, frankly, it was a pretty quiet town. So one night I got a call from the assignment desk saying, “Hey, the fellow who does the weekend public affairs show that we tape tonight got sick and can you come in and host that show?” I didn’t even know what the show was but I asked who the guest was and they said Ronald Reagan. This was 1976 and Ronald Reagan was running against Gerald Ford for the Republican nomination, so he was out on the campaign trail. I got there and was completely unprepared because I didn’t think I was going to do this. And no one had prepared any questions because we didn’t have a staff, so it was going to be a half-hour of ad-libbing. And I thought, “Well, maybe I can get him into a positive mood or get some rapport going by telling him that I had once interviewed him.”

So when he came in and sat down, before we started rolling the cameras, he had a mic on but it wasn’t live. I introduced myself and I said, “Governor Reagan, I once interviewed you when I was in college. In fact, it was the first interview I ever did at UC Santa Cruz. I’m sure you don’t remember it.” And he said, “Well, I don’t really remember it. But I do remember my visit to your campus.” Then he just kind of glides into a story which, in retrospect, may or may not have ever occurred, may or may not have taken place in Santa Cruz. But it was the kind of thing that could have happened in that war protest era. He said, “Yeah, it was a beautiful campus and I was walking along through the trees and this young woman, very angry looking, looked like my daughter but much angrier, and she walked up to me.” And as he’s saying this his hand just slides over the microphone, even though it was not live. Just very subtle. And he said, “And this young woman who’s very angry comes up to me and she says, ‘Governor Reagan, fuck you. Fuck you. Fuck you.’ And I was taken aback and I said to her, ‘Young lady, you may think you’re being
very smart right now, but in the time to come you’ll be very ashamed you just said that.’ And, you know, she got reflective, looked straight up at me and said, ‘Fuck you.’”

You have to understand that in the mid-1970s especially, it was absolute gospel that you never, ever swore in a television studio or a newsroom. Every mic was assumed to be open. Everything you said supposedly off the record you should assume might go on the record. But he was unafraid. And, yes, he protected it because he knew there would not be an audible recording of this. Today one of the guys on the floor would have a cellphone going and it would have been up on Twitter, the web within an hour and it would have probably made a huge difference in his career. But those were different times. And what he succeeded in doing, and he knew perfectly well what he was doing, was he disarmed me. I was a young man and I always tried to be very objective as a reporter. Now, my politics were not Ronald Reagan’s politics, but I always tried to play political coverage straight down the middle. And I recognized that Ronald Reagan had been a very popular two-term governor of California, even though he was not good to the UC system. I was just amazed. That was my exposure; I don’t think I’ve ever seen a better one, to somebody who just captured it. Bill Clinton was the closest I came to somebody who, in terms of a politician, was just charismatic, put you at ease. It was easy to understand, after seeing that, how, when he became president, he could sit down with Tip O’Neill and have some whiskey and get all Irish with each other. And, of course, Reagan’s reputation in Hollywood was as a great storyteller, raconteur. So that was kind of an initiation to me in what made politicians special. We’ll come back to that when we get to San Francisco. That was in 1976 and then in the next year, I think I mentioned in the last interview, I got an offer to come to my hometown.

Holmes: Come back home.

Laubscher: At KRON, Channel 4, which was the NBC affiliate then, and I did.

Holmes: Yeah. I wanted to head that way in our discussion. In our last session we did speak a bit about your return to San Francisco. You gave up other opportunities, potential opportunities back east, to do that. And I wanted to have you reflect a little bit again on coming back to your hometown. You’re a fourth-generation San Franciscan. You spent most of your life, large segments of your childhood and even young adult years, here in San Francisco, seeing the city grow up and go by when you were at your family’s delicatessen to even visiting again during your college years and young adult years. By 1977 San Francisco was in a very turbulent transition. We see this socially, politically, and even somewhat culturally. Can you tell me what were your
Laubscher: Well, San Francisco, something seemed the same on the surface but they were very different underneath. The city had elected an Italian Catholic mayor. It was hardly a surprise for San Francisco. Irish and Italian Catholics had played very large roles, many would say even dominated the San Francisco political scene for a long time. And George Moscone was certainly in that San Franciscan mode except his politics were not really the same. While San Francisco has always been a very pro-union and, well, progressive city, anybody who was a person of color in this city at the time would tell you that did not apply to anybody but white people. The prejudice certainly wasn’t what it was in the South. It wasn’t de jure but there was a lot of de facto prejudice. And, of course, Willie Brown made his name in San Francisco by fighting the prejudice that existed. Because of his exceptional brilliance and his ability to infiltrate different segments of San Francisco society and politics, he remains one of a kind in that way. George was really a legislator. He was a state senator and looking out for the interests of San Francisco. He was a ladies man in a way that does not necessarily imply infidelity but women found him totally captivating and charming. He was a great looking guy. He was one of those guys that you wanted to go out and have a beer with, which is good because sanctimoniousness never works in San Francisco. And this was important because the city was moving left politically and the city was trying to address a lot of these racial and other wrongs that had been done. George [Moscone] was pulling the city in a direction that many people did not want to go. If I remember the election correctly it was a watershed election because he beat a realtor from West Portal named John Barbagelata, another Italian, who was very, very conservative. And it was a very close election if I remember it correctly.

Holmes: Sure, in 1975?

Laubscher: Yes. So there was a real sea change going on. And some of this, as we learned later, was happening because of people who organized and turned out the votes. One of these groups was the People’s Temple, where this white preacher from Oklahoma, I believe, somewhere down in that section of the country, Jim Jones, had managed to assemble an almost exclusively black congregation in the Western Addition and was holding sway over them and was turning them out to vote and was getting to work on things. George appointed him to the housing commission, I think it was, and he gave him a city commissioner’s job. That was a little different because the clergy in San Francisco that mattered was the Catholic clergy. It was the archbishop. Their involvement in politics was just to kind of keep the existing status quo but
they didn’t really have to work too hard on that because of the way the city was governed and the general feelings in the city and populace at the time. So you saw a completely different group arise at Glide Memorial under Cecil Williams, the young Cecil Williams, that was much more integrated, I guess, a much broader constituency and not as involved in politics. More involved in social issues. Certainly they were involved in social justice. But my memory, frankly, is not good enough to pinpoint exactly where Glide’s power was at that point in time in the 1970s. So that was the environment.

The big change that came to the city came in the fall of 1977 with district elections for supervisors. The city had always elected supervisors-at-large. That tended to put a lid on diversity. But once the districts were drawn, all of a sudden you had an African American supervisor who represented African American people. You had a gay supervisor who represented gay people. And you had this whole sea change in the way the city was governed. The way we pass laws was different and the interests that were represented were different. Yes, it was by affinity group or race but it was also economic group. It was also by geography. And that continues till today. This was the San Francisco I arrived at in June of 1977. I know the elections for district supervisor were in November, so I would imagine the enabling legislation was passed in June but I don’t remember.

But at any rate, certainly shortly after I got here it was passed. And when I got to KRON, as I say, it was the NBC affiliate then, it was powerful. The signal was powerful and it had the network programming. The news department was third of three network stations. I don’t remember whether it was ahead or behind of Channel 2 in numbers but they were only doing a 10:00 show then so there was no direct comparison. But it was not a primary news operation. It was owned by the Theriot family, part of the de Young family that also owned the Chronicle. It was part of the same company, family-owned company. And I never saw one whit of newsroom interference or anything involving the Chronicle while I was there. They really did, as far as I could tell, operate completely independently of each other. But I think because it was tied to a newspaper it was a little more conservative. Not conservative politically but conservative in the way they did the news. They were slow to go to flashy anchors and beautiful weather women, the kinds of things that the other stations were already doing. Channel 7 owned the market at the time. The anchor there was Van Amburg. They did crazy promotions. They dressed up in western clothes. It was the news sheriffs or the news marshals or some silly thing like that. And I, of course, being a sanctimonious young Columbia grad just thought this was ridiculous, and how happy I was that I did not have to wear some blazer with a little 7 on it. When I look back this is all so trivial.

Holmes: Well, you wore three-piece suits, didn’t you?
Laubscher: I did and it was really strange. One of my indoctrinations to San Francisco very early on, must have happen the first couple weeks I was there. There was a state senator named John Briggs, ridiculously conservative from Orange County, and he had a ballot measure on the June ballot, I think it was the June ballot, that would outlaw gay teachers or something like that.

Holmes: Yeah, that was Proposition 6.

Laubscher: Boy, very good. He had a news conference on the steps of city hall and I went and covered it, and there was a fellow from, I didn’t know, who walked up to me and introduced himself after the news conference. His name was Randy Shilts and he was with the Chronicle. He said, “Tell me something. When is KRON going to get a gay reporter?” And I couldn’t resist. I just looked at him and I said, “How do you know we don’t have one?” And he looked back at me and he said, “Oh, no, I mean openly gay.” You know that was funny to me.

San Diego was not at the level of dialogue that San Francisco was about gay rights and things like that at that time. I thought about a smart-ass answer but I didn’t because I was kind of trying to digest what all that meant. Of course, I was new in town and I hadn’t been in town, between my trip abroad and college and graduate school, I hadn’t really paid much attention to San Francisco in terms of politics for seven, eight years. And I thought, “Wow, this is different.” It was really fascinating to me. As it turned out, I mentioned that I was married, my wife had come up here, she had been working for the chief of staff of the San Diego County Board of Supervisors. [Her] name was Judith Woodard. She was at Channel 10 before I was in San Diego. So she was a trained reporter and she had actually covered George Moscone in Sacramento and knew George pretty well.

As soon as I got to KRON, I was in the middle of a housecleaning in the news department. I may have mentioned a little bit of this last time. I was brought in; several other people were brought in. We brought in a new anchorman named John Hambrick from Texas who was very charismatic and installed him. Brought in a very beautiful young woman to do the weather, Kristine Hanson out of Sacramento. And brought in a guy named Barry Tompkins, who’s still going strong in the Bay Area as a sports guy to do sports. Barry was a very cerebral guy, not like a lot of these other sports guys. It was a very interesting anchor line-up. And riding herd over all these people was this crazy man named Mitch Farris, who had been KRON’s consultant with Frank Magid, the big news coaching management operation out of Iowa. Mitch was determined to shake things up. So we were all told to be aggressive, go out and get stories. He didn’t want to see the same things he was seeing on the other stations, which was great. We could enterprise, we could do different things.
So we slowly but surely started sharpening up the newscast. Fewer news conferences, more packages, as you call them, involvement by reporters. This was uncomfortable for some of the reporters who had been there before. And the other thing we did was we started going live. Whereas in San Diego we were the first station to be live, in San Francisco KRON was the last. The fact that I had done it and nobody had done it at KRON because they couldn’t do it meant that I ended up doing a lot of live shots. Some of the people who were solid reporters just didn’t have the ability to extemporize and so they would have a real problem doing live shots and they ended up kind of getting put on the back burner. It caused some friction in the thing.

The other thing that happened at KRON was the news writers, who were not on the air, were unionized. There were several of them. We were all AFTRA, American Federation of Television and Radio Artists members. It was a closed shop, so we had to be. Mitch had decided that most of these writers couldn’t write, but they had protected jobs. I have to say, I agreed with him, at least in one or two cases. The way that you would do things then is that you’d do your so-called package, you’d write your own story, record it, get it done, but the news writers would write the lead-in. I didn’t like anybody else writing my lead-in because sometimes it would say the same thing the first line of the story said, which you’re never supposed to do. It didn’t set it up right. What you want to do is you want a cohesive situation where your anchor is not redundant, says something very important about the story, and then you pick the story up. In other words you’re sort of sharing the story but the way the labor had been divided was the reporters packages were pretty much standalone and you could just string them all together. You really wouldn’t need the anchor at all. And that wasn’t the way that this system was supposed to work. John was supposed to be the knowledgeable—and we were doing more serious news.

Shortly after I got there, once we got the machine rolling a little bit and we had the content kind of where we wanted it, they started taking their first major ad campaign in a long time. Billboards, bus signs, things like that, and with quotes over John’s name usually. The biggest one, the one that ran the most, was “To Hell With Happy Talk.” The whole idea there was it was counterprogramming against yuck, yuck, yuck, Channel 7; yuck, yuck, yuck, Channel 5, which was a Channel 7 wannabe. We’re going to be different. We’re just giving you the hard stuff, the real news. We hired a fellow named Thayer Walker who was a good investigative reporter and sent him off to try to do some investigations. Kind of a precursor to what NBC Bay Area, Channel 11 down in San Jose, now does. And it shows that there’s nothing new under the sun. It just gets repackaged.

So I would do a couple stories a day. We’re doing better in the ratings. We weren’t going as fast as Mitch wanted us to go, which was always a problem.
And Mitch—rest his soul, he passed away a number of years ago—was a very erratic guy. If things didn’t go well he would get extremely angry, livid, red-faced. And he played favorites in the newsroom. When I think of management styles today I always think of the Giants manager Bruce Bochy, who could teach anyone good management skills: how you deal with people and treat your people; how you recognize your limitations and understand when things happen that are out of their control, and understand how to correct the things that were in their control. Well, Mitch was none of those things. He just yelled and screamed. One famous incident: he kept a machete in his newsroom as kind of a symbol of, “I’m the cutter here,” and somebody did something that he didn’t like, I don’t even remember what it was, and he came screaming out of his office into the newsroom with the machete and swung it at a phone, decapitated the phone. Everybody kind of went like this, you know. In today’s world, they’d probably haul him off. It’d certainly be a firing offense today.

But it was San Francisco in the 1970s, right? [laughter]

I guess you could say that. It was a yeasty environment is what I’m trying to say. And the news business is a business. It’s pretty crazy and I don’t know that people understand, not to excuse anything here, but I don’t think the people understand the amount of stress that gets passed around on deadline and around stories. Abuses were common. Women were objectified. There’s no question about that. They were chosen for their looks. The women who were good reporters but were either overweight or not “attractive” enough would be marginalized. And KRON had, I would argue, better female reporters, better reporters, male and female, in terms of just journalistic skills than the others had. We had an excellent reporter named Melba Beals who was one of the Little Rock Nine. Melba Patillo Beals. And she never talked about it. She could have been a celebrity just for that. But she went about her business and she did it very professionally and very well. But Melba was heavy. She was large, I’ll say it. And this was a time when everybody tells you that television puts on twenty pounds and you’re supposed to be a stick. That did not sit well with them. So there were so many unfair things going on. We know now when we see things like the Roger Ailes action at Fox, and I will just say as an aside, as somebody who’s both a journalist and somebody who’s been an observer of that scene inside the newsroom, I can only imagine all the things that had gone on for so long that forced them to do what they did. And that if Gretchen Carlson and the other brave women hadn’t come forward finally, that this would have just continued as long as he was there. At any rate, so I was there.

The other thing we did at KRON was we set up bureaus. This was the other new thing. Because we had this live capability and they wanted to really show off. So what they did was they created, set up sort of a mini-newsroom, really
a studio in various places. They had one in Contra Costa County, they had one in Oakland, they had one in Santa Clara. Then they added one in San Mateo County and they hired my then-wife Judith to run it. Mitch knew her work, did not know she was married to me. He had kind of lost track of her after she had left town. Remember, his job at Magid was to keep track of all the TV talent. And he said, “Well, bring her in immediately.” So she was down in San Mateo. Then they opened one in Sacramento. And this was real news. I was very proud of this operation because it was more like print journalism. You actually had people in the community. They weren’t just going out there in the van and taking a few shots. That was the theory. It became a little hard to manage because all news is not created equal. It’s really the problem with any beat system.

When you have a container for the news, that is a limited amount of time or space to put it in. This is not operative on the internet where you can take as much space as you want. But when you have an hour and you’ve got to fill it, and you’ve got five bureaus and you do a piece from each of the five bureaus, you subtract the commercial time and everything else, then you don’t have a lot of time for the rest of the news. And so you’d have kind of an unbalanced newscast. It’s an interesting challenge. Other stations, then and now, kind of take it up, except for big news, it doesn’t really matter where it happens, it’s what it is. If a child is abducted and you’re in Contra Costa County and you’re a parent you absolutely care about it if it happened in San Jose or somewhere else. So you don’t have to regionalize or localize the news all that much for big stories. So there’s different philosophies that are going in. But this is what KRON was doing and it was pretty exciting.

So we had bought a house in Noe Valley that was a fixer-upper. I remember we paid $82,000 for it. It was vacated by a white working-class family with kids. And I remember when we went in to look at it; the kids bedroom had a bunch of knife cuts in it. One of the kids spent his time throwing his knives at the plaster walls. Now, that house today is probably worth close to $2.5 million because of where it is.
Well, before we get to that, and just to briefly touch on the revamped news team, the bureaus. In relation to, of course, George Moscone’s very close election in 1977, a lot of historians who have studied this, a lot of journalists who were there reporting, really talked about the shift away from the old politics by embracing the various interest groups, if you wanted to call it that—people of color, the gay community, but also your progressives left over from the 1960s and also going into neighborhood politics. Did this new system at KRON, did it also start looking into more dispatching reporters to various neighborhoods of the city, doing more on the ground reporting?

Not so much directly, no. I think that we saw San Francisco as an entity. I even raised the issue at one point, “Hey, shouldn’t we have a San Francisco bureau because we have all these other bureaus?” Well, of course, in the city-centric culture, “Well, no, we’re a San Francisco station so of course we don’t need to do that. It would be like having a Manhattan bureau in New York.” It’s the center of the universe so why would you have to have a bureau for it? And I don’t mean to be snide there but, I mean, that was just the mindset. I don’t want to get too far into speculation because it’s kind of memory versus guesswork. I mention these because they wanted to be a regional station, fill up the air with relevant content. They wanted more content from other counties. And therefore you were squeezed in the amount you could do around San Francisco.

Just on San Francisco.

And if I’m not mistaken, and I could be mistaken, but I think the newspapers were kind of fiddling around with this at the time, too. I mean, you’ve got to remember that the Oakland Tribune was a very viable newspaper and the Mercury News was a very viable newspaper and the Chronicle, if I remember, was widely circulated because San Francisco was still considered the center of the Bay Area. I don’t think there was as much gravity in San Jose—it was not as secure in its place in the Bay Area firmament. And so everybody kind of deferred to big brother, uncle, whatever you want to call it, San Francisco because that’s where the culture was, that’s where all of those things were. That was certainly a traditional feeling. If you look at the history, San Francisco was a tremendously important regional city, the most important regional city west of Saint Louis at the turn of the twentieth century. So all the hinterlands, Fresno, Chico, all these other places, this was, “Wow, this is The City,” with capital T, capital C. And that was very much the way it was.

Now, this was starting to dilute in the 1970s as the suburbs started to take on their own character. Remember, BART tied all these people together. And BART was built really to funnel workers to San Francisco.
Holmes: Yeah, San Francisco-focused.

Laubscher: But what was happening was, and you’d go to Walnut Creek now, boom, office towers. Businesses realized, hey, we can be close to where our workers want to live, which was not San Francisco. San Francisco at the time demographically, just like these people had moved out, I don’t know where they moved to, but these people who had moved out of the house I bought, that was the continuing diaspora from San Francisco of white working class and middle class people. You weren’t seeing the black diaspora yet. It was to come. And so San Francisco, that’s, I think, a huge reason why it became progressive. You had at that time immigration of gay Americans to San Francisco because they felt freedom here and they were becoming a political force and they elected their own supervisor when we got to district elections. And that’s where the real change took place.

Holmes: I wanted to touch on that. George Moscone’s election in 1975, as you pointed out, surely was a watershed of the different type of coalition he pulled together, the different types of—I mean, it’s almost cliché now but of change, right, that he embodied in that campaign. Two years later, Harvey Milk, the first openly gay supervisor elected through the district elections. And, again, this is also happening in the backdrop of a city that is going through this political and social, even cultural change. A very turbulent change. I think even if we look at Harvey Milk’s, I was looking this up. Yeah, because you brought up Proposition Six by State Senator John Briggs to try to ban gay teachers in California schools. In some ways we have just a backlash simmering beneath.

Laubscher: Think about how quaint that is. I mean, maybe “quaint” is not the right word, but when you said that to me again it just flashed on me. That’s been forty years now, which is a substantial amount of time. Maybe it doesn’t seem like that to me. It’s amazing the changes in attitude. That you could have something where so much blind ignorance and hatred would guide people. And the whole belief that clearly millions of Californians and Americans felt that there was something wrong and that it was something that could “infect”, these are all words in quotes, their children. The homosexual agenda. Remember that phrase. What the hell is that? [laughter] At the time it was really interesting. And I was sort of the de facto political reporter for KRON. So I spent a lot of time at city hall and I got to know all these folks. It was a really interesting mix. You had incumbents on the board and all of a sudden they were forced to run for district seats. Well, for some of them it wasn’t very difficult. Dianne Feinstein, who lived in Pacific Heights, was not going to be defeated in Pacific Heights. Quentin Kopp, who lived, amazingly, and I think still does, on a street called Country Club Drive down by Lake Merced
in one of the newest developments in San Francisco, was not going to have any trouble representing that district. Barbagelata in his district and so on and so on. So some of this sorted out naturally. But you ended up with a woman named Ella Hill Hutch in the western edition who was African American and a community activist in a district that was not represented before. You ended up with, of course, Harvey Milk in, I want to say, district five but that was certainly the district that included the Castro—

03-00:43:10
Holmes: Castro.

03-00:43:10
Laubscher: —and the Haight and Noe Valley, district I lived in. And then in the corner of the city that I’m in now, down in Portola, Excelsior, this whole area, which did not include Hunter’s Point, if I remember correctly. But it did include all these white working class areas and may have even been gerrymandered for that purpose. It was kind of the leftover parts of San Francisco. If you look at maps of San Francisco, including one in my kitchen from the 1920s, they don’t show all of San Francisco. They cut off about what was then known as Army Street, now Cesar Chavez. And everything was down here was ‘there be dragons’. We don’t go down there.

03-00:43:57
Holmes: Hinterlands, yes.

03-00:43:59
Laubscher: Hinterlands, yes. But we’re still voters. And that collection of districts went to Dan White or he won it in a very contested race because there were no incumbents. These were dispossessed and disenfranchised parts of the city really. Yes, you got to vote for eleven supervisors but none of them cared what you did. And if somebody who did care what you did or what you believed in or what your problems of your neighborhood were and ran for city wide office they wouldn’t get elected because the map cutoff. So you had these outsiders. And Dan White and Harvey Milk were two very different, but maybe not all that different, outsiders who came to power at the same time.

03-00:44:51
Holmes: I wanted to have you touch on that a little bit. But before we do it, what I also thought was interesting, and I wanted to get your perspective on, is that 1977 election. We really see not just race but sexuality as very much on the table alongside race in almost what’s been described as a kind of culture war type of election. Harvey Milk’s slogan in 1977 was ingenious of “Milk has something for everyone.” Or you have Dan White’s slogan—

03-00:45:27
Laubscher: “Unite and fight with Dan White.”
Holmes: Exactly, exactly. And that almost sums it up. But then you were saying that while they seemed to be obviously representing two completely different demographics and agendas within San Francisco, they’re both seeking office and had similarities.

Laubscher: Yeah. Now, Harvey was a politician. He had run for assembly before and lost. He was shrewd. He was really smart. And he was active. Dan White had been a cop and then moved over to the fire department. It would be really interesting, just a total aside, if you could go into police department personnel records and sort of see why that happened. But he was protected in the city family. He’s a public safety officer. Irish Catholic.

Holmes: Irish Catholic, yes.

Laubscher: Married a good Irish Catholic girl. Mary Ann Burns. Mary Ann was older than Dan, if I remember correctly. Not a whole lot, but a few years. And they were trying to have kids. And they lived on Shawnee, which is right down by a place I would frequent later very often, the Geneva Car House, where the historic streetcars are stored, they were two blocks from there, in that part of town, which is this part of town. So that swath of the south, way down south in San Francisco. And there was a different old-fashioned kind of attitude there.

As the political reporter I was tasked with introducing people to these new supervisors. I did a story on Harvey Milk. But he had been getting a lot of coverage because his election was historic. I was in his camera store on election night. I did a live shot. It was incredibly exciting and there was so much going on. The celebration was really intense and he was so happy. Now, I knew Harvey in civilian life a little bit because he was my camera-store guy. I mean, he owned this camera store and I was a pretty avid photographer and that was the closest camera store to me. I take my film in there and it all got shipped off to Kodak anyway. So it wasn’t a question of whether he could develop film or not. And I don’t think he could. Harvey needed a storefront in a funny way. So I interacted with him a little bit as a customer and things like that. When I saw him as a politician he was very good at what he did and he spoke up very eloquently but also pungently for the things that his constituency wanted to see. He was abrasive. The funny part is, Harvey could have just as easily taken Dan White’s campaign slogan, “Unite and fight,” because they were fighting for their rights. Dan White’s constituency was taken for granted but they certainly had rights. If you look back through today’s spectrum it was a white community, literally, who elected a White to represent them. So I remember doing a profile on Harvey.
Then I went and did a profile on Dan White, which in some ways came back to haunt me in a funny way. I decided I wanted to introduce people not only to the man but to the district he represented, since nobody really knew where it was. You drove through it on 280 on your way to and from San Francisco if you lived on the Peninsula but otherwise—

03-00:49:59
Holmes: Well, I could also imagine, too, that you have district elections. Districts had to be drawn, right?

03-00:50:04
Laubscher: Right.

03-00:50:05
Holmes: And the residents had to understand where these various districts now were.

03-00:50:10
Laubscher: Yeah. And so we did a walk-a-long. I sent this up through one of his staffers. I’m trying to remember what his name was. But we did this walk-a-long. And I think they probably prearranged a little of this in the way that handlers, political handlers take advantage of reporters now anyway. They said, “Well, meet us down on San Bruno Avenue,” which is kind of the business street for the Portola district. So he was walking along and we were chatting about San Francisco and old San Francisco and the way it was and he was saying, “These are great legacies. We should put this stuff together. Keep the traditions of San Francisco going.” As we were walking along the sidewalk, the cameras were rolling, he and I were talking. It was what we call a two-shot. We’re walking along. And this woman comes out of a beauty salon. And in retrospect I think this was probably set up for my benefit. I would never set up anything like that. And she said, “Oh, Dan, it’s so good to see you.” And he says, “Oh, this is Mary. She’s one of my big supporters. She owns the beauty shop here. It’s about having vibrant neighborhoods in this city and that’s what I’m here to do, is to make sure our neighborhoods are safe.” I’m almost certain his district included the Geneva Towers and the Sunnydale Housing Projects, which were in those days one of the absolute un-safest places certainly in the city, maybe the country. You did not go down there. It’s about a mile and a quarter from here.

When we were talking he was saying, on camera, on mic, and this made it into the piece, he said, “We need to have more neighborhood events. We need to knit our neighborhoods together by getting San Franciscans to know each other. For example, we should have like softball games where each district has a team and then maybe my district could play, oh, let’s say, Harvey Milk’s district.” And he picked that one out of a hat. He had ten other supervisors. That’s the one he picked. Well, did that mean anything? I don’t know. Maybe he was just doing a compare and contrast or maybe he was being snide and saying, “Well, those people can’t play softball.” Now, this became salient, in
the sense, later, as word got out about who White was and what his history was, that when he played softball on the police department team, he was known for going in with spikes high. That he was so intense. Softball we sort of think of as softball. But he was such an intense competitor that it was kind of scary to people. That’s what came out after when everybody was looking for why did this happen, how did this happen. But I perceived him as being young. And when I say young, he was only a few years older than me, which meant he would have been barely thirty at the time, if I’m not mistaken. Naive. But I thought he was sincere about wanting to make the city better. He did not understand how combative politics can be. Combative in a different way than his inclinations. You don’t settle things with your fists. You settle them with your mind. And in that environment he was not doing well. Yet the board had a six-to-five, what would be called conservative or moderate majority in San Francisco, at that time. Just like now. Now it’s flipped the other way with Aaron Peskin’s seat. It was a very closely divided board for a very closely divided city.

Holmes: Sure. Some had described it as, I mean, there were two San Franciscos.

Laubscher: Yeah, there were.

Holmes: Your traditional—

Laubscher: There was the progressive San Francisco and the conservative San Francisco. There was the traditional San Francisco that was represented by Dan White—

Holmes: White.

Laubscher: —and the people like that and to some extent by Dianne Feinstein and Quentin Kopp and John Barbagelata. And Ron Pelosi I think was one of them (who wasn’t related to Nancy Pelosi, by the way). There’s that whole, what would you call it, a crescent from this little corner of town all the way up and around to Pacific Heights. And then you’ve got the more densely populated, smaller geographically, but equal in population, North Beach, Chinatown. There wasn’t many people living in SOMA then. But Western Addition, that whole area where you had an African American population that was more progressive. You had the Mission, you had a Hispanic population, and you had a lot of progressives and gays. So that was the division of the city at the time. It was a pretty fine balance.

Then we come to the end of ’78 when everything unraveled. Can I take a minute and get some water?
So we’re getting to the fall of 1978 and that these two San Franciscos are being to collide. At least we’re going to have an incident that really, I think, encapsulates this collision. A very tragic incident. But before we do that, I wanted to ask. Your sister mentioned that there was actually a time where you got both sides, what seemed to be both sides, of these San Franciscos together for a fundraiser in your house in the fall of 1978. Do you recall anything about that? This would have been the Edwardian house that you redid. She mentioned that she remembered sitting at a table during this party with Dan White.

That was a party I had at the house for Judith’s 32nd birthday on September 9, which was a Saturday. The Whites were among the guest, along with a cross section of work and city folks and of course friends of Judith who lived in the Bay Area. An odd thing happened there. On their way out the door, Mary Ann White mentioned to Judith that it was Dan’s birthday too. Not just the same day, but the same year. Turns out Judith and Dan had been born 15 minutes apart five miles from each other in LA. And neither Dan nor Mary Ann mentioned it when we invited them or during the evening at all, until they left. We both thought that was weird at the time.

I’ve always loved entertaining, bringing together diverse groups of people. And so, yes, we socialized a bit with Dan because he wanted to. And he seemed kind of at sea in San Francisco politics. I hate to use too many baseball analogies, but it’s like a double A hitter is called up to the major leagues. It takes time to adjust. The fastballs are a lot faster and then they break, too, and you’re flailing at the pitch because you feel you were really good at something but now you’re not good anymore because the environment is so much different. And I think that’s one of the things that happened to Dan White. He was so frustrated.

You think he was a bit out of his depth—

Oh, yeah.

— in comparison to someone like Harvey Milk who was so much—

Oh, yeah. Because you had guys like John Molinari, who was on the board of supervisors, who was a moderate. John had been there and Dianne and people like this who aspired to be mayor at one time or another and were sophisticated in the way politics works. That’s not necessarily a compliment.
They knew how to play the game. And Dan White was very literal. He meant what he said, he said what he meant. If you said something to him he assumed you meant it, which is not the way politics works, unfortunately. And so he was a naïf in that regard. I don’t want to overblow this. I only saw the Whites a few times socially. Clearly people who were there remember it because of what happened. I would never have remembered if he had served a couple terms on the board and disappeared, retired.

But he was so naïve that he really thought, and this is very important to understanding where he was, that he was going to be able to keep his job as a firefighter. So completely naïve. He apparently never asked before the election or, if he did ask, he didn’t want to hear the answer he got, because it’s clearly something you can’t do. You can’t just recuse yourself from the fire-department budget vote because you’re a firefighter. And so he ended up having to leave city employment. And Mary Ann was a teacher. And the supervisor’s pay was $9,600 a year at the time. So that was not enough to live on. And he became more and more strained.

Pier 39 opened in this timeframe. He got an independent post by Dianne as a supervisor and she had made a bet with Warren Simmons, the developer, that it would not open and if it did she would jump into the Bay in a swimsuit. And so he won. She showed up, this was brilliant, wearing one of the old Sutro Baths swimsuits which, of course, were the bloomers. Very modest. And that was, again, another little change in the old city. We’re building our own Disneyland here. One of my best friends, Anne Halsted, I think you talked to, that’s how we met, because I covered that story. She was a long-time Telegraph Hill resident and was just adamant that this was the worst thing that had ever happened to San Francisco. And as a San Franciscan who had grown up with Playland at the beach, which, of course, was not in the good part of San Francisco, was tucked away over the edge of Ocean Beach. As a side, San Francisco is one of the few cities that kind of throws away historically seven miles of Pacific Ocean frontage compared, to what happened in southern California and other places like that. But anyway, the city was changing. Warren Simmons, who owned Pier 39—and I don’t know what went on behind the scenes and how this was done, but Dan was given a space in the food court and they started something called the Hot Potato that made baked potatoes with a bunch of stuff on them. And that was his business. And he worked there when he wasn’t supervising, and he and Mary Ann worked there. They tried to avoid as much as possible paying other people to work there because they needed to take the money home. This all resonated with me because I grew up in this delicatessen family. Small business, family business. I knew how tough it was to make ends meet.

So we come to the summer and fall of ’78. KRON, and I give him a ton of credit for this, did something that no other TV station in the state did that year.
And I don’t know if any TV station ever gave this much attention to a governor’s race. Jerry Brown was running for reelection against Evelle Younger, the attorney general. And Thayer Walker, the investigative reporter, and I were assigned to cover these guys. And we were on them for a month. I think it was the last month of the campaign pretty much. We rotated. I did two weeks with Jerry, then two weeks with Younger, and Thayer did the reverse. I can’t remember exactly what it was. But wherever they went we went. And I was very focused on this race, which was not close. Wasn’t really following very closely what was going on in San Francisco during that period. And as I look back on it, the compression of events in that time period probably fried my brain and I didn’t even realize it at the time.

We did election night, and Thayer and I were both totally exhausted. I can’t imagine. I can imagine, because I did it briefly, but when you look at how reporters do presidential campaigns and things like that now. Wow. It’s hard on you.

Holmes: And you imagine the candidates themselves doing this.

Laubscher: Oh, yeah. Cut some slack on these people, please, no matter who they are. Everybody was sitting there waiting for one word to be misspoken, and then, boom, especially today, it’s up on social media, it’s all this other stuff. Even when somebody obviously didn’t mean to say what they said and it’s out of context and everything else. Bam, bam, bam. And, of course, because every polemical website and everybody else is just sitting there looking for red meat, all of a sudden it’s all over. I’ve gotten to the point on Facebook, by the way, where I now curate all these websites my friends, friends, use. There are so many different political websites now that are just totally partisan. This is not a new part of America. You can go back to the Hamilton-Adams-Jefferson days and find the same thing. But you have to be able to put these aside if you’re going to keep your sanity and make some discernment, which a lot of voters don’t, and that’s another whole issue.

But we got to election night; we were down in Beverly Hills. I remember really clearly we were going to wipe the floor with everybody else on election night. Election night coverage was really important to the station. So Thayer and I, because, I think, of cost considerations and also just technical limitations, we had every camera we had somewhere going live. So we had to share a camera for the Brown and Younger campaigns and we were both at some Beverly Hills hotel. I can’t remember which one it was. And we’re standing by the pool, except that somebody had decided we had to have two completely different looking shots. I couldn’t just hand him the microphone, right. So he was on the other side of the pool and the camera was just going to swivel or something. I can’t remember exactly what the technical thing was.
And I had done my piece and tossed, as they call it, tossed now with the Brown campaign’s wrap-up. “Here’s Thayer Walker.” And Thayer, who was just so exhausted, he couldn’t speak. He looked at the camera and he just couldn’t talk. I’d never seen that happen before on the air. And they didn’t know what to do back in the studio. I don’t know what happened. I walked over to him and took the mic and did the summary myself. And it was an odd moment, but it was emblematic, I think, of how exhausted we certainly were and everybody else was.

Election Day was November 7. Just three days later, we get this bombshell that Dan White was resigning from the board of supervisors because he could no longer afford to be on the board. And this was a really big moment in the station. I was exhausted. The station said, “You’ve got to go cover this. You’ve got to get on this. You know him. You’ve got to go do this.” So I did. He had already made the decision, and he was getting a lot of pressure to ask for his seat back because he had constituents who were not geographic constituents. He had the public employees union, the firefighters, the POA, police officers association, and all these other groups. The conservative downtown. The chamber of commerce, all these downtown people who knew something that he didn’t. And, again, this was an example of his political naïveté. That with Moscone as mayor the board was going to flip. Moscone was not going to appoint a conservative, and you’re going to have a progressive board, and that meant you would have no checks on what Moscone wanted to do. And so this was a real issue.

So White resigned his supervisor’s seat on November 10, but by November 14 the pressure from these interests had gotten to him, and he asked if he could take back his resignation. Meanwhile, another huge story was developing. Judith was the San Mateo County bureau chief and the congressman from San Mateo County was Leo Ryan. And Leo was a friend of Judith’s from the Sacramento days when she was the pioneering female radio reporter in Sacramento. So she knew Leo. And this kind of bubbled up, this Jim Jones thing. There were allegations. And I did not cover this myself. I don’t remember how much KRON covered it, frankly. Jones was very powerful politically and he managed to kind of keep a lid on any investigations of voter fraud, voter irregularities, or anything else. But that was starting to bubble up. And he was being pursued, if I’m not mistaken, there were criminal charges brewing. And so he bailed out, had bailed out a few months prior to Guyana with his flock. And they still had the People’s Temple in the Fillmore District on Geary. And I guess they were still holding services and stuff like that there but he was gone.

And so Leo Ryan, because he had gotten complaints from constituents and others, that what Jim Jones was doing, in effect, was holding people against their will in Guyana and that their relatives here in San Francisco in the Bay
Area were saying, “This is ridiculous. It’s like my relative has been brainwashed. It’s not the same person. I don’t know what’s going on.” He decides to go down and check it out. And it had gotten enough notoriety and it was this cult, which is what it was being called, was big enough news that NBC decided to send Don Harris. He was the San Francisco correspondent for the network. And, of course, I was a local guy and I thought, “Oh, that’s the job I want. I want to be NBC San Francisco. I want to be the network guy. But I want to be based here. I don’t want to go there.” Yeah.

Harris was the only network correspondent – the only TV reporter – accompanying Ryan. And because he was with NBC, KRON decided not to send its own reporter, since we were going to have an exclusive locally anyway. Certainly nobody knew what was going to happen and just how odd this really had become. In retrospect I think there was racism involved. I’ll just put it this way. If this had been an African American preacher who had somehow managed to lure 800 white people, white Americans to South America, and had them in some remote jungle compound, I think there would have been a lot more attention than if it had been 800 largely disenfranchised, economically disadvantaged African Americans that were pulled down there by a white preacher.

03-01:15:19
Holmes: And it wasn’t just adults. There were women and children who were in that.

03-01:15:23
Laubscher: Oh, of course. Oh, no. It was whole families. And in some cases, if I remember, spouses were left behind and their kids were taken away. This was a big deal. So on Saturday, November 18, 1978, Judith and I were off work and at an antique show in Golden Gate Park. We stopped at home late in the afternoon to change because we had agreed to meet Dan and Mary Ann White at their food stand on Pier 39. Dan had asked me for my advice on dealing with the press in his quest to get his Supervisor’s job back, which he had just rashly resigned. When we get home, there’s a call on the answering machine, a young desk assistant at KRON calling Judith. She called back, and he said there were reports coming from Guyana that Ryan and his party were “out of touch” in Jonestown (which was very isolated, remember) and there was concern about their situation. He asked her to come in and use her contacts with the Ryan office to find out what she could. But at that time, we didn’t know how serious the story would be, so we agreed I would go ahead and meet Dan and Mary Ann White.

Once she got to the newsroom and called Ryan’s office, her instincts told her something was very wrong. So she called me and told me to come in, too. The desk assistant hadn’t been able to reach the news director yet and didn’t want to take the responsibility of bringing in more people, but I said I’m coming anyway, and let the Whites know we had to postpone our meeting. So
I went out to the San Francisco People’s Temple building on Geary near Fillmore and knocked on the door, getting no answer. So I was more or less standing by. I think I did a live shot from in front of People’s Temple, which didn’t say much, and Judith was out tracking people down. At this point, we still didn’t know the full dimensions of what had happened at Jonestown in the jungle.

And this is where all this ties together. I’ve never told this to anybody before, certainly not on the record. Judith knew that George Moscone was a good friend of Leo Ryan. She had George’s home phone number, so she calls his house and learns from one of the kids that the Mayor is at a fundraiser at Trader Vic’s downtown. She knew this issue was politically sensitive for George, because People’s Temple votes had helped elect him and Jones had been his political ally. She gets a note to him at the fundraiser and he comes out in the alley to do a quick interview on Leo Ryan – who we only knew at that moment was out of touch in Guyana.

Very late that night, after the news of Ryan’s murder – along with Don Harris’ and the others at the airport, and the mass suicides at Jonestown had broken – we made it back to the house she said, “George took me aside after the interview and told me something, said something interesting to me.” I said, “What?” He said, “You and Rick know Dan White, right, on a social level?” She said, “Yes, we know him. We talk to them.” And he said, “I need to get a message to Dan.” And he said, “I’m not seeing any support from his backers to reappoint him and I’m getting a lot of pressure from others to appoint somebody different and he needs to show more support if I’m going to give him his job back.”

I had already interviewed Moscone on camera in his office the week before, right after White had said publicly that he wanted his job back, and George was conciliatory in that interview, saying something to the effect that he thought White deserved a second chance. So this was a major change of direction for Moscone.

So the People Temple’s murders and directed suicides were November 18, 1978. The days that followed were a blur. Judith and I were both just grinding away on aspects of that enormous story, as were others in the newsroom. Of course, as soon as the story broke, the news director wanted a reporter to go. In fact, he wanted John Hambrick, the anchor, to go, but, amazingly, John didn’t have a passport. I did, but when I looked at it, it was expired (a lesson I never forgot). I was bereft. This was a huge story. So I couldn’t go. But my colleague and desk mate Jeannine Yeomans went, did a great job, and she went with a cameraman named Joe Brenes, whose life was devastated. Because what happened is they got down to Georgetown, the capital. Obviously the government was completely overwhelmed by this thing that
had happened in the middle of the jungle at Jonestown some long way away and there were no roads into it. You had to fly in. And they got only one space on a plane, a small plane that was going on. So Jeannine said—and I give her a ton of credit for this, she said, “Joe, you go, because I can look at the pictures, but the pictures are more important.” And Joe took the only video footage that was ever taken inside Guyana, inside Jonestown after the killings, suicides. Joe was never the same person. He did his duty. He did an incredible job. But it changed him. I can’t imagine what that would have been like. And when I think back, that I was close to being there, I think in that chain of events, gee, maybe I could have gotten in there. It always reminds me of what the horror is of death, mass death, whether by war or other means, and how overwhelming it is to people. And when I see people today, politicians, anybody, I’ll be honest about it. The whole younger generation, which has never really had any close contact with personal experiences with war. The people who were in lower Manhattan on 9/11 and went through that, those people were all very much changed, too. They get it. But people kind of la-di-dah this whole thing about, “Well, we’ll wipe them off the face of the earth. We’ll do this, we’ll do that.” Wow. But this is a human condition. This has always been going on. And I think this was so dramatic and sobering because that had just caught everybody like a sucker punch in San Francisco. “What is this?” Because most people didn’t even know what People’s Temple was. The African American community knew what it was. There was a lot of debate and discussion in the African American community because they were stealing parishioners from other traditional black churches, things like that.

So we all worked right through Thanksgiving, which was November 23 that year. The station even brought Thanksgiving dinner in for us. The weekend after that, Judith and I just holed up at home, binge watching some documentary series in the back room where the TV was. She recalls it was ‘The World at War’. Fitting. Judith’s memory is that on Monday morning, November 27, we emerged from the house to find Dan White’s card stuck in the front door. She has a better memory than I do, but my recollection doesn’t include the card. I seem to recall that I got a call from White saying “Hey, where were you guys last night?” I said, “What do you mean, where were we?” “Well, I came over. I wanted to talk. And I came over and knocked on the door and your lights were on but nobody came to the door.” And I explained that we didn’t hear the door, that we were exhausted and everything else. And he said, “Let’s get together. I’d really kind of like to talk to you about my future and all this other stuff.”

This was no more than forty-eight hours before the killings, the murders. I believe that they were murders regardless of what the jury verdict was. And so I kind of filed that. But to be honest, I was just so wasted that I hadn’t really thought about following up. What I probably should have done was trundled
down to his house the next day with my camera, my cameraman, and say, “Talk to us.”

But in fairness, his story of resigning but wanting his job back had been so totally eclipsed by the People’s Temple that it was kind of like, “We’ve got too many stories to do.” Because by this time the victims’ families were coming forward. People like Freddie Lewis, who had lost several relatives and was so articulate. And the station had reporters, mostly in the East Bay, because a lot of the victims’ families were actually in Oakland, so it was being covered out of there.

The morning of the 27th dawns. The mayor has called a press conference for, I want to say, 11:30 and it was to announce the new supervisor.

03-01:27:55
 Holmes: To replace Dan White?

03-01:27:56
 Laubscher: Yes. And word was leaking out it was a fellow named Don Horanzy, whom I didn’t know. And so my camera crew and I were assigned to cover the Mayor’s press conference at 11:30 and do a live shot on the news. So there was going to be a live truck involved. Except something had happened. One of our trucks had broken down. My crew was in a loaner van. And I said, “Hey, we’ve got a little time. Let’s whiz out to Dan White’s house and I want to interview him. I want to get a pre-reaction,” because I didn’t even know if any other reporters even knew where Dan White’s house was. So I figured, “I’ll just go out there blind and say something.” I didn’t want to call him because that might be a problem. So they said, “Okay, we’ll do that.” We got in the van and we start to drive. One of the guys said, “Oh, we’re going to need a mic stand for the mayor’s press conference and we don’t have it. We have to go over to the garage where our van is being repaired and get it out of the van,” which was in the other direction. It wasn’t far, but it was a time thing. And I’ve thought about this a million times. Did I just really not want to do my job as a reporter and confront Dan White and say, “What were you thinking?” and get some kind of newsy thing. Or was I just being too—what’s the right word—gracious to my cohorts, who should have had the mic stand with them?

And in retrospect, what a stupid thing to need, because it was clearly going to be at a podium and they could have gaffer taped the thing to the podium. It was really a ridiculous kind of thing. But we didn’t go is the long story. And at that moment, as we found out later, Dan White was in his house loading up his weapons and getting ready to go to city hall. If I had gone down there I might have intercepted him, I might have seen him, I might have been able to talk to him. Obviously I would have never anticipated what could have happened. I honestly don’t believe that if I had walked into him, walked into
his garage and he was loading his gun or something like that, that he would
have turned the gun on me. I just don’t believe that. But I will never be able to
stop wondering what if. What if? But I didn’t. And so we went back to city
hall, we set up. Went out and got the thing, went back to city hall. And the
timing, it may have been he was already on his way to city hall. I may have
missed him. I may have missed everything that we ended up being able to
cover. So you’ll never know the answer to this.

But it all happened, again, in a very compressed timeframe in that morning
and when we finally got around to going over to City Hall, because we didn’t
have enough time to go out to his house then, as we’re pulling up, we’re half a
block from City Hall, we get the police call, “Active shooter in City Hall.”
And we just tore out. I jumped out of the van. I remember this vividly. It was
on the Larkin Street side. It was a block from the entrance on Polk. And I told
the guys, I said, “Pull your van into here.” I said, “Call the station. Get a live
truck here now. I’m going in.” And so I ran in without the camera crew and
they followed me. And as I got up there, it was a maelstrom. Police,
everybody were kind of milling around. And in that area outside the Board of
Supervisors chambers—the offices in City Hall go all the way around that
floor, the supervisors’ offices, and then the Mayor’s office is at the other end,
the Polk Street end. So I ran in, I ran up the ceremonial steps to get to the
supervisors area because that’s where all the people I saw clumped as I ran in.

And as I got up there, I saw a young woman named Denise Apcar, who was
Dan White’s legislative assistant, who I guess was still holding the office
open, even though Dan wasn’t there anymore. And I said, “Denise, what are
you doing here? What’s going on?” She said, “I don’t know. I don’t know.
Have you seen Dan?” And I said, “What do you mean have I seen Dan?” And
she said, “Well, he was just here. He ran into my office and he said, ‘I need
your car keys and I need them now,’ and he grabbed my car keys and rushed
out. I’m trying to find him.” And I said, “Dan White was here?” “Yeah, he
was just here.” And she clearly did not put all this together, and I did. And,
again, this I probably I’m trying to protect somebody instead of just being a
grabby newsperson. Remember, I didn’t have a camera here. I didn’t have a
camera with me.

03:01:33:59
Holmes: What was your initial thinking of what may have went on with him being

03:01:34:03
Laubscher: I’m trying to recall whether we knew at that moment, because Dianne
[Feinstein] had not come out to announce this yet. I can’t tell you with
certainty today that I knew. I knew there had been shootings. I didn’t know
that it was the Mayor and Harvey Milk at the time, as far as I can recall today.
I would have to reprogram my brain to know exactly what the sequence is of
my cognition. But I think they were buzzing about that in the hallways. And she came and I said, “Okay.” What did I say? Oh, I know. I took the police chief who I believe at the time was Charlie Gain. Remember, Charlie Gain was the police chief that they brought in from out of town and he was the guy that painted all the police cars baby blue.

03-01:35:18 Holmes: Sure. To make it—

03-01:35:19 Laubscher: And took off the seven-pointed star that had always been on the police cars, and put the city seal on it and underneath said, “Police services.” You can hardly imagine waving a brighter red flag at the conservative community, especially the cop community.

03-01:35:36 Holmes: I know there was a lot of consternation between Moscone, the new chief that he brought in, and the police department.

03-01:35:43 Laubscher: Oh, yeah, and everybody. Oh, sure. And that was one of the watersheds. That was one of the really clear dividing lines because it was so symbolic. Anyway, Charlie Gain was there and I took Denise. As a journalist I probably should have said, “Would you come with me outside, please?” where the camera was. What I did instead was I said, “You need to talk to Chief Gain right now.” And I took her over to the chief and I said, “Chief, you need to hear what she says.” And I sort of forfeited what would have been a big exclusive. But at that time I thought what was really important was getting the information to the police as fast as possible. But I did know what I knew and so I went downstairs. I ran back downstairs because a camera crew at that point had come up. And I said, “Is the live truck down there?” and they said, “Yes.” And so I ran back downstairs. They were setting up. And pretty soon I was on the air. I beat everybody else on the air, which was important. While I was running downstairs Dianne emerged and gave what is now that announcement, what is now a very famous video clip, which I only saw on video because I went down to do the live shot. And then we knew it was Dan White.

I was able to report live on the air that I knew that he had been at city hall, that his assistant had said he’d been at city hall. So then we talked about it. And in the course of doing the live shot I felt an obligation to disclose that I knew Dan White socially. That made it much more of the moment. And it was like drinking from a fire hose. You can’t stop to think. You’re just trying to keep from drowning in all the information. And so we went on until late at night, down there all day, all evening. They had the vigil at city hall. Then a lot of this becomes a blur to me. I did a lot of talking about Dan White, who he was,
all the same things I just told you about what he represented and all those other things.

And then we came to the memorial service. There was already a little buzz around town that I was the reporter who knew Dan White. As people were already starting to turn this into a question of homophobia and motivation, I was very aware that it might not be a good idea to be identified as Dan White’s. So I did not want to exacerbate anything by—and I don’t recall getting any death threats or anything. It’s not like that. Reporters are always getting people saying things good and bad about them, being objectified and things like that. We did the report, the memorial service, and I asked if I could cover it. It was one of the most touching events I’d ever been to. So I decided to do a piece that was just actuality. There was no script at all. It was just people, segments of the speakers at the thing with visuals.

Holmes: At the memorial service?

Laubscher: With visuals, yeah. That ended up winning an Emmy. And I was the producer, but I was never identified in the piece, never anything else.

Holmes: Interesting.

Laubscher: It was harder to do it that way. It just takes more time to arrange these things and just to write a quick track and whip it out. But I’m still probably proudest of that piece of all the pieces I ever did because I think it really captured in a beautiful visual way, it had a great editor, great cameraman, what this meant. And then I went back—

Holmes: In a sense of what George Moscone and Harvey Milk represented to the city?

Laubscher: Yeah.

Holmes: And what was lost.

Laubscher: And what was lost. But it was not my words. It was the words of people who actually talked about them. And Dianne was just compelling. She owned that service, she owned that stage. I don’t remember any of the things she said, but she pulled the city together single-handedly.
Holmes: I want to get to that in a minute. You did put a personal touch on your reporting of the coverage of that tragic event and then, again, winning an Emmy for the piece you produced. What do you think made your coverage different than others? Do you think it was having that connection to Dan White, of knowing the people involved versus perhaps other reporters or—

Laubscher: Yes, it was not just Dan White, but as I’ve said before, it was knowing all three principals. I don’t know that there are that many news events where a journalist knew both the victims and the killer.

Holmes: Surely unique.

Laubscher: In general, it’s so easy to categorize and stereotype murders of this sort. People want simple answers. “What motivated her to kill him?” “Why did he do that?” “He had it coming. He must have provoked it.” “Why did she snap?” These are the kind of questions that are asked about so many murders and other acts of violence. We certainly see it in the tragedies now, and so many people are so quick to judge when we see these mass murders that take place, whether by terrorism or by unhinged individuals. It’s kind of like, “Well, what’s the motivation?” And we as human beings, I think, our instinct is to slot this into some pigeonhole—there’s an old word—pigeonhole that is not threatening to us personally. “Oh, this happened because he’s this.” He’s a radical jihadist or because this happened or that happened. If it’s a postal shooting, the old phrase going postal when we had mass killings in post offices. He snapped because something—but this couldn’t happen to me or by me. I think that’s the reassurance that most of us want to give. And the thing that was impacting for me, and I don’t know how this reflected, is here we had the Mayor coming to my wife at the time and saying, “He’s got to give me more support.” Whether he was setting up an excuse with a reporter he trusted to give him cover to appoint somebody else—a conscious, calculated political ploy to say, “I’m going to be able to say that I—” He may have already decided it. But I think George was really—and certainly Judith saw this and she knew George pretty well. That he was genuinely conflicted. His old San Francisco values. He understood that San Francisco. He understood, as somebody who came up from a hardscrabble background himself, he understood the struggle. And I think maybe his instinct was to give this guy another chance, politics be damned. That’s not the way it turned out. And it cost George his life.

Holmes: And knowing all three, could you also reflect a little bit on Dan White and Harvey Milk’s associations—
There’s a couple of thoughts I have here and one of them is completely out of left field. The other is observational on my part. I’ll never know the degree of homophobia Dan White may have felt. I know that Harvey was glib, very fast with his tongue. In supervisors’ meetings Harvey could take anybody down, mock them and joke and sometimes cut with his words. I know he had done that to Dan. He had done it to others. And the word was also getting out, and it was true, that Harvey didn’t want Dan to stay on the board. And Harvey was one of the guys who had put the most pressure on George to appoint someone else. A progressive. Not just someone else but a different political philosophy because, again, it was going to change the board. I’m pretty sure Dan knew that. I’m pretty sure Dan knew that Milk was one of the instigators. And I think that for Dan it could have been just revenge. It could have been just cold—what do they say? Revenge is a dish best served cold. Well, he wasn’t cold. He was certainly enraged. But he ran by Dianne’s office. He didn’t turn the gun on Dianne. He clearly seemed to have one and only one target among the supervisors. He could have run amok and shot everybody in that whole place. That’s why I thought it was an open-and-shut case of first-degree murder. Malice aforethought, all that stuff.

Another philosophy that I’ve never seen articulated before—maybe it has been—it’s quite possible and certainly open to discussion about whether Dan White was closeted and gay. I’ve seen no evidence of this when I knew him, when we socialized or anything like that. You saw this couple together and you didn’t think there was a lot of physical passion between them, just the way they were. Mary Ann was very reserved, very restrained. They ended up having children but whether that was out of some sense of duty? We know so much more now about how in those repressive days men and women whose affectional affinities were to people of their own gender would marry heterosexually because they thought they had to. As I say, it’s a totally wild kind of assumption. But a lot of the actions in all of this could be seen as being congruent with that. Totally suppositional on my part.

But the more I’ve thought about this over the years, and the way I kind of went back and tried to parse what his reactions were and the kind of guy he was and how he was in person, he was an unusual guy. And it was easy at the time, because nobody thinks somebody is going to be homicidal unless you’re really dealing with somebody with truly bizarre behavior. But he was wound so tight and there was so much anger and other things in there that I never saw that you wonder at the end of the day what really motivated him. But that’s not about me. That’s about somebody else and that’s a suppositional thing on my part.

Anyway, so just to kind of finish that whole thread — That was a devastating period. I tried to do my reporter’s duty. I went to see Dan White in the county jail before his trial. He was not forthcoming with anything. He clearly had
talked to his lawyers. He knew I was a reporter. He wasn’t going to tell me anything as a friend. I asked for a jailhouse interview. He declined. I wanted to talk to him on camera. I wanted to do this. I don’t remember whether I was asked to cover the trial or not. I think I was and I said, “You know, I don’t think that’s a good idea given my disclosure. You need somebody who is totally neutral.” So I didn’t cover the trial.

Holmes: And speaking of the trial, this would have been, I believe, May of 1979. Where, in your view, it was open and shut case of first-degree murder. I think may—

Laubscher: In everybody’s view.

Holmes: But he was only convicted of involuntary manslaughter, which gave rise to what they called the White Night Riots. Did you cover the riots in San Francisco?

Laubscher: No. I don’t believe I did. I certainly saw the aftermath. I did not cover the event itself. And it was horrific. We know so much more now. The OJ Simpson trial made us all very aware of jury selection and the nuances of jury selection and how you try to make your case, try to win your case, before the trial starts. And clearly the white jury, literally, the Dan White jury, was one predisposed to let him off the hook for this. As I say, I didn’t cover it because it was—

Holmes: Conflict of interest, perhaps.

Laubscher: Well, a conflict of interest. I wouldn’t want anybody to question the station. So there was that. And then when he got to Soledad I went down to try to get an interview with him, saw him. Did not do a piece on it, because the only way he would talk to me is if I agreed it was off the record. And I, again, tried to get some insight. And it was creepy, to be honest with you, to see him in a visiting room and have him put his hand out to shake my hand. Literally the hand that held the gun. I just felt bizarre. But as a reporter I wanted — and as a human being—I wanted to try to figure out what makes somebody do something like this. How can you do it? How can you throw away a life? And I’ve gotten more insight into that as time’s gone on in different contexts. But then it was inconceivable to me. And I never did get clarity on that.

I will mention, going fast-forward, just to wrap-up the Dan White discussion — After I had joined Bechtel, I’d left KRON, joined Bechtel, he came up for parole. I think he was in Southern California on a supervised parole or
something. He couldn’t come back to San Francisco. And right after he came back to San Francisco, whenever that was, you would know better than I, maybe it was ’84 or something like that, ’85—

—somewhere in there. I come back to my office and my assistant said, “You got a telephone call while you were out at lunch.” And I said, “Really?” And she said, “Yeah, it’s on your desk.” And so I looked and it said, “Dan James called,” with a San Francisco number. I said, “Dan James? Did he say what he wanted?” “No, he said you’d know him.” So I dialed the number and he said, “Rick, it’s Dan.” And, of course, I recognized the voice and a chill went up my spine. And I said, “Dan.” “Yeah, well, I’m back in town. I thought you’d like to get together. I thought it might be good to get together.” “Well, Dan, you know I’m at Bechtel now. I’m not a reporter.” “Yeah, yeah. But I just thought we’d get together and kind of have dinner and talk about, oh, I don’t know, the 49ers and stuff like that.” And I was just stunned. But I did it.

I went over there. Same house. There had been talk of death threats and all these other things. At this point he had two children. One of his kids has Down Syndrome. Mary Ann greeted me at the door. She looked a little haggard. When I parked my car, I parked my car around the corner, up the block, and walked around looking—“Is there somebody sitting in a car here? You know, is somebody going to shoot me as I go up the stairway?” I was really uncomfortable. But I went in and there he was and he stuck that hand out and he said, “Hey, how you doing? It’s great,” all this stuff. It was a very uncomfortable environment. Mary Ann was clearly very uncomfortable. She was always an open, very kind woman. Now she seemed like a trapped animal. Didn’t want to be there, didn’t want to do things. During the course of the discussion he never got personal. It turned out they were not sleeping in the same bedroom. And it was a small house but somehow he was sleeping on the floor on a mattress in the living room or something like that. All he wanted to talk about was sports and neutral subjects.

When Mary Ann was out of the room I said to him, I said, “Dan, what are your plans?” Or maybe I said this when she was in the room. “Well, I’m going to see if I can get a job. Well, you know, see what we can do.” And I said, “Your life here is over, Dan.” I’m aware this was a man who had murdered two people and I’m in his house, and I wanted to be careful about what I said. I’d never been in the presence, other than the jailhouse visits where he’s in jail, around a murderer before. And I said, “Look, I don’t know what’s possible here, but my recommendation would be pack up, go somewhere else. Mary Ann’s a teacher. Get her started. Change your name, change your life. Try a different place. Oklahoma, Idaho, someplace far away, and see if you
can start over. But I just don’t think you can resume your life here, Dan.” And he didn’t like that. He didn’t get mad or anything. He got quiet. And I had come to deliver a message. I delivered it and then I was ready to go, because I remember waiting until after dinner to do that.

And I never saw him again or heard from him again. And then it was some months after that that he killed himself. My initial and overwhelming reaction was, I was happy for Mary Ann that he had done that. I can’t imagine what it’s been like for her to go through that. It wasn’t the deal she signed up for. And this is one of the reasons, by the way, that I kind of have wondered about Dan’s own sexuality. What was going on in that mind and what was motivating him. I’ve never talked to Mary Ann since then. I wish her all the best. I think she stayed in town. I’m pretty sure she did. I think I heard she was teaching on Treasure Island for some time. And, as far as I know, people have left her alone. And her family came around her and it was kind of like, “We’ll take care of you.”

03-01:59:00
Holmes: Well, speaking of picking up the pieces and moving on from Dan White, Dianne Feinstein, as you mentioned, at that memorial was in many ways picking up the pieces of San Francisco in the wake of that tragedy. She became the interim mayor after Moscone’s death and then won election in 1979. In many respects, when you look at Dianne, who became a famed US senator, this in many respects was really that first big stepping stone in her political career. And one that it seems that many forget. She’s a very hands-on mayor, from what I understand and from what I’ve read. The stern mother the city needed. I think many people put it that way.

03-01:59:54
Laubscher: And extremely detail-oriented. Dianne understood intrinsically, which George did not, what it takes to make a city run.

03-02:00:04
Holmes: Discuss that a little bit, your view of that.

03-02:00:07
Laubscher: Well, you used the mother term.

03-02:00:10
Holmes: Yeah. In a different kind of context they described Bill Graham the same way, as the adult in the room among the children, right, when they were talking about sixties music here in San Francisco. In some ways I think Dianne Feinstein kind of fit that same mold.

03-02:00:24
Laubscher: Well, I think Dianne was and is a San Franciscan right down to her toenails. She loves the city. She understands the city. She understands the basics it takes to put things together. If you look at mayors around the country who
have succeeded and failed, there’s all kinds of ways you divide success and failure from each other. But for a mayor you have to deliver services. The streets have to be paved. The police have to show up. It’s not an accident that one of the biggest fights, going back to the Agnos years, in San Francisco has been around the homeless. It’s not that San Francisco lacks empathy as a city or as an electorate. It’s that people feel like, “Hey, I don’t need somebody defecating on my front doorstep, literally, or shooting up needles in my front yard.”

The other day I was on my way to a meeting at MTA and I parked in the Civic Center garage, was walking up one of the exits, which many people don’t even walk up because the exits, which are one-way exits from the garage up to Civic Center Plaza have to be washed with bleach every morning because they’re used as urinals every night. But I was late. I wasn’t going to go up any elevator. I needed to get right up. So I went up and I opened the door, the one-way door out and here’s a guy splayed on the stairs shooting up. Totally nodded out, trying to find a vein. And I just walked past him. And I felt a sense of just emptiness. The things as a native San Franciscan flashed through my mind. It was should I call the police? I know the police are not going to arrest the guy and haul him in. I don’t want the guy arrested and hauled in. I want somebody to help the man. But where am I going to do that? This was in public view. This was not in some little corner. This was eight steps down in Civic Center Plaza. And I walked up and I looked around for police officers. For a long time they had one at the Polk Street entrance but they don’t anymore. I just knew that if I went over and said something to somebody, nothing would happen. It’s like calling the police when somebody breaks the window on your car to steal cassette tapes or whatever the modern equivalent is. And I’ve had that happen to me. It’s like, “Yeah, don’t bother us. We’re too busy. We don’t have time for this.”

And so Dianne—

But Dianne did. And that’s a huge change in the way the city was between then and now. Dianne was a firebug. She loved the fire department. She loved the guardians of the city. That was so much different. She had respect. She wasn’t naive about the power of the unions or any of that other stuff. She had respect for the people who protect San Francisco. She had a desire to make sure that the quality of life was high. She was in Pacific Heights. Of course she was used to clean streets. Of course she was used to all this other stuff. But she could see in large parts of the city that that wasn’t being kept up.

How would you compare that? Because here we had Moscone, which was a watershed election of a very progressive vision of San Francisco, a path in
many ways that he was trying to take the city down and wanted to lead that
down. In the aftermath of his assassination Dianne Feinstein is putting the
pieces back together but then has to chart her own path, which seems to be
right down the center, which is not very easy to do in San Francisco.

No. And she did an excellent job. You could draw a comparison, and I think
there’s some validity to this, to LBJ after the Kennedy assassination. It’s kind
of like, “Oh, well, I might not have ever voted for this person for that office
but they’re in that office now and I’m going to give them the benefit of the
doubt.”

And that allows them, I think, a lot of political capital and room to maneuver,
to get things done after that.

Absolutely. Absolutely. But the other part was that Dianne would have these
meetings of all the department heads and she would be relentless about
making sure they did their jobs. San Francisco, the city governance here is
very laissez-faire. What is it they say about Russia, the old Soviet Union? I
can’t remember what the joke itself was but the punch line is, “We pretend to
work and they pretend to pay us.” Here, and I’ll just say this, the combination
of civil service and public employees unions over the years have made it
possible, and the love of convoluted processes in this town, which is growing,
makes it possible for people not to really have to work very hard most of the
time.

And I’ll just give you a quick aside. I was at a meeting the other day where we
were talking about this Muni heritage weekend thing we cosponsor with the
MTA, the transit agency. And one guy who is in charge, put in charge of this
and doesn’t really want to do it, reported out that—we’re going down about
which bus we’re going to have, vintage antique buses, most of which we
saved ourselves and gave to the city. “Well, what about this bus?” “Well, no,
that bus won’t be there.” I said, “Well, that’s one of the original buses from
1941.” This is the seventy-fifth anniversary of Muni’s first trolley coach line.
We’re trying to promote what we call green machines, zero emission vehicles.
San Francisco has more than anybody else. This is a great PR thing for them,
not us, about today and we’re using history as a context for it. I said, “All we
need is a static display. It doesn’t have to operate,” because I know it’s not
operational. But it’s beautifully restored, cosmetically. And he said, “Well,
it’s in this very tight space, parked in this very tight space.” I said, “Yeah, I
know where it’s parked. It’s always parked there.” “Well, they don’t think
they can get it out.” I said, “Who’s they?” “Well, the people who told me
about it.” I said, “All they have to do is pull it out.” He said, “Well, they say
the tires are flat.” And I wanted to say, “Did the dog eat their homework,
“too?” I did say, “I’ll bring my bicycle pump and I’ll pump up the tires myself.”

I get pretty animated about this because there is a whole thing in San Francisco, and it’s true then and it’s even truer now, of can’t do-won’t do government. And this is at the operational level. I’m not saying there aren’t a lot of people who don’t work hard. There are a lot of people who want to do the right thing. But there is an ethos here that new arrivals in city government are told by their coworkers, “You’re making me look bad because you want to get too much done.” I have heard this constantly over the last thirty years from young people who go into government, new employees, they’re not all young, and say, “I can’t believe this.”

And the reason this is salient to this discussion is Dianne understood that. Dianne had been through that. And Dianne was not having it. And if you want to call her the stern mother or whatever else you do—I don’t think a sexist or gender specific thing is really appropriate. I think the appropriate thing is she was a tough—

Holmes: That wasn’t my words.

Laubscher: I know. But she was a tough manager. A tough manager. And because there were no women mayors in this country at that time it came across as all the more different. George was very much the old *laissez-faire* thing. “As long as it doesn’t cause me any political trouble, I’m fine with it.” He was not going to take on the civil service employee unions. His main concern, as every mayor’s is, was having enough money to pay for this huge human infrastructure we have and the pensions that are associated that the voters approved. The voters can’t blame the politicians. I’m getting off on this. But Dianne understood all of this and I think her strength was that she was able to govern from the center but still demand performance from the people who worked for her, worked for the city. And I think that’s her great strength. And I don’t think we’ve had a mayor since then who is as good at it.

Meeker: It’s been two hours.

Holmes: About ten more minutes.

Meeker: Okay.
Laubscher: Just so you know, I can go longer. I know you guys have limitations on how much you can transcribe and stuff like that. And I know we haven’t covered as much as—

Holmes: No, no, that’s fine. Actually, this is actually getting to the last section I wanted to wrap-up. Because this also happened around what became the late stage of your journalist career. I want to talk about the KRON strike.

Laubscher: Okay. And I want to talk about it. I’m just going to have to beg one dispensation. I got a bio break real fast.

Holmes: We ready?

Meeker: Yeah.

Holmes: I wanted to talk a bit before we go on. Again, coming after the Moscone assassinations, Dianne taking over, this is also a point of transition in your own career, of leaving journalism and going into your public relations career, which started with Bechtel, which we’ll talk about next session. After your years in broadcast journalism, maybe reflect a bit before we get to the KRON strike, on the difference that you saw between print journalism and broadcast journalism.

Laubscher: At the time people, made a date to watch the news on TV. It was what they call “appointment viewing.” I don’t know if that term was used then. The news came on at 6:00. There were no VCRs. You wanted the news, you watched at 6:00. And the audiences are what they were. Certainly profitable for the stations. And print came once a day, in the morning. The print covered the news that was made the day before, by and large, unless it was some breaking event. If you were broadcast you were fresh. I have always been a visual guy so I felt that the pictures were the most important part of the story. Show me. I started in radio but television, I thought, was just a wonderful medium. And I thought print was trapped a little bit in old conventions and the way we’ve always done it and the way we lay out the newspaper. When USA Today came out much later and debuted, the pushback from daily newspapers in cities was almost inchoate in its anger. Stories were too short, it was too punchy, it was too well-written. Reminds me of the historians who rage about the popularizers. We’ve talked about that before. You mean somebody who actually reads the thing? And I think it was that same kind of human instinct. This is how I do it. This is how we protect it. We’re not going to change it because change is bad. Who moved my cheese and all that other sort of stuff.
And all these things have conventions that grew up when broadcast news conventions were pretty young and they were shaped and limited by the technology involved. Same with print.

I remember the other day a Facebook friend went berserk on me, a woman. But she asked me specifically in one of these Facebook comment things, but posted to her wall, “Rick Laubscher can—” And she named somebody else, another friend of mine, Sam Singer, who’s a PR guy. “Can you tell me how it’s possible that there was not one picture on the front page of all these pages?” She had taken a photograph of the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, and the San Francisco Chronicle, that morning’s papers. “Not one of these papers have Hillary Clinton’s picture on the front page.” This was the morning after her acceptance speech. And I just sent a note back. And she was clearly very exercised about this. And I said, “Deadlines.” “What do you mean deadlines?” And I explained. This was a text. And I said, “They have deadlines.” And I said, “They have deadlines.” And she lives in Sonoma. And I said, “They can’t get the paper to you by the time you wake up.” I said, “That’s why I don’t read print newspapers, I don’t read newspapers in print anymore.” And she was astonished. But not as astonished as I was to look at a photograph of somebody who actually still subscribed in the Bay Area to three print newspapers.

Holmes:
To print newspaper.

Laubscher:
And that’s one of the dichotomies we have. I tried to pride myself, and always prided myself, on not taking assignments off the assignment desk unless it was breaking news or something, because the escape for any TV reporter from mundanity, from the run of the mill stories, is get your own stories. Make your own contacts. It’s the same. Print reporters did that. That’s how the stories got in print. And then broadcast news stole them. And this was and still is almost universal. And I remember a couple of times when I would come up and somebody would say, “The Chronicle has this story. Go cover it.” I said, “We covered that story two weeks ago. We broke that story. The only reason they waited that long is that they didn’t want to look like they were taking it from but that’s our story.” “Well, go and do an update.” “I don’t think there is an update.” But they’re so trained that they’re going to be in trouble if something appeared in the paper and they didn’t cover it that night. And that’s mediocrity.

Holmes:
I wanted to ask you as a reporter, it seems from an outsider’s view that when someone—a live reporting or a live shot such as you pioneered, there’s not really much room for interpretation. You’re there getting the views of the people, you’re reporting on what happens. Where it seems as a print journalist
in their writing could enter in maybe just a paragraph or two paragraphs of interpretation and context more than, say, a live reporter.

I tried. We talked about some of the live reports I did in San Diego where the plane door was stuck and you got to fill. It’s all a function of time and resource. There’s nothing inherent in the broadcast medium that limits the depth you can go to. If you look at a Ken Burns documentary, if you look at *American Experience*, if you look at so many different pieces that have been done as broadcast journalism, it can be incredibly deep and have a lot of interpretation. But it takes resources to do that. And the danger of live shots, and any story that’s done under a super tight deadline with inadequate resources, is that you’re not going to get much interpretation. You’re formulaic in the way you approach a story. If it’s a raging fire, let’s say a breaking news thing, you show the fire and you talk about the fire. If there’s a victim on the street, you seek a victim out who’s been burned out of their home or something like that, you try to talk to them. You want the emotional nugget, as they say. And you want to create a situation that viewers will empathize with. That’s one of the oldest formulas in the book. You’re not going to have time in the context of a breaking story that’s happening right now to find out whether somebody had bribed the electrical inspector to overlook myriad code violations in the wiring which turned out to have caused the fire. That develops later in time. Are you going to want to put the resources in to do that? In a broadcast context where for decades the old saying was, “If it bleeds, it leads.” Let’s get quick crime. Let’s scare the hell out of people. Let’s show something. Now, of course, it’s whatever viral video.

The greatest thing you can do in broadcast news, local broadcast news now, and heck, you see it on the national shows, you want to be able to catch a viral video on the way up. You didn’t produce the content. The content may have essentially zero news value except that everybody wants to watch it. Cat videos, all this other stuff. But you want to pick and choose and catch something that creates that same emotional resonance and you want to do it before everybody has seen it on the internet already. That’s curation of other people’s content. That’s not news gathering. It’s a whole different world. And television, of course, for people who sit and stare at the tube, which are, by and large, a much older demographic. To sit down and actually watch a television news show today, which I don’t to—I record CBS out of habit and I’ll kind of thumb through it real quick to see if there’s anything that looks interesting and I’ll watch the political stories and that’s basically it.

Sure. But it was certainly a different time, as you were saying.
Laubscher: It was a much different time. I can’t imagine going into broadcast news today because there’s no time to think, no time to work. And I’ll give you an example of that that ties directly into the KRON strike, if you want to kind of move into that.

Seventy-nine, it was a pretty stunning year. In the middle of ’78, in the middle of all this of this other thing, I had been approached by a guy in the Bohemian Club. And I can’t remember how this happened. But he knew me from television or something. And he recruited me. The Bohemian Club is always looking for gifted people with certain talents to do scut work for them, and they make them associate members. And there are a few journalists who have been so dubbed. And I was interested. I was a San Franciscan. This was a big tradition. I was troubled by the fact that it was a male-only club and all that other stuff. I also liked to sing and he invited me to sit in with his camp. There’s a camp up at the Grove called Aviary. They’re the singers, the birds. And in Aviary they pick professional singers to kind of make the rest of the crooners sound better and to do that. Somehow he got the idea I wanted to do that or I might be able to do it. And I loved the stuff they were singing and I even took a couple of voice lessons. Ended up flunking the audition, I remember, but I made a friend with this guy. His name was Hal Rhodes. And he told me, “We’re singing. I’m a part of the group that does the Bracebridge Dinner in Yosemite every year.” So I went up, totally burned out by all this People’s Temple stuff. They used to do only one show and it was Christmas Eve, I think.

But this year for the first time they were doing two for popular demand, so I went up and won agreement from him to tape the dress rehearsal and then get a wide shot without any lights of the actual event and turn those into a package. And I didn’t misrepresent or anything. But what happened was in the dress rehearsal this man, in his period English costume, was marching down singing, and I’ve got him. We got him on the camera and he’s leading the parade. Then the next night all we were allowed to do was go in the back and take one wide shot but we were allowed to stay for dinner. And then the very next morning, because we had no live capability out of Yosemite, early the next morning, which I remember as being Christmas Eve morning, I drove back to San Francisco, did the piece, put it on. Then I got a call, I can’t remember if it was Christmas morning or the morning after that, from the office saying, “Can you call this woman? It’s very important. She said it’s essential she talk to you.” And it turned out to be his wife, who had become his widow, because the morning after that dress rehearsal he had had a massive heart attack and died and nobody told me. And I put him up, suggesting, implying that he was alive for the performance the night before, which he wasn’t. He was never named. It was just a visual. The story was about the tradition of the dinner and Ansel Adams starting it and all that other stuff. And when I realized all this, I thought, “Oh, my God.” And I phoned her
and I was afraid she was just going to sue or do something, emotional distress, whatever else, and she said, “Thank you for including Hal and making that a tribute.” And, of course, I had no idea what was going on. But this was kind of another thing that was adding to this. Here was something that was supposed to relieve stress and kind of added more to it.

Holmes: Added more stress. Yeah.

Laubscher: So ’79, much of ’79 was a blur to me. We went through it. I went in, did the work. The news director imploded. He was fired. I think he had substance abuse problems, clearly. We were moving on. I can’t remember if the anchor had left. But the station was kind of stumbling. And we had this contract coming up. I was under a personal services contract, which was a fancy way of saying that they would pay me a few thousand dollars a year more than the AFTRA scale in exchange for which I was essentially exempt from overtime and other sorts of things. I can’t remember all the details. But it was a common practice. If you got a personal services contract it meant that they couldn’t fire you at will without paying you off for the contract. And in that business, which was volatile, that was a nice thing to have. Well, I think my contract was for a couple of years or something.

After the ’79 elections, this thing really started heating up with KRON because they wanted to decertify, in essence, the writers. They had hired this whole category of people called associate producers, who were really writers.

Holmes: And they were union? Is that correct?

Laubscher: They were non-union.

Holmes: Oh, they were not union.

Laubscher: The associate producers were non-union, the writers were union. There were only a few writers, and as I said before, they really weren’t very good as writers. They had been shunted aside and they had filed grievances. And I was not really aware of any of this but it was kind of going on. I knew I didn’t like to work with the union writers because it was more work and the associate producers were, frankly, better writers, and they were hired for that. They had no job protection as the writers did. Well, anyway, that was going on.

And then we had this other thing kind of going on at the same time, which was another example of why KRON was a really great story, a great place to work. It had the right values. The Cambodian Holocaust was going on. A
story appeared in the newspaper or something about a group of doctors from UCSF who were going over there to volunteer in the border camps just inside the Thai border. And I went to the news director and I said, “This is a local story. We should go with them.” And she said yes. This was a new news director named Jean Harper. And she had been a producer there before. And I knew Jean. And she was kind of a no-nonsense person. And she said, “Yeah, go for it.” So we went over, did a story. It was tremendously impacting on me. Again, your hook, because it’s an international story and you’re a local reporter, your hook is covering the local people. And you’re watching these doctors and you’re trying to get the audience to identify. This is what reality television became. This was kind of early reality television but without the fakiness. You’re trying to get them to identify with the people who are there. Here’s someone who is just like me who is over there saving lives or watching babies die in their arms. And I saw that, I watched that. It was tremendously impactful. But you’re focused on getting the story, and you don’t really think about that pretty much.

So we came back and we ran a five-part series and it was just very well-received in the community. It was very strongly received. Joan Baez got in contact with the station and said, “We want to do a fundraiser. This is tremendous.”

03-02:30:05
Holmes:
She was a very active singer and activist.

03-02:30:08
Laubscher:
Oh, very much at the time. Yeah. So they sent me back. Go back and do an update. I think it was a different crew of people had gone. So I was out of the city. I was gone, I was there for a week, maybe two weeks, then I went back again. This was all in November. It got pretty heated, November, early December. And the contract expired on New Year’s Eve and it looked more and more like there was going to be a strike. I’m not sure exactly where the timeframe is but in the middle of all this, while I was focusing on the story—and really didn’t intend to be a labor activist—my friend and colleague, Thayer Walker, who had a personal services contract as I did, came to me and he said, “You know what? This is bullshit. They’re trying to break the union. And if they break the writers this time it’s going to be the reporters next time. We have to stand up for the writers.” And I remember saying, “But Thayer, they’re not very good.” Yeah, but it’s the principle of the thing.” And so I was convinced. And I don’t know why I did this. I mean, I really don’t know why I did this, to tell KRON, as he did, that I was exercising my option to opt-out of my contract and return to staff reporting. There was some option that I had.

This did not go over well with management and it coincided with coming back from the second thing and putting together the pieces, running the pieces. And the second trip involved coincided with a fundraising campaign to raise a
million dollars for these refugees that we were partnered with Joan Baez and her organization on. This was advocacy journalism, but I was totally involved in it, because once I had seen this how could I not want to do it? And I got very interested in doing something instead of just reporting on something. And we got back and we started running the pieces. And then we had a moment where the station, which was trying to collect all the benefits they could, the goodwill, positive PR from doing this. We had made the million dollars. My second series of pieces were running. They had been promoted and they were essentially all sketched out, hadn’t all been edited yet.

There was a lunch that I got told to go to, and I was happy to go to. I remember. It was at Julius’s Castle up on Telegraph Hill with the general manager of the station, Paul Wischmeyer. Was a very nice guy. And a bunch of other people from the station, and Joan Baez, and others. And at this time the strike was almost a certainty. And there was just a lot of ill feeling about management going around. I’m not quite sure what overcome me. I guess my ego was just out of control, is all I can say. And I said something. They were giving toasts and stuff like that. And I felt compelled to say something about taking care of the little people and honoring the writers, and we shouldn’t do this. And it was probably pretty pointed. I really don’t remember what I said except that apparently Paul Wischmeyer came back to the station and he was steaming. And you’ve got to understand, I didn’t have many interactions with management. When I got into business I was a part of management. But reporters were sort of told to be, lack of a better term, shit disturbers. Stir it up, challenge authority, do all this other stuff, and then, of course, I came out of the sixties and all that stuff. I overstepped. Clearly, in retrospect, I overstepped.

And when I got back I’m immediately called into Jean Harper’s office and she tells me something. She didn’t mention what had happened there but she said, “I’ve really had it with your stories. They’re way too long. They’re going on.” Just really kind of trying to provoke me into doing or saying something. And I remember saying something to the effect of, “But this was on the story budget. It’s always been budgeted for this amount of time.” And she said, “I don’t care. This is way too much.” I said, “But we’ve reached our goal, it’s done all this other stuff.” And she just had this completely doctrinaire and arbitrary kind of thing. She said, “Are you refusing? Are you refusing my instruction to reduce this thing, to cut this package in half?” I said, “No, I just wanted to be sure I was clear on what bullshit was going down around here.” And I used that word. And she turned livid.

I walked out of the room. The piece ran. The next day she called me into her office. And at the same time, to make everything even better, I had been having a lot of trouble with my knee, which I’d hurt in college. And I’d literally gotten to the point where I was falling out of my chair. When I would
try to stand up my knee would give out and I would fall down at work. And people had seen this. And I’d been to the doctor. In that same period I’d torn a meniscus or something. The next day I came in on crutches because I wasn’t supposed to put any weight on it and the doctor had scheduled this thing. And my attitude was, “Well, if there’s going to be a strike, I’m going to get my knee fixed so I don’t miss any work.” And all in the same timeframe we had scheduled the operation. Well, she calls me in, she looked me in the eye, and she threw an envelope at me, which turned out to be my last check, and she said, “You're fired. Nobody fucks with me.” Those were her exact words. And I was very tempted to say, “I’m sure you’re correct about that,” in a different context but I didn’t. And I left. And then the strike hit the next day. I became a cause célèbre around the strike. My firing was viewed as retaliatory. You’ve got to remember, in the newspapers, even the Chronicle, those reporters are all guild people. They’re all newspaper guild people. The union is strong there. So this story was much more important to them than it even was to me, because I found myself feeling like, “Okay, I’ve got to be in solidarity with this stuff.” But frankly, I would have rather seen buyouts of the writers and some other kind of transition. But I just got carried away and I think my ego was what carried me away. I thought I was more important than I was.

03-02:38:37 Holmes: Well, and needless to say, the strike didn’t get any positive press, most likely.

03-02:38:43 Laubscher: It did not. What they did was they stuck a bunch of management people on the air and those people, by and large, were shunned for years by any journalist who was in a union. And it wasn’t their fault. They were just put on the air. And several of them turned out to be very good reporters. One of them, Vic Lee, who was our assignment editor at the time, who was our assignment editor at the time, is still on the air forty years later and he’s still doing a great job. And Vic and I are still in contact. He’s a great guy. I consider it a major mistake in my life to have gotten so involved, to let myself get so worked up, to let myself get carried away with my own ego. The strike, I don’t know that it changed all that much. I don’t even remember whether the union writers went away. They might have. But did it make any difference in the lives, other than those three people who were the union writers? No, except mine. And that was self-inflicted. Because, as I say, I was married to another reporter at KRON. She came back to work at the strike. We lost both our incomes; mine permanently, hers temporarily during the strike. And I ended up getting a modest settlement that the union worked out, but not enough to make up for everything we went through. And then she ended up leaving and getting a job as the chief of communications for the office of the president at UC, David Saxon at the time. And that started a very good career for her in the UC system. It also contributed to the demise of our marriage, frankly. And that’s on me, because I had gotten swept up in this world and my brain kind of lost touch with reality. Television will do that to you.
Holmes: And it’s from that point that you transitioned to the Bechtel group?

Laubscher: Yeah. Not willingly. In very brief form, we were living over by St. Francis Wood. We were on our second sequential remodeling project, where we build equity in the real estate market by taking houses that need a lot of work and you do the work yourself. And that was something that had eaten up a whole lot of time for both of us, all our free time. But without the incomes, that wasn’t going to be sustainable. Plus, she was working at Berkeley and that was a tough commute from that part of San Francisco to Berkeley. My ego was so big that I assumed that all the other stations would immediately walk up to me and say, “Well, you’re a hot reporter. We want you.” Well, my union activism was enough to make that an impossibility. And it wasn’t really that much deep-rooted activism, but that’s what it was perceived as. We were then stuck in the reality that for me to rebuild my television career or extend it or whatever else would have required me to go to another city. And that would have made her career impossible, an uprooting, a whole different thing. I wasn’t going to go back to San Diego, as much as I loved it. I wanted to do a major market. But I also did not want to leave San Francisco. And that’s where that connection comes in. So maybe that’s a good place to break.

Holmes: I think so.

Laubscher: Thanks.

[End of Audio File 3]
Interview 4: October 11, 2016

Holmes: This is Todd Holmes with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley, sitting down once again with Rick Laubscher, for his fourth session of his oral history. We are here in his beautiful home in San Francisco, California, and today’s date is August 11, 2016. Rick, thanks so much for sitting down with me again.

Laubscher: Sure, Todd.

Holmes: In our last session, we left off discussing essentially what became the end of your journalist’s career. The KRON strike, you leaving KRON, and then looking for a new career path, which became an executive in public relations with the Bechtel Group in 1981. Before we get there, maybe talk a little bit about that transition, between KRON and deciding that you would have to look for other opportunities outside of journalism.

Laubscher: I spent a period of time kind of unmoored from things. I mean, journalism had been my passion for years. I had forfeited my position at KRON—that’s the way I look at it now—and really had to rethink what I wanted to do next. I had a few friends in network news, bigger markets; that’s something that could have been explored, that people thought—clearly, there was—word gets out—it’s a very small community. Word gets around: “Hey, this guy was a labor activist,” which is kind of interesting.

Holmes: Especially the way you were recounting the story, that’s a stretch on “activist”

Laubscher: Yeah. So it took a while for the shock to kind of settle in on me, and it’s like, do I really want to do local news forever anyway? 1978, which we talked about in the last session, was an unbelievable year of news and change, and pressures, and stress. For a journalist, you want to be there, and you want to be covering it. And I know that the last year that I was at KRON, 1979, I can’t remember anything about it, because there were just no stories. There was nothing that really kind of tied things together. And journalism is like that. You get these yeasty, hot times when everything is going on and you are really focused, and then there are times that aren’t as focused.

So trying to think about what I wanted to do, I did remember that I liked being involved in this fundraising campaign to help the Cambodian refugees, and I liked that kind of opportunity to be an advocate for something. And I loved my city. So while all of this was kind of going on, Judith, my wife at the time, was keeping the boat afloat by taking a job at the UC president’s office, and
indirectly, I learned a little bit about university politics, which kind of taught me that, boy, no industry, no business, no occupation is without those kind of things, you know? I spent a stint of about four or five months working on a political campaign that I don’t talk much about because it was just kind of there and gone, but it had its interesting aspects. It was called Proposition 10, and it was a separate smoking sections proposition. I was working for some folks in Southern California. Paul Loveday was the main proponent, and he was just a very strong anti-smoking campaigner. He had worked on a previous campaign, Proposition 5, which had gotten beaten down by the tobacco industry mercilessly. They thought, “Well, we are going to correct it and come back.” And this one didn’t go as far, really—and this seems funny now, but this was in 1980. It was a November ballot measure that called for separate smoking sections in restaurants and public spaces. There was a fellow who is still active, I think, named Stan Glantz—Stanton Glantz, PhD—who was at UCSF [University of California, San Francisco] who was one of the leading academics piling up the evidence against secondhand smoke. We ran this campaign kind of on a shoestring—it was on a shoestring—and we were well ahead in the polls. I ran the media for it. And in the last three weeks, the tobacco industry put in some incredible amount of paid advertising, and beat it back. Well, they won that battle, but as we know today, they lost the war, in a big way, on all these things. And I think there was some consciousness raising that went on there, which was good.

So I was both kind of dipping my toes into political campaigning and also the idea of advocacy, and taking a stand, and trying to influence the media instead of being part of the media. So that was very valuable to me, but that ended in November. And then I didn’t see other prospects popping up right away. Early in the spring, I guess, 1981, a friend of mine, Larry Thomas, who had been Mayor Pete Wilson’s press secretary in San Diego, and was a good friend of Judith’s and mine, he had joined Bechtel a couple of years before. We were social friends in San Francisco. And Larry said to me, “You know, we are looking for somebody to run all our audiovisual activities. We do project films; we do a lot of different stuff. You are perfect for this job.” My reaction as I remember it was visceral and negative. I don’t want to be some corporate clown, and I don’t want to do this, I don’t want to do that. Eventually cooler heads prevailed. The more I thought about this, the more I thought it was interesting, very interesting, and I was grateful to Larry for the opportunity.

So an interview was arranged with his boss, whose name was Paul Kane, who was the head of PR, an old newspaper reporter. Old school. Old school PR. And Bechtel was a very low-profile organization at the time. It was considered secretive, or hermit-like. Well, a lot of that was because it was a privately-held company, and they didn’t have to tout their wares on the stock
market, and to analysts and things like that. Also, it was a business-to-
business company. You couldn’t buy Bechtel milk or beer, or—you know?

04-00:07:59
Holmes: And at the time, it was considered the largest privately-held company in the world, right?

04-00:08:05
Laubscher: Certainly one of them. I mean, it was always between Bechtel and Cargill. And when we would talk among ourselves, it was kind of like, “Well, we build things. They are just shipping—buying and selling grain. I mean, their revenues may be higher, but”—Everybody has their pride about these things.

04-00:08:25
Holmes: And to put this in context a little bit—for readers—the list of projects that Bechtel had built—and starting with—what? Hoover Dam in the 1930s?

04-00:08:40
Laubscher: And I went to the records, I went to—whatever I could find about this company, and that’s what changed my mind, when I realized, oh my gosh, who are these people? I am a native San Franciscan. The name had sort of vaguely floated in and out, but they weren’t a household name, even in their hometown. And when I learned about them and the things they had done, I thought, man, these people are risk-takers. They are builders. I have always had an affinity for people who build instead of just talk about it. It’s an action-orientation. And that’s what they had.

04-00:09:26
Holmes: Just to provide a list for context, so we have Hoover Dam, the nuclear power plants, BART [Bay Area Rapid Transit], the [San Francisco] Bay Bridge, something like 95 airports worldwide. They had projects on six continents.

04-00:09:41
Laubscher: Well, the very brief history of Bechtel could be summarized through the generations of the leadership. The founder, Dad Bechtel—everybody called him “Dad”—Warren Bechtel was his name, was a railroad builder. He was a dirt mover when he started. He took his two mules and an old Fresno scraper, and started grading railroad beds as a subcontractor in 1898. And he built a steadily-increasing business in the West, mostly around railroads. He was respected. He wasn’t the biggest, and he was regional. And then he got in on this consortium with these other people who went on to be titans of construction: Harry Morrison of Morrison-Knudsen; Henry Kaiser; and the Utah construction people, the Wattises. All of these were very, very big names, and they put together the winning bid on Hoover Dam—a fixed-price bid. And to do something that had never been attempted anywhere in the world, and which many doubted could be done on that scale. To this day, if you stand in front of that dam, you wonder how they did it. You really do.
Holmes: It’s amazing.

Laubscher: It truly is amazing. And the guy who came out of that, the one person who came out of that who learned the most and applied it was Steve Bechtel, Sr., Warren’s son. Steve—I was really lucky to meet him after his retirement. Well, he never really retired, but he wasn’t in line management anymore. He was so charismatic and so able to capture your imagination with his imagination. Whether it’s the nuclear power industry, or Steve, who had assembled after World War II, a variety of really brilliant people, many of whom had been in the shipbuilding business with him during the war—he was all-in on Atoms for Peace. People can look back now and sneer and do all that other stuff, but you have got to look at the history. The history was, this is—we are going to turn this thing, atomic power, from a curse to a blessing. And he played a major role in helping cajole utilities into trying it out. He put in substantial amounts of capital to kind of feed the process. Bechtel built one of the first demonstration plant, they built the first commercial plant, and then they were off and running. And that turned out to be a mainstay of Bechtel’s business for many, many years—decades really—to come.

When I joined Bechtel in 1981 and toured the buildings, there were 10,000 workers in downtown San Francisco alone. Most of them were in brand-new office buildings South of Market, another area where Bechtel pioneered, because they built the first high-rise South of Market. And now it looks like a dwarf. But then, it towered above anything that was south of Market Street.

Laubscher: It was 23, and it was built in 1968. There was nothing there. Even in ’81 when I joined it, it was a bunch of low-rise construction around it, one new tower next to it, which Bechtel also built and joined by a sky bridge to the old tower. And they had filled all these buildings, and much of it was with nuclear engineers sitting at drafting tables. That’s the technology in 1981. It was a tremendous amount of work. It employed a heck of a lot of engineers. I still run into, today, people who are the children of then-Bechtel engineers doing that kind of work. It was a mainstay in San Francisco in terms of employment. And, by the way, that was just the San Francisco office. They had a similar nuclear division in suburban Los Angeles. They had one in suburban Washington, D.C., and they had one in Ann Arbor, Michigan, handling plants for various regional energy clients.

Then when it comes to BART, that was really Steve Bechtel’s vision. Not all by himself, but Steve served on what was called the Blyth-Zellerbach Committee in San Francisco, a group of businessmen including—I’m going to
miss his first name, but—Mr. Zellerbach—was it Harold? But Mr. Zellerbach of Zellerbach paper [Crown Zellerbach], who had built the first modern high-rise on Market Street itself in the 1960s, and was a forward-thinking kind of regional business executive. They all saw downtown San Francisco as a regional center. They saw the diaspora of people that we have talked about before out of San Francisco after World War II. They had seen the suburban settlements; they saw the clogged Bay Bridge; they saw that if we can get people downtown, we could grow the downtown.

Holmes: It’s an interesting transition, if we look at it that way. California historians, if they do their homework, can usually point to the pivotal role of, say, Bank of America in building not just California, but also San Francisco. You have got the Golden Gate [Bridge] that they funded. Their two buildings, built around the same time—the Transamerica Building, which was their holding company, and then the Bank of America Tower—they are great symbols of the rise and the development of San Francisco as the corporate center of California. But at the same time, what’s often overlooked, mostly—perhaps because it was a private company and it kept a low profile—was the equally vital role that Bechtel played in that development.

Laubscher: Yes. And when I went in to interview, I learned—and I had learned from my friend Larry Thomas—that the COO of Bechtel, George Shultz, who was not the chief executive, but he had a remarkable positive partnership with Steve Bechtel, Jr., the CEO and chairman—that George was looking to open the company up to the outside world.

Holmes: For transparency?

Laubscher: For transparency.

Holmes: I want to get to that, but I wanted to ask you—well, which I think also leads down that road—about that transition, from going from being a reporter, a journalist, an award-winning journalist who reported the news, to public relations, where, I guess some would say, you are not really reporting the news, but you are crafting a message on behalf of your client. And this really fits in with that transparency that George Shultz was trying to bring to the company around this time. Can you explain a little bit about that, and talk about that transition?

Laubscher: It was bumpy. It was bumpy. I was a journalist. I believed in facts. I believed in this kind of thing, and putting it all out there. And that was not what Bechtel was. I’ll give you an example.
But I want first to just mention the interview I had with George Shultz after interviewing with Paul Cane, which was all I thought I was going to do when I went down there. His boss was George Shultz. And he said, “Do you have a few minutes to talk to Mr. Shultz?” And at this point, I don’t remember if it was a separate trip down, or whether it just happened. I was so naïve about job interview prep and stuff like that, it’s kind of like, let’s go, let’s do it. I had kind of worked on my own internal resume to talk about things. When I got there to see Shultz, he right away started asking me about world situations and other kinds of things. And I answered. It was kind of a higher-level conversation than this and that. I told him what my skill set was, and what I thought I could do for the company, and why I agreed that it was good that the company would open up.

The thing I remember most about the interview was the silence. And I learned a lot from this. George would ask you a question, and you would look at him, and you would listen carefully, and you would try to formulate your best answer. I knew enough to try to keep it short. And then he would just stare at you. He had these big, blue eyes. Still does. He would look at you with that face that showed nothing, and you would then blurt out something else, [laughter] and try to elaborate. It must have been a real blessing to him—a gift to him—in diplomatic discussions. Famously, in the Nixon tapes, when they came out later, one of the asides, if I remember it correctly, was that when Shultz’s name came up in some discussion with Nixon’s confidantes, he said—when they were trying to figure out what George was thinking or doing—[President Richard] Nixon commented, “I’d sure hate to play poker with that guy.”

04-00:20:40
Holmes: Best poker face in the world. [laughter]

04-00:20:42
Laubscher: It really is. And so I left that interview convinced that I wasn’t going to get the job. It wasn’t that he had said anything negative that I could remember, but it just wasn’t—I didn’t make an impression on this guy. So I was a little downtrodden, because I had ginned myself up to really get this job. I found out later that George had been very clear to Paul Cane that he wanted more women in senior management. And this wasn’t senior management, but it was a groomable position. He was not happy that Paul didn’t bring him a woman that he could hire. I was very grateful that I got in the door.

Once I got in the door, I got handed other stuff besides the audiovisual stuff. And that was a completely archaic, sclerotic, outdated department that had been run by a guy who had come into the company in the 1950s after making project films for the Navy, or training films for the Navy. I won’t spend a lot of time on those details. What it had yielded was a lot of very valuable project footage. The industrial films they had made were pretty boring and stilted, but
the raw footage that you could pick from really helped illustrate the history of
that company, and the projects it worked on.

But one of the other things I had to do was called the Arab Information
Project. It was an effort by Bechtel—not terribly well funded, to be honest—
well, I shouldn’t say that. They made some beautiful, glossy brochures, and
they made some other things. But they were there to really please their Saudi
clients rather than necessarily being targeted at having a big impact on the
public.

And to touch on that, Saudi clients. So Bechtel by this time had a number of
projects going in the Middle East.

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Airports. The biggest one they had was called Jubail
Industrial City. And this was another Steve, Sr. special.

In Saudi Arabia?

In Saudi Arabia. Steve flew in right after World War II. He had met Prince
Faisal [Faisal bin Abdulaziz Al Saud], later King Faisal, at Marin Ship, the
local shipyard, and given him a tour. And this was just before, if I remember
the timing right, just before Faisal’s father, King Abdulaziz, met FDR
[President Franklin Delano Roosevelt] on—I don’t know if it was on the
Potomac. It must have been on a destroyer, over on the Red Sea, after or
before [the] Yalta [Conference]—I can’t remember. It was right in the Yalta
trip. Obviously, petroleum was involved. We were talking about geopolitics.
We were already talking about the Russians, who were a lot closer to Saudi
Arabia than we were, and everybody knew that the Germans had tried to
penetrate the Middle East to get its oil for their war machine. So the stakes
were pretty high.

And one of the things Steve noticed with the rudimentary activities that they
had—or I may have my timing wrong on this. This may have been a later trip
that Steve took. I don’t want to misspeak here. But it’s easily checkable. But
anyway, at one point, after Saudi had built its first early refineries, Steve flew
in, and he noticed these gargantuan gas flares. Natural gas is a byproduct of
pumping petroleum oil out of the ground. They didn’t know what to do with
it, so they flared it. They burned it off, which, of course, has greenhouse gas
consequences that nobody was thinking about at the time. But it’s also a waste
of clean energy—reasonably clean energy.

So Steve’s idea was let’s take this and let’s use it, and build a city around it.
We’ll build petrochemical plants where we can turn the natural gas into all
sorts of saleable chemicals. At that time, natural gas transport was in its infancy, so I guess this was in the ’60s when he first came up with this. You could liquefy natural gas, it was possible, but there really wasn’t much of a market for it that would justify the cost. But chemicals you could make money on. You could build all these chemical plants and build an entire city in the desert to work around. And the Saudis liked the idea. They ended up building two industrial cities: Jubail on the [Persian] Gulf Coast; and Yanbu on the Red Sea coast. Bechtel got a big role at Jubail, and that carried them for 25 years at least.

Holmes: Well, I believe by some accounts, it was hailed at that time as the largest construction project in history.

Laubscher: Yeah. You have to understand that when you talk about these things, there aren’t that many turnkey jobs anymore where one firm handles everything. Bechtel was the program manager, and then they had architects—separate architecture firms, separate engineering firms, all sorts of—a myriad of other firms were involved. But Bechtel was basically responsible for the outcome. So that was another example of Steve, Sr.’s brilliance and foresight.

But there was a lot of fear and suspicion about Saudi Arabia and what they stood for even way back then, in the 1980s. And a lot of it was the stated position of the Arab Gulf States about Israel, its refusal to put Israel on their maps, literally. The Zionist state doesn’t exist, and all this other stuff. So this was a very sensitive issue—understandably so—in the United States. One of the things we were tasked with was trying to get the so-called Arab point of view, which amounted to the Saudi point of view, because that’s who was encouraging us to do it. To the best of my knowledge, it was not the Saudi government pouring money into this project. That’s not what happened. It was doing PR to make your clients happy. So it was on Bechtel’s nickel, [laughter] and because it was on Bechtel’s nickel, it wasn’t overwhelmingly funded. There was a nice brochure; there were some videos, and some other things. And then we were there to help.

So very early into my career—maybe the first month, certainly the first two months—it was suggested to me that I needed to go over and see Bechtel in Saudi. So I went over, and got a tour, met with people, talked to people, and offered the help of our video unit on their project activities. There was a fellow—I’ll never forget this—whose name was John Hanna. And he was a longtime Bechtel fellow. He was an immigrant to America. I’m sure he was a citizen, but he may have come from Lebanon or someplace like that. That part is a little vague now. But he spoke with an accent, and I had to listen to understand him. Anyway, he wanted us to do an orientation video, and the script had already been done, and he wanted my comments on the script. The
orientation video was for expat wives coming to Saudi Arabia—what it was going to be like. It painted this wonderful picture of how idyllic it was to be an expat woman in Saudi Arabia. And I remember making comments and I don’t think I was hostile in making them. I was quizzical. “Are we going to say that they can’t drive? Are we going to say they can’t go out alone? Are we going to address any of these issues?” And he said, “No. Why would we do that?” I said, “Because you are recruiting people.” And these weren’t necessarily all Bechtel employees. Many of these would be new hires. I said, “If you bring families to Jubail, the husband goes off and works, and the wife can’t do anything. She’s going to have expectations that she can do certain things, and if you don’t manage those expectations, you may have some failed hires.” He said, “Well, that’s really not our problem.” And I said, “It’s not?” He was very obstinate and very aggressive. And I challenged it. I was a reporter. But it was all within the bounds of politeness and everything else.

Anyway, I get back to San Francisco, I’m called into Paul Cane’s office, and a telex—how quaint—a telex had arrived, it beat me home and demanded from this fellow that I be fired immediately because I had insulted the client. And he said, “What do you know about this?” I said, “I haven’t the slightest idea what he’s talking about.” He said, “This young man is too aggressive and too brash, and he insulted the client.” I said, “I never met the client. The client wasn’t there. My discussions were with this guy.” Now, in retrospect, he may have been feeling some pressure from the client to say, “You can’t say any of these things. You have just got to deliver all of this stuff.” But he never said that to me. We never had that kind of a discussion.

So I was terrified that I had just got this job, and now I was going to lose it. And so I just said that no, this didn’t happen. And he, to his credit because the PR guys at Bechtel were not at the top of the totem pole, and any PR department that talks back to the business side, you had better have firm footing. But Paul did not blink. He just said, “I want to know exactly who in the client’s organization was offended. I want to be able to address this with the client directly.” And the guy backed down, because he was not telling the truth.

Coda to that little story: a number of years later, long after I had left Bechtel, a man in Riverside killed his wife, got in his car, drove around for three days, was the object of a huge manhunt. Came back to his own driveway with the police watching him, and shot himself in the head. And that man was John Hanna. The same one. That was a big news story at the time in the Inland Empire. And I thought, “Wow. Wow.” I felt sorry, certainly, for his wife, but for everything else that he had gone through. Must have had a tortured, tortured life.
But so that was my introduction to Bechtel. And I learned that being a hardnosed, plain-speaking reporter in the world of PR—you needed to have some nuance.

Holmes: And certainly, entering Bechtel at the time you did, there was a need for talented public relations, and a nuanced tact. Looking at the history of the company, there in the late 1970s, and certainly in the 1980s, the company was experiencing a wave of criticism. Partly, some would argue, because it was a private company, so they had that mystique, that secrecy.

Laubscher: And that’s what Shultz was trying to combat.

Holmes: Which you became a part of—that push for transparency. There was also criticisms of what some called the first aspects of that revolving door. George Shultz, who was in the Nixon administration, later on, in 1982, became Secretary of State in the Reagan administration. We could touch on that here in a minute. But you also had Caspar Weinberger, who worked, like Shultz, both for the Nixon administration and the Reagan administration, as well as John McCone, who was an early business partner, I think, with Dad Bechtel.

Laubscher: With Steve Bechtel, Sr. in World War II. John McCone ran CalShip [California Shipping], which was the big shipyards in Long Beach.

Holmes: That’s right, that’s right. As well as Richard Helms and William Casey, all three of which would be later associated with the national security apparatus, the CIA.

Laubscher: Yeah. The Helms and Casey connections to Bechtel were very, very slender. And everybody kind of plays that whole thing up: “Oh, it’s the Bechtel spooks.” Yes, McConce went on to head the CIA. It’s interesting that, quite coincidentally, a friend of mine is married to John McCone’s daughter. And she gets apoplectic about this. Because it’s a denigration of her father’s career. “He’s a stooge for the Bechtels.” If anybody knows the Bechtels, yes, it’s a political family. Yes, they are Republicans. They are proud Republicans. Mainstream Republicans. And last time I checked, that was all perfectly legal in the United States. [laughter] Of course, we are at a point now—

But that was then. And seriously, we were in the Cold War. It was not a stain to serve your country in intelligence. The other guys had nukes. I think that every child in America needs to have a school orientation, they need to be like my generation. When we were kids, little kids, we got the “duck and cover” films. It’s so ludicrous. But somehow we tried to grapple with the
unthinkable. They should do a program for these kids where you show the “duck and cover” films, which is a two-minute segment, one of those Twilight Zone episodes about nuclear war—and these were things we all watched and were riveted by—and Dr. Strangelove. Those three things alone are enormously instructive about the state of the country’s fears at the time. And they should see something about the Cuban Missile Crisis. I went to Cuba last year, with friends, one of whom has written about this in book form. He is a historian, a nuclear-age historian. It’s just absolutely chilling to contemplate what could have happened. And almost did happen. When we look back, to say to try to defend American interests was wrong lacks any kind of context to me. That’s just my opinion. And by the way, for the record, I am not a registered Republican. [laughter]

No, but I think it hits a good point: that the criticism, both coming out at the time and then in later books—which we, again, could talk about here in a minute—does seem to not really highlight that context.

Well, but people like simplistic answers, simplistic bromides. Nowhere is that clearer than in this current 2016 presidential election campaign. It can’t get any simpler than this. We are down to a third-grade comprehension level. We have even passed the fourth-grade comprehension level now on our way down. And that’s another whole story.

But when you look at the interlocking world that revolved around the nuclear industry, the nuclear fears, all of those things—that embrace Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the Cold War, all of these other things—it’s a much more complex picture than a lot of people would like to paint. And one of the things that Bechtel later did—and of course got criticized for that, too—was it did an incredible job in helping demilitarize and defuse the ex-Soviet nuclear arsenal under some of the treaties that, yes, George Shultz helped negotiate. Well, somebody had to do it. It was competitively bid, it was competitively won, and it’s not something that got a lot of attention. It’s not very sexy; it doesn’t look like Hoover Dam. It had a huge impact on humanity, potentially.

I want to get into—within this same vein—your role within the public relations department. Again, when we put this in the context of increasing criticism from even—depending on the party in power—sectors of the government against Bechtel, you had a lot on your plate to address. You mentioned, of course, brochures for the Saudi Arabia products, audiovisual. What were your other roles in trying to, I guess, re-craft a different public message or vision of Bechtel at the height of this?
What transpired were a couple things. First of all, it became pretty clear that there were several things going on. The VP of the public relations department, Paul Cane, was—coasting toward retirement—I’ll just say that. He had done a lot for the company; he had put in a lot of work; he had given himself, literally, a heart attack the year before I got there, and had been laid up for a long time. He was trying to de-stress and relax so he could live longer. And he was presiding more than leading the department, and that was not missed by George Shultz and Steve Bechtel, Jr. And that’s all I’ll say about that.

But they had three guys, and I was the most junior of the three, who really led almost all of the day-to-day efforts of the work, did the work. And one of them was named Tom [Thomas G.] Flynn, who became my mentor, who had been [San Francisco mayor] Joe [Joseph] Alioto’s press secretary. Tom never had a college degree. He had come to us from the Alioto administration before I got there. Tom was one of the shrewdest political operators and smartest people I ever met. He was always insecure that he didn’t have a college degree, and I always told him, boy, that matters not a whit! And Tom was—as you would guess from the Alioto connection—a loyal Democrat. And they brought him in because they wanted another point of view, which was to their credit. Larry, who came in after Tom, was, I would say, Pete Wilson’s press secretary, a rock-ribbed centrist Republican. And I think he was clearly Paul’s favorite because his political views and everything else mirrored Paul’s.

I was kind of brought in to do this specialized thing, but very early was given broader responsibilities, including some relations with the city of San Francisco, which was our host city, our headquarters city, and a lot of different projects involving media relations. The foundation got moved under me. Basically, I got handed managers in the company, in the department, who had been there a long time, and that Paul was very frustrated with. So after I basically restructured and dealt with the audiovisual department, I moved on to other areas where the management wasn’t very responsive to the new directions of the company and where things were going.

Could you just take a moment to describe what the audiovisual was usually used for—was this for television, or—?

Yeah. It was so old; it was so out of date. This was the 1980s. Remember, I had been doing integrated live broadcasts with doing TV news. Everything was on tape by the time I left TV news, and when I got there, everything was being still shot on 16 mm film. And when I asked the fellow who was doing it, I said, “Why aren’t we using tape?” he said, “Well, this is industrial video, and tape is industrial video, and that’s for training and teaching.” I said, “It is? Why?” And so I immediately ran into this kind of thing.
And what I did with that was essentially worked myself out of a job. I’ll explain that really quickly. The context of what was going on was the nuclear power industry was doing that. Three Mile Island had occurred. Bechtel was not involved with building Three Mile Island, but not surprisingly, the utility, General Public Utilities in Pennsylvania, called us, called Bechtel—this was before I got there; ’79 I believe was the date—and said, “You have got to help us clean this mess up.” And of course, this was unprecedented. Nobody had ever done it. That’s why they called Bechtel. It was a real mess, and Bechtel not only did that, but they dispatched Tom Flynn to, in essence, be seconded—that is, given to the utility—to help them with their PR. Help them defend what was going on. And Tom was a brilliant media strategist and framer of arguments.

So that was his background, and he had come back. And then, along with the Arab Information Program, which was kind of winding down a little bit at that time, and frankly, I thought, was—I think we all thought was kind of like, “Do we really have to do this? I don’t know if we want to do this.” So when the funding kind of dried up—it was not lamented—I got very involved in defending the nuclear industry, kind of taking that portion over from Tom, and sat on industry councils. Let’s face it: all of these utilities had enormous investments in nuclear power. It was going to break their balance sheets if they had to shut those plants down. And the public fear was runaway. If you look at the hard science of TMI [Three Mile Island] and radiation releases, and things like that, it was nothing. It was miniscule. Certainly compared to Chernobyl, which was a true calamity on a global scale. And that really put the stake in the heart of the nuclear industry; partly because TMI had gotten so much non-scientific condemnation for what it was, Chernobyl, it did no good to explain the difference between our PWRs [pressurized water reactors] and BWRs [boiling water reactors], the technical kinds of reactors we had, and unshielded reactors like the Russians—the Soviets recklessly built everywhere. That’s a subject for another day.

But yes, I spent a great deal of time being very focused on the nuclear defense, and helping this industry put stuff together, putting arguments together, and things like that. At the same time, we were doing a lot of internal management around what we came to call the downturn. The nuclear industry peaked, we had oil crises, we had all sorts of things. Bechtel had diversified its businesses. Steve, Sr. had seen to it way back when to avoid cycles—I mean, to have counterbalancing cycles. If this is up, that’s down. If this is up, that’s down. It’s like homebuilding and residential construction—it’s whatever. A lot of this stuff is feast and famine. It’s tied to bigger macroeconomic cycles. And it’s tough, because if you want to give people a career and keep them going, just think about the notion of a project-based company in the first place. You are not running an insurance company here where you just keep grinding it out, or you are not a gas station where people
are always coming in to fill up. You are building something, and then you are
done.

And you have to move on to the next.

Now we have got all these people to feed and pay for, and you are going to
kill your own corporate economics if you have to carry too many people for
too long on an overhead payroll because you don’t have a project for them, or
you don’t have a client to send them to. And that’s what happened with the
nuclear power industry. The plants came online, then the pipeline suddenly
dried up, and no new plants were being ordered, although there were a lot that
had been anticipated.

So that was a major problem. And who gets it first? Corporate overhead, of
course. That’s as it should be. So I had not been there more than a few months
when all of a sudden, it was like, “Hey, we have got to cut this place down.
And what can we cut down?” We had a meeting of the top managers, and we
had to lay off something like—I don’t know. We had 50 people in the
department, roughly, something like that. We had to lay off seven or eight,
something like that. And Paul asked for volunteers, and I said, “I’ll take them
all.” And they said, “What?” I said, “I propose to shut down this whole
audiovisual unit. If we are going to do audiovisual in the future, we’ll contract
it out with something different.”

He was shocked. Everybody was shocked. And later, I remember Larry came
up to me afterwards, took me aside and said, “You don’t understand. You
don’t do that in corporate America. You just don’t do that.” I said, “But it’s
not pulling its weight.” He said, “But you are giving away everything you
have.” I said, “But it wasn’t worth anything.” And I really wasn’t concerned
about whether that meant sayonara to me, too. I was doing other things at the
time. The unit was a drag on my time because the guy was so hard to manage
and so difficult.

So anyway, that happened, and we just reshuffled all of the other stuff, and we
went on. But there were some lean times there for several years where we
really weren’t—we didn't have a lot of room to run and do things.

Well, and again, when we put this also in the context of the early 1980s, and
Bechtel under a lot of public criticism, even political criticism, it’s a bold
move. It may have been a drag, but it’s also having cuts to a public relations
department that was very much needed.
Laubscher: I agree. What would have been better would have been to replace a lot of those people who were just not productive people. I’m sorry. And I had already tried to update the technology, to update the mindset and thought of people. And we needed help, but it wasn’t—it was a different kind of help. It was people who were more skilled at storytelling.

One of the things I ended up doing was bring in my old colleague from Channel 4, Thayer Walker—not as an employee, but as a contractor—to produce these quarterly video pieces for us that were like a news magazine kind of thing. Obviously, it was corporate stuff, and it was distributed around the company. Not easy to do; you had to send out video cassettes in those days. But it was a way for people all around the world to kind of see what the company was doing in a dynamic way. The company had had—and still has today—a magazine called Bechtel Briefs, which was always the subject of jokes. What about “Bechtel Boxers” instead of “Bechtel Briefs?” That had gone back to the 1940s. So the company was actually kind of ahead of its time under Steve, Sr. in what it was doing, but it needed—in terms of informing its employees and its clients, and the people in the public who cared about it. But they weren’t pushing it out to the world as a whole, because there was no consumer advertising, or B2B [business-to-business] advertising.

And so what popped up then—and I would have to go back and see exactly where this came up, but I think it was ’82—very early on was this book by this fellow Laton McCartney, and this was sort of a turning point in my Bechtel career. McCartney had worked for BusinessWeek, and was a reputable reporter. And he had come to the company and wanted to do a book. He told us what he was doing, and it was going to be a cooperative book. He wanted cooperation. So the company let him in. I think this probably was ’81 or ’82, because I think that outreach had happened before I got there. He had come in and done all this stuff, and interviewed people, and things like that. And then he just sort of disappeared.

We heard nothing from him for a long time, and then suddenly word gets out that this book is coming, through Simon & Schuster. And we managed to get our hands on a galley before publication. We had SWAT teams going through and fact checking everything. Did this happen? Did that happen? What’s this about? It was a book that was filled with innuendo, and not a lot of facts. And no context. For example, anybody who knew George Shultz and Caspar Weinberger knew that they didn’t like each other. They were rivals. They were rivals at Bechtel, where Cap was the general counsel, and George was the president, but Cap did not report to George—he reporter to Steve. And then they were rivals again in the Nixon administration.

Holmes: Yeah, before that.
Laubscher: Before and after!

Holmes: And then they became rivals in the Reagan administration.

Laubscher: In the Reagan administration. Exactly.

Holmes: No, it was pretty famous, that rivalry.

Laubscher: It was extremely well known! This was no big secret. And this notion that you could get these two guys—I mean, let’s presume there was some desire to aid Bechtel in some way from some high government office. Well, I guarantee you—if one of those guys had tried to do that, the other guy would have [laughter] stopped him just because he didn’t like the other guy! And that’s human nature.

So it was that kind of thing where you gloss over, you ignore obvious flaws in your story, obvious flies in your ointment. And as we went through this thing, we went through it sequentially, and we hit gold at the end of it, where McCartney has to sum everything up. And he sums it up that it’s almost like the epilogue, where he talks about Steve Bechtel is at this event in Washington, and he is beaming as he looks out over the room with all of these people that he has influenced and have helped him over the years. And I can’t remember if it was Shultz and Weinberger, but he names people who were there, and David Rockefeller, and all of these folks, all part of the “cabal.” And “Oh yes, life is good when you are king.” It was to that extent. Those weren’t the words, but that was the sentiment that was being expressed.

There was only one problem with that, which was that Steve was not in Washington. He wasn’t at the event. He didn’t go. What had happened, apparently, is that McCartney had seen some sort of invitation to some event, and Steve was listed on the dinner committee. Well, if you have ever been in any kind of corporate life for a month and had to run one of these events, you know you have got people on the dinner committee that aren’t going to come! He never checked. And we took that and just ran with it. We went to—and this was mostly Tom Flynn’s doing, and it was brilliant—we went to Engineering News-Record, which was the most respected publication—it’s a McGraw-Hill publication—in the industry. We took this to them, showed them the—I think we showed them the galley, and we said, “Read it for yourself, but read our annotated version.”

And the day that this was scheduled for release, or the day before, ENR, as it’s called, came out with a scathing editorial against McCartney that this was “a
slur,” to use George Shultz’s phrase. Let me get this timing right. Yeah. As it turned out, it came out the day that McCartney started his press tour. And he started it in San Francisco, and I think that was on the date of the book’s publication. I am not sure I have these dates exactly right, but the ENR editorial was unveiled by me to McCartney on the Ronn Owens show [The Ronn Owens Program]. He had an hour on Ronn Owens, which was the biggest talk show in San Francisco at the time, on KGO. Ronn’s still doing it. And I was lucky: being new out of the San Francisco media, I knew these folks all by name if not personally. So when I called Ronn and said, “Could I go on with McCartney?” He said no, he would only do this if he were the solo guest. And I said, “Well, that hardly seems fair.” And he said, “Well, I’ll tell you what, we’ll give you the last ten minutes as a call-in.”

So I prepared a script of what we wanted to say. And it was heavily based on this editorial from a respected trade publication, and I quoted from it, and all this stuff. Then we got into it, and McCartney was clearly dumbstruck, because he had not been accused yet of having fabricated anything. His response was to attack the credibility of ENR, which he didn’t know anything about. And my response extemporaneously was this just makes my point. He is going to attack anybody who dares to present facts. This is not a factual book. It’s full of fabrications.

If I remember correctly, they canceled most of the rest of the press tour, Simon & Schuster did. And we were, just by the way, simultaneously going in with our general counsel, John Weiser, who was a wonderful man, who just said, “You can’t make it up.” I believe they ended up changing the last chapter in the paperback. And his credibility was shot. We got a lot of positive feedback inside the PR community for being so direct and combative about this—and it was all the more shocking because Bechtel, of course, never put its head above the parapets.

And this was a very positive thing as far as Steve was concerned. So that was a very positive development.

You guys just seemed to successfully combat that book. But it also seemed to have legs in some ways, right? The rolling criticism. And what I was thinking here is looking at, say, George Shultz’s confirmation hearing, Senate confirmation hearing in 1982, for secretary of state.

But before we get into that, I wanted to get your view, as one who had to deal with this for 18 years for Bechtel, what do you think the roots of that kind of criticism, that kind of perhaps even suspicion, that negative view towards Bechtel? Do you think it was because it was a privately-held company, so you had that secrecy aspect?
Laubscher: I think that contributed to it a little bit. But I think if you look at most of the people who criticized Bechtel, their views were no different if you asked them about PG&E [Pacific Gas and Electric Company], or Chevron, both of which had been Bechtel clients for 50 years when I joined the company—60 years. Or any other large industrial company.

Holmes: Do you think it was about bigness?

Laubscher: Well, not just bigness, but what was being done. We all have different views of what an ideal world is. And there are a lot of people who would take almost a Gandhian approach to life and society. We don’t need all this stuff. We don’t need to develop oil. We don’t need to use our cars. This is still a very strong strain in society today. If you go around San Francisco today, the bile that gets thrown at automobile users, for example, because you are not part of the collective. The things you see and hear about any kind of resource development or exploitation. And of course, it’s a spectrum. A lot of these people see it very starkly, in black and white. But it is a grayscale. Do people want to cut down first-growth redwoods? No. Did we cut way too many down? Yes. Did we do things in this society that we greatly regret, almost all of us, doing later? Yes! And it’s the people who point that out and who rail against it—the early Sierra Club folks, things like that—that I think rightly deserve celebration today. But there is a balance. We are a society. We are not just a collection of people. The whole has to be more than the sum of its parts. And because we are a messy republic where people vote and people make decisions about the kinds of things we are going to do, these things have to get done.

In my personal life, when I look at the Bay Area and the development of the suburbs, and all this other stuff, and the amount of negativity that goes on about how the suburbs evolved, there is no discussion—because I am older. I am 67 years old right now, and I grew up in the 1950s as a little kid. And I took those trips across the Golden Gate Bridge every day to Marin, once we moved there, and I saw how the suburbs developed. I watched it with my own eyes. And, sure. I have a friend who has written a wonderful book about the apricot groves and Silicon Valley, where she grew up. She still lives in the house where she was a kid. But where were you going to put the people? As I like to point out, since I was a kid, the population of California has doubled. The population of the United States has doubled. And California has become an even more attractive place than it ever was. How are we going to feed these people? How are we going to move them around? How are we going to build their homes? How are we going to do these things, this stuff?
And interestingly enough, today in the Bay Area, one of the biggest battles is between Millennials, who want more housing, who want high-rises, who want all these things that when I was representing Bechtel and the San Francisco community, I remember being around Bruce Brugmann and the *San Francisco Bay Guardian*, and the folks who screamed about Manhattanization. And they had a point. Manhattanization that was exacerbated and encouraged by BART, and all of those things. Now, BART sucks because it doesn’t have enough trains, and because it doesn’t move enough people. And we don’t have enough high-rises. And who is saying all that? The Millennials! The young people! They want more dense cities. They want high-rises. And they sneer at the people who chose to move to the suburbs precisely because that was the only place they could afford to move back then. The land was cheap. The GI Bill [Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944] made it possible. But that’s the historical context.

And I think that same kind of myopia about the context of the past is what led a lot of these people to say, “No, this is bad. It’s bad. You are doing this, so you are bad.” And in that regard—I got off on a tangent a little bit—but Bechtel, Chevron, PG&E, Big Oil, Big Utilities, Big everything, chemical companies, all of it, it’s all the same thing: it’s all bad. We need to get back to the land. We need to get back to [Max] Yasgur’s farm, and do Woodstock all over again. Well, none of those people cleaned up Yasgur’s farm after it was over! And just like they don’t clean [Mission] Dolores Park after they trash it every weekend now. You are a society. You have a whole range of things you have got to do collectively.

Can I break for a second?

[break in audio]

04-01:10:23
Laubscher: I want to correct the record on one thing, Todd. We took a break, and we determined that the Laton McCartney book came out in 1988. My timing is off. It didn’t happen in my first years at Bechtel. I was at Bechtel almost seven years when it happened. Time flies when you are having a good time. But the role I described and the things we did were true. We came out with a booklet that actually got quite a bit of pickup in the media. During the break, I was rereading *The New York Times* review of McCartney’s book, and it mentions our response, which was called “The Real Story,” which was this 16 page pamphlet that we created that went chapter and verse, and we found errors—errors of fact—on more than 100 pages of the book. Now, you are a historian. You know that errors creep into anybody’s work. But how many errors and the magnitude of the errors are how you judge the veracity of the overall story.
No, absolutely. Absolutely. And that really is a good segue to getting into early parts of that criticism, which really kind of sowed the field or the road that McCarthy went down with his work, is looking at, again, that rising criticism, which came out publicly in a very serious way when George Shultz was tapped by the Reagan administration for secretary of state in 1982. The Senate confirmation hearings, rereading those records, nearly 75 percent or more of the questions posed to George Shultz had everything to do not with his past work and experience in the Nixon administration, but everything to do with his time at Bechtel. I am sure you guys there at Bechtel were at least dealing with that somehow, and watching those hearing closely.

Oh, yeah, absolutely. We were riveted by the hearings. The whole thing was stunning to us because it was so unexpected, the Haig meltdown—and so many people forget that Alexander Haig was [President] Ronald Reagan’s first secretary of state. And when he tapped George Shultz, Steve, Jr. was actually in Alaska salmon fishing—one of his rare vacations—and he was completely out of touch with anybody. And George got the call from the White House, and he didn’t have the chance to ask Steve. He had to make his decision. Steve found out about it when the bush plane came in to pick him up, or whatever it was. I have no knowledge [laughter] of what the reaction was.

Let me put it this way: anybody who thinks that Steve Bechtel or our top management was happy to lose George Shultz, to anything else, is just dead wrong. Everybody wanted Shultz to stay exactly where he was—and I think he wanted to stay where he was. George was an economist. He was an economist, and then he was a government servant. When he became a partner at Bechtel, when he was brought in, that was a very lucrative position to be in. But George was also an academic at heart. He still is. And when he got the job at Bechtel, he also got—and got Steve’s permission to take—an academic appointment at Stanford [University] in the Hoover Institution. So that he could continue to do what he did. And George, who could have bought almost any mansion in San Francisco—he did buy a condo up on Russian Hill, but his primary place of residency—he and O’Bie [Helena Maria O’Brien Shultz], his then-wife—was the professor’s house at Stanford. That’s who George really is. That’s what you need to know about George. He is not some grand conspirator or some titan mogul who has to live the fast life, the big life—that’s not what he does.

Yeah. He still lives there.

Exactly! Exactly!
And so when we got to the confirmation hearings, yes, it was tough. And one of the toughest parts was that we didn’t have George at Bechtel to fight for a full and robust public discussion of this. I can’t honestly tell you, because I don’t remember, what our responses were. We did issue responses to the press, and we did stuff like that. But let me tell you, it would have been so much more powerful had George himself been the one that spoke for Bechtel. Let’s say some other Bechtel executive had been named secretary of state, and the criticism came. George would have looked them in the eye, the reporters, and just said, “That’s poppycock,” and he would say why. And he would be very articulate at it. George had immense credibility—and has—which is why he was named secretary of state in the first place.

But it was a tough situation to see all of this stuff rehashed. But you also knew that it was about just the distaste for corporate statism, for all of these other things. You are looking for an angle, you are looking—Ronald Reagan’s political enemies were looking for something to dent him with. You can’t dent him because he was so Teflon, at that time in his presidency, especially after the shooting and all that other stuff. You go after his people if you can’t go after him.

Well, sure. And that really connects with our conversation before the break of the ideology, the anti-corporation ideology, which we see arising a bit in the 1930s during the Great Depression, obviously, but then, again, you see this revamped in the ’60s and ’70s. And then Bechtel really sat in the crosshairs of a lot of that—as did other corporations, as you pointed out, such as Chevron, such as PG&E, particularly here in the West.

By the way, it is important to make a point here. It’s counterintuitive, if you really think about it from a business perspective, to think that Bechtel would relish having all this visibility. There is a whole different—and more logical, at least—case to be made for networking, connections, knowing, “friends in high places.” That doesn’t get you work. Anybody who knows George Shultz knows that if we had tried to get any work at all for the State Department through him, it would have been an instant no.

But when you look at what builders do, builders build things for other people. And when you build things for other people, your client is the one who should get the credit. The way this usually works is a contractor is the one you kick down the street when something goes wrong. When everything goes right, it’s all the client that did it. We in the PR group at Bechtel would regularly get loaned out to clients to help them with their PR. And if we could make money at it, that was fine, too. But the whole idea was to help them sell their projects, not to sell ourselves. Yeah, you sell yourself, but you sell yourself in internal
presentations to the clients, sales pitches in your proposals, and all that stuff. That’s marketing. That’s business development.

But with the public, the less people—and this was Steve, Jr.’s clear view, and I think still is; and his son Riley’s, too; and his son Brendan’s view now—which is “our work speaks for itself.” Whereas Steve, Sr. was an entrepreneur and an expansive guy who was just catnip with clients—he loved chatting and doing all this other stuff—Steve, Jr. is a very affable guy, and in small group situations and with clients, he is a delight to be with. But he is an engineer, and he is restrained. His dad wouldn’t take umbrage at being called a salesman. But Steve, Jr. was absolutely—and is—an engineer. And engineers let their work speak for itself. The Code of Ethics of the American Society of Civil Engineers is very clear that self-aggrandizement is to be very much frowned upon.

04-01:20:26 Holmes: Well, speaking of “the work speaking for itself,” I think that’s a good segue to talk about some of the projects that you also worked on there at Bechtel. We talked a bit about Saudi Arabia and your role there with the city.

04-01:20:41 Laubscher: Which was limited. Yeah.

04-01:20:43 Holmes: Jubail. [pronounced “Jubile”]

04-01:20:45 Laubscher: “Jubail.”

04-01:20:45 Holmes: “Jubail.” But you were also working in Iraq.

04-01:20:53 Laubscher: Well—

04-01:20:55 Holmes: Well, at least Bechtel was working in Iraq on a chemical plant, as well as a proposed pipeline.

04-01:21:04 Laubscher: Yes. There was some work that was done, and I was never involved in the work or the talk about the work. You have got to remember the company had hundreds of projects going on at any one time. And clients’ wishes were clients’ wishes as far as what got publicized and what didn’t get publicized. The Iraq project wasn’t a secret.

There was one flap which I got involved in with the media, but it was kind of an up and down thing. And again, I would have to go back and look at what
year this was. It was before the Gulf War. It was in the run-up to the Gulf War. It was a conventional petrochemical plant that was being designed. We were accused by an alternative newspaper in Berlin, on the basis of no presented evidence at all, that we were building a plant that could make chemical weapons, or that was intended to make chemical weapons, which sent us right through the roof. And we issued—I issued, after making just one or two phone calls, and getting a categorical assurance that this was horse pucky, I called it essentially that.

But there is no question that when you have a large petrochemical presence, a large petrochemical business—that, whether because a regime change after the contract happens, or whether because of a decision that’s made to go after a project initially with a government that does odious things, that’s a tough decision to make. And I won’t get into a lot of comments on that, except to say that I guarantee you that sometimes these things happened. As with any large, decentralized company, decisions might get made in London about what projects to take on, and of course, they are checked to see if they are legal under American law. But that’s not the same question as should we be doing it.

And we had workers taken hostage during the Gulf War.

Holmes: I wanted to get into that.

Laubscher: I won’t do either of two things. One, I won’t give away things that really should remain confidential. And number two, I won’t take up that saintly role that some people take after the fact, and say, “Well, I was fighting the good fight, and I was doing, and”—you know? But I will tell you that there were intense discussions about the wisdom of having done this once it was underway. But a lot of this stuff, we weren’t—it would be nice to say that the PR people were at the center of the universe at Bechtel and were told everything that was going on, and were consulted rigorously on the ethics or desirability from an atmospheric point of view of what projects we should take on and what we shouldn’t. But we weren’t.

Holmes: Yeah. But I did want to ask you a bit about [Operation] Desert Storm and the first Gulf War, when Iraq invaded Kuwait. Now, Bechtel did some small projects in Kuwait as well—am I correct in that?

Laubscher: Yes, but we didn’t have the kind of relationship with the government of Kuwait that we did with Saudi Arabia.
Holmes: Can you tell me a little bit about Desert Storm, and the role that perhaps the PR department played in regards to the company?

Laubscher: Well, it was more in the aftermath than before. We had hostages taken in Iraq off a project, and we launched major efforts behind the scenes to try to get those folks rescued. They were in the Canadian embassy. They had made their way there, and there were a couple scattered in other places. And it was an extremely intense time. Riley Bechtel, who was newly minted as the CEO, and was still in his 30s, if I remember the timing correctly—

Holmes: And that’s Steve, Jr.’s—?

Laubscher: Son.

Holmes: Son. So to clarify, we had Warren Bechtel—

Laubscher: Warren Bechtel is first generation; Steve, Sr., second; Steve, Jr., third; Riley, fourth; and now his son Brendan, the fifth generation of family leadership. Which, by the way, is just exceptional. Absolutely, almost unprecedented for a company of that size in American history.

Holmes: And keep that same trajectory of success. In a lot of family companies, usually the joke is by the third generation, the wheels start falling off—

Laubscher: Well, and this is a wholly separate subject, but the family has done a brilliant job of taking their personal assets, keeping them separate from the business—they have the controlling stake in the business, of course, but using what they made to establish other ventures, the most visible of which is Fremont Group, which is a separate investment company—and so that the engineering construction business can continue without having to go public or being broken up, or things like that. You look at families that have one asset, whether it’s The New York Times or The San Francisco Chronicle, or a whole bunch of other things, you get down into what they call the “cousins”—that’s what the Rockefellers called that group, the “cousins”—and all of a sudden, you have got all of these people who are human beings with different, divergent interests, and many of them are not interested in being in the business. And the business has to be sacrificed so that you can give them what’s due. The Bechtels have always been excellent at keeping it sorted out, and all completely legitimately and properly. That shouldn’t have to be said, but given all the suspicion around the company—which is wrong.
And by the way, I just will say, for people who think that knowing other people, building friendships in business, being approachable and trusted is somehow wrong, get over it. Business is by definition transactional, but it’s also personal. And when you are trying to develop dreams and visions, and build very big things, you have to have a personal rapport, because without that, you don’t have trust. What you see in the world today is you see this stuff kind of being scrutinized so closely on so many levels that you wonder what kind of lives the scrutinizers have.

Just a quick example: you look at the Hillary Clinton email thing that’s flashing around in the news as we speak now, about a member of the Clinton Foundation saying, “Hey, we have got a good job candidate,” and a kind of a noncommittal, “Yeah, send me the information. I’ll talk to Jeff about it,” whoever Jeff was. But it’s kind of like, “Oh, well, see, they’re evil.” And as a State Department spokeswoman I saw on TV today said, “We get job referrals and requests for interest from thousands of people every day.” And there is no evidence in the email chain that it was like, “you will give this person that job at this salary, and I mandate it.” There is nothing like that. It’s the kind of prosaic, normal, and totally legal operations of business or government, which now, by some, gets scrutinized as something that’s inherently evil. I think that’s just because, somehow, so much suspicion in general is being bred in people in this country. There is no benefit of the doubt for anybody about anything. That’s another whole story.

Holmes:
But the interesting thing, in connecting this with Bechtel, is that Bechtel sat at the center of suspicion, of criticism, from some sectors. Yet, at the same time, when we look at Desert Storm, and we look at the successful release of hostages, but also it was Bechtel who came in and put out the fires that were set ablaze all throughout Kuwait that many thought would take years to extinguish.

Laubscher:
Absolutely. Absolutely. We were talking during the break about big companies and small companies. What happened there was unprecedented. We had several people sent over there in—what is it—’91? Immediately in the wake of this thing, I was assigned to work with some of our Saudi clients on cleaning up the massive oil spill in the Gulf, which got virtually no attention at all because the Kuwait fires overarched everything. But we were there doing everything we could to save marine life and everything else on a deliberate terroristic oil spill by the retreating Iraqis.

The Kuwait oil fires were much bigger. They were, obviously, enormous. And initially, the immediate press attention was on people like Red Adair, and kind of like, “Well, I’m coming in, we’re going to take care of those things.” Well,
they found out right away it wasn’t the same as any other blowout. And there were—were there hundreds?

Holmes: Hundreds, yeah.

Laubscher: Yeah. And so one of my colleagues, Mike Kidder, went over there to Kuwait, and we made some fabulous—Thayer Walker, the guy I had mentioned, the video guy—a fabulous video piece called “Bringing Back the Sun,” with some footage that I still have never seen the likes of, much better than any of the broadcast outlets ever really got. They covered it, but it was kind of like, “Oh, well, this is horrible.” Because the story was going on every day and it wasn’t going to go away anytime soon, they thought, it kind of got shoved to the back burner.

But that story is a remarkable story. And it’s a story of people who jumped in at risk to their health, because of all that noxious smoke, and the dust, and all the other stuff, and saved God knows how much pollution—I know we did a calculation at one point—from entering the atmosphere, by capping those wells. And a lot of it was trial and error, because nothing of this magnitude had ever happened before. Well blowouts that happen organically are a lot different than deliberate sabotage. When you are putting explosives in things and wrecking the pipes, the infrastructure, and all that sort of stuff.

It was a remarkable achievement. And it took everybody. Yes, every single oil field service team that could be mustered, starting with the Red Adairs, the little guys with the big reputations, had to go in there. But somebody had to manage it. It had to be somebody who had a real clear sense of prioritization, of logistics—the amount of materiel you needed, and the ability to get it there quickly, and the ability to stage it, and all of those things. A lot of people just kind of go, “Do it.” But they have no idea. They have no clue what’s involved in stuff like this. Bechtel does.

Holmes: Can you also tell me a little about the cleanup as well? The oil spill? Because you are right that in a lot of the documentation about the war, the media coverage, that really was not highlighted that much at all.

Laubscher: Well, we used skimmers, we used everything from low tech, like straw bales, and anything that could be pulled in to make it work. We tried to remove as much oil as we could from the sand, package it up—but it was all done under extreme time constraints, extreme time pressure. And it was also something that the Saudis were just as happy not getting headlines on. They didn’t do it, but it was washing up on their shores. So it was a big job in and of itself.
It was also very interesting to be there in that time, and I have got to tell you
one story that just has stuck in my mind. We rotated people in and out, and I
was there for, like, six weeks or something like that at the key crisis point.
When it started to get managed, we sent somebody else over there. And I
remember we’d worked and tried to stay on top of this thing all day long, and
then we would go to—at night, we were at Dhahran, which is an eastern
province where Bechtel had offices, and then we would go out, usually fairly
late, to dinner. And there were malls and restaurants. There were so many
Americans there at that time, and all in camo, and all armed.

I remember going to dinner, and the restaurant was up on the second level,
and it was an open area, and glass walls, glass escalator going up. And I got
on the escalator behind two female MPs [military police] who were carrying
sidearms. As we got toward the top, there was an Arab man, a Saudi man, and
his wife was with him, and she was in the burqa. And I’ll never forget this
scene. He takes one look at these two American women with 45s on their hip,
he takes his hand and pushes his wife’s face away so she couldn’t see this.
Then he takes her by the shoulder and walks her in the opposite direction,
as—and this was happening in real time—they were walking on the second
floor, we were coming up on the escalator.

I would have given anything to have a cell phone video of that, if they had had
cell phone video at the time, because it was such an illustration of the clash of
cultures. Here you had a traditional Saudi woman, who knows what her
thoughts were, what her dreams were, any of that stuff, and they were headed
for the private dining area, because wives are not allowed to dine alone
anyway, they had to dine with their husbands. These were all things I learned
very early in my Bechtel career. And he absolutely did not want her to see this
scene.

By the way, this coincided with a little bit of a flap that did get news coverage,
where a lot of the American drivers of the heavy equipment who were over
there were women. And the Saudis, [laughter] when they got there, they said,
“Well, you can’t drive.” “Say what?” “Women aren’t allowed to drive in our
country.” “Oh, really?” So that didn’t last. But it was clearly a very
uncomfortable situation for the Saudis, and they didn’t—they were—their
bacon had just been saved by the United States, but they just wanted us to go
away. It’s a very fraught arrangement. It’s a very difficult thing, with the
traditional society that they want to maintain, and when it clashes, as it did
during the first Gulf War, it was a real change.

I did get to fly in a helicopter, by the way, over the—what did they call it—the
Highway of Death, or whatever they called it, where the Iraqis were
retreating, and we basically gallery shot them—
Holmes: As they were coming back in?

Laubscher: We were going actually to Saudi, but we took a little detour. These distances are very short in that area. And, wow. It was just astonishing to see that. A powerful reminder of why we should do everything we can to avoid those kind of wars.

Holmes: I wanted to ask you, speaking of the culture clash of working there in the Middle East between, well, American military, but also an American company and its workers, its contractors, and a very traditional Islamic government and culture. Did Bechtel offer training—

Laubscher: Oh, yes.

Holmes: And did the PR department play a role in that or help develop that?

Laubscher: Yes. Well, there was training of all kinds. All kinds of training. Like every other group, we would take Saudis under training on assignment. They would come over and come to Bechtel, and we would try to teach them the ways of American PR. A lot of them ended up taking courses at Menlo College down in Menlo Park, if I remember correctly. So there was a connection there, too.

Holmes: But for the American employees, a training course in the customs of the culture and the country that you are entering in?

Laubscher: Well, no. We were not involved in that orientation. I mentioned earlier—excuse me—my little flap with the fellow who didn’t want to show any of the blemishes or the unusual things. But there certainly was orientation toward that, and it was an important thing.

But you have to remember too that a lot of the expats—the management especially—on projects like that, you would have tiers of people. You would have your top management, and those were usually called “family positions,” where you would bring your family with you. And you would get an uplift, you would get extra money for going, which was, of course, the incentive, and then there was tax—most countries, favorable tax situations from being outside the United States, so you kept more of your money. And that’s what it takes to get people to do these kinds of jobs in places that have societies different than ours. We would all like to work in Italy, [laughter] and get paid
extra for it. But that’s not where these jobs tend to be, especially if they are resource projects.

Then you would have very large numbers of laborers, and craftspeople, electricians, plumbers; all of these kind of jobs, you would have a lot of them. A lot of those folks came from the Philippines, or maybe Malaysia, or other countries; they’re third-country nationals. They would be there under the laws of their country, and the relationships with their countries with the host country. And those were usually single status. In other words, here is your bunkhouse. You are going to make a ton more money than you could possibly make in your home country doing similarly skilled work for this time period, and that’s the incentive. And that’s been going on for a long, long time.

But generally, the people at Bechtel who went on these assignments, it was a very tight-knit community of people. If you were a project person and you had been on job after job, if you did a good job, you would get selected for the next job by the project manager. I go to the next job; you are my team; you come with me. Or maybe somebody else tries to take you for another project. And that’s the way it is. You build up a network. It’s like choosing baseball teams when you are a kid, right? If you end up being a right fielder, you are probably not going to get chosen for the next team at all, unless you really show improvement. It’s really what it is, because you are accountable to each other. In that way, there is a lot of comparison to military units, except—in most cases—without the lethal danger.

I saw this firsthand in one project I want to mention, because it stands out to me as important in my career and for my understanding of the world, which was the project in Papua New Guinea.

04-01:42:25
Holmes: Yeah, I was going to ask about that.

04-01:42:26
Laubscher: This was called Ok Tedi—O-K-new word-T-E-D-I—and it was a gold and copper mine in the middle of one of the most remote areas in the world, in the western highlands of Papua New Guinea, almost to the border of Indonesia. New Guinea is a giant island, and politically, it’s divided in half. Half of it is the Indonesian province of Irian Jaya, which I think means “East Java,” but it’s not Java. I’m trying to remember what the political history of it is. But anyway, the island was divided in half between the Brits and the Germans—or, the Brits and the Dutch way back when. Maybe part of it was taken from the Germans at one point; it’s all very colonial.

But when I got involved in the early/mid-1980s—’83, ’84, somewhere in there—it was—no. Actually, it was earlier. I got involved in ’82. We started in ’82—and I’ll tell you why that was worth mentioning. The Australians ran
Papua New Guinea, had run Papua New Guinea, as essentially a colony, and it had just recently gotten its independence. And this was an enormous economic engine for them, this project. There was already a huge copper project that Freeport-McMoRan operated across the border some distance away, on the Indonesian side. So the resources were incredible, the natural resources, but the isolation was almost complete. We had gotten this project, and it was really—you had to build a road to get there and you had to build a pipeline to get the slurry, the copper slurry, out. This was a couple of hundred miles from the ocean, and on top of a mountain. Without screwing up the environment, you had to be able to take the copper, mine it, put it into a slurry, which is a mixture with water; you had to be able to get it out at the other end to extract the metal, make sure the water was clean, and then ship the copper off.

And Bechtel was gearing up for this when—it had been awarded, and it had gotten some news coverage—when a letter comes in. The letter was addressed to George Shultz, but it got sent to us. It was from a young man who was a Juilliard [School] student. He was a Juilliard student on the double bass, and he was a really unusual guy. His name was Chris Roberts, and he wanted to be an ethnomusicologist. And he had, on his own money, gone to the Trobriand Islands, which is part of Papua New Guinea, but is really culturally quite distinct from the highlands. Papua New Guinea, because of the extreme isolation, is one of the most diverse linguistic places in the world, with 800 languages—not just dialects spoken—most of them mutually incomprehensible to others. Most are spoken by just a few people. And these languages are dying extremely quickly as the area is physically opened up. This is the area of cargo cults, and for many people, the first exposure they had ever had to anything outside of their immediate village was bombers flying over in World War II. Or in some instances, Japanese or Australian or American soldiers coming through. And literally true that if something fell out of an airplane, or a supply drop that went astray, and these would get found by these people, some of these people, that it was treated as something that had been delivered by the gods.

So it’s kind of hard to explain what a different world this was. But this young man, having gone to the Trobriands, which was much more settled—Margaret Mead had studied it, and because it was a maritime culture, it had much more interaction with the world. He was trying to get them to play—so he could record—their sacred music. But because it was sacred, it wasn’t shared with outsiders. So what he did was he took this double bass of his, this huge thing, had a backpack built for it—a canvas thing that looked like a bass. And he went in, and he would play Bach, or Beethoven, or classical Western music, and he would say this was his gift to them. And then he would ask them to share their gift with him, and he would openly ask to record it so that it could be shared with others. He was remarkable at building up their trust.
This was kind of a cockamamie idea for a company like Bechtel to even look at something like this. It was kind of like, “What?” At the same time, we knew that we were going into a cultural environment that was going to be very different, and where the government—which was the client; it was a government company that was the client—was very concerned about preserving traditional culture where they could. But there was no hiding that, for the small number of people—it was very sparsely settled, but there were people there—this was going to be an enormous impact on their life. So long story short, I took this to my boss, who kind of looked at it like, “I don’t know; I don’t think so.” But he agreed to run it by Shultz, who said, “Yeah, let’s do it.”

So we paid for this guy to go over there, we paid for him to be on the project for a year or two, on our nickel, and go out to the tribes surrounding the site, and collect their music. And then I went over on several trips with the film crew, which I hired, and we made a movie, a 20 minute movie, which actually documented what this young man was doing. And we brought the project into it, too, and said basically, “Look, this is a huge amount of change, and it’s an impact, and here is an effort to preserve things.” We designed it so that it could run in theaters in Australia, New Zealand, and Papua New Guinea, which in those days still showed short subjects in their movie theaters. I still have that film. It won several awards. We are very proud of it. Chris Roberts has gone on to an ethnomusicology career, with a lot of time in Taiwan with indigenous peoples there, and trying to capture these kinds of things. And I was very proud of Bechtel for being willing to do this.

Now, I am also aware that some people would sneer and say “It’s tokenism, it’s exploitation; it’s this, it’s that.” And the point that really has to get made is that Papua New Guinea was and is a parliamentary democracy. Their elected government are the ones that decided to develop this resource in their own national interest. And they were very happy to see efforts made by their contractor to do something that showed some cultural sensitivity. The obvious alternative that some people would like—and this is a broader kind of thing that I think illustrates the push about, the distaste for what Bechtel does, and the suspicion, and all the other stuff—to use a political au courant phrase, “It’s all rigged. We are doing all this, we are exploiting, we are ruining, it’s all you people that are doing it.” Well, “you people” in most of these countries—not all, but most of them—are elected. Not true in Saudi Arabia. It wasn’t true in Iraq. It wasn’t true in a lot of countries. But in a lot of countries, it is true. And when a country makes a decision, when the democratic process makes a decision to develop something for their own economic gain, and what they consider to be in the best interest of their people, who is going to sit in what chair and play God and say, “No, you can’t do that”? It’s a dynamic situation. Each one is different. Each one has to be evaluated differently.
Holmes: Indeed. And that’s an important story that underscores a lot of the overlooked aspects of what Bechtel has done outside of those that are always at the center of criticism. Another side of the bigger story.

Laubscher: To be straightforward about it, the OK Tedi project was not operated the way it was designed to be operated. We didn’t operate the project. There was a cyanide leak that, as far as I remember—I mean, this happened many years after—was caused by improper management, improper operation. It does take constant vigilance, and it takes governments that are willing and able to monitor and enforce.

The bigger question—you could ask a very big question, which is why is gold valuable? Because that project could not have been otherwise—we called it “a mountain of copper with a crown of gold.” That was the buzzwords we came up with. I think I may have come up with that; I am not sure. But it was true. It was this huge mountain of very high-grade copper ore, but if I remember the economics correctly—and I am not sure I do, but I think I do—it was the gold that made the project economically feasible. If it were just copper, it would have been too expensive to go after.

Holmes: For all the infrastructure and everything to extract?

Laubscher: Yeah. Basically, the gold was the finance for the project. And why do human beings value gold so much? None of this is simple, and nobody is going to say—and I think that a lot of people at Bechtel would say, were there things that could have been differently? Had we known later what we know now, would we have done things differently? The answer is yes, but on various projects. But when you have these projects, you don’t—you work with the very best information you have at the time, and so on and so forth.

I will give you a very prosaic and local example. Bechtel played a role—not the major role, but a role—in building the eastern span of the Bay Bridge. The eastern span of the Bay Bridge, at the time it was built in 1936, that whole area sits on very deep bay mud. Bechtel did not engineer it. They built a couple of the caissons, or the pilings, I guess, on the eastern basis. It was decided that you were going to drive—it’s hard to believe—120-foot redwood piles into the mud to stabilize it and serve as the base for the piers, because there wasn’t any technique available at the time that they were willing to put in to go down to bedrock. And that bridge worked just fine until it didn’t. In 1989, we lost one—but the whole bridge stayed up. One hinge at a vulnerable point, which probably should have been—we probably, at that time, had the seismic knowledge to say, “Oh, we better do something about this.” And we
didn’t, and about four people died there. Just like on the Cypress structure [Cypress Street Viaduct], which Bechtel had nothing to do with.

H: The freeway?

L: Double-deck concrete construction that was done to the highest standards known at the time, which was the 1950s; pancaked, and killed 55 people. A terrible tragedy. You make judgments in all kinds of areas that are based on the best information, and they are made in good faith. And if there are evil, scheming people like—who is the character? Done more to kill nuclear power than anybody else. Mr. Burns on The Simpsons. That’s a great cartoon, but that’s what it is: a cartoon. By and large.

H: I wanted to ask you: by 1995, the last four years—you left in 1999—you managed the entire public relations department.

L: I managed parts of it, but really only on an interim basis. What had happened was that when Paul Cane retired, Tom Flynn took over, and I was—Tom was my mentor, my dear friend, and I happily served under him. And then he retired; I think it was around 1995. And I acted in that role for some time, and then they brought in a man named Chuck [Charles] Redman, who had been ambassador to Sweden. He was a career foreign service officer; I am sure—

H: The revolving door.

L: The revolving door. But Chuck was an expert on security as well as other factors. And what we had learned after the Iraqi hostage taking, which was—it’s hard to overestimate how much impact that had on the psyche of Riley Bechtel, the CEO. He slept in his office for days at a time, never went home, trying to watch out for these people. He was constantly in contact with the families personally. He led this stuff. That was the kind of guy Riley was.

I will mention, because I just mentioned the Loma Pieta earthquake, when that happened, Tom Flynn and I were at the World Series game at the ballpark [Candlestick Park]. And the shaking at the ballpark was terrible in the upper deck, but we were in the lower deck, and it didn’t feel that bad. Then when we saw on battery-powered TVs the bridge damaged and saw the smoke plume rising over the marina, we realized, oh, my gosh, this is a lot worse than we thought.
We went back to the office immediately, and went down to City Hall, where Tom’s friend Hadley Roth—a very good friend of Tom’s, who had been a deputy mayor to Dianne Feinstein and was deputy mayor to Art Agnos. He went down and immediately volunteered anything Bechtel can do, because Riley had made it clear that we’ll do anything we can here. This is our town. And Art Agnos, who later became a friend of mine, said, “I’ve got great civil servants here. I’ve got a great city staff. I don’t really need any help.” He was pretty dismissive, frankly. Then Hadley came over and grabbed Tom and said, “Come over here. [laughter] I’ll talk him into it. What can you do?”

The next morning, we had 150 civil and mechanical and other engineers deputized by the city as temporary building inspectors. And we were all in the marina, and we were personally led by Riley Bechtel. I got choked up when I think about this, because he is—his dedication to helping the city was complete. And we were down there in case the press asked questions, just to be open and answer, and this is what we are doing, and this is how we are doing it. I ended up doing crisis counseling part of the day, because there were people desperate to get back in their homes, and there weren’t enough police down there to cover everything. And there were homes that were obviously endangered, and were being red tagged—that is, no human entry. Some people got irrational, and we had to kind of counsel them and say, “Look, this is for your own safety. This ground could shake again at any instant. We just don’t know”.

But that was an example, again, of the kind of commitment that Bechtel could make and did make without being asked when the need was there. And I just think that’s important to kind of mention. And it takes scale to be able to do those kind of things.

04-02:05:12
Holmes: Yeah. I wanted just to also clarify: in regards to the hostages, they were released after—?

04-02:05:19
Laubscher: Yes, they were. The “human shields,” as they called them, we managed to get them out. And it was an enormous relief. You didn’t expect that that kind of thing would happen, on that level. Sure, there were always precautions taken for any expat, any senior expat, in any country that might have a history or the potential for kidnappings for ransom. That was something that had gone on. We had somebody kidnapped in Colombia for ransom. These things—gosh. I hate to say it, but it’s kind of like saying, well, we are making a uniform declaration that we are just going to stop terrorists, period. I don’t quite understand how—especially when you look at all these solo practitioners who never talk to anybody, except inside their own heads, and then go off and commit these atrocities—how you can kind of make a blanket statement that you are going to stop it. But you can make it more difficult. And defensive
driving courses, top executives would take these defensive driving courses in case somebody tries to cut off your car, or something like that. These were all part of any large American business in the area—and still are, frankly, although they never get talked about.

Holmes: And for a company of Bechtel’s size, and its reach, and operating projects on six out of seven continents in the world, it seems that’s almost kind of just par for the course, unfortunately, right? When you are working around the world, that you have to deal with those kind of situations.

Laubscher: Yeah. It’s built into it. When people say, “Well, just don’t do that kind of work.” It’s part of our economy, and it’s legal. And Bechtel wanted to make sure it was ethical. The whole family does have high standards of ethics. It’s not to say that things don’t happen that you missed going in, that you didn’t see the pitfalls or the shortcoming. But I never knew, ever, a case where they went in and took on something knowing that it was unethical or that it was going to be a mistake. Projects have a life of their own. They evolve. Governments evolve. Things change. I could name you projects—but I won’t, by name—but a couple of very prominent projects where we had clients, public sector clients, instruct us to alter a project budget, and game-playing, and everything else, because they didn’t want to get in trouble. These are always very difficult situations to be in. But it does happen. That is just reality.

Holmes: And again, those are some of those overlooked aspects in discussions about Bechtel that never really make it into the conversation?

Laubscher: And I learned some of this on projects. One project I was on—and I know we should move beyond this, but—Bechtel got the contract to manage the construction of two new Metro lines in Athens. And this was a big deal. The EU [European Union] was providing most of the money in a subvention, where the richer countries pay for public works projects in the poorer ones. And Greece had had a history of frittering away the money—that’s a nice way to put it—frittering away EU money on capital projects, infrastructure projects, previously. So the EU told them, number one, you cannot have your government Ministry of Works run this project. It must be run by outsiders. You must have a separate company set up to own the project and administer it, even though it’s going to be a government thing. It has to be done by international standards, and the manager of the project cannot be an EU country.

So Bechtel ended up bidding against a Swiss company—and winning—to manage a consortium of 23 contractors, the majority of whom were German, a
lot of whom were French, and then there were a couple of Greek firms in there, too. That was really some management project. And I learned a lot, in a very positive way, about working in international environments. I was there for six months, setting up. We were tasked with setting up a world-class PR department—-independent. One of the first things I found out when I got there was that the practice—which we were expected to follow—the practice was to hire active journalists who were on this beat for six months at a time to run our PR. So the journalists would be talking to each other, and they would be putting the money in their pocket, and this was all done openly, and it was the accepted way. We said we are not going to do that. And that was not very popular.

We ended up hiring a guy—just as an aside—named Bill [William G.] Margaritis to run it permanently. He went on to become the head of worldwide PR for FedEx, and then for Hilton beyond that. A brilliant guy, who is a Greek-American who had emigrated from Greece when he was seven years old, and spoke no English at all when he arrived to the US. He is an incredible guy, and a friend. I mentored Bill in the Bechtel way and the way we did things back then, and he went on to a stellar career.

But to understand how you do things in other countries, I remember one very interesting thing. There were constant protests about where things were going to go. And there was a lot of very smart concern about all the antiquities under the streets, because you are digging up the streets. You are digging through centuries of history. Brilliantly, Bechtel hired a fellow who had run Muni here, Bill [William] Stead, who is an engineer, to head the whole project. Bill was an amateur archaeologist, and a very good one. And he transformed that project. He was responsible for creating a museum in the malls of the main station, under Syntagma Square, where, as they would—they called in the Ministry of Antiquities and worked with them, and it caused some significant delays. But culturally, it was necessary. And aesthetically, it was worth it. You see, behind glass, the actual excavations, and the antiquities that were found there. It was remarkable.

But there was some argument over whether a station entrance was going to go next to the university, and for some reason—I can’t remember why—the students were very exercised about what was being done. And they pelted the contractor with eggs, or something like that. They were very demonstrative people in Athens. We had a meeting with the consortium about how are we going to deal with this, from PR. And I remember the guy from Hochtief, I think it was one of the German companies—I said, “You can’t be bullheaded about this. You have got to kind of give these people time to do this.” And he says, “Well, the police didn’t do anything.” And I said, “Well, this is their country, and it’s their decision how they are going to enforce this.” The guy looked at me and he says, [German accent] “I think the police should always
be on our side.” And I thought, well, now, there’s a nice little culture clash! I suddenly understood a little more. Every time I see stories now about the Greeks and the Germans in the EU, I am reminded of how—[laughter] I just think back to that moment.

So I would just say from a personal standpoint, my 18 years at Bechtel gave me an immense education in international affairs, intercultural affairs, and how to listen and respect other societies and what they do. People mistakenly think somehow we can all get together, and by just humming a few bars of “Kumbaya,” we will all decide spontaneously to play it together. Well, the world is not that way. But if you don’t listen, you won’t learn.

Holmes: I wanted to ask, before we go: in 1999, after 18 years, you decided to leave Bechtel. You eventually went to—

Laubscher: Well, no. I actually got recruited. This is part of my life I don’t talk much about. I had been there a long time. I didn’t consider myself really great at playing corporate games. I still had some of the journalist in me, and I didn’t embrace—I’m being self-critical now—I was, and remain, tremendously loyal to that company and to the Bechtel family, because I think they represent some very positive virtues and values. But there was a whole ethos around the corporate world, in the daily milieu and maelstrom of these kind of things. I made some very good friends at Bechtel, but I also—by being blunt and speaking up when some senior executives wanted to do certain things, I made enemies, too. And so I wasn’t yet at the top level, and my career was moving on, and I thought, let’s see—I was thinking about other things.

Then a recruiter called me and said, look, there is this company in Los Angeles that’s huge—it’s going to be huge—called Global Crossing. It was a tech company, a fiber optics company, and it had been started by this entrepreneur named Gary Winnick, and it was going to revolutionize long-distance communication. And it and its peers ended up more or less doing that. Their business was to lay fiber optic cable across oceans to beef up connections, and take advantage of the explosive growth of the internet. It was funny: they were recruiting me actively while I was on a plane with Riley Bechtel to Trinidad, where we were building an LNG [liquefied natural gas] plant. And I saw Riley reading this Forbes magazine, and I looked at it, and I did a double-take, because there was my prospective boss on the cover, and the headline was “Making Money at the Speed of Light.” It was this hype piece about this incredible lean, mean startup that was being run out of Beverly Hills, of all places.

So they recruited me, and what kind of interested me was that their board chair was Lodwrick Cook, who was the recently retired board chair of ARCO
[Atlantic Richfield Company]. And Lod Cook was a good friend of Steve Bechtel, Jr.’s. There’s connections again. And I thought, well, if Lod Cook is involved in this, it’s a good deal. I didn’t pay attention to the fact they had been through three CEOs in 18 months.

I’ll keep this very short: I got down there to head all their communications, and it didn’t take long to realize that it wasn’t quite what Bechtel was. I mean, Steve, Jr. told me that if Lod Cook was involved, it must be a good thing. Riley let me know that he was sorry I was leaving; it was all very nice. But it was time to turn the page, and it turned out to be not a nice page. And just in a short form, the public record shows that there ended up being a lot of investigations of them, of things like double-booking revenues—it was where you had two ostensibly competing companies both building fiber optic capability under an ocean, and one would sell—“sell” in quotes—capacity to the other and book that as revenue. And the other would sell a like amount of capacity to the first company, and book it as revenue.

04-02:20:16
Holmes: A bit of a shell game, then?

04-02:20:17
Laubscher: Yeah. It wasn’t that they weren’t actually building something. And what they were involved in when I was with them was a giant construction project. That’s what it was. It was very much like project work. But they were publicly traded, and they were obsessive about their daily close—and I understand that. It was just not a good fit. And on top of it, the fourth CEO that they brought in, who was an AT&T veteran and a great guy named Bob [Robert] Annunziata, was constantly being criticized by Winnick, the founder, who was really the dominant power there. I was cheese in the sandwich, because I reported to Bob, but Bob was in New Jersey, and Gary was down the hall from me in Beverly Hills.

So that was a tough situation. And when Bob just tried to solve the problem by moving everybody to New Jersey, all the corporate staff, my contract said I would be based in California. So we agreed that I would just leave. I was only there six months. And it was a real education. If I seem to some that I am too zealous in my defense of Bechtel as an ethical company, it’s because I know the difference now. By the way, Bob left very soon after that, too. And then the company kind of sold out to some Singapore people. The pipes are real, the cables and all that stuff, and it’s—but it was people who didn’t have the same values—and Lod left, too. It was a whole different thing.

And then I set out my shingle. Then I did consulting. That was a whole different thing.

04-02:22:31
Holmes: Well, and you ended up founding your own PR firm: Messagesmith.
Laubscher: Yeah, my own PR firm. Early on, one company, Kintana, which was a startup in Silicon Valley, essentially bought out all my time, and I was working for them pretty much exclusively for three years. And that was great, and we were all going to make a zillion dollars. Until they sold to another company, which then sold to HP [Hewlett Packard].

Holmes: I wanted to ask you before we go: you mentioned something about “the Bechtel way.” And after, of course, leaving Bechtel and working for other companies, and then moving into private practice, how would you define that. What is “the Bechtel way?”

Laubscher: Well—

Holmes: And has that influenced your profession?

Laubscher: This is not “the Bechtel way,” but it’s the way I characterize it, which comes from my childhood, and the old Disney series on Davy Crockett, which took the country by storm when I was six or seven, with coonskin caps and Fess Parker, and all that. They held up Davy’s philosophy—at least allegedly—“Be sure you are right, then go ahead.” And I think that’s the way. It’s an action-oriented environment. But it’s one where you follow the old carpenter’s saying: “Measure twice, cut once.” And always be sure that what you are doing meets all the tests. Now, it doesn’t mean it meets everybody’s tests. As I said before, there is a fundamental disagreement among different groups in this society about what we should be building and what we are building, and all those other things. And there is the march of science. The things that we have done and we did not understand were harmful at the time are now recognized as such. And action has to be taken to work on those.

But the one thing that always sticks with me about all this is—and you as a historian understand this, too—it’s context. It’s what are you doing in the context of the times. On a macro-American level, it’s like criticizing [President Abraham] Lincoln for not doing more to end slavery sooner. It’s the dynamic environment in which decisions are made in any society. And when you are a builder, you have obligations to build. Not just anything, anywhere; you are not the one who gives the permission to build. You only build after the permissions are gotten.

Holmes: What are the most important lessons and principles, continuing on for years later after leaving Bechtel and into public relations, that you took with you? That you have followed since?
Plain speaking is tremendously important. I am a lifelong enemy of gibberish and overwritten—I can barely make out a will now because of the way—you have to have this, and you have to have that as well. Why do we do this? That’s a whole thing about the legal profession, but—it was hard for me as a journalist and someone who enjoys writing with style to write speeches, for example, for our CEOs, our COOs, who are not public speakers.

I think, by the way, one of the reasons that Bechtel has been kind of behind the scenes is because the Bechtel family members are modest. They are genuinely modest. And they are not self-aggrandizing, and they are not interested in making a big name for themselves. And that’s partly the business. Again, you don’t get bigger than your clients. And it’s partly that they are just the type of human beings they are. We can all look at people on the public stage today—and you can certainly start with Donald Trump. But you can go on to a whole range of other people—in the corporate world, in politics and other things—who just can’t wait for the spotlight to be on them. And somehow, as a society, we kind of, in some ways, have come to believe that if you don’t want the spotlight on you, there is something wrong with you. And that dribbles all the way down to reality TV, where—you know, I still don’t understand quite why the Kardashian family is famous. But they are.

What I have learned is be willing to be judged by what you do, not what you say. And try to actually do something. Don’t just talk about it.

Well, that’s actually a good segue into our next session, of going into your civic activities in San Francisco.

Okay, good. I am looking forward to that.

All right. Thank you, Rick.

Thanks, Todd.

[End of Audio File 4]
Interview 5: August 25, 2016

Holmes: All right, I guess we should begin. This is Todd Holmes from the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley, and I have the pleasure again to sit down with Rick Laubscher. Today is August 25, 2016, and we are here at his beautiful home in San Francisco, California. Rick thanks for sitting down with me again.

Laubscher: Thank you, Todd.

Holmes: I wanted to pick up where we left off last time, here in our fifth session together, of giving back to the city of San Francisco. In our last session, we talked quite extensively about your time at Bechtel. And yet, at the same time while you were in business, it seemed like you also had a parallel career of civic service, civic involvement. Market Street Railway, which we’ll talk about in our last two sessions together, was probably the most celebrated and widely used contribution to the city. But the groundwork, both simultaneously and before, was also well laid with a lot of other of your civic activities.

I want to go back to Bechtel, though, and really go back to the start of this kind of involvement with the city. Because many of these activities happened and occurred while you were working with Bechtel. Maybe you can reflect on Bechtel’s influence, perhaps, in your civic involvement; their participation, and how this kind of shaped you. And maybe a good place to start is the story that we only got into a little bit at the end of our last session regarding the 1989 earthquake.

Laubscher: Yes. Well, just to recap that very briefly, my mentor and close friend, Tom [Thomas] Flynn, who was also my boss, was heading Bechtel’s PR [public relations] at the time, and he and I were at the World Series game when the shaking started. And we saw the puff of smoke come up from across the [San Francisco] Bay, which was the Cypress structure [Cypress Street Viaduct] collapsing. We saw the [San Francisco-Oakland] Bay Bridge collapse on TV, a battery-powered TV somebody had in the stands, and it was apparent there wasn’t going to be a game. And so we left.

We saw the smoke plume rising over the marina, so we went straight to the office, and—which was intact; I believe the electricity was on—and we decided something needs to be done. Tom said immediately, “We have got to go to City Hall.” He got a hold of his boss, who at the time was Riley Bechtel, then the executive vice president of the company, reporting to his father [Stephen Bechtel, Jr.], the CEO. And Riley immediately said, “Yes, we are going to help. We are going to do whatever we can do as soon as we can do it, which means now.”
So Tom went down to City Hall, and there encountered his friend Hadley Roth, his very close friend, who was working for Mayor [Art] Agnos, as he had worked for Mayor [Dianne] Feinstein. And Tom immediately volunteered anything we can do. Bechtel had a couple hundred structural engineers in the San Francisco office who could immediately be deputized, for example, as city building inspectors or something to kind of help look and ascertain the damage. As Tom related the story to me—I wasn’t there, but he related the story to me right away—he said, “Well, Mayor Agnos said, ‘No, we have all we need. We have our building inspection; we have—we don’t need your help. Thanks’. And [laughter] Hadley then grabbed Tom and said, “Not so fast. We need to talk.”

The next morning, before dawn, there was a parade of buses lined up at 50 Beale Street, and Bechtel engineers had come in from all over the Bay Area to volunteer to help get people back in their homes, or red tag those homes if they needed to be condemned or held out. We all went down to the marina. Riley Bechtel personally managed the event. We went to Marina Junior High [School]; we fanned out. I was there to deal with the media if we ran into media. But most of the time I spent was kind of as, frankly, an amateur crisis counselor, because there were people there who were extremely upset about having lost their home, or being forced out of their home. I counseled a couple of people who wanted and were about to try to climb into some of those homes with the soft story construction where the ground floor had collapsed, and said, “Really, please don’t do that. Please don’t do that. Because we don’t know when an aftershock’s going to hit.”

So that was an example of the spontaneous and unheralded—because Riley said, “I don’t want any publicity on this if we can avoid it. This is not something we are doing for show.” And he was always that way. We just do this. So that was an example, to me, of how the company would get involved in the city when it counted. It wasn’t for show; it was the real deal. They were always very supportive of me with my civic endeavors. I had to get my work done; there was no question about that. It’s a very demanding climate and culture.

But they like the idea of being involved civically, and they liked the idea of—they were a transportation company, among many other things they built. They had built BART [Bay Area Rapid Transit]! And so I thought it was a good idea, because it was both in Bechtel’s interest and in my interest, to serve on the Transportation Committees, first of SPUR [San Francisco Bay Area Planning and Urban Research Association] and then of the Chamber of Commerce—both of which Bechtel was a member of—and to try to look for ways we could improve transportation in the Bay Area. This was not with an idea of getting contracts for Bechtel, because the kinds of things that would be done in the city were generally not—we weren’t talking about large capital
projects that a Bechtel would be involved in back then. But in terms of little fixes and improvements to the—such as the city is making now, with transit lanes and other—that kind of infrastructure stuff. Small stuff, but that makes a difference incrementally.

So I served in that function, and it was appreciated, and noticed, and I guess appreciated, by the head of the Chamber then, the executive director, John Jacobs—a wonderful man, who has passed away. And we can talk about the Trolley Festival perhaps a little later, because that grew out of it. But it also grew into recognition of, I guess, some broader contribution I could make in some way, because they asked me to serve on the Chamber Board [of Directors], which was very unusual for someone at my level in those days.

And then also, I was chosen for this first class of an organization that’s still going on 30 years later called Leadership San Francisco, which is modeled on one in another city, I think, where corporations and nonprofits, government agencies, are asked to nominate younger people who are on the rise to get together, and it’s essentially a networking opportunity. And it’s 12 two-day or one-day sessions, full days; I think it might be two days a month—or maybe it was one day. But it was full day—a long day. And you would get together, and there would be speakers, and there would be a topic that was covered. You might talk about homelessness with experts that came in to discuss it and brief you, and you would give them feedback. Transportation would be another topic.

05-00:08:50 Holmes: I want to get to that. But to also clarify, so Bechtel—because I looked in the press reports, and there was really very little if no press on Bechtel’s involvement in the earthquake and helping out with the city.

05-00:09:04 Laubscher: See? I did a good job.

05-00:09:05 Holmes: Yeah. You did, you did! And they didn’t get reimbursed or paid. It was all volunteered.

05-00:09:11 Laubscher: Oh, yeah.

05-00:09:12 Holmes: It was all volunteered to the city.

05-00:09:14 Laubscher: Yeah.

05-00:09:15 Holmes: Now, the Bechtels themselves are San Franciscans at heart. So was there a—
Laubscher: By birth!

Holmes: ---relation also there? Yes, yes. Was there a relation? I mean, was that something also that helped you identify with the company?

Laubscher: Oh, yes. I think I mentioned in the past interview that when I made the difficult decision to leave journalism, daily journalism, I did it because I wanted to be involved in the city, the city I was born in. And you can’t find a more—you couldn’t, in that day, find really a more San Francisco company than Bechtel, unless—well, there was a big three. There was PG&E [Pacific Gas & Electric Company], there was Bechtel, and there was Chevron, which were all founded in San Francisco. And of course, Wells Fargo, which was then a smaller company, and B of A [Bank of America], which was a very big company. So that was kind of the big five, as far as employers went, with San Francisco roots. But I am expressing my prejudiced view here now that the other companies, by that time, because they were publicly-held companies, had been kind of pulled into a broader role. I mean, they were still headquartered in San Francisco, they gave a lot to the San Francisco community, to charities, and things like that. But I don’t think their leadership necessarily had—I mean, there was certainly exceptions to this—had as much passion for the city itself.

But the Bechtels’ passion was, I think, a little different. I mean, Steve, Jr. lived in the city, loved the city. His dad, Steve [Stephen], Sr., lived in Oakland, and loved Oakland, and had a passion for Oakland. I think they reflected an older era, where you had some kind of loyalty to the place you were brought up. I don’t know. Maybe I’m wrong about that.

Holmes: And did Bechtel do a lot of philanthropy in the city as well?

Laubscher: Quietly.

Holmes: Quietly?

Laubscher: Quietly. Even today, Steve, Jr. and Betty, his wife, are tremendously generous to the city. They just gave $25 million to Golden Gate National Park Conservancy to landscape those tunnels that were just built for the Doyle Drive replacement. And they gave a lot of money before that to create viewpoints of the Golden Gate Bridge from the shoreline there, which had all been completely blocked by overgrowth of trees, of diseased trees. They built an overlook, a beautiful overlook that people can use, and helped build the
trails that are so well used around there now. It’s remarkable. Even as an adult, when you would drive through the Golden Gate Bridge Toll Plaza, you just kind of wanted to get through there, because it was so schlocky. It was very industrial, there were parking lots, and when you got past that, there were the old Army coastal fortifications that were overgrown, and you had no sense in that whole area surrounding the Anchorage and Toll Plaza that you were in an incredible natural area—you know, if you got out of your car and got on foot. Now, that’s completely different. The Bechtels were the main funders of that. And you don’t hear much about it.

Holmes: No, you don’t. And I wonder, too, how much has been written criticizing Bechtel, or that’s at least been very critical of certain practices of Bechtel, and as well as other business. Do you believe that that kind of philanthropy, business philanthropy, is often overlooked? And particularly when one of their PR men, they’re instructing them not to actually give any fanfare to it?

Laubscher: I think it’s disregarded more than it’s overlooked. I think that our society, as it—we have always been polarized. You can go back to the colonial and revolutionary times and the formation of the country, and there could hardly be more vicious battles than Adams, Hamilton, Jefferson, all these other things that went on back then in the context of those times. And throughout our history, the ad hominem against people—the North and the South, and all these other things. And you get into the late nineteenth century and you have the elites, the Gilded Age, and the Robber Barons, and all these other things.

My personal view is, of course, there have been excesses. Of course there have been people who have made enormous amounts of money and not treated their workers well, and not treated their communities well, and expressed greed in all its forms. Of course that happens, and not just in the United States. If you want to look at Russia and the oligarchs; if you want to look at the Middle East; if you want to look at many countries in Asia or Africa, this is not news. There are a lot of human beings who are truly venal people who will take everything they can get and give nothing back unless they have to. And I think because, over history, we understand that, there is a cohort of people who are willing and anxious to apply that condemnation kind of wholesale rather than on a case-by-case basis.

And so I think you have to look more deeply, which nobody wants to take the time to do, to separate the wheat from the chaff here. When I see what families like the Bechtel family have done philanthropically, and other families, like the Hellmans. Of course you could go on and on, I don’t want to start that list, because I’d never be able to finish it if you really were thoughtful about it. There are a lot of really good people who are trying to give back to their community. And certainly, in the larger sense, the pledge
that Warren Buffet and [William] Bill Gates started about, you know, we are going to give away all our fortunes and we’re going to do these kinds of things, there are still people who will vilify—and do vilify—Bill Gates. And here is a man who is—you can’t accuse him of building atomic power plants, and oil refineries, and despoiling the Earth, and doing all these things, these overwrought charges that have been made against Bechtel. Here is a guy who does computer code and created operating systems and PowerPoint—[laughter] and I have my problems with PowerPoint, but I mean, I don’t think that makes Bill Gates a bad person!

My point here is that I think people are quick to judge, people are quick to create ties between things. I find it interesting that when you look at, whether it’s the biographies, the books that have been written about Bechtel, the two big ones—the new one and then the Laton McCartney book before that—there is entirely too much analysis, in the sense that you stop and think that people are doing all these things, manipulating all these little points, to get this outcome. It is not possible to do that, number one, in many cases; and number two, it’s much simpler just to do your job well.

So maybe that’s a bit more of an answer than you wanted, but that’s—I think that you are right. Maybe the Bechtels don’t get enough credit because they don’t want the credit. But that’s the nature of how they are. And I have mentioned this before: Steve Bechtel subscribes to the Code of Ethics of the American Society of Civil Engineers, which specifically says you shall not seek self-aggrandizement for your work. Let your works speak for themselves. And I think he is a genuinely modest man, and I think his sons picked that up, and daughter. You go about your business, you do what you think is best, and that’s it. There is never going to be a reality show featuring the Bechtels. I can safely predict that.

05-00:19:00
Holmes: You worked for Bechtel 18 years?

05-00:19:04
Laubscher: Yeah.

05-00:19:04
Holmes: You went in as a journalist, trained as a journalist—award-winning journalist. How do you think that reshaped you? Not just personally, but also professionally, that experience?

05-00:19:19
Laubscher: I learned how to see other viewpoints. If you sit down opposite Saudi men or a tribal leader in Papua New Guinea, or a government official there, or if you sit across a table at a banquet from the mayor of Novorossiysk, Russia, and ask him about his town and would he like another pipeline there, and what’s important to his community, and you turn up too many glasses of vodka
because it’s impolite not to, and end up singing Elvis karaoke, which I did one night—it’s hard not to have a broadened perspective. I got a lot of broad perspectives in journalism, but these were business-oriented perspectives. And what it taught me is that—you know, don’t be so quick to cast anything in black and white terms. There is a lot of nuance, and decisions that are made are taken, by and large, pretty carefully. And so that was one of the things I learned.

One of the things I learned was also that business people are accountable to a whole different set of bosses—that’s shareholders—than politicians are—voters. And you obviously want to put your best face forward in business. Now, Bechtel was privately held, so our shareholders were the fifty partners in the company, and of course everybody knew who was a partner and who wasn’t. You wanted to serve the interests of the partnership, but the individuals in the partnership didn’t always have the same interests, just like shareholders in a public company don’t always have the same interests. So you go up the ladder and see what your boss wants, and ultimately, what the CEO wants, and try to reconcile all those things. But you have to keep other people in mind besides just yourself or your boss.

One of the things we were tasked with doing was provide information on outside things to our executives, and sometimes that could be uncomfortable to deliver. One time—I genuinely have sort of forgotten what the issue was now; it was some state issue in Sacramento that was going to affect the project. And I was meeting in a group with our executive vice president—one of the executive vice presidents—and I laid out what the issue was, and I cited sources as I was doing it, and this was what was going on in Sacramento. This guy, who was notoriously impatient with people, and assertive and aggressive, said, “How do you know that?” And I said, “You pay me to know that.” And he didn’t miss a beat. He looked right back to me and said, “Well, maybe we’re paying the wrong guy.” At that point, my boss, who was the general counsel to the company and was a very wise and measured man, stepped in to calm down the other guy. And on the way out the door, this fellow, the EVP [executive vice president], slapped his arm around me and—you know? And I guess that was some sort of test, and I guess I had passed.

But it is tough, especially in a private company, where you don’t have the kinds of pressures from communities and other places that you have in public companies to be the bearer of what they would consider bad news. This is the environment here; this is the other problem. Now, I mentioned that I was not involved in the Boston Central Artery job, except very peripherally.

05-00:24:19
Holmes: The Boston dig? No, Big Dig—
Laubscher: Yes, “The Big Dig” they called it. Yeah. But I can tell you that, boy, there was a graduate school education, because Bechtel had done big jobs before, of course. But big transportation jobs vary in the cities that they are in. I was doing a lot of work in Athens on the subway, back at the Athens subway, at that time, and I got really well schooled in Athenian politics. But my colleague who was spearheading the Boston thing, got ten times the lessons I did. And he was an Easterner! It was an amazing thing. And it was extremely intense. Boston is a very intense town. You were ripping out the heart of the city. And I don’t know of anybody in Boston today who goes down to that wonderful linear park that sits where the two-story rusted central artery, the freeway, used to sit and doesn’t think that this is a big improvement, and doesn’t think that this was worth the tremendous effort that went into it.

I think it would be much harder to do something like this today, because it’s so expensive, and there’s so many things. And what so many people don’t want to allow for is that public empowerment is at an all-time high in this country. You can stop anything. Or at least, if not stop, you can certainly delay it. And when you delay it, the costs go up. There’s no two ways about it. In these kind of situations, your client will lay out the schedule, and you lay out the schedule, and if you try to say, we have got to build in a lot of pad here for things being shut down or delayed because of public protests, or some other kind of thing that it ends up with some court order putting a hold on the project—because of course the courts don’t have to pay for that—they’ll say, “No, no, no, no. We have got this. We’ll take care of that. You just build it.” It’s not that easy anymore.

Holmes: Sure, sure. And I know that contrary to the reports around the Big Dig, of criticizing Bechtel for the delays and increasing costs, you are referencing that a lot of that also had to do with the city government?

Laubscher: Oh, not the city government, the state government. Well, the city government was involved because of the utilities and a lot of the other stuff. But the client was the Massachusetts Department of Transportation. We were dealing with replacing an interstate highway. And I said before the difference between politicians and business people is the audience, the bosses to whom they report. If you get council members in Boston screaming at the Secretary of Transportation, who is a state official, in theory, if you look at an org chart, they could kind of go like this [gestures], “No, you are not in my chain of command.” Well, in the Massachusetts political world, that doesn’t happen. If the city council person is powerful, you are going to listen and you say, “Well, we can’t – you are going to disrupt Joe’s Spaghetti Shack, and Joe is my wife’s cousin.”
These things really happen. And they don’t all get press. I am not going to speak specifically about any client, because that’s not appropriate, but there are cases where your client will impose delays on you because of their constituents or their circumstances that have nothing to do with the engineering or construction of the project—not directly. And when you tell them there is going to be a cost for that, they’ll look at you and say, “Eat it. I’m not going to adjust the cost.” And if you have a good contract and you have lawyers, you say, “Well, thanks for sharing, but the contract says we get to charge you for this.” “Well, I don’t have the budget for that.” “Well, you need to raise the budget.” These things happen, and it’s a very complex thing. It’s like looking inside a Swiss watch: you have got all these moving parts, and it’s kind of like, “Whoa—that’s really complicated!” Most people don’t really want to look at that. They just want to know what time it is.

It seems like, from an outsider’s view, this experience working with Bechtel professionally led to this transition from journalist to, in a sense, a businessman. You did operate your own businesses after you left Bechtel. Would you consider yourself at least a professional executive, not just a journalist?

Oh, I certainly learned to take a much broader view. I certainly learned the value of all the old sayings. “Time is money.” Warren Bechtel famously said, “If you can’t trust a man’s handshake, you can’t trust his signature.” And how you build relationships with clients, and how you maintain good relationships with clients. And what do you do when the client isn’t a good client? And what do you do when the client is unethical? All of these kinds of things come up in the course of that, and I learned a lot about how to deal with that.

I have to say, though, that I never lost the journalist’s skepticism, and I never swallowed whole the—internally, quietly, I would always kind of probe. It’s very much like what a good advisor to a politician would do: if you get into a situation and you are accused of doing something, the first thing you want to know internally is did we do it? And if the answer is “no,” that’s great, because that’s easy to deal with. If the answer is, “Well, it’s complicated,” then you need to really kind of look into these things.

Bechtel was a highly ethical company, but that doesn’t mean that there weren’t a few renegades in a large company who—for their own purposes or to save their own hide on a project that had gone south, or something like that—might be tempted to shade things internally. When those people were found, they were ruthlessly weeded out because the family and the leadership of the company had no tolerance for that kind of stuff—and still don’t, as far as I know. But that doesn’t mean it doesn’t happen. That’s like telling your
kids never shoplift, or you can’t take a drink until you’re 21, and thinking, “Well, that’s done. That’ll never happen now because I said something.”

And now, going into more of the civic activities, you mentioned in our last session about “the Bechtel Way.” Which, to paraphrase, if I am doing so correctly—and if I am not, you’ll have to correct me—the Bechtel Way was “Don’t talk about it—just do it.” It was more of a motto of action. Did that really influence you, or at least dovetail with your own perspective of when you had ideas of getting involved with the city?

Well, I think if you asked anybody who knows me well, one of the easiest ways to set me off is to talk about people who talk instead of do. To this day, I have very little tolerance for kibitzers, whether it’s online, in groups—and I have to restrain myself sometimes when I see—we talk about our Market Street Railway streetcar group, historic preservation group. When people—not “make random comments,” but when commenters in these online dialogues and stuff like that endlessly criticize, and have never raised a finger to either volunteer, donate money to people who are working on this professionally, to do anything to correct it—. There are just negative people out there, and the world is filled with people—and we see this in every discipline, on every discussion board and comment page all over the internet—who are quick to criticize, but unable or unwilling to actually do anything about it.

I used to have a poster; I wish I had bought it from Bechtel when I left. There was a series of posters that was done for the Commerce Department during the [Great] Depression, and there were these—well, you see I have travel posters; I like this format, of the big bold graphic. And this was a big, bold graphic that was bigger than these. I don’t know; it was very large. And it had a bridge being erected in bold graphics, and somebody looked like he was inspecting the work. And it said, “Progress” — it was this huge word, “Progress”—“depends on men who build.” And it says, “To build takes determination, confidence”—or something else. And then the tagline was, “Anybody can tear down.” And I had taken a Dymo label and on the glass—I didn’t want to touch the poster—and put “and women” after “men” on the page, because it was obviously something that was very dated. But the point was very clear, and it clearly represented my views, and everybody who worked with me and for me knew it. We are here to build something. We are not here—and we are here to discuss! If you take the old carpenter’s mantra, “Measure twice; cut once,” you don’t go in and do a half-baked job of preparing to build. But once you start, you finish.

And so, yeah. I think I’ve always kind of felt like I want to do something. If I reflect back going back to college, we—
Holmes: With the radio station.

Laubscher: Yeah. We don’t have a radio station. Well, let’s start one. Well, how do we do that? I don’t know. But I can find out.

I had a high school physics teacher, Cliff Georgeson, who was one of these absent-minded teacher types. But he was great, because he said something I never forgot. He put this physics problem up there and he said, “What is this?” “What is X?” or whatever. And he’d say, “We don’t know, do we? But we can find out.” And that was kind of something that’s always kind of stuck in my mind. And even today—it’s ridiculously easy, and I’ve now become totally addicted to this, as I should not be—if somebody asks something over dinner, I’ll pull my phone out and say, “We can find out.” And I’ll start with Wikipedia or whatever. You think about that, the information, it’s more or less accurate. There’s also a whole lot of inaccurate information on the internet.

And by the way, I believe that one of the biggest failings of our education system is the failure to teach discernment as something that is baked into the curriculum at every level. It’s not a question of whether kids today have access to information. They have it. If you have a phone, you have everything you need. The Encyclopedia Britannica times a gazillion. Except you also have trash novels and bad information, and fables, and all this other stuff, and how do you pick the right information and know how to use it?

I’m getting off topic here, but that’s—. But journalism told me how to look for reliable information and how to verify that information. And I think business taught me how to apply it.

Holmes: That’s really interesting. You mentioned something about building. And so when I talked to people and we talked about your time of working with the Chamber of Commerce, a few of them mentioned that one of your mindsets when you were dealing with the Chamber of Commerce was about building bridges. It was building bridges between the business community and the city in a lot of ways. Could you tell—maybe before we discuss that a little bit and some of those activities—maybe reflect a little bit on what was the business climate, say, in the late 1970s, early 1980s?

Laubscher: Can I just ask for a quick break? And we’ll—

Holmes: Sure.
Holmes: So dealing with your time there at the Chamber of Commerce and building bridges between the larger business community, particularly here in San Francisco, and the city and community at large, perhaps maybe reflect on how did you see the business climate developing or changing, particularly if we went from, perhaps, Mayor Feinstein to Mayor Agnos.

Laubscher: Well, that was a big change. In that era, we had the subject of “Manhattanization,” which was a term I believe was coined by Bruce Brugmann at the [San Francisco] Bay Guardian. The Guardian was pretty influential in those days in the progressive community. And Bruce had a very clear and sharply-drawn set of villains. Bechtel was one of the villains, but they were kind of a minor villain because PG&E was the huge villain, and had stolen public power, and all this other stuff. And Chevron was up there, and of course the others. But these were large corporate entities in the city.

One of the untold stories here—or underappreciated stories—is how the business community of San Francisco itself changed. And when I was working at Bechtel during the ’80s and ’90s, there was definitely a diminution of corporate influence in San Francisco, corporate presence, in San Francisco. It was always, I thought, laughable that PG&E was turning this and influencing that, and the Bechtels were making phone calls, and Dianne [Feinstein] was doing whatever they wanted. It was actually quite the opposite. You did what Dianne wanted [laughter] if you wanted to be a respected or important entity in the city. She was a very straightforward and tough mayor.

During this whole period, though, you had this less targetable group, not of corporations, but developers. These were companies whose names you didn’t know—with a few exceptions. Shorenstein’s, of course, where Walter Shorenstein was the devil because he built high-rise buildings, but there were many others who did that, too. And Walter was a philanthropist. But there were these clashing visions for the city: the one that said build to the sky—we are doing this again, by the way—build to the sky; the other said no, don’t build to the sky. And who gets to live in San Francisco? Is it the beat poets, as in the 1950s? The hippies, as in the 1960s? Or is it these other folks?

Well, what actually happened in San Francisco, by and large, was that most of the workers in, certainly, the downtown corporations were not really city people. If they had families, small kids, they did not want to go to San Francisco public schools, they did not want to live wall to wall in small houses if they could have big suburban yards, and all that other stuff. I mean, that diaspora had already taken place, to the suburbs. So the people in the city,
the electorate, tended to be a more progressive group who didn’t share as many of those suburban values. But the corporations in the city and their leaders, most did not live in the city. The Bechtels did, but they had a more, you could call it “Republican,” to use a short phrase for it, view than the people in the city, and that was kind of a clash. And these corporate executives didn’t like having demonstrations outside of their offices on Market Street all the time. They didn’t like being thought of as villains. They didn’t like increasingly progressive Boards of Supervisors enacting new taxes or threatening new taxes, or doing other kinds of things. And they had shareholders to answer to, as well. I have no doubt that that played a major role over time in causing Chevron to move its headquarters to San Ramon. Most of their executives lived in Contra Costa County anyway, so why not?

And so that was a big change, and that was brought about, I think, in large measure by the feeling that the city government and its elected officials were hostile to business. Or indifferent, at best. And the transition from Dianne Feinstein to Art Agnos showed this. Art ran against John Molinari, who had been president of the Board of Supervisors, and was very much in the same mold as Dianne, and was, if I remember correctly, a native San Franciscan, of Italian heritage. Art was Greek. He came to San Francisco, was a social worker, and of course famously was nearly killed by an assassin—or not an “assassin” but an assailant in a street crime. And he embodied that more progressive view. When he got into City Hall, he wanted to do what his constituents wanted him to do, and what he thought they wanted him to do, which was be a more open, inclusive, and forgiving kind of government. But of course, history tells us that the homeless situation became very visible during the Agnos administration, and what was called “Camp Agnos,” which was just arrays of tents on Civic Center Plaza, became a very controversial point, and Art lost his reelection bid.

05-00:47:55
Laubscher: Well, of course, you have the political factors, and you have the economic factors. Right now, I follow with some interest those escalating demands on residential developers for a percentage of affordable housing. And somebody
recently did 40%; I think the [San Francisco] Giants did 40% on their development, and somebody else did 25%. Is this the new floor? Is this the new standard? And I kind of read this with sort of bemusement, because it’s the standard until the next downturn, when it goes to zero, because nobody’s going to build anything. There is a fundamental disconnect between people who never think about money and people who only think about money. If you are a developer, you might have aesthetic feelings, you might have social principles. There are some very good developers in this city, such as Oz Erickson, John Stewart—I could go on with a list of very thoughtful people who really, really are concerned about the social fabric of the city and want to do the right thing, and balance profit against something that delivers value to the city.

But you don’t abandon the notion that you have got to make money to do this. It’s not a public service. Even the not-for-profits that spring up, most of the executive directors are trying to figure out how they keep up, how they keep their salary to a level that it allows them to live in a city this expensive. That’s human nature. But they don’t necessarily see the bigger economic context that allows you to decide whether you are going to make a decision to build a $50 million or $100 million building, or $500 million building. My gosh, these are huge investments! And you look at the Salesforce Tower that’s going up now, or all the buildings that were built in the past, you don’t know what your tenancy is going to be, you don’t know how long it’s going to last, and you have got to do the math. I am the first to tell you I am not very good at that, but I appreciate that it has to be done. And I appreciate that, at the same time, the public, the voters, have a right to determine how much development they want in their city and where they want it. What developers want are rules that don’t change. There have been all kinds of analyses about this. It’s like going to bat and having three pitches thrown up at your shoulder level and all called strikes. And all of a sudden, you are out. You say, “Since when is that a strike?” Well, since about ten seconds ago, when I decided to change the rules. Well, thanks for telling me. Because when you enter these long-term investments and things like that, what you want is a predictable environment.

Of course, in San Francisco, going way back, because it’s a progressive city, if market rate rents rose too high, boom! You get rent control. And rent control has been in New York for decades, and everybody in New York knows what the games you play are about subletting your property to someone else and going to great pains not to let the owners know, because now you are in violation of your lease, and he gets to revert it to market rate, but we can’t have that, because I might want to move back there sometime. All these other workarounds that result from that kind of thing, and the disinvestment in property when you can’t raise rents. These discussions have gone on for a long, long time. In San Francisco, that’s just an endless battle back and forth.
Holmes: And were these part of the discussions when you were there at the Chamber of Commerce?

Laubscher: Oh, yeah. Well, all of these things were there. I don’t remember the numbers; Prop M sticks out in my mind, but there were all these different propositions to limit things. The so-called “beauty contest,” where we are only going to allocate x-hundred-thousand square feet of space for office buildings every year, and you have to compete to get that space. And we have judges in the beauty contest—the Planning Commission—and we are going to look at this, and we are going to say, you have done the most for the city, so we are going to give it to you. I actually got involved in one of those on behalf of Bechtel—or actually, the Freemont Group, the family investment, when they wanted to build a building for their own headquarters. And it was actually a pretty modest building, and it was within the zoning envelope, and it was everything else, but they had to compete with out-of-town developers to have a right to build their own headquarters to house their own people. They won that, but it’s something that, again, when you deal with business people who aren’t all San Francisco natives and they come here from other places—I mean, if you came from Houston, where Bechtel had big offices, for example, and there is no zoning whatsoever, you can build anything you want anywhere, at any time, almost—this is like going to Mars.

Holmes: And what kind of strategies were discussed to try to, again, build those bridges between the city and business community?

Laubscher: The Chamber Board—or the Chamber, when I first got involved with it—was largely large corporations. Why? Because you had to have a budget to operate, and the dues structure was progressive, so the more employees you had, the more your dues were. Trying to solicit small businesses as members was a lot of work and you didn’t get much revenue out of it. Anybody could walk in and join the Chamber, and small businesses were welcomed and encouraged to join, but you wouldn’t run big, long campaigns because if you did that, you had to sell to small businesses on the value you provide it. And in those days, the Chamber was seen—and I think accurately so—as the defender of large employers’ rights and positions in San Francisco. And that’s evolved over the years, where the Chamber is very, very small business-focused now. I am sure they’d like all the large business members they can get, but there aren’t very many of those anymore. There aren’t the kinds of large employers in San Francisco that you used to have.
And would you say that this is largely because of that type of business climate? Like you mentioned with Chevron—the almost anti-business environment in San Francisco?

Yeah. There’s no question it was anti-business on the part of the progressive majority. They philosophically did not like large corporations in general, and they did not like specifically what these corporations did. PG&E cheated us out of the public power that we were promised in the Charter of 1900 [Charter of the City and County of San Francisco]. Chevron, of course, makes polluting oil, and my god, cars are bad. And Bechtel built all sorts of terrible things. And that kind of thing. And I think that’s fine. People have those views, and if you get a majority of them, they control the electorate.

And that’s why, by the way, in my opinion, San Francisco missed out on the biotech boom and a bunch of other stuff. What other explanation is there when—gosh—Arthur—the founder of Genentech—. There was a huge, strong cadre of biotech people from UCSF [University of California, San Francisco] in the city themselves. Many of them lived in the city. Where’d they build their buildings? South San Francisco or Brisbane. Close to the city, but not in the city. So they didn’t have to deal with the vagaries of these jurisdictions. And when Mission Bay was started, one of the goals was to lure all these biotech firms down there. And by and large, it has not worked, because the climate is unpredictable in San Francisco. It’s not necessarily that the taxation is too high; it’s the fear that it will go higher. If you are a major employer in Brisbane, population 5,000, you have got a lot of leverage. Or South San Francisco, you have got a lot of leverage with the local government. By extension, if you are Google in Mountain View, or Facebook in Menlo Park, people can gripe and grouse, but the council members know, the mayor knows, and the planning commissioners know that the amount of revenue you bring into that city can’t be replaced if you leave.

So that’s why when Mayor [Edwin] Lee decided to implement the tax zone or proposed the tax zone in Mid-Market for Twitter and others, the people who criticized him for doing that frankly did not get it. Because to the mind of somebody who doesn’t know business well, or who has a natural antipathy toward business—no matter what it is, whether it’s ridesharing like Uber, or Twitter, or something that makes no pollution, no matter what the organization is—there is this fear in the executives of those organizations, I think, that if we don’t have a guarantee here, we are going to get screwed. And in the case of all of these tech companies which issued stock as a huge incentive to their executives as they grow up, you are not going to be an incubator in San Francisco, you are not going to start up in San Francisco, if you think that somebody can come and snatch a huge percentage of what you worked so hard for once you go public in an IPO [initial public offering]. Why
would you do that when you can have offices in Palo Alto, Menlo Park—I could name a dozen cities up and down the peninsula alone where you know the city government is not going to slap that on you.

That’s the ongoing battle with business in San Francisco. And if the city does not understand that there are consequences to these kinds of things, then they’ll end up with the mix of people they have. And that, in turn, goes back to developers, because developers have these huge sunk capital costs in their office towers and things like that, and if the business climate turns sour in San Francisco, you are not going to fill that with a bunch of non-profits.

Holmes: I wanted to ask you: your time of working with the Chamber, of seeing both sides—again, as a native San Franciscan seeing this side of the city, as well as then also understanding the broader viewpoints of business—did this also help you in your work with SPUR, the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Association?

Laubscher: Well, SPUR, of course, in those days, I think was really more of a “good government” organization than anything else. SPUR welcomed support from anyone, including developers. I think the knock on SPUR today that a lot of people have is that it is way more pro-development than it used to be, and that’s in the—I mean, I have heard this said over and over—it’s in the pocket of developers. I was honored by SPUR a few years ago with an award called “The Silver SPUR” for my transit advocacy and stuff like that. I was very pleased to get it. And I have been a member of SPUR for—I don’t know—30-plus years. But I notice when I go to these gatherings now, the meetings of flannel-shirted activists who wanted to get something done in the city seem semi-quaint now, because there, you’ve got 2,700 people in Moscone Center celebrating a variety of people, many of whom have nothing to do with development at all, but the whole thing is paid for by developers. And you can go out and see the sponsor for that activity and for that particular luncheon, and it’s all developers. You can practically see every major project that’s in the pipeline in San Francisco because they know that all the planning commissioners and Planning Department staff and other key people come to this luncheon. So it’s their chance to make a point. So SPUR has become much more corporatized, but not necessarily with the big companies. Now—

Holmes: Was it that way when you started?

Laubscher: I thought it was more balanced. There were more activists and neighborhood types in there, in stronger positions. That’s my view; I could be wrong about that. I say that very quickly. And I am not at all unaware that SPUR grew out of the Blyth-Zellerbach Committee, which Steve Bechtel, Sr. was very active
in. And the Blyth-Zellerbach Committee was a major driver of BART, among other things. It wanted San Francisco to be a vibrant, busy city.

It’s interesting to think about sometimes what the Bay Area would be today if BART had never been built. But I guarantee you that, with pretty good certainty, that you wouldn’t have what we have in terms of downtown in San Francisco today. Is it overbuilt? I fear that downtown San Francisco is overbuilt, in the sense that we have not made the investment—it’s not that you can’t be this dense. Look at Manhattan. But you look at the infrastructure Manhattan has and the connections it has to its catchment area, its suburbs and things like that, in terms of public transportation, we are just nowhere compared to where they are. Every system is overburdened, and all of the things that are being proposed so far are essentially band-aids. We are going to electrify Caltrain? Well, that’s fine, but we need to double the length of the platforms and buy train sets that have twice as many cars, and we are not doing that. The new train sets we are buying barely increase the capacity. You will be able to add a few extra trains because electrification lets you start and stop the trains more efficiently and quickly, but the capacity of the corridor is nowhere near where it needs to be. And that doesn’t even start to talk about BART, where the second tube is needed immediately just to accommodate what’s built now or will be built in the pipeline we now have. These are real problems.

So let me amend what I just said, because I wouldn’t want people to think that I have the view that SPUR was never a grassroots neighborhood activist organization. But it always has been driven by the desire to see the city grow, and to see the business community grow. But I do think there was a little more balance in the past than there is now.

05-01:05:20
Holmes: And what you mean by “balance” is trying to not just develop but develop in a smart way, right? Or building bridges in the sense between, say, the community and the needed development? I guess compromise might be another term when you are thinking of “balance?”

05-01:05:41
Laubscher: Well, my feeling is that cities have carrying capacities. You can only take so many people and put them in, in our case, 49 square miles, without having real problems that you need to correct as you go in. And we talk about the number of units we want to build, housing units and all this other stuff, but I don’t see the action coming anywhere close to matching the rhetoric. Because you say, well, we are going to add 50,000 units, but then you have a fight to the death over five units in this location or that location.

The notion, for example, if you were to take the existing 3rd Street rail line and significantly up-zone along there in the Bayview, and maybe put a spur out
Evans Avenue and through India Basin to Hunters Point, and up-zone all of that, you could really add tens of thousands of units. But nobody really wants to do that. This whole Hunters Point development and the Candlestick development near me are almost suburban in their scope and size, as opposed to doing what, say, Vancouver has done, with just lots of slender high-rise towers. You could put those in Hunter’s Point, as long as you had the transportation infrastructure, which we are capable of providing, and which you could fund from the incremental property taxes you would get from this kind of stuff. But nobody really wants to do that because they are concerned—in this case, there are issues of social justice, of equity. There is a very strong feeling among some in the Bayview community, particularly African American leadership that’s been there for a while, that this is their last enclave in San Francisco; they don’t want to be pushed out. So there’s a lot of politics that go back and forth on that.

To take another part of town, we have been talking for decades about putting an actual subway under Geary Street. The original BART plan called for a BART line out Geary and then across the Golden Gate Bridge. If they had built a subway line under Geary in the 1970s when they proposed it—and after BART said no, Muni [San Francisco Municipal Transportation Association] tried to build a subway line under there, and the voters said no. You have tremendous opportunity along the Geary corridor to up-zone. But the fact is that the people who live out there don’t want to do that.

One of the more interesting fights, I thought, in recent San Francisco building history was when a fellow named Joe O’Donoghue, who was the head of the Residential Builders [Association] and an Irishman through and through, collaborated with Asian American families who wanted to build multigenerational housing on the existing lots in the Richmond District. And so you would get these maxi-boxes—there was a term for them; I can’t remember what they called them. “Richmond specials,” I think they called them. Where you would build out to the property line, you would build absolutely as high as you could, and you would fill up all the space, because you often had three generations of a family living in the same house. And I personally believe that there was racism involved. People didn’t want to see these Asian families move in, and so there was pushback to say, no, we can’t build these because it would tear down little cottages and things like that that were 100 years old in the Richmond, and you would replace them, as I say, with these boxes that were permitted under the existing code but were never envisioned. And that’s part of the dynamic of the changing population of San Francisco.

This was—I don’t know—25, 30 years ago. Now you have an Asian American supervisor in the Richmond [District]. You have two Asian American supervisors in the Parkside and the Sunset [Districts]. So you now
have actual political representation for that community. And yet, the residual resistance to building more mid-rise and high-rise residential anywhere in this city is tremendous. The only development we have been able to get through that’s sizeable other than in the Mission Bay—the “new lands,” as they call it—is the densification of Parkmerced. But that’s a unique, a literally one of a kind preexisting development in San Francisco anyway.

05-01:10:58 Holmes: What attracted you to get involved in SPUR? I could understand the Chamber of Commerce, there was the connection with Bechtel and being invited to be involved in that.

05-01:11:10 Laubscher: Well, SPUR had done a very good report, before my time; I think it went back to right after I was out of college of something like that. They did an excellent report on Muni: “Building a Better Muni.” And I was a Muni junkie.

05-01:11:27 Holmes: You are a transportation junkie.

05-01:11:28 Laubscher: Not just transportation, but Muni in particular. As I explained earlier, maybe it’s because I rode those streetcars and buses when I was a little kid. But that was part of my childhood, and I liked getting around; I liked the system. And so I really just was fascinated with this notion of how can we make our transit system better? How can we improve it? Modernize it, do whatever we need to do with it? And so because SPUR had the leading role as a advocate, non-profit advocate for this, that’s why I wanted to get involved with them. And then when I did, I became acquainted with other city issues and was interested in other city issues. But it started with their report on Muni, which I still have somewhere.

05-01:11:24 Holmes: That is a good segue to start our discussion on Market Street Railway. But before we do, I also wanted to ask you about the City Club of San Francisco.

05-01:12:36 Laubscher: Let me just ask for one more break, if I can.

05-01:12:43 Holmes: Sure.

05-01:12:43 Laubscher: I’m sorry.

05-01:12:44 Holmes: No, that’s okay.

[break in audio]
Laubscher: I can make the City Club pretty quick, I hope.

Holmes: Oh, you don’t need to. I know from some of the background interviews, many people said this was really important—“Oh, have him talk about this.”

Laubscher: Okay. Well, sure.

Holmes: So I wanted to get this story. But then after that, we could call it quits for today, and we’ll pick up Market Street—the founding of the Market Street—next time. It will be the basis of our next two sessions. And so that will give us ample time to really get into it. So among your other city activities, of course, many of the people I spoke to were heralding the founding of the City Club of San Francisco, which I believe you founded in 1988. Can you discuss that a little bit?

Laubscher: Well, it was a group of us. When you are with Bechtel, there are all kinds of civic events that you participate in. If there is a charity event, political event, other things, you buy tickets. You buy a table. I would go to maybe three charity dinners a month. And so you meet a lot of people around the city, and you enjoy their company, and you become friends, and you build a network. It’s pretty typical. A group of us kind of thought we should do a luncheon club or something. [laughter] This all seems very quaint now, because it was the days when you could actually go to lunch during the workday.

Holmes: [laughter] People actually did that?

Laubscher: You actually went somewhere and had a lunch, and you might discuss business, but you actually had to leave your desk. And so there were other groups like this, social groups. There was Villa Taverna, and there were some others that have been around the city. And we decided we would just get a group of people to maybe go to one restaurant and another restaurant. And I remember Mark Buell was in this group; Jim [James] Lockhart, who was the SVP [senior vice president] of Transamerica [Corporation]; and there was some others.

At the same time, the Stock Exchange Club had gone out of business, and that was a club in the Stock Exchange Tower at 155 Sansome [Street], which coincidentally had been the building that housed Steve Bechtel, Sr.’s personal office for decades. And that building was a landmark, and this space—which I had never seen, because I didn’t know anybody in the Stock Exchange Club, or had never been invited; the Bechtel people all went to the World Trade
Club, which was, in those days, in the Ferry Building—was and is an astonishing Art Deco space. And this PR fellow, now deceased, named Art Blum, who was a classic old school publicist, had been retained by the building owners to try to gin something up for that space—maybe another private club.

So these two groups, these two forces, sort of came together. And Art, I remember, showed us this place, and some of the furniture had sheets over it and things like that, but you can’t walk into that space without just dropping your jaw, because the interiors were all done by Timothy Pflueger, the noted architect. The artisans who worked on the things—things like elevator doors were paneled on the exterior in multiple types of metal. You had copper, you had brass—the elevator doors themselves were art, with figures and people, and things like that. It was just unbelievable. And the dominating, crowning glory of the whole club was the Diego Rivera Fresco, Riches of California, which graced the main staircase, and still does. I just looked at this and I thought, wow! This is a place for grownups! Maybe I are one now! And I mean, I was in my 30s then—or what would I have been in 1988? I would have been 39. So I kind of thought, well, this is quite the place. This has to be saved.

So we ended up getting put together with a group called Club Corporation of America, which professionally managed clubs. They were out of Dallas. And I remember vividly the first organizational meeting. There was, I don’t know, a half dozen of us or something like that—maybe more; maybe it was more like a dozen—people who were going to be part of the board. Then this fellow came in from Dallas; I can’t remember his name, but he had kind of a template for how you put a club together. And he said, “Okay, we are going to build the membership of this club. We are going to do all this. We need to get some people on the board. Who knows automobile dealers?” It was like, what? “Yeah, we need the owners of automobile dealerships on the board. Anybody know any of those people?” Well, Ellis Brooks, but he’s dead. Kind of unclear on the concept about what we wanted.

And the other thing we wanted, and we insisted on, was diversity. The Stock Exchange Club did not admit women, and I assume it did not admit minorities either. So it literally died out. So the first thing we said was, we are going to be actively inclusive, and—

Holmes: And this was kind of groundbreaking, for, particularly, a business club, or a professional club in San Francisco.

Laubscher: Sure, because the powerful people in business in this city belonged to the Bohemian Club. That was the traditional place for the CEOs and all these
other folks. And that was and remains exclusive of women. Yes, there are minorities in there now, but I don’t think anywhere near the representation that they would have in even the business population.

Holmes: And what about gays? Gay and lesbians?

Laubscher: Well, there are always gay and lesbian people in—no lesbians, by definition, but I’m sure there were always gay people in the Bohemian Club, but they weren’t out. But in our case, absolutely! So when we went out to meet people for the board—and this was a great experience, because you got to meet people that you hadn’t otherwise necessarily encountered. So our architect for the historical renovations, Patrick McGrew, who was gay, Patrick was invited to be on the board, because he was a prominent architect in town. Jim [James C.] Hormel, who later became the first openly gay ambassador, American ambassador to Luxembourg, ran his investment firm on Sutter Street one block from the club, so he was invited to be on the board. And so on and so forth. It was a pretty diverse board.

I was shocked when they asked me to be the chair, the other board members asked me to be the chair. I always thought that would be Mark, because he was the—and still is—a real civic leader in this town. Mark Buell. But I guess maybe I had rolled up my sleeves and had done a lot of the work and the organizing, and I guess they thought, [laughter] “Well, we could stick this guy with it, because he’ll do the work.” I don’t know. But my two vice chairs the first year were Leslie Tang Schilling, who is Asian American and was a property owner in the city at the time, and who has been my close friend ever since. And then the other was Jim Lockhart, an African American executive who was the top public affairs guy at Transamerica at the time, when Transamerica was here. And then the board reflected that kind of diversity: female, male; gay, straight—you know?

But a business orientation, because there were dues involved, and corporations were faster than small businesses to pay the dues to clubs of their key executives. So there was that restriction. It was a business-oriented club, but we wanted to have a whole cross section of the city come in, because it was like a meeting room.

Holmes: Wow. That’s nice.

Laubscher: So, yeah. So—.

Holmes: And the membership, did it go up to about a thousand, or—?
Laubscher: Going up to about 1,000. I don’t know where it is now. I haven’t been actively involved. They named me chairman emeritus or something like that, so I get to go. I get to go in and pay for my lunch. And I still go there a number of times. But if you don’t work downtown—this is one of the things that’s become an issue for all of the clubs. And you now have some hot—the Battery is one, and there are others of these kind of exclusive clubs for techies. There are a couple of them further up north of where the City Club is. But they are much more focused, as I understand it, on after work stuff. The one thing we struggled with a lot was after work activity, because the kind of folks we had, most of us had families, or significant others, or because we were heavily drawing from law firms and downtown corporations initially, if you lived in the suburbs—I didn’t; I lived in the city at the time. But if you lived in the suburbs, you wanted to get out of here to get home. You weren’t going to sit around for a couple drinks if your spouse was watching the kids in Orinda. So its focus was lunch, luncheon, and now these newer clubs tend to focus, I think, on after work stuff, because their constituency lives in the city.

Holmes: And are probably eating lunch at their desk.

Laubscher: And that was the other thing that happened. After we started it up, you didn’t. The idea of walking out for a 90 minute lunch or even a 60 minute lunch, unless you had definite business that you had to accomplish, and even if you did, you’d be running behind the rest of the day.

Holmes: As one of the first really open and diverse business clubs in San Francisco, do you think that kind of opened a new page for other clubs to follow? Kind of broke new ground in regard to being much more open and much more diverse in their memberships.

Laubscher: I don’t know if the City Club really had much to do with that, other than showing that it could be done. First of all, I could not possibly imagine trying to start any kind of private luncheon club in San Francisco when we started ours that was anything but what we did. So while people have given it credit for being diverse and all that other stuff, to me, it was like, “Yeah, of course. Is there any other way to do this? No, you can’t. You can’t possibly do it any other way.” It sort of reminds me of—I don’t want to take credit for this, but it is the same tone as that wonderful statement by Prime Minister [Justin] Trudeau in Canada when he was asked at a press conference why he was committed to having 50 percent women in his Cabinet. And his answer was, “Because it’s 2015” is when he said it, I think, or 2016—whatever he said. And that’s exactly the same feeling I think we all had, is—
It’s 1988.

Yeah—how could we do this, because we have, all of us, a diverse group of friends. It’s inconceivable that you would say, “No, you can’t be in because you have more melanin than I do, or because you have different plumbing than I do,” or you have this or that. Please. It’s so quaint to even think about that.

And I have to say that I reflect back and say it’s been an amazing time span to be on this Earth, when I think of what the world was like as a child in terms of social mores and assumptions, and what people said and did, and where we are today. It’s really quite remarkable. I can go back and remember the mid-1950s on. I was born in 1949. I could remember everything from television programs to sports events and other environmental surroundings I had from the time I was maybe 5 or 6. And so that’s a 60 year span to where I am now. If you flip that to the previous 60 years, I don’t think you would see anywhere near the scale and scope of social change in this country. It just didn’t happen. You had universal suffrage, except for all the people who were kept away from the polls by poll taxes and all the other things. But you did have a constitutional amendment that let women vote. And you had other changes, of course. But then and now? Really?

Oh, it’s been remarkable.

Yeah. Even in the last 30 years. And it makes me wish that I could kind of get a look at what it’s going to be 60 years from now. But, anyway.

I want to mention the most important thing to me about The City Club – in fact, the most important thing in my life: my three daughters, Kelsey, Katherine, and Caroline. They’re here because of The City Club – because I met their mothers at the Club. I had mentioned that I was single after 1985. Well, one day shortly after the Club had opened, I went there for a drink with one of our original board members, Susan Husskison, who had moved to Brussels and was back visiting. She was expecting friends to join her for dinner, so I excused myself, only to run into then-Supervisor Bill Maher, who herded me back to Susan’s table for another drink. During that drink, Susan’s friend Jocelyn Kung joined us; we hit it off, that turned into a whirlwind courtship, and we got married at the City Club in 1989. Our daughter Kelsey was born in September 1990, but the marriage didn’t work out, sadly, and I became a single dad by the end of 1991. Not long after that, I got a call at work from Nicole Sunahara, who had led the City Club account for Art Blum, the PR maven. Nicole was looking for another job. I put her in touch with people at Bechtel, and she aced out older and more experienced applicants in a
writing test. She wasn’t working for me there, but we got to know each other well, and after she left Bechtel, we became a couple and got married in her hometown of Honolulu in 1995. Our daughter Katherine was born in 1996 and Caroline in 1999. Nicole has been a great mother to all three girls, and while we sadly broke up in 2012, I am forever in her debt, and Jocelyn’s as well, for the wonderful daughters I have. Without the City Club, I wouldn’t have met either Jocelyn or Nicole in all likelihood, and while I might have met someone else and had children anyway, I cannot imagine they could match the happiness my kids continue to bring me. I am so grateful to both of them.

05-01:29:00
Holmes: Well, next time we’ll be sure to get into the Market Street Railway.

05-01:29:03
Laubscher: Okay. Great!

05-01:29:04
Holmes: Thanks, Rick.

05-01:29:05
Laubscher: Thank you.

[End of Audio File 5]
All right. This is Todd Holmes, with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. I have the pleasure of sitting down, once again, with Rick Laubscher, for our sixth session in his oral history. Today is November 29, 2016, and we are at his house in the beautiful city of San Francisco. Rick, thanks again for sitting down with us.

Thank you, Todd.

Well, in our past sessions we have explored the various segments of your life and your many achievements—your achievements as a journalist and public relations executive, both for Bechtel and your own business. And in our last session, we talked about your numerous activities of civic service, of giving back to the city of San Francisco. Today, I want to finish up on that, and discuss in detail one of your most notable achievements that many San Franciscans enjoy, but may not know that you actually put it together, which is Market Street Railway, bringing the vintage streetcars back to the streets of San Francisco. I think a good place to start is maybe for us to discuss what was the state of rail transportation, and transportation in general, in San Francisco, say, in the 1980s, when this idea came about?

Well, you know, San Francisco has had a long history, surprisingly, of under-investing in public transit. The major transit system until World War II—by far, the largest one—was called various things; it went into different ownerships. But it's most frequently called Market Street Railway Company. It was called that three different times, most recently from 1921 to 1944, which a lot of people would say was certainly the golden age of streetcars in San Francisco, when we had up to 50 streetcar routes, and more than 1,000 vehicles—streetcar vehicles—that roamed the city streets. That's about five times the size of the combined historic streetcar and light rail vehicle fleets that Muni [San Francisco Municipal Transportation Authority] has today, so you can get a sense of how extensive the system was. And yet, as a private company, they were expected to make a profit. They did make a profit, but it got harder and harder.

Muni, which started out in the burst of progressive thinking in California—Progressivism—in 1912 as the first publicly-owned American transit agency, for a big city, Muni was much more modest in size to Market Street Railway, because it was kind of filling in the gaps where the private companies had not built lines. And Muni, too, by the time we got into World War II, was starting to struggle financially. I mean, it’s hard to believe that a nickel fare could pay the wages of two people on each vehicle plus the support staff, but the fact is,
the support staff was very, very small in those days. There was no big office building downtown at Market and Van Ness [Avenue] filled with people who didn't actually operate or maintain the equipment.

But this is all a prelude to saying that when these companies or agencies did go to the public, and either Market Street Railway tried to get a fare increase, and the state, which then regulated streetcar fares kept saying no, their profits kept getting squeezed more and more, and they deferred their maintenance, and their equipment became rickety. This was all exacerbated by World War II, and they couldn't get enough people to maintain the cars, et cetera. And Muni basically was facing the same problems after World War II. So when they went to voters for different bonds, for example a Market Street subway bond, which even in 1925 was considered needed, it failed by a margin of something like five to one. I mean, [laughter] it was just a total wipeout.

There were other attempts to buy the Market Street Railway. It took, I think, six attempts for voters to approve buying this rickety, increasingly sclerotic private system, and incorporating it into the city's transit agency, with the promise of much more efficient service. And then in the 1950s, voters rejected—because this is a union town—a measure to reduce the required crew size on streetcars from two to one. That finally passed in 1954, but really, the labor costs of streetcars had accelerated their demise in San Francisco.

So these were all factors that were in play. The citizens did pass one significant bond issue in 1947, which led to the conversion of a lot of streetcar lines to trolley buses, again, partly driven by the labor costs, partly driven by the desire of merchants downtown, the Chamber of Commerce, and others to make more room on the streets for automobiles. And this was a national trend. This was not limited to San Francisco.

So then we got the BART [Bay Area Rapid Transit] bond, and Muni was given—handed, on a platter—a subway under Market Street. Finally, their own subway level above BART, but under the street, on Market, and then continuing, after BART turned off near Van Ness, all the way under Market to Castro, and connecting to the old Twin Peaks tunnel, which interestingly, the tunnel portal had actually been designed to do back in 1917. They knew then that ultimately there would be a subway. They didn't know that "ultimately" meant 60 more years.

Holmes: [laughter]

Laubscher: But when Muni went to the voters with a bond issue to upgrade their rail lines to full subway status, taking them off the street altogether and building a line
out Geary [Street], the voters rejected that. And that was in, I'm going to say, 1965. It was not that long after the BART bond, you know?

So Muni didn't know what to do. They even thought about taking their own streetcars, putting them in the subway, running them in the wrong direction, because the doors were on the right side of the streetcar, and in a subway with center platforms, when you run the normal way, you use doors on the left. They had no money. This was not something that Muni is to be blamed for. They struggled to replace worn-out buses. They had to come up with creative lease arrangements, because again, there was just no capital money.

So by the time we got to about 1980, they were ready to open the subway, ready or not. And they opened the subway with streetcars that were built in a helicopter factory. The federal government wanted to do a swords-into-ploughshares deal where they took a Boeing Vertol helicopter factory near Philadelphia that had been building helicopters for the Vietnam War and convert it to build light rail vehicles. And they were going to build an all-new standard American light rail vehicle that would sweep the country. Well, only two cities ended up with it: San Francisco and Boston.

And design compromises had to be made, because Boston's ancient subway had very tight clearances. So for example, the cars had three sets of doors on each side, but the front doors could not be used in the subway because they were at an angle for Boston, which loaded at a low level. But San Francisco loaded at a high level, so they needed these steps that went up and down. And you could go on and on about this, and I won't, but suffice it to say that these streetcars were never reliable, and they were so hated that Muni couldn't wait to get rid of them, these Boeing streetcars. Just last year, [laughter] Muni came to me and said, "We have still got two of these things on the property, and we really want to get rid of them." And somebody said they were keeping them around because Market Street Railway wanted them saved. I said no, we didn't.

06-00:09:44
Holmes: [laughter] I’m sure.

06-00:09:44
Laubscher: They were old enough to be historic, but it wasn't good history. And we realized that you can't make a transit agency operate something that can't be maintained. These all had first-generation computers, computer boards, and things like that, which could hardly be replicated anymore.

So 1980, the situation was fairly sclerotic. Muni had had a total bus meltdown and had to—you know, either their maintenance was so bad or the buses were so bad, I think it was probably a combination—they had to import these antique buses from southern California. The head of the Public Utilities
Commission, which then ran Muni, had to issue a public apology—Richard Sklar was his name—to the riding public for what a terrible job his agency was doing. I mean, there was major outrage, you know? And they were working to deal with it.

But [laughter] Muni needed some good PR. Muni needed something positive. They opened the subway under Market Street in stages, putting streetcars in one line at a time until they had put all five in. And that last migration to remove streetcars from Market altogether—from the surface of Market—took place in September of 1982. That was within a month, plus or minus, of the time the cable car system was totally shutdown for rebuilding. Have we already talked about this? No?

Holmes: No we haven't.

Laubscher: Okay. The cable car system was shut totally down, because—along with everything else at Muni—it was sclerotic.

Holmes: And neglected for years—

Laubscher: It had been patched up, and patched up, and patched up, and it was dangerous. I mean, it was literally dangerous. So Mayor [Dianne] Feinstein was paying a lot of attention to the cable car issue, because she felt it was—rightly—that it was iconic, and the symbol of San Francisco; we couldn't let it go. She—

Holmes: In the 1960s, the cable cars were made a national landmark, were they not?

Laubscher: Yeah. I can't remember the exact year—

Holmes: I believe it's '65 or '64?

Laubscher: Yes, they became a national historic landmark, yeah. And they gained world fame. I mean, they were simply another conveyance that was technologically suited for steep hills where buses couldn't go, and that's the way most San Franciscans thought of them, certainly until after World War II. Then when the mayor tried to get rid of them—Mayor [Roger] Lapham tried to get rid of them—that's where Friedel Klussmann stepped in, and that story is now history. But once the cable cars were "preserved," in quotes, that didn't mean they were maintained.
Holmes: [laughter] Indeed.

Laubscher: And again, it's a shortfall of money. I am not going to opine on whether the management was good, or bad, or indifferent, but the system deteriorated. And so the cable cars were down. The mayor was out tin-cupping everybody, every business in town, to give substantial money to pay the city's match for a federal grant that the city had obtained. I think the total cost of the rebuild was something like $60 million, which seems ludicrously small today, probably because the front end work was done a lot faster.

But I remember when I was an executive at Bechtel, we got hit for a big donation from the mayor, and it was exacerbated by the fact that Chevron kicked off the campaign. She got Ken [Kenneth T.] Derr, who was then not the CEO [chief executive officer] yet, but he was EVP [executive vice president] or something like that, but—COO [chief operating officer], or something like that. He coughed up $1 million—maybe coincidentally, maybe not, two days before they announced their largest quarterly profit ever. But once he had done that, the mayor would just go to all these other companies and say, "Where is my million?"

Holmes: Well, and for those reading this transcript, it's really interesting to point out that this was a time when San Francisco was at the center of what could be called the "Corporate West." I mean, the big businesses of California were still A) situated in California, and B) in San Francisco.

Laubscher: And in downtown San Francisco! Yeah. I mean, that's all changed since then. But then, yes, Chevron was huge; PG&E [Pacific Gas and Electric Company] had a much bigger presence in the city than they do now. Bechtel had a huge presence.

Holmes: Bank of America, Wells Fargo.

Laubscher: Wells Fargo, B of A [Bank of America]. And Wells Fargo was a smaller bank than it is now, but B of A was one of the biggest. And there were other companies, like Potlatch, and McKesson, and others, some companies that aren't here anymore that—some companies that are.

And the Mayor succeeded in raising the money she needed from the private sector, so the cable car thing was taken care of, but they were going to be down for 18 months. And she was flogging [laughter] the engineers, and the builders, and everybody else to make sure that it was done. Her target was the
Democratic convention of 1984. She wanted them up and running by mid-
1984. I think the convention was in July, I think.

Holmes: Was that slated to be held in San Francisco?

Laubscher: It was at Moscone, yeah. It was at Moscone Center. And she was determined
to have the city shine for the national spotlight.

Well, we are still back in 1982; she is thinking ahead. And at the same time, I
noticed that Muni had put out a couple of streetcars, including their old car
No. 1, which they had maintained all these years, and restored in 1962 for
their 50th anniversary. That car still ran. I thought, well how fabulous that
they’ve got this old car. And then they leased a car, one of their old cars, from
the museum up in Solano County, the Western Railway Museum, and they ran
these two cars up and down the J [Church] Line on weekends in the fall of
1982 as a farewell to Market Street surface streetcars. And my reaction was—
seeing these old cars rumble by on the surface of Market—“Not so fast. Why
do we have to give this up?” There was already a movement among some of
the planners in Muni and a few community activists to preserve the tracks on
Market Street, and Muni had already conceptually proposed something called
the "F Line," which was going to go—then—from the Ferry Building to
Castro. But—excuse the expression—it wasn’t getting any traction. It was just
sort of languishing there in the planners’ pile.

And so I came up with the idea—I think it was my idea. [laughter] Who
knows? People tell me it was my idea, but I mean, it grew out of a number of
discussions that said, “Why don’t we get the kids together and put on a show?”
I call it the Mickey Rooney/Judy Garland moment, where we said, well, we
have got these old streetcars. They are running on Market now. We’ll need
some more, but there was—enough track was in place to run the kind of
round-about route up to the Castro district, because the tracks on Market itself
had been taken out from Duboce [Triangle] to Castro when they built the
subway underneath, because they had just opened the street. It was called "cut
and cover construction."

So there were several people who were really kind of seminal to this. And the
most seminal one was a man named Maurice Klebolt, who was the
quintessential San Francisco gadfly, and someone I think ranks just a couple
of notches below Emperor Norton as a colorful character. Maurice was a
travel agent. He was a corpulent man—a word you don’t hear much, but if you
think of Sydney Greenstreet, but more disheveled, that was Maurice. He ran a
travel agency, he was a fanatical rail fan, and he also, in those days, did much
of the private, personal travel arrangements for members of the Board of
Supervisors because he gave them deals. This was all in the days before strict
lobbying laws and other things [laughter]. And he also gave them all his money. He was single, he was gay, but he was not partnered. All he had was this, you know? He even signed up to be a part-time Muni operator so he could extend his fantasy.

He was a very unusual character. And he was also incredibly assertive and—"bombastic" is a good word. Now, Maurice had made San Francisco history, in a tiny way, in 1979 by arranging for the "donation" of a newly-retired tram, streetcar, from Hamburg, Germany. He managed to get the money together to bring the car over here. The shipping was cheaper than it is now, but I am sure it wasn't all that cheap. And he either got it donated or something else. He put it on a flatbed truck, and with no warning or notice, he pulled it up in front of City Hall on a day in 1979 when Mayor Feinstein, then pretty new in office, was giving some sort of unrelated presentation on the steps of City Hall. And here comes this rusted red Hamburg tram on a flatbed. And he comes rushing up to her with roses and saying this is a gift to her. Marshall Kilduff of the [San Francisco] Chronicle wrote a brilliant story on it, which I have. I mean, it was the kind of thing that if there is an "only in San Francisco" kind of thing, that's an only in San Francisco kind of thing.

So I knew this guy. I didn't know him, but I knew who he was, and I knew, as several people said to me, "You need to get him involved very early on." And I think one person used the old analogy that LBJ [Lyndon Baines Johnson] had supposedly said about J. Edgar Hoover: "I would rather have him inside the tent facing out, than outside the tent facing in."

And so we formed what a number of people described to me as the ultimate odd couple, almost a [Stan] Laurel and [Oliver] Hardy physical presentation. But it ended up working out pretty well, because he was not going to be reined in; he was going to do what he did. So he was sort of Mr. Outside, and I could be Mr. Inside. And I think we both understood what the goal was going to be.

I mention this, because it was a hard slog to get this done. The late John [H.] Jacobs, who was the head of the Chamber and had been the head of SPUR [San Francisco Bay Area Planning and Urban Research Association] before that, and was one of the most urbane men you could imagine—beautifully dressed with the head of wavy silver hair that you would say, "Oh, I wish I had that." And so, so smooth. Dianne knew him from SPUR, from the Chamber; they were on good terms. I was heading the Chamber's
transportation committee, and I said to John, I said, "You know, we could do this one time summer festival of old streetcars and prove the concept. Show that it works."

So we went to see Dianne, and she was encouraged; she bought into it. We made the proposal. And she looked at me, and I pointed out to her that these were the streetcars she rode as a child, and things like that. She looked at me; she said, "I'll do it. But I don't want to see any junk out there," which was clearly a reference to the state of bad repair that Muni's streetcars had fallen into in the last ten years of their service life, because the subway was always imminently going to open, and then it didn't. So they had to extend the life of these PCC [President's Conference Commission] streamliner streetcars that were the mainstay of San Francisco's—were the only streetcars by that time that San Francisco was running in regular service.

So we went around to rail museums. I made a trip to New Orleans to try to pry loose a New Orleans streetcar—you know, one of the "streetcars named Desire." I went to rail museums in the East—self-financed—and tried to see what we could lease. We ended up leasing a couple streetcars from the [Western Railway] museum up in Rio Vista Junction, including the one that had been there the month before. We connected with a guy in Oregon who owned several streetcars from Porto, Portugal, which had been bought and brought over in hopes of starting a vintage streetcar line in Portland, which hadn't happened; that a downtown businessman there had promoted. So we leased a couple of those. And we got a streetcar from Australia, which was selling surplus cars at the time.

And we repainted a couple. We repainted one of Muni's old PCCs and tried to put Bondo in the dents to make it look better. Some of Muni's cars had come secondhand from St. Louis, so we painted it up in a bright red and cream livery that St. Louis used, and that was something different. And the whole idea was to have something that looked different.

One of the cars we rented was from the place up in Rio Vista, was an "open-top boat tram," they called it, from Blackpool, England, made in 1934. Very Art Deco in style. And that car had come to San Francisco years before—maybe 8, 9 years before—for some kind of British week celebration. I had nothing to do with it. The city was offered ownership of it, but they passed. They gave it away to this museum. Now the museum was charging the city to run it. So I looked at that car and I said, "I want that car. I want some of those." [laughter] Because they were immediately so popular. People sitting in the open air and kind of looking around. I mean, the whole thing was about novelty.

And some nostalgia as well—
Laubscher: Yeah, nostalgia, even though nothing like that ever ran in San Francisco. You know, in Silicon Valley they say about something that isn't exactly what you planned, "That's not a fault—that's a feature." We took the cars from wherever we could get them. And so we said, "Well, this is a global collection of historic vehicles," because that's what we could find.

And the one area we had a little tough time with was the people in the Castro District, because in those days, there was a lot of suspicion about anything the Chamber of Commerce had its name on. That was "evil downtown," and it was probably anti-gay, although there was no evidence for that.

Holmes: And so this negotiation with the Castro District was even happening before the festival?

Laubscher: Before it started up. I mean, the mayor wanted it, but the Castro was kind of like, "What's this all about?" And they formed a committee to oppose it, of citizens and other people. I didn't anticipate this, and I just said, "Well, come on, guys—it's just for summer, and it's going to be fine." And they said, "Well, I mean, why should we support this? It's just going to bring a bunch of tourists from Iowa." This was the phrase that was used, I guess, fairly widely at that time. I don't know why Iowa, but it was going to bring tourists from Iowa just to gawk at gay people. And I said, "Well, wouldn't it also attract gay tourists to come to San Francisco?" They hadn't really thought about that, I guess, and they kind of said, "Well, all right, we'll try it."

But one of the things they wanted was they wanted to do their own promotion, their own take, on this thing. So I said, "Sure." And it was an introduction to a different pattern of thought, I guess, because—I never saved one of these, and gosh, I wish I had. They said, "Well, we want to do our own poster." And I said, "That's great." So I guess they got access to the streetcars, to go out and photograph them and do everything. And they did a drawing, and it was a black and white charcoal drawing, I think. It was just the trolley pole, with the big knob at the end. And that's great, you know? So I had not really kind of considered that, but if—I mean, you want a coalition. And they became enthusiastic about it. To this day, we have very strong support. One of our strongest alliances is with a group now called Castro Merchants. I was just on the phone with them over the weekend talking about a thing we can do together, and to make sure that they keep the service up, you know? So that's been a relationship that endured for a long time.

So we start this thing up; it has to go to a vote of the Board of Supervisors. The vote is ten to one, with Dianne behind it. The one opponent was her best friend, best legislative friend, Louise Renne, who was representing Pacific
Heights. And Louise said, "Oh, it's just a waste of money. It's fatuous. It's a toy. It's something—." You know, she was just kind of dismissive in the way that Louise can be. But that was fine. We got the vote, and we went and built the thing.

We still had to deal with a lot of negativity on the part of—inside Muni, who didn't want to do this. There were some old-timers who really loved the idea. There were some operators, maintainers, and some executives at Muni who really thought this was swell—something that was good for their image and other things. But the top guy, Rudy Nothenberg, who ran the Public Utilities Commission then, was very skeptical. Yet, because he worked for the mayor, he said, "Fine. We'll do it." Luckily, in the winter of that year, a new general manager of Muni appeared. His name was Harold Geisenheimer. He came out of Chicago. Harold was maybe the biggest rail fan in all of American transit management. I mean, there was one guy in Chicago named George Krambles, who was his mentor, who might have surpassed him, but—I mean, I didn't know any of this at the time, but Harold was legendary in rail fan circles.

And he was also a kick-ass guy. Muni was slothful in many ways, I am sorry to say. The productivity levels and maintenance were very low. A lot of goofing off among operators; not a lot of enforcement by management; not a lot of support for enforcement, because the unions were very powerful. And so the mayor's office would say, "Don't get the unions riled. Just get along. Go along to get along." So I felt it as the chair of the Chamber's transportation committee, and of SPUR's transportation committee before that. I thought that Muni was not a well-managed organization, and it was very hamstrung by the bureaucracy that the city imposed on it. But Harold didn't put up with that. He would show up at divisions at 2:00 in the morning, unannounced, and see whether the overnight staff was sleeping, were they doing their jobs. If they weren't, he would personally discipline them. And this became sort of legendary. He could show up at any time, in any place.

So he got there just when the Muni staff was saying, "Well, we can't get the little maintenance facility done in time. We're not going to be able to maintain the cars." You know, it was excuse after excuse, after excuse, and it was very frustrating. And all of a sudden, things started happening. So we had our Trolley Festival, and we had opening day in June of 1983—a few weeks delayed, but—. And five-day-a-week service. It was hugely popular. And that got us going. It wasn't long before the mayor was starting to say, "I like this. I'd like to do it again next year." I hadn't bargained on next year.

I wanted to ask you, before we get into the next year—well, first, let's start with the name. We call it "streetcars," but it was also a Trolley Festival. There are different names for the streetcars, right, that are—
Laubscher: Yes. And people still argue, rail fans and others, about what the correct name is. The answer is there are really three names that are used. If it's outside the United States, except for Canada, the usual word is "tram" or translation of "tram." In the United States, some cities in the East call them "trolleys," which is technically the name of the little thing at the end of the top of the trolley pole, but by extension, the whole car. On the other hand, much of the country, including the entire West Coast, call them "streetcars." And for a long time, that was rendered as two words, and then it became one word. Technically, any vehicle that runs on rails in a street is called a "streetcar," so that also technically applies to cable cars as well. But that's really a fine-grained distinction. We decided—I decided; I think this was my decision—that "trolley" sound jolly. It sounded more fun.

Holmes: It does have a jolly ring to it.

Laubscher: Yeah. So we called it the "Trolley Festival." And as a matter of fact, another name—a derogatory name—for rail fans is "trolley jollies." You know? So that's why we called it that. And ever since then, [laughter] we have been trying to get back to "streetcar." Because that's the traditional San Francisco name.

So, yeah, that first year was really kind of interesting. I mean, in those days, it had been so recent that the PCC streetcars—the traditional streetcars with the overhead poles instead of the big pantographs that the light rail vehicles used—people were so used to seeing the old type of streetcar on the streets that you could run them almost anywhere and it didn't cause a problem. I mean, the only place they didn't go was in the subway.

So during the year, we would operate occasionally on the weekends, we would run out Church Street on the J Line. We didn't have a means to turn single-end cars up at Castro and Market for the first three years, I think, two or three. And so all the single-end cars we had, like some of the Muni PCC cars, the streamline cars, and the German car—which had been restored, vindicating Maurice Klebolt—they had to terminate somewhere else. They could run down Market Street, but then they had to go somewhere else. So one year, they went out the J Line to 30th and Church Streets in Noe Valley, and the next year, they went through the Sunset Tunnel on the N [Judah] Line until it turned back at 30th Street there. So you would see them in the Sunset District, you would see them in Noe Valley, and occasionally, we would run excursions that wound around all the way out to the zoo on the L-Taraval line. So I mean, you would see these cars, occasionally, all over town. And people liked that.
A couple times, Harold Geisenheimer, who, as I told you was a total rail fan, one night, he said—he had a very clipped way of speaking—he said, "Now, I want you all together at shutdown time for the Trolley Festival tonight, because we are going to run a test. We are going to run two cars out to Ocean Beach on the N Line as a test." And nobody knew what this meant. Well, it turns out Harold wanted to take a joyride. So when we got there, we all assembled, and we took a Melbourne [Australia] tram, I remember, which is a big, kind of boxy tram, and then we took a PCC that was the last one ever built in North America out of 5,000 that was manufactured originally. And that car was San Francisco's car, and it's still in the fleet today, and it's still in its original condition, because we consider it a museum-class historic transit vehicle, as the last of its breed.

And that car was there, too, and Harold said, "Now"—he looked at me—"Mr. Laubscher, you are qualified, are you not, to operate this car?" I said, "Qualified?" He said, "Which is the accelerator pedal?" And I said, "The right one." He said, "Which is the brake pedal?" "The left one." "Then you're qualified. Operate the car." Now, this is arguably a firing offense, and it's certainly a violation of the union agreement and everything else, but I did it.

Both: [laughter]

Laubscher: It was kind of like driving a truck, or a bus, except you didn't have to steer it, you know? And I drove that out, and I drove the Milan [Italy] tram, which you controlled by your hand, back. And—

Holmes: Was that the first time you've ever driven a streetcar?

Laubscher: No. I think I had operated a couple of cars just for a little spell down—up at the museum in Rio Vista Junction. I may have done so at other museums around the country. But I mean, those, you are in the middle of nowhere. You are out in a cornfield, you know? There is nothing to hit. Nothing to hit you. And I remember on the Melbourne car coming back, vividly, I was getting the hang of it, and we were coming in Judah Street, and making pretty good time. There was no streetcar in front of us, and it had a separate—still does—separate right of way between 19th Avenue and 9th Avenue, where it makes a sharp left turn to go down 9th Avenue for a block. And there is a passenger island right at 9th and Judah inbound, as they say, headed toward the Ferry. So I had the signal. We weren't going to stop for the—we didn't pick up passengers, so I just kept going, not realizing that the tail of the car swings wide onto the island.
Holmes: Oh! [laughter]

Laubscher: It had running boards on it, which cleared the island, which was sort of sidewalk height. In the wake of—[laughter] literally, in the wake of the car—I mean, passengers and people waiting for a regular streetcar were kind of scrambling. When I think about what could have happened—.

But that wasn't as bad as another excursion that Harold arranged that didn't involve me, where another rail fan who was more experienced at operating these cars was coming through the Sunset Tunnel, which was downhill, headed toward Market Street. And when he emerged, he was going so fast he couldn't stop the car, which swept up out of the tunnel and onto Duboce Avenue, and—. And there were a couple things that happened that Harold himself initiated that were kind of reckless. None of that, I will say very clearly, has happened ever since, nor will it ever happen again. But those were kind of crazy days, because we didn't really know. This was all new. This was experimental. And so there were some excesses.

We went through that first year, and it was great fun. The Chamber was happy to be the co-sponsor and the fiscal agent, because we had to lease these cars. We had to have the ability to lease equipment and do things that the city wasn't structurally set up to do easily, and given the timeframe we had, you know? So when Dianne came to us at the end of the first year and said, "I want this back for the second year," I can't be sure that—I mean—and that's not what she said. She said, "The cable cars will be done and operating by the time of the Democratic convention. But just in case, I want this, too."

Holmes: You know, I had a question on money, though. I mean, so we look at the 1983 Trolley Festival during that summer. You were leasing some of these cars when—and the logistics of flying around the world, it seems, and trying to locate them, but—

Laubscher: Well, not around the world. Around the country.

Holmes: Around the country.

Laubscher: I paid for those trips out of my own pocket.

Holmes: But what about the cars themselves?
Laubscher: The cars themselves, the standard lease for most of the cars was something like $10,000 for the year, for the summer. And I went out, and I'm a terrible fundraiser, and I'm proving it again [laughter] trying to raise money for a nonprofit now. But I hit up businesses, liberally using the mayor's name, and we got them to take "sponsorships," we called it. I called it a "PBS-style sponsorship," but what that really meant was they could put an ad on the side of the car. So Pan Am [Pan American World Airways] sponsored the Australian tram, because they flew—you know? And I got Security Pacific Bank, now gone, to sponsor one of the cars, and so on and so forth. So we raised enough to cover the lease costs. We raised enough to cover the lease costs, and I think the Chamber donated administrative services.

Holmes: And was there refurbishment that needed to be done on some of these cars for that?

Laubscher: Well, they needed to be brought to Muni standards, and that was what Muni did. And they were not going to allow just anybody to go work on their cars, on these cars. They were responsible for safe operation. But they had a lot of mechanics in those days that were familiar with the old, mechanical type of equipment, and had operated the old-style streetcars with the air brakes, and the hand controllers, and all this stuff; had operated in the city until up until 1958, so there were still a few people around who remembered that equipment. They had a young guy who ended up as the shepherd of streetcar maintenance for 30-plus years, a young guy named Karl Johnson who had come from the East, where he had volunteered at the Seashore Trolley Museum in Kennebunkport, Maine, and knew all these old systems inside-out. He taught others how to do it. They are simple systems, so it's not like trying to learn computerized bus engines and all this stuff.

So Muni took care of the maintenance, and we took care of the administration, and the publicity, and the other stuff like that. And that model worked fine for the second year, too, with the Chamber involved. But the Chamber said, "We would really like to get out of this business. We signed up for a year. We'll do a second year." But John Jacobs said to me, "We would like a transition to another nonprofit." And I thought of the Western Railway Museum up in Rio Vista Junction, which had leased several cars. I knew the chairman of their board, whose name was Harre Demoro, who was a reporter for the Chronicle at the time; had been a Tribune reporter; was relentless in covering BART. He was their biggest critic in the media, and they deserved it. Harre was really knowledgeable. And he was a total rail fan, and he was a son of a total rail fan.
So Harre agreed that they would be the co-sponsor for that year, but it didn't go well, because his membership, and board, and volunteers were a pretty fractious bunch who saw this as a hobby. Some of their members would occasionally turn up at Muni and go into the maintenance shops uninvited and unpermitted, and complain, loudly, about something or other that Muni was doing to their car, and it wasn't acceptable, et cetera. They weren't authorized by their board to do that, but they did it anyway. So there was a lot of bad feeling that developed between Muni and them. And I ended up as the so-called "volunteer project manager," trying to adjudicate this between these two groups. My recollection is that at the end of the second season, 1984, when the mayor said, "Let's keep doing it every summer," she said, "We need somebody else." Or, she didn't say. Rather, Harre said, "You need to get somebody else. This is not working for us."

At the same time, the light at the end of the tunnel was glowing brighter. At first, I thought it was an oncoming streetcar, but in fact, it was the promise of this permanent line. Because the support for this was so long that certainly by the second year, we were already thinking about, okay, how do we make this permanent?

And before we get into that, I had a question. From reading the newspaper accounts, the festival was very well received, so warmly received, particularly in 1983. You also had, I think, the American Cup [America’s Cup]. Was that right, that year? Or some kind of sailing competition that same summer?

Well, if we did, I don't remember it.

But nonetheless, there was enthusiasm for this.

Oh, yeah!

And rail enthusiasts from around the world were coming to see this.

Yes. But our goal was not rail fans. They sort of came with the package. Our goal was not tourists, not initially I mean, although we did bill it as a substitute visitor attraction. That's how we sold it. But my innermost hope was that San Franciscans like myself remembered the streetcars on Market Street, valued the streetcars on Market Street, and believed that they could be effective shuttle transportation to augment, to complement, the subway underneath.
Now, you have to understand that the hopes inside the Muni Planning Department for the subway were so optimistic that they at one time—or consultants had recommended at one time, and I think they may have formally adopted a plan at one time—to remove not only the tracks, but all the overhead wires from Market Street as well, which meant the trolley buses would go away. Not entirely, but they would all terminate at Market Street instead of going all the way down to the Ferry Building, and you would have to get off those buses and get on the subway, because the subway was going to be so wonderful and fast that riders wouldn't mind doing that. Well, that went over like a lead balloon once they got into public hearings, and people would say, "What? You want me to transfer? No, I like my 21-Hayes," or "my 5 McAllister," or whatever the lines were that they were riding at that time.

So the subway, which had been dreamed of as a panacea, turned out not to be all that, because Muni had a hell of a lot of trouble operating it. They had tried to put five different lines joining at two different terminals—going into the subway at two different locations—and tried to keep it all straightened out with a terminal that BART had bequeathed them under the foot of Market Street that was just called a "two track stub terminal." You could only have two trains in the terminal at the same time. So their operations were a total mess. And that's not what we're here to talk about, but there was disappointment in the subway, so some people did see the surface streetcars then as something—you know, this is an insurance policy. This is something that we ought to have.

Well, it was interesting how you were saying that the first target audience was San Franciscans themselves. And it reminds me of someone you know very well: the former director of SPUR, Jim Chappell. One of the principles of urban planning that he promoted was always build for the locals, and tourists will come. And it seems like the streetcars followed that same type of logic.

Well, sure. I mean, we had the cable cars as a model. This was a local transportation system, until after World War II, really, when—and with some people that would come and say, "Oh, aren't these quaint? We're going to ride these." But after World War II, that really—and after the national publicity, international publicity that Friedel Klussmann got when she saved the Powell Street cable cars in 1947, there was—they kind of blossomed into this symbol of San Francisco. You know, if you asked people, "Name two symbols of San Francisco," I bet you 90 percent of people would say the cable cars and the Golden Gate Bridge.

So I saw the streetcars as a possible extension of the cable cars, because by that time, there were only seven or eight cities that were running streetcars in the United States anymore. And so it was different. It was something you
couldn't do anywhere else. And that's why people come to San Francisco in the first place: because it's got a whole bunch of things that you don't see or can't do in most American cities.

Holmes: In regards to the PR [public relations] and the push for this, you obviously were promoting the Trolley Festival in San Francisco. How did word spread outside of, say, California on that? You know, this is 1982. Again, for our readers, there was no internet at this time.

Laubscher: [laughter]

Holmes: Right? I mean, it's one of those things we have to remember.

Laubscher: Right! Well, I know. I know. It's amazing.

Well, I was in that business. I was in the public relations business, and I did it the old-fashioned way. We reached out to the bureaus of the *New York Times*, which wrote a great piece. AP [Associated Press], the wire services, all the others. My recollection is if we had a streetcar from a particular city, we would send something to that city. And anything we could do to kind of get the word out. My recollection is we took ads in rail fan magazines, which were very cheap to do in those days, and that begat news coverage from those magazines. Even in that pre-internet era, we didn't have much trouble getting the word out to the rail fan community around the world. That got out on its own. And tourism took a little longer, because it was a seasonal activity, and it didn't have permanent status. That was one of the drivers to say let's see if we're going to make this thing permanent.

Holmes: Which began—what was it—in 1985, you guys started looking at—

Laubscher: Well, '84, '85. We were certainly dreaming about that. But then the question was, how do you do it?

There was a registered California nonprofit that had been set up in 1977 by a couple of planners who worked for Muni at the time, Peter Straus and Tom Matoff. And then they were joined by a lawyer named Steve Tabor, who is still active in the community today. They registered this nonprofit called Market Street Railway Company, taking the name of—you know, just kind of a nod to the old transit company. They did it because Muni was at the time scrapping a fleet of trolley buses that had been built in 1950, and they wanted to save one. So they used this nonprofit as a mechanism for doing that, and then it really didn't—it was just three guys, and a couple of other guys came in
later, kind of getting together and talking about their trolley bus, I guess; talking about what might be done. And I have to give Peter credit as one of the people inside Muni had been pushing very hard to make an F Line permanent. But he was kind of a prophet without honor in the way that it was seen as a fringe kind of thing by the serious operations people there.

So when we got to 1985, my recollection is that in some discussion—I can't tell you where or when—Peter said, "Why don't you use MSR," which was our shorthand for Market Street Railway. "Why don't you take MSR from us, or turn it into, perhaps, a membership organization," which it wasn't. "And we can use that as the nonprofit partner." So they asked me to serve on their board, and they asked Maurice Klebolt to serve on their board, and then we went out to get members. And Klebolt, who was a wild man, went around to individual people. He went to every operator, Muni employee who operated the historic cars, he went to the maintenance people, and he said, "I want $10. Give me $10 right now. You're a member." And by the end of 1985, we had something like 300 members, and by the middle of 1986, it was close to 500 members.

I found myself drafted into doing a newsletter, which we named for the old newsletter of the Market Street Railway, which was called Inside Track. That was a joke, an inside joke—pardon the pun—because on Market Street, when there were four sets of streetcar tracks, Market Street Railway being there first had the inside tracks closest to the middle of the street, which were considered the better place to operate. Less interference from automobiles and other things. And Muni had the outside tracks. Well, so we revived that name that had been attached to their employee newsletter and made it our member newsletter, and then we just started figuring out “What do we do now,” you know?

We had already acquired a boat tram. I had actually acquired a boat tram from Blackpool, a surplus one, and had it brought over here. I talked my employer, Bechtel, into talking one of their suppliers—a global shipping company—into donating the shipping for the tram. Blackpool gave us the tram. I got Embarcadero Center and its remarkably civic-minded chairman, Jim [James] Bronkema, who—in those days, Embarcadero Center was new in town. It had been built by the Rockefeller interests out here, and it was kind of controversial because it looked a little bit like Rockefeller Center, and it wasn't right on Market Street, and there was a bit of “what is this thing?” And Jim gave us $30,000 to rescue a streetcar from the Sierra. It was the last surviving original Market Street Railway streetcar that had been hand built in the city. 250 of those were built by the company's employees in the 1920s and early 1930s, and only one was left. And it was just a body. We still haven't gotten it on the road all these years later, but it's on the cusp now of being—you know, the body has been restored, and now we are on the cusp of getting
it back in service. We are going to dedicate it to Maya Angelou, who, when she was a conductor, she was the first African-American female streetcar conductor in San Francisco in the 1940s, and wrote about it in *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*. We are going to dedicate it to her, and by extension, all African-Americans who broke the barriers down in city employment, starting with Muni, which was the first city agency to hire African-Americans during World War II.

Anyway, I digress. So we would do little projects like this to kind of keep the momentum going and make the thing permanent. And we had three more summers: '85; '86; '87. And during that period, we moved forward through the planning process for a permanent F Line.

06:01:04 Holmes: Now, this also require purchasing instead of leasing the cars? Thinking that they would be permanent there on those lines.

06:01:14 Laubscher: Yeah. We purchased a couple of cars. We purchased one of the cars from Porto, Portugal. We purchased a couple of Melbourne trams. We purchased a tram from Milan, or got it donated; I think we got it donated. Maurice Klebolt, amazingly, got a tiny little tram from Russia donated through the Soviet embassy. I don't know how he did it. It was an amazing story. So we had assembled this kind of diverse fleet of unique transit vehicles. But as we moved closer to the notion of a permanent line, we realized that this was not going to be eight hours a day. I mean, the popularity of the line was very clear. But we were operating it eight hours a day only, usually from 10:00am to 6:00pm, so it didn't run the morning commutes. But as we worked through the planning, we realized, okay, the operational cost of this was being eaten in the city budget as an extra service. But it wasn't there full time, so people didn't count on it in the winter or anything else.

So early on, I realized if we are going to do this, it has to have some sort of basis, some underwriting in the operating budget of Muni. So we said, "Okay, this should substitute." And Muni had already planned in their original F Line proposals for this; it would replace a trolley bus line that ran all the way up and down Market called the 8 Line, which had been a streetcar before that; had been a Market Street Railway streetcar line. So they said, "Okay, we'll just take off the trolley buses and put on the streetcar." That pays for the operators that will be running this line. Later, when we talked about extending it to Fisherman's Wharf, there was a line on the Embarcadero, a bus line, that carried almost nobody, but it had runs, and budget. And so, "Okay, it will replace the 32 Line."

So that was our strategy: to say this is a regular Muni service. It's not a toy. It's not just for tourists. It's providing a basic transportation service, and it will do
so on the same schedule that most Muni lines do, which is to say seven days a week, 365 days a year, 18 or 19 hours a day. That's a lot of wear and tear on the vehicles. And we had learned during the Trolley Festival that if something went down—if a car lost an air compressor, or something like that—you couldn't just plug in another air compressor. You needed to take it off, take the car out of service, unbolt the thing, take it apart, figure out where the parts are, manufacture parts if you didn't have the one—something you needed. It would be like fixing an old refrigerator or something like that. And there was understandable resistance to the notion of trying to run a mixed fleet of vintage vehicles every single day. Plus, we didn't think we'd have enough.

Again, Market Street Railway was peripherally involved in this. We didn't make these decisions because our whole goal was to get Muni to embrace it, and make it an integral part of their service. Any government agency has resistance to a lot of outside influence that isn't legally mandated, like, say, Congress or the Board of Supervisors. And even there, it's kind of like, “Stay out of our business—we know what we are doing.” That's not limited to Muni. So we wanted to get them to embrace the possibilities, you know? And we were there supporting and cheerleading, and saying, "Hey, we'll stump for money to fund this," and everything else.

In 1987, a commitment was made to—because they needed to tear up Market Street anyway. I mean, I don't have the chronology of this exactly right, but I could double check it. I think pretty much in 1986, it was decided to do a couple things. One, on a whole separate note, the city was fighting—and folks like Peter Straus, the Muni planning director, were fighting—to rebuild Market Street post-BART, to make it more transit friendly. This has been an ongoing thing about Market Street for the last 30 or 40 years, really. So automobiles were still allowed, but they changed the wire arrangement on Market Street so the trolley buses, which have two overhead wires, could run in all four lanes, two in each direction. So they could pass each other, you could have different lines on different lanes, and it would improve the throughput. Well, that was compatible with streetcars, because streetcars only have one wire. The second wire for a trolley bus is the ground, because they have rubber tires and they don't have any rails. Streetcars return their current through the system by using the rails as their ground. So that's why there was only one overhead wire. But the streetcars can use the "hot wire," they call it—the left hand wire—of a trolley bus overhead just as easily as they can use their own, so that was fine. It was kind of a wonky thing.

They had to do some redesign of Market Street and some other things because in the rush to eject all these transit vehicles from Market, when they rebuilt Market Street after the BART construction, they had replicated the historic Path of Gold streetlamps, which sit on either side. And they are beautiful. But they replicated them with—I think, the material was fiberglass. But in any
event, they didn't have a strong, anchored base because they were never designed to hold up overhead wires. So on an interim basis, you had these beautiful streetlights sitting there, but you also had—and this was primarily in the station areas, where they had completely excavated the street—you had these telephone poles sticking up, bending over with the weight and tension of these temporary overhead wires that were supposed to go away. So this was a really ugly thing, and this was all a big project to redo all of that.

So they replaced the Path of Gold posts with ones that would hold up trolley bus wires just like the old ones had held up streetcar wires. And in that process, it was decided, okay, we are going to build the F Line using existing track where possible, but restoring track on outer Market Street. And at the same time, they were dealing with other issues involving the Market Street subway, which, as I mentioned, was not functioning well, because it didn't—its terminal wasn't big enough.

So a grand plan emerged that would ultimately extend, if money could be found, the F Line to the foot of Market Street. It had terminated at the so-called East Bay Terminal, which is now where the giant new bus facility is going up. And the tracks were in there, so it went just down to the 1st and Mission, but that missed the opportunity to do anything to revitalize the waterfront. So the idea would be that phase one would be to open it on Market Street only, and then phase two would be to extend it to the foot of Market Street, and then up to Fisherman's Wharf via the Embarcadero. And the Embarcadero would be rebuilt into a grand boulevard using space alongside the old roadway on the inland side of the old roadway that were used for freight trains for many, many years. The Embarcadero has a huge, wide right of way, but part of it was for the state-owned railway called the State Belt [Railroad] that served all the piers, when the piers actually functioned as cargo piers.

We, parenthetically, Market Street Railway, sponsored—and this was Maurice Klebolt's baby—a demonstration project in 1987 that took those old freight tracks, and they didn't have any overhead wires or power, but if you put a little—if you put a diesel generator on a trailer and attached it to a streetcar, the diesel generator would generate the electricity to run the streetcar up and down the tracks. And so we took two of the smallest cars that we had—one dating to 1896, the oldest car in the fleet—we coupled them to generators, I don't remember where we got the generators, we kept them overnight in a sewage treatment plant [laughter], which had a siding where the old chlorine cars used to go in. And so we used this nearly-abandoned trackage—essentially abandoned trackage—to run from the Ferry Building to Fisherman's Wharf, to kind of convince the merchants of Fisherman's Wharf, “Hey, this could be a cool idea.” And even though you had the streetcars in the dank, shadowy underside of the Embarcadero Freeway, because that's
where the track ran at that time, it was a pretty popular little service. It only ran—I can't remember. It didn't run for very long. It was, I don't know, a couple months. And it was, again, a demonstration project, and it worked well. So those were the kinds of things we were doing in Market Street Railway, just kind of moving the ball forward incrementally.

After 1987, Dianne left office. A new mayor, Art Agnos, was elected. Art didn't really know much about the Trolley Festivals. We talked to him about continuing to run them. And meantime, the Muni management was kind of saying, "You know, I don't know if we want to do this again." They came up with the notion that we need to put the permanent tracks in, we need to make the changes, we need access to the street to do that, so we shouldn't run the historic Trolley Festival while we are building the permanent F Line. It turns out that there were very long stretches where they were doing nothing at all, and we could have run. But—

And were you afraid at this time, too, that the absence of those Trolley Festivals would lead to a loss of, I guess, momentum—

Yes! Yes I thought “You know, we have got to keep them out in front of people.” So that was definitely a concern. But I took some solace in the notion, “Well, they actually are going to build this sooner or later,” and focused our attention on a sales tax measure in 1988, which was called Prop B that included—they pieced together a bunch of projects for Muni to sell to voters, and one of them was funding the permanent F Line and the extension to Fisherman's Wharf. And it passed. We were active in supporting it within the bounds of a nonprofit advocacy group that can't actually advocate for those kind of things. But—

I wanted to ask you really quickly about that. So particularly in some of our work at the Oral History Center with SPUR, and finishing up an oral history with Jim Chappell, those who study those kind of policy initiatives in San Francisco—and particularly when we look at the 1980s, 1990s, even up to today—it's really difficult to get some of those bonds actually passed.

It is.

Could you talk a little bit about that campaign? I mean, briefly. Like your role in that.

To be honest, I wasn't terribly closely involved in the campaign. I was certainly supporting it. Any time you do one of these, you get consultants
involved. There was a separate fundraising organization that we didn't get involved in. We were more cheerleaders, to be honest, but we did feel strongly that you needed to put this in there to have a palatable group of projects.

I will say, without naming names, that just this year, City Hall put a ballot measure on to give more money to Muni without specifying any projects to be named at all—just kind of "trust us" thing. And I remember, I was on the mayor's 2030 Transportation Task Force, which was this mob scene of every possible special interest. And we had a big meeting where someone from the mayor's office said, "Well, everybody should be doing"—you know, just get on board and make this pass. And I said, "Are you going to have any callouts? Any special projects?" And just kind of like, I was kind of waved off. I believe strongly that you can't just ask the public just to spend more money without telling them what it's for. They have been fooled too many times with projects that—having the money not realize any tangible, discernable benefit. Well, that measure went down with a big thud.

Holmes:

And when you think about those type of measures, if I am correct, is after Prop 13 in 1978, you need two-thirds.

Laubscher:

And this one, interestingly, they tried to skirt Prop 13 with a mechanism that might have been challenged in the courts had it passed. But it was a general—what was it? It was somehow a tax that did not require two-thirds because of the way it was going to be—because it was going into the general fund. And it wasn't a property tax, and it wasn't—you know? But they put a separate advisory measure in that said it's going to raise $150 million or whatever it is, and $100 million goes to Muni, and $50 million goes to homeless programs. And that companion measure passed, but it was meaningless because the tax itself didn't pass. I mean, it was just kind of like—well, I'm not going to characterize it because it's over, but going back to 1988, we thought that this was a very important thing to have something that the public would like. And the F Line was in there, and the thing passed with some margin to spare, and it was a two-third requirement. And so we felt pretty good about that.

Then the next eight years were—let me just think, it passed in '88, opened in '95, so the next years were pretty much—where did they go? Where'd the time go? It was just kind of endless discussions about what kinds of equipment are we going to use, what kinds of—what are all the details? How are we going to make this work? And how to get it up to the Wharf and around the Wharf. During this time, I met Art's—Art Agnos's—transportation deputy, a man named Doug Wright, who had worked for Dianne in a similar capacity; had been the planning director of Portland before that. He became my best friend over time. We started out as kind of—I won't say adversaries, but on different sides, because as we would work through some of the details, Doug, who
knew federal law and requirements inside-out, would tell me what could be done and what couldn't be done, and I would question why it was the way it was.

For example, when we were determining the route of the streetcars to go to the Ferry Building, I assumed that they would go straight through what is called "Justin Herman Plaza" on the traditional historic alignment of Market Street itself. The last block of Market Street was closed off in the 1950s, and all the traffic kind of unceremoniously diverted down this last side street called Steuart Street because the Embarcadero Freeway blocked everything anyway, and it was ugly, and it was—. So I said, "Well, I assume we will just go straight through Justin Herman Plaza." He said, "You can't do that," and I said, "Why not?" And he said, "Well, there is this federal environmental regulation known by the shorthand 4(f) [Department of Transportation Act of 1966 Section 4(f)] that says you can't put it through parkland if there is a feasible alternative. And we can go down a half-block on Steuart and then loop back up, and make this U”—literally a U-turn—“to go up the Embarcadero." And I remember endless discussions with him about this, that this is stupid because it's not a park, it's pavement. You know, the historic foot of Market Street had just been paved in aggregate concrete, and why couldn't you take the opportunity to redo the park, and all that stuff. Well, because we can't. And don't be pigheaded about it.

Then up at the Wharf, there was a years-long battle that I participated in. Again, we wanted the Muni people to take the front. I mean, it was important. It was their process, and we didn't want to be interlopers. We wanted to be supportive of what they were doing. And they had a wonderful man named Don [Donald] Chee who was the project manager, who had endless meetings with some of his staff and others with the Wharf merchants to try to work out a route through the Wharf. And Muni was quite adamant that they weren't going to build any more streetcar lines where the streetcars had to share lanes with automobiles. It was a real problem for them on the outer sections of their lines, and it contributed to the fact that the subway didn't work, because the old J, K [Ingleside], L, M [Ocean View], and N Lines ran in the street and shared the street with every other vehicle. So they wanted separate right of way on the Embarcadero, and they wanted that separate right of way to continue through the Fisherman's Wharf area, but the only way to do that was to take out curbside parking. And the merchants were absolutely convinced that that was a terrible idea.

Now, the context of this that's very important is the fate of the Embarcadero Freeway.

Holmes: Well, I was going to ask you about that—
Laubscher: The earthquake of 1989 severely damaged the freeway. Doug Wright, as the mayor's point man on transportation, had passionately urged Mayor Agnos to try to take it down before the earthquake. And it went to a vote—I want to say it was in 1988—and the voters said no. The voters, after a virulent campaign that involved the Chinese-American community in Chinatown saying this was racist, prejudiced, you are trying to kill Chinatown businesses because customers were coming from all over the Bay Area across the [Oakland] Bay Bridge and then up the Embarcadero Freeway, and right off the off ramps on Washington [Street] and Broadway to reach Chinatown.

Laubscher: Well, Rose was certainly involved in that, yeah. And they were powerful even then. The Wharf merchants were equally vociferous to say, "This is our lifeline. We don't want it to come down." And Art Agnos, to his credit, wanted to do what was right, and saw a vision for the city that would last for a long time. This was complicated a little bit by the fact that Muni desperately needed to fix the subway terminal under the foot of Market Street. I mentioned that they had this totally dysfunctional terminal that wasn't working. The only way they thought that would work would be to take the streetcars into a loop terminal under the foot of Market Street. But the pilings of the Embarcadero Freeway made that a difficult task.

And so everybody was kind of saying, "Well, how are we going to work all this out?" A plan had been devised to skirt the freeway, and take—rather than putting a loop, which they didn't think would solve the problem, they needed to get some of the streetcars actually out of the subway. They built this—and this is how it turned out—they built some turn-back tracks under the foot of Market, and then they built a ramp up to the surface at Fulsome Street. And on the surface, there would be another set of turn-back tracks. That would defuse the reversing things. Well, all of this required a tremendous workaround under the Embarcadero Freeway, as did the initial engineering for the F Line extension. I mean, I have drawings somewhere showing the tracks weaving in between the piers of the Embarcadero Freeway on the surface, running in the shadows or whatever to get to clear space just south of Broadway. At that point, then you had this beautiful right of way in the middle, but I mean, it was all designed, at least conceptually, to fit under the freeway.

Then the earthquake happened. And then another big fight, where Art stuck to his guns. I mean, these people really wanted this thing to be propped up, and anybody who saw the freeway at the time wondered, "What the hell? How are you going to ever do this?" So Art persevered; the freeway came down.
Holmes: Well, and that arguably changed San Francisco's waterfront forever—

Laubscher: It changed San Francisco entirely. It changed the waterfront in a cosmic way. You would have had this beautiful boulevard anyway south and north of that double-decker freeway, but that central section, which was the heart of the Embarcadero around the Ferry Building, would have still been this dreary, dingy, dilapidated area. And it just wouldn't have been what it would have been. I mean, prime real estate, including a half-block just south of Market, bounded by Mission and Steuart and the Embarcadero, that half-block was being used for a Muni bus turn-around because it was in the shadow of the freeway. Later, Muni leased that land, and Doug Wright managed this whole process, and championed it. They kicked the buses out of there, over the objections of some Muni planners, and built the Hotel Vitale there, which is a tremendous success story. Our museum [San Francisco Railway Museum] is in the Hotel Vitale as part of the deal. And the streetcars did end up running around Justin Herman Plaza, which was an unintended benefit because they stop right in front of the museum, which would have never been possible had they run through Justin Herman Plaza. For the record, I would still rather have them run straight down the historic route of Market Street, but we don't re-fight these battles, and we benefited from it, so I am not complaining. But the important part is Muni makes millions of dollars every year in revenue from the lease of that site, and after 60 years, now 50 years, I think, they will own the hotel itself. They will own the building outright. So—

Holmes: That's a big success story

Laubscher: It's a big success story. And it ties to both the freeway and the F Line. The freeway’s demise I think just ushered a whole new era in, as you said, for San Francisco's waterfront. It did delay the completion of the extension to Fisherman's Wharf by several years.

Holmes: Well, that's what I was going to ask: we'll get to the extension here in a little bit, because I know that didn't open until 2000. But thinking about of making that historic F Line permanent, which opens in 1995, and discussing a lot of the logistics leading up to that, you mentioned in 1988, the success of a sales tax. Did that cover most of the fundraising needed to get these cars?

Laubscher: Yes.

Holmes: So you didn’t have to go and fundraise further with the business community?
Laubscher: No. No, no, no. Our whole goal as a nonprofit was to stay small, and ultimately disappear. Sort of like [Karl] Marx believed the state would disappear, right?

Laubscher: We believed that the idea was that you inculcate the love of this in the city government itself—the desire, or at least the duty, to keep it going. And that's why we insisted that it replace existing bus lines; that their operating costs were already being paid for by another mode of transit; that it not ever be uncoupled from the basic Muni fare. There were a couple of occasions where we have had to fight since then when, during down periods, Muni planners have said, "Oh, we are going to raise the streetcar rates to the cable car rates." And we marshaled merchants and others to say, "Hell, no. This is not the cable cars. This is a basic form of transportation. What are you going to do to the Castro if you do this? I mean, this is ridiculous." And we triumphed both times. I hope they know better than to try to do that again. The whole idea was to incorporate this not as a tourist attraction, but as a core part of the transportation system. So that was what we did. And spent a whole lot of time selling that, explaining it, getting others to buy into the concept. And we succeeded on that.

Holmes: You mentioned selling it, which, I was going through your book as well as many other pamphlets with Market Street Railway. We see Rick Laubscher the PR specialist actually come out with some of these quotes of "Without us, it would be a bus," which I think was one of your lines." Calling them "moving museums," which is, I think, very apt. "History riding history."

Laubscher: Yeah. "Ride history to see history." I am a historian first and foremost, in my heart. An amateur one, sure, but "amateur" in the sense of doing it for love. And I love my city, and I love Market Street. I have come to love the waterfront. And the historical nature of the waterfront and what it represents, not—both for the structures that we have that are beautiful, but also for the people. That's where the real story is. When I look at the waterfront, I see Harry Bridges. I see titanic labor struggles. I see a history that inevitably led to shipping going to Oakland when they chose to containerize their port and we wouldn't because of labor pressures.

History is shaped by people. It's not shaped by buildings or streetcars, or other things like that. And that's what we try to emphasize. So when I found out that Maya Angelou was the first female African-American streetcar platform
employee, as they call a conductor or motorman, I thought, what a wonderful story. That's a story we need to tell.

And we have told many other stories like that. We dedicated a streetcar to Harvey Milk, not because Harvey Milk was an LGBT pioneer, although he certainly was—not solely because he was that; that was still the most important thing—but because he was a transit advocate that I covered as a reporter during his tenure, and I knew Harvey to be a multidimensional guy. And I personally did not want to see these other dimensions of Harvey lost to history.

06-01:34:19 Holmes: That's interesting. Was that part of that kind of conversation when you were trying to get the Castro Merchants onboard originally for the Trolley Festival and—?

06-01:34:30 Laubscher: No, actually. I think all that sort of emerged later as we were—

06-01:34:36 Holmes: Working together and—

06-01:34:37 Laubscher: Yeah. As we moved it in. I mean, how do we tighten the embrace that communities put on the streetcars? And part of that answer is, make them relevant to them for something other than what rail fans appreciate. I mean, people appreciate the bright colors of the streetcars and all this other stuff.

And it's probably a good time to quickly mention the choice of vehicles. When Muni was assessing this, there was some thought about getting a bunch of surplus Melbourne trams, because there were a lot of them available at the time. They are very peculiar looking to our eyes in America; I mean, they are boxy, and they are—they have entrances in the center, and almost inconceivable that you could operate them with just a single operator. At least the ones they were selling then had canvas roll-up doors. There were open platforms in the center. You'd get on in the center; there would be a conductor; you would pay your fare, then you'd go to an enclosed section at either end. We still have two of those trams. Actually, we have three; the third one's kind of a spare, for parts. It's never run here. But they are wonderfully reliable pieces of equipment. They are quiet. They hold a lot of people. But they require two operators. So when we were kind of assessing all of this, how would we do this? And for us, we felt very strongly that you could not saddle yourself with a core fleet of cars that required two operators.

Then there were trams from Milan. We had acquired one of them in 1984 for—'83 or '84 for the—it didn't run until '84—for the Trolley Festival. That
was another Maurice Klebolt special, by the way. He died in 1988, and it was a huge loss.

Holmes: Oh, he never got to see the permanent line—

Laubscher: He never got to see the permanent F Line. No. And it was really a sad thing.

So we considered Milan trams, because again, this was a very large—they had 500 of these trams that were being operated by a single person. Old-fashioned with the hand controls, built in 1928, but they had kept them up very well.

But I kept pointing back to Muni's old streetcars, the ones I remembered as a kid. It was funny: when we started the Trolley Festival in '83, I personally was resistant to including the so-called PCC cars—the streamline Art Deco cars—because everybody had ridden those forever, and they were beat up, and they were old, and they were done. My initial thoughts were, “Well, we have got all this wonderful old stuff from around the world. Maybe we can do it with that.” And we had a couple of PCCs in the "historic fleet," so-called, for the Trolley Festivals. But my feeling was now people wanted really to ride the old, unique stuff.

But you know what? That morphed. That morphed. After the PCCs had been gone from regular service for a few years, and younger people came up, moved to San Francisco, or people moved to San Francisco who had never ridden them before, didn't remember those streetcars, it was kind of like, “Oh, well, this is kind of different.” And we knew that they were reliable—properly maintained, properly done. So as a whole separate side event, we had fought—along with Peter Straus inside Muni, Maurice Klebolt outside Muni—we had fought hard to keep Muni from scrapping the 100-plus PCC cars that they had taken out of service by the end of 1982. Maurice went so far as to use his influence with the Board of Supervisors to pass an ordinance requiring their specific approval—the board's approval—to sell any Muni vehicle more than 25 years old.

Holmes: Oh, wow.

Laubscher: And so this gave us a political backstop for stripping away the whole fleet. Now, they did sell off more than half of their cars before we kind of put the brakes on it. And then they had hauled them down to Pier 70, and then they moved them to Pier 80. I mean, they would be picking up these old streetcars and moving them from pier to pier, depending on where the port would give them cheap space. And some sat inside for a while on Pier 70; the others sat outside. Inevitably, they all started to deteriorate. And I kept saying, "These."
I had realized that these made more sense. And that people would like them, and it was part of our history.

To that end, I also believed, personally, that the streetcars should all be painted back into the single livery I remember in the 1950s, and that was my nostalgic tie, which was what they called the "wings" livery, with these fingers of green paint going down the side of the car, and the big "SF" emblem, which was then Muni's logo. Because that was the heart of the Municipal Railway of the 1950s, which was my frame of reference. Others—and Peter Straus was one of these inside Muni, and by this time was on the board of Market Street Railway, but he was doing this in his Muni capacity—believed that the cars, because this type of streetcar, with minor variations, had run in 33 North American cities over time, that we should paint them up in different colors, kind of like a kaleidoscope, to pay tribute to all these other cities. I thought that was not a good idea, and I was 100% wrong. Absolutely and totally wrong. Because it's the color of these different cities that means that every car looks unique, even though they are mechanically similar. Most are mechanically identical.

Well, where to get the cars? I said, "Take them off the pier. We got our own cars. We know the service history of all these cars. Most of them, if you put them back on the tracks and put the trolley pole up, they would run. So we don't need to reinvent the whole wheel here." Well, in the internal Muni planning process—and I don't know exactly how this happened—somebody determined that no, we're going to buy the first group of cars. Rather than restore the ones we have, we'll buy them from Philadelphia, which was retiring a bunch of its PCCs. And one of the reasons for doing it was that those cars had been rewired. They renewed the wiring on them in the 1980s, and the idea was that, “Oh, well, we won't have to rewire the cars.”

So they got these cars, which were the same model—it was very similar to San Francisco's cars, but they were six inches narrower. The committee of railway executives that designed the PCC car in the 1930s allowed for variations in the design—slight variations—to take into account narrow streets in Eastern cities, for example. In the case of Washington, D.C., they had cars that were a little shorter because they had limitations in their storage area. But otherwise, the average person looks at them like, oh, this is all the same.

So they decided to get the PCCs. We supported that decision, although not the source they got them from, Philadelphia. When they got them restored by a company named Morrison-Knudsen—interestingly, an old Bechtel competitor—

06-01:43:29
Holmes: [laughter]
— and sometimes joint venture partner, which had gone into the locomotive restoration business. They said, "We have room in our plant in New York state, upstate New York. We are going to redo these cars." Muni, after buying these cars from Philadelphia because of their almost new wiring, wrote up specs that called for ripping all the wiring out and starting over. The problem was that these cars had run in the East, which meant they ran on roads that were salted, and had corroded the underbodies. And they ended up spending something like $125,000 extra, unplanned, per car just on under-frame stuff.

Oh, wow.

Which they would not have had to do if they had used their own cars. This is totally wonky, but it reflects the kind of sporadic nature of the kind of planning that was being done. It was kind of one thing after another.

The original contract was for 14 cars, all of which were these ex-Philadelphia cars, with an option for seven more that the city could exercise if they found additional money. They only had the money for the 14 initially. We urged them in the strongest terms to exercise the whole option, and more than that, to use these big double-ended PCC streetcars. Almost all PCC cars were single-ended cars, because they wanted something that was automotive. You only drove it from one end. It had a distinctive front end and back end. And the transit companies that participated in this were willing to make modifications to their trackage to be able to turn these single-end cars at the end of their lines, because the old double-end streetcars looked clunky and boxy.

Nonetheless, Muni had bought, and insisted on, 10 double-end cars when they bought their first true PCCs in 1948, and [laughter] having done so, immediately assigned them all to lines that already had loops at the end, so they didn't need to be double-ended after all. And they ripped out the double-ended feature by the middle of the 1950s, so you had these converted streetcars. We said, "Convert them back," as we had done with one such car during the Trolley Festival. We'll convert them back into double-end cars, because you have more operating flexibility. You can turn them with just a switch instead of having to have a track loop and all this paraphernalia, and it gave you more operating flexibility. And we were thinking ahead to a second line on the Embarcadero.

So we finally, after a lot of urging—we wanted seven, but they could only come up with the money for three. So three of the double-end cars got added to that initial estimate. We had managed to convince them that they did not have enough cars to run this line. They thought that 14 cars would be enough
to run the entire line from Castro to Fisherman's Wharf, including a spare factor. You can only have a certain number of cars out of service for repairs and regular maintenance. Well, right now, we schedule 22, 23 cars on the F Line alone every day. Actually, more cars than that when you consider other cars pulling in and out of—I mean, the number of discrete streetcars that are on the street in one 19-hour service day is over 30. So they were very happy that they had bought these extra cars.

And then they knew immediately when the F Line opened in 1995 on Market Street the popularity was double what they anticipated. They added more cars. They didn't have enough cars. They scrambled. And we weren't consulted really about any of this. There was a particular couple people in management there at a middle level that had taken total ownership of it—too much ownership, almost, in our line. I mean, it was, in one hand, what we wanted, and we were encouraging to let—you know, it's your railway; you run it the way you want. On the other hand, it would have been nice to have been consulted, and that was kind of a little bit of a desert period for us, where we weren't working as closely with the top Muni people as we would have liked to.

And so they went out and bought 11 trams from Milan, on the basis of the one that they had. And those also proved very popular. But even then, they didn't have enough equipment.

And that was a question I wanted to ask regarding the restoration process, and the painting that you talked about. How did that process work? I mean, did you had to strip it down to find the original colors? Were there discussions about what was the original livery for those cars?

No. Let me just take a break here, and I'm just going to—

So in discussing—well, let's first start with the livery and the restoration process on that. Was there historical work to match up the original livery for each car? How did that process go—

This is the part that is confusing to everybody, and we do our very best to make it plain so it doesn't look like we are faking anything. This streetcar type, the PCC, was a standardized product that the transit industry itself, in the 1930s, came up with to try to save the streetcar as a viable means of transportation. People were starting to be able to afford automobiles, private automobiles, so they bought those. The design of the old streetcars dated
really back to the first decade of the twentieth century, and was seen as archaic and old, so they wanted a streamlined-looking, fully-enclosed car that would compete with the automobile as an attractive way to get there. And 33 cities in North America adopted this or ran these cars at one time or another. Some of them, extensive. Chicago and Pittsburgh each had more than 600 of these. Toronto had more than 700. And each one had its own distinctive color scheme.

Our cars—the actual physical objects, the streetcars themselves—the first 14 came from Philadelphia, and had all been painted in a sequence of Philadelphia schemes over their lifespan, but it wasn't a question of scraping off the new paint to reveal the old paint and then leaving them in that. It was, we are going to use these cars to pay tribute to the other cities that ran them. So they needed to be put into the best historical approximation we could make of that livery.

We didn't choose the initial liveries—Muni did. Again, this was kind of a period when we weren't as actively involved in this thing, and they made some odd choices. I mean, one of the planners at Muni was from Louisville, and Louisville had bought a handful of PCC streetcars after World War II. And I think one or two were delivered to their property, but before they ever carried a single passenger, they decided to get rid of them in favor of buses. And most of the cars were shipped in this rather handsome Louisville paint scheme to another city; I believe it was—I can't remember if it was Cleveland or somewhere else. But they were shipped to another city and ran there, and repainted before they ever ran. And yet, Louisville had this streetcar dedicated to it in San Francisco. Other cities that were huge streetcar operators, like Pittsburgh, didn't have one.

Part of the limitation was that when Muni started this, the cost of maintenance was kind of an issue, and it was kind of like, “Well, how many colors are we going to be able to keep around here?” And I think they started with something like eight or ten, and with different combinations, which meant that some of the cars would come out half a shade or a shade off what the original city streetcar looked like, and the rail fans sure let them know about that. But it was a practical compromise. So you had these cars painted in all these different schemes to represent—I mean, San Francisco's old colors were put on Philadelphia cars because the initial batch of cars didn't have any actual Muni cars in it. And others were for Los Angeles, and Brooklyn, and a couple were painted in Philadelphia colors, restored to their earlier liveries, so that would—those two cars were, quote, "authentic" in that regard, but then Cincinnati, Chicago, Boston, Newark, New Jersey, and so on, and so on.

And that provided a nice splash of color. We made sure that all the signage we did, all the publicity we did, we made it very clear that the streetcar itself
comes from Philadelphia, but the paint scheme, the livery, is a tribute to another city that ran this same type of streetcar. And it’s amazing over the years, no matter how we have tried to explicate this, how many people just refuse to get it. I remember one discussion once with a car from Kansas City, and a man is telling me, "I rode this car." I said, "In Philadelphia?" "No, I rode this car in Kansas City." I said, "Well, you rode a car that was painted like this car." "No, I rode this car." And I mean, he was quite adamant about it. So I guess we did a good job, because people [laughter] really thought that they were those cars.

But I came to see the distinctive mix of liveries—which, as I said, I did not initially support—as a much better idea than my idea of the just putting them all in the same 1950s livery. I liked the idea so much that I stole it [laughter] and worked with Muni to apply it to their Powell Street cable car fleet. Where now, there are 9 of the 28 Powell cable cars that are painted in a different scheme than the rest of them. And each one is uniquely painted in the best authentic replication we can make—remember, there are no color photographs from those days—of how these cars were painted by different owners at different times in their history. There are nine different schemes. We have them all. This year, we finally finished, because we only do it—we only ask Muni to consider doing it when the car is going in for a total rebuilding and needs a complete paint job anyway. So over the years, we have filled in all the gaps, and now, there is every livery from 1888, when the cars were new, to the current one is represented on the fleet. And you see the same colorful cars on Powell, but those cars all legitimately carry the colors of a Powell Street cable car from decades past. So I always think that if somebody else has a better idea than you, use their idea and expand upon it. So now we have both cable cars and streetcars painted in these multiple colors.

You have mentioned a lot of times in regards to your relationship with Muni that there has certainly been bumps along the way, which is understandable, how a relationship between a city agency and a nonprofit can, in a sense, work out. Could you discuss a little bit of those perhaps critiques or those bumps along the way? Maybe starting with even the Muni uniforms of those who drive the streetcars—

Oh, yeah! Thank you for reminding me of that. On the one hand, we wanted this to be a regular Muni line. On the other hand, it is part of the heritage. Muni went through attempts to modernize itself, its look and things like that, in the 1980s. In the 1970s, excuse me. They hired the famed San Francisco industrial designer Walter Landor to design a new livery for their vehicles in the early to mid-1970s. And Landor designed a striking scheme which was basically white, with what he called "California poppy" and "harvest gold." Those were the colors, I think. And one was a rich sunset glow orange, and
the other was a golden tan. And these were combined. And he designed a new logo for Muni, replacing that "SF" in a circle and with "Municipal Railway" around it.

By the way, during this rough time, too, there were efforts among the top management of Muni to get rid of the word "railway," which of course is what Muni was. It was dominated by streetcars until the 1950s. But they wanted to call it "transit system." They had built a whole division for buses out in Dogpatch [neighborhood], and they—to this day, there is a big bronze plaque that says, "San Francisco Municipal Transit System," which it was never called, legally. But the guy who was running it, for whom that bus center is now named, ironically, was a bus guy, and he would have been happy to get rid of the streetcars altogether.

And that is partly at the crux of what is good and bad over the years about our relationships with Muni. It's very much an in-grown city department. And you talk to an old San Francisco employee—and some of these are third-generation Muni employees—the shorthand would always be "the railway." The civilians call it "Muni," but a lot of people inside still call it "the railway." And they have their way of doing things. They have what they consider to be good work habits, and dedication. I mentioned before we started, I think, about when we started, the dynamics of strong unions protecting their workers, and exerting political influence on the funders of the railway, the Board of Supervisors, and on the mayor's office. And you had a series of top managers come in, many of them from outside—and very much like the police department in that regard. If you try to bring in a chief from outside, ooh.

06-02:00:56
Holmes: Oh, yeah.

06-02:00:56
Laubscher: Oh, yeah: "No, and you don't understand how we do it." To which the outsider might say something like, "Hey, policing is policing. I know what I am doing here. I know the process." Well, no, you don't know San Francisco. This is endemic—and it may be true in every other city in the world; I don't know. But I know in San Francisco it's true. You don't understand San Francisco. And that was certainly true inside the railway. So whenever an outside top executive would come in, it was kind of like, “You don't understand San Francisco.” And there would be resistance to that person. This has been going on for as long as I have been associated with this—40 years now—going back to my days as a reporter here.

And so as the cast of characters would change—not only the general manager, that title has changed, too, but for a long time it was general manager who was the top person at Muni; through to other people, the lower-level people who
ran maintenance, ran operations, ran all this stuff—you would have a cast of characters who varied in their feelings about the historic streetcars. I mean, we have had people in there as chief operating officers who would go around the system telling employees that if it were up to him, he would get rid of the cable cars altogether, which is not really possible under the charter. This was an outsider who came in, "And by God, I am going to clean this place up." You know? We have dealt with general managers who were empathetic to the streetcars; we have dealt with their successors who were hostile to the streetcars.

All the time, we would do everything we could to keep good relations with the governing boards and the mayors who sat on top of these folks, because that was your fallback. I mean, you try to work with the staff and be positive, and of course you make compromises. You never get everything you want. But you try to keep it on a positive forward path. And if you absolutely can't deal with the staff, and you have got a hostile reaction, or it's going badly in the wrong direction, you have to use that card, but you don't use it very often. You know? It's a positive thing. The members of the Board of Supervisors just think it's cool. They don't want to know about all the mechanical stuff inside, but if you tell them, "Hey, it's threatened"; "Hey, this is a problem"; "Hey, if you raise the fares to match the cable cars, you are going to have to deal with the Castro Merchants, who are livid about this, and the Wharf merchants." So it's not so much lobbying on our own behalf—it's reminding people, “Hey, our counsel is don't do that, and here is why. We can't stop you from doing it, but it's like, don't walk through that door.” [laughter] You know? Because I know what's on the other side; you don't, yet.

And so yes, we have had a wide range of options, and we've had good relations. Things would move forward. Get right to the cusp of restoring maybe a few of the really old streetcars; getting them into service more often than they run now. Again, it's not a question of running them full time, but Muni's famous car, No. 1, which they fully restored for their centennial at our—really, all due to our advocacy. Say, "This is your flagship car. This is the centennial. It's worth the investment." And we had to get a vote of the Board of Supervisors and everything else, and it wasn't cheap, but they did it, and they are glad they did it now. But throughout that whole period, we had been trying to get other older cars restored—and importantly, the ones that already ran well, used, spotted into service, on a predictable schedule, like weekends in the summer or summer daytimes. You know, just two or three cars a day, and rotate them so you are not wearing them out. And that gives you extra color, and it really puts the history on display rather than just running the PCCs, which are painted differently but are really all alike inside.

So, for the last—well, ever since 2000, it's been one step forward, two steps back. I remember vividly in 2000, on opening day, early in the year, for the
extension of the F Line to Fisherman's Wharf, I remember two things. And the thing I remember in 2000 was the deputy general manager of Muni—I can't remember her name, but for the opening celebration, they had brought out the Melbourne streetcar and some other streetcars, the historic cars. And they were slotted at the Ferry Building to run up the Embarcadero and everything. And I remember being on the Melbourne car for that first run, and a reporter asked this deputy general manager, "Are these going to be part of the permanent scene out here?" She said, "Oh, no. We have no intention of running these after today. Just for the celebration." And I mean, that set off alarm bells in my head, and I was just—you know? It turns out the ridership was so enormously huge immediately that the operations people had no choice but to put these cars out there.

06-02:06:59
Holmes: And what do you contribute that periodic resistance in some quarters of Muni towards the streetcars to?

06-02:07:06
Laubscher: I think just an unfamiliarity with what these cars are. I mean, I am still going through that today, because you get generations of new people. For example, one of our current urgings for restoring a group of these historic cars is, look you already operate ten, now, Milan trams. They are on your active fleet. Some of them are under repair. They are all due for a refurbishing as soon as this current contract is done for the first batch of PCCs. And we are urging that extra cars—the historic cars—be added to this, and Muni has assented to some point, but we are still in active dynamic on this. And there is resistance among some—not Ed [Edward D.] Reiskin, the top guy at Muni, who supports, tells us he supports this diversity of the fleet—but others, and at a fairly high level. And I try to explain to them, and I think I am making some headway; you never know.

Look, you already operate these Milan trams. You train every operator to be able to operate a Milan tram with the air brake in one hand and the controller, the power controller, in the other, which is a totally different operational mode than the PCC cars, which you drive like an automobile without a steering wheel. And you have committed to keep these Milan trams. I mean, understand this: we, at the same time, have told them, this is your railway. Yeah, we like the old stuff, but we also understand the advantages of having a homogeneous fleet. We have even said to them, "You still have 20 un-restored PCCs, which we are largely responsible for being preserved out there. You could, instead of restoring the Milan trams, retire them, and rehabilitate more PCCs. You have already done 32 PCCs with restorations. I mean, you want to consider this."

And in some ways, that's against our historic preservation interest, because if you take away the Milan trams, then operators would not be trained anymore
as a matter of course to run these hand-controlled cars, which would mean that
the Muni car No. 1 and these other cars wouldn't be intuitively operable by
these operators, because they wouldn't know how to run hand-controlled cars.
This all happens over time. I have learned this because when we started in the
1980s, we had these old hands who, I mean, they could run anything. And
they were experts. And they were really good at what they did. Those folks
are long retired, or passed on, and it doesn't seem so intuitive to people who
are being hired now.

So we were trying to show Muni options, but their insistence is, “Well, we
have these Milan trams; we are going to restore these Milan trams.” And I
would say to them, "Well, but you bought these in an emergency. It wasn't
part of a grand design or plan; it was just cope, cope, cope. You have a chance
to do something different." No, we are just going to do what we have always
done. Okay, fine. If you are going to do what you have always done, then
restore these cars, too, because they operate the same way as the Milans; they
can be modified to operate with one operator, like the Milans. So, what do you
think? You know? And that's where we are at this particular moment.

Now, I want to take just a second and jump back to this uniform thing,
because you asked about it. When we started—I can't remember—yes—Muni
had changed its uniforms as part of this redesign that Walter Landor did. They
changed the color, and the inside of the buses—as they were buying new
buses—went to a tan coloring, from the traditional green. And at the same
time, they decided, OK, we are going to turn the basic Muni uniform from a
classic navy pants and medium blue shirt to brown, with orange highlights.

And Muni gave up the Landor paint scheme in favor of this gray and red that
they use now, at least—well, when the Breda [AnsaldoBreda S.p.A.] cars
came, so that was 15 years ago. But they have never changed the uniforms.
And the operators don't like the uniforms. Even in the 1980s, the operators
didn't like the uniforms. And so several of our streetcar operators just
unilaterally put on the old blue uniforms again. One guy, a cable car
conductor named Richard Morley, went out and bought the old conductor's
pillbox hat and the whole regalia. He had the whole thing out there. Some of
these operators had advocated for those special uniforms on the cable cars,
and now Muni is finally looking again at new uniforms that are kind of gray-
based with red, like the car colors, which, the drawings I've seen are more
handsome.

But we would like to have a sense of pride among the operators, but since
operators can switch in and out of streetcars at every single sign-up, every
year or two years, they can go back to—you know, from buses to streetcars
and back again based strictly on overall seniority in the system. There is no
control by management over that, which is another whole issue. If you had
separate sets of uniforms for streetcar or cable car conductors, you would have to be able to give operators the appropriate uniform every time they changed modes of transit that they are operating. So that's one of those fights that we sort of decided, “eh—.” But we'd be very happy if they got rid of the brown.

06-02:14:11 Holmes: [laughter] I wanted to ask you, too: when we talk about Muni and the restoration there, when using cars from around the world—at least, initially— were those gauges all the same?


06-02:14:27 Holmes: Did they have to go and refit them for the tracks in San Francisco, or—

06-02:14:31 Laubscher: Yes. And not only the gauge—the distance between the rails. Muni uses what is called "US standard gauge," which is 4 foot, 8½ inches. But for example, a tram that came from Russia was 5 feet something. The streetcars that came from Philadelphia are what's called "Pennsylvania broad gauge," which is 6 inches wider than standard. And New Orleans also uses that gauge. So cars would come in from different cities, different gauges, and to change that—and the Milan cars were 10 millimeters wider—

06-02:15:06 Holmes: Yeah, I was going to say, they are using the metric system.

06-02:15:09 Laubscher: 10 millimeters wider than US standard gauge. And each one of these requires modifications. The Milan trams, when we got the other ten and put them into service in a hurry in 1997, desperate to have more capacity, they ended up being a lot noisier than the one we had in 1984 that we bought. And Muni and we aren't really quite sure why. It may have been the way they tried to push the wheels in that little ten millimeters to make them fit. Nobody is quite sure exactly what the re-gauging process was now that we look back on it, because it's been 20 years. So these are little deals. When we got these streetcars originally, now, the Philadelphia cars were re-gauged by the contractor, Morrison-Knudsen, that rebuilt them. The other cars were re-gauged in Muni's own shops. And back then, they had mechanics who intuitively—or at least, could figure out how to do it. The Russian car particularly had a very complex hinged single truck. They managed to make it work. I don't really know how.

Other cars have the same gauge, but the so-called "wheel profile" is different. Each wheel has what's called a flange, the thing that sticks out from the wheel, and then it has what's called a tire, which is the part of the wheel that rides on the top of the rail. The flange, in the flangeway—that little depression in the track—the flange keeps the car from sliding off the track side to side. And of
course, the tire provides the traction on the steel rail to make the car go. But the different systems profile their tracks and their tires differently, and they have different depths of flanges.

We brought one car down from the museum in Rio Vista Junction, Solano County, to try it during the first or second Trolley Festival, and it was a car that had run for the Sacramento Northern [Railway]. It was a cute little single-truck Birney car, they call it, which was a standard small-city streetcar. And this car had run in Chico, I think, and Marysville, and places like that. But the Sacramento Northern was really a mainline railroad, or an interurban railroad, and they had open track with deep flanges, so when the car goes faster, the flange—you know, you have more depth there to keep the thing from sliding off. Well, those flanges would hit the bottom of Muni's track, the flangeway, and so it would—the car was, like, running on tiptoes. It was actually moving forward on the flange rather than on the tire, at least in large parts of the track. So you couldn't run that car without taking all the wheels off, re-profiling them—and since we didn't own the car, that wasn't feasible. But, so every time we get a new car, there is always tweaking of the wheels.

Holmes: A last question with Muni before, perhaps, taking a break: Muni had—outside of the streetcars, it had its own numerous problems, particularly right around this time that Market Street Railway was taking off, back in '95—what some San Franciscans have noted as the "Muni meltdown."

Laubscher: Muni meltdown.

Holmes: Yeah. How did you interact with that, and how did that perhaps affect, or at least, cause anxiety about affecting the streetcars?

Laubscher: Oh, I think we benefited from it, in the sense that the F Line had just opened on Market Street. The meltdown took place I think Willie Brown's [Jr.] first year, in 1986, as mayor. And of course, Willie had famously promised that he was going to, quote, "fix Muni within 100 days." And he still, to his credit, jokes on himself, saying, "I had no idea."

Holmes: [laughter]

Laubscher: You know, that's one of those things that most mayors kind of find out: they had no idea what they are dealing with with Muni. You think you can wave a hand and change the direction of this aircraft carrier that goes—you know? And as we said before, voters have a love/hate relationship with Muni. You have to use it; most people have to use it at one time or another. It continues to
be a highly uneven experience, both in terms of the other patrons that you might find, the other riders you might find, on your bus or streetcar, how friendly or helpful the operator is or isn't. Very few people understand the stresses that the operators are under. That's a terribly difficult job. And meanwhile, traffic just keeps getting worse, and worse, and worse, making it harder to operate—especially buses—in mixed traffic reliably.

So this was not nearly that bad in 1996, 20 years ago now. But what happened, if I remember correctly, is that the automatic train control system that governs how the streetcars proceed through the subway, it basically worked at the time by giving operators three speed codes: 10, 27, and 55, I think, were the three speed codes. And this was archaic. First of all, there was no zero speed code, so you theoretically could always operate the car at up to 10 miles per hour, even if there was another streetcar right in front of you. The 55 code was designed to be a maximum speed in the subway, but for a lot of reasons, it was not something that was—you know, that they felt comfortable using all that often. So the cars would go 27 instead, because there was no interim thing. Anyway, all this got looked at, and we are going to redesign a whole new, much more sophisticated train control system, and it's going to solve all our problems.

Except it didn't. The whole thing "melted down," as they said, and things essentially stopped functioning. And I am not the expert on this; I would have to go back and look at all the articles to see. But it's a matter of history that the whole subway became essentially un-functional for an extended period. People didn't know what to do. I mean, I remember it because I was living here at the time. No, I take it back—I had just moved, so I didn't have to ride it anymore. That's right. But I had certainly been frustrated by the old automatic train control system and the limitations of the turn-around. I mean, I worked at Bechtel on Beale Street, and I would often, taking the J car downtown. If there was the slightest hint of a backup, I'd get off at Powell Street and walk six, seven blocks to get to my office, because I knew that if I had stayed on the train, I would just be sitting in-between stations underground for an indefinite period. And so many people had lost so much faith in the subway by then anyway that this further deterioration just sent people into an uproar.

So a lot of them bailed out and took the F Line, because you could get off at every block no matter what happened. Yeah, in theory, it was slower; in practice, it was kind of a tortoise and hare deal. Streetcars might run fast in the subway, but then all of a sudden they stop and sit there indefinitely. But the F Line would just kind of keep going along. And so I think that it became a bit of a lifeline for commuters along Market Street, who said, "Oh, yeah. Okay. We'll do this." I think it probably cemented our positive relationships with the Castro even more, because it was kind of like, “Subway? No. Why would I do
that? I'll take the F Line. Look at the stores out the window; you are in the sunshine—.” So, yeah.

In fairness to Muni, and its managers, and the people who run it, I mean, there is a lot of room for management improvement in Muni, and the last few leaders, particular Michael Burns and Ed Reiskin, have really worked very hard to build morale, to improve productivity, reduce the number of abuses of the workplace. But it takes a long time to turn an aircraft carrier. That's really the best analogy. And I give great credit to Ed Reiskin in particular for sticking with this, as he has had presided over a much expanded agency that's not only transit, but bicycles, taxis, street maintenance, pedestrian safety, and all these other things, too. It's a remarkably difficult job, and I think Ed Reiskin has done a really good job at doing it.

Not always appreciated by the people in "the railway" now, which is just now one part of the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency. But still, because of—you know, it dominates the employment, total employment of the agency, and it has the legacy going all the way back to 1912—Muni people think of themselves as the heart of SFMTA. And you will regularly hear them kvetch about the bicycle lobby and all these other people who are keeping us from doing our job properly. I mean, you hear that quite a bit inside Muni. I don't agree with it, but I understand why people do it. It's the tradition; it's the “We don't really want to change things.” It's roughly analogous to when Charley [Charles] Gaine became police chief in the late [George] Moscone era, painted all the squad cars—

06-02:26:44
Holmes: Powder blue.

06-02:26:44
Laubscher: Yeah, powder blue. I mean, that was like, God, you might as well—and took off the seven-pointed star. He tried to do that, and put the city symbol and "police services" underneath. I mean, this was just total heresy in San Francisco. And you still see people who talk about that in the PD [police department].

06-02:27:06
Holmes: Yeah, absolutely. I noticed that passing a police car on my way. I was just thinking like, oh, how things have changed back. [laughter]

06-02:27:14
Laubscher: Oh, yeah: the black and whites. This is off-topic for us, but you see the current trend in just the last couple weeks is stories about more and more African-American officers leaving, resigning, from the Police Officers Association, the union. I think they have to pay dues anyway; I can't remember what the current status of that law is. But basically saying, "No, you don't support diversity. You don't support minority officers." I mean, so those frictions, that
old school, new school, all this stuff is still very much alive in San Francisco. And it exists at Muni, too.

Holmes: I think that's a good place to stop.

Laubscher: Yeah.

[break in audio]

Holmes: All right.

Laubscher: I kind of like those introductions, so—.

Holmes: Oh, you do?

Both: [laughter]

Laubscher: Okay.

Holmes: Are we good? All right. Rick, before we get to the other aspects of Market Street Railway, I wanted to talk about the F Line expansion. We talked about it earlier, of how the F Line initially just went down Market Street, down to Embarcadero. And then in 2000, with the opening up of San Francisco's waterfront, the tearing down of that double-decker Embarcadero Freeway, which allowed a revitalization of the waterfront. The F Line then took a left turn, and then would finish going down that north side of the Embarcadero from pretty much the Ferry Building up to Fisherman's Wharf, give or take.

I wanted to talk a little bit about that process. Obviously, it's a logical extension that built on the success of the Market Street line and its popularity, as well as the revitalization after the 1989 earthquake. Could you talk a little bit about the obstacles of that extension? And particularly of dealing with—as you mentioned a little bit before—if, I guess, trying to garner the support of the merchants there in Fisherman's Wharf?

Laubscher: A lot of people, I have learned over the years, need to see something directly. It's very hard for them to envision things. The status quo is what they want. They don't want to see a lot of change. When it comes to transit projects, that seems to be especially true. You are seeing it now in the Geary busway: rabid resistance from merchants on Geary Street who don't want to lose their
diagonal parking so that you could improve the transit along the street. You saw it in Fisherman's Wharf back then.

It was Muni's job, not ours, to come up with the routes. They had public hearings; they had a whole, proper process. There was no such thing as a backroom, you know, where the nonprofit whispers in their ear, "Oh, let's do this. Let's do that." No, no. It was a full and open process. And we were peripheral players only, and that was by design. Again, the whole goal here was to not become any kind of power source ourselves, but to embed this in Muni's daily decision making.

And candidly, that could be frustrating at times, because the decision making on transit projects now has become so inclusive, in my opinion, that it often paralyzes the process. The standard process for anything like this is you have an outreach: you call public hearings; you kind of try to get people acquainted with it. Very few people come to the public hearings, except those who are full-time wonks who have nothing better to do, and certainly don't run businesses. If you run a business, you are not anxious to go to an evening meeting when you have been working all day, and have to get up early and work the next morning. So the process moves forward, and there is some public input, but only some. And a lot of the biggest players are on the sidelines—until a proposal comes out that incorporates public input. “Well, you didn't ask me!” Then the process stalls. And then sometimes a process reverts. Sometimes a process starts over. Sometimes the whole project dies. It depends on how powerful the unheard voice turns out to be.

This has been something that's involved us more than once. I remember with the Wharf thing, I don't remember the details of this, but I remember that there had been outreach. There had been hearings. The merchants had come together, and the merchants were not unanimous. And frankly, the Wharf merchants traditionally are resistant to change. They like what they have.

06-02:32:38
Holmes: Are these old, traditional family business that—

06-02:32:43
Laubscher: More so then than now. I mean, there has been some change since then. But, yes. It was second generation, sometimes first generation, of the families. If you look at old postcards of Fisherman's Wharf, you would see happy families driving, which means, in those days, not rental cars. In the 1950s, they'd drive over from their new suburban home to have cracked crab at the Wharf, or walk along and see the fishing boats, or do whatever you do. The Wharf, since the 1950s, has become much more tourist dependent and much less resident dependent, to the point where a lot of San Franciscans sneer at the whole idea of ever going to the Wharf. And if you look at the mix of shops and things like that, I mean, it's not things many San Franciscans would want to buy. As a
matter of fact, so much so that when we started our museum and put a shop in it, and started creating our own merchandise, rule one that we all agreed on on our board was we don't want to sell anything that you can buy at the Wharf.

It was not kind to the Wharf, but I mean, we understand who their audience was, and that was not our audience. We wanted San Franciscans to buy the stuff. I mean, you are drinking from a Herb Caen mug there. That was the kind of thing we wanted to evoke that tourists wouldn't necessarily get.

So, I remember one meeting with the Wharf merchants fairly well on in the process where Don Chee, the project manager, was very frustrated because the Wharf merchants would not agree on a route through Fisherman's Wharf, or even where to terminate it. The original plan for waterfront streetcar service had it going all the way to Fort Mason, but through the old railroad tunnel, it goes from the foot of Van Ness into Fort Mason Center. And that got beaten back by the Wharf people. There was partly some cost issues involved, partly interfaced with the National Park Service, because you had another—now you had the whole federal layer added to it.

If I have one regret about advocacy and those kinds of things, I probably should have, back in the 1990s—it might have been early to mid-1990s—devoted more time to trying to keep the Fort Mason portion in there. But at the time, Fort Mason Center was barely hanging on. It was fairly recently converted to a nonprofit center. It didn't—

Yeah, with the base closures during that time, very early on.

Yeah. It didn't have a big constituency at the time. There wasn't enough that could be marshaled in favor of it. And at any rate, the Wharf people bickered among themselves about where to put it, and a lot of the bickering was "I don't want it in front of my business. I don't want to lose the ten curbside parking places that someone might conceivably take to visit my store." Ignoring the Pier 39 garage, ignoring all this other stuff, all the other garage or lot parking that exists there.

Well, I remember going to one meeting, and being frustrated, and finally kind of putting down a map of Fisherman's Wharf and saying, "You have got Jefferson Street. You have got Beach Street. You have got North Point Street. And then you have Bay Street. Those are the four parallel streets that run through or near Fisherman's Wharf. Those are the only four. Pick any street or any combination of streets, and I will go advocate for whatever you agree on."
And you would have thought—I don't know—I was asking them to eat their own children or something. It was kind of like, "Well, how could we agree?" "I've got a problem with this. No," "Well, I have a problem with that," and all this other stuff. And I said, "Well, you know, there is another choice." "What's the other choice?" "End it at Pier 39."

And their eyes got big. "You can't do that." "Why not? If you don't know where you want it to go and I hear all this thing—'We don't want it in the Wharf'—it'd be fine to me to end it at Pier 39." "Well, that's our competition. You are dropping everybody off in front of our competitors." And they just got really furious. And one guy said, "Well, I am going to stop you from doing that." I said, "Fine."

I think by this time, the Embarcadero Freeway had been torn down, and there was talk about a glowing future for the Ferry Building; that it could have been—you know, at that time, they were considering almost everything, including a kind of a mini Pier 39-type arrangement. And I said, "Fine. We'll stop it at the Ferry Building. That's already approved. That's already done." And the Ferry Building will become an alternative to the Wharf as a destination."

Now, in fairness, there were people like Antone Sabella, who has been a supporter of ours for many years. Antone is a member of the A. Sabella family, and they now lease their old restaurant [A. Sabella, now Sabella and La Torre] out to Applebee's [International, Inc.], and they are in the real estate business now. And I just had lunch with Antone recently, a wonderful guy who was expressing the frustration, his frustrations, with the Wharf people. And Antone is a bit of a black sheep there because he spoke up for the F Line way back when and said, "This is great. It's the best thing we can do. Bring the people through."

So anyway, the terminal was finally worked out. I think it shortened Don Chee's life, literally—he got cancer not long after that and passed away. It was really sad; he was young. But I know the whole thing was tremendously stressful because of all the demands the Wharf merchants had. And I remember when they were laying the track, and in one place, where Guardino’s and Tarantino’s restaurants are, just across Taylor street from the big Fisherman's Wharf sign, I noticed the track is bowed out going into the traffic lane, and it makes this little jog around these two restaurant spaces. And I said, "Don, what's that about?" He looked at me; he said, "Trust me, you don't want to know." So I guess somebody may have gotten to somebody, and maybe said, "You are not running that thing right up against my restaurant". And it's still there. And it slows the trains down, because now they have to merge very briefly into a traffic lane, and then they merge right back out again. And I've never seen that space used for anything—not for
truck loading, or anything else. But that's another whole story. These are the kinds of compromises you make when you do a big project and you have got to say, "Eh..."

Holmes: But it was those compromises happening during the same time of also taking down the freeway that largely kind of stalled the development for another five years, right?

Laubscher: And the bottom line today is really clear. When you go to Wharf people, nobody opposed the F Line. They were for it from the very beginning. People who looked at me and said, "This thing will come here over my dead body"—and there were people who did that—now they say, "I was for this. What a great thing. I was for it all along." And I always say, "I know. We really appreciate your consistent, longstanding support." I say it without irony or bitterness, or anything else, because people don't always—people make mistakes. People do something that they think is right at the time, and then it turns out there was a much better way to do it. That's the way I was with the painting the streetcars in different ways.

The best thing I ever had happen related to the Trolley Festival that I remember with a politician was the opening day in 1983, when Louise Renne walked up to me—the one vote against it on the Board of Supervisors—and said, "I want you to know I was absolutely wrong. This is fabulous." That meant a lot. Not just because she changed her mind, but because she was an honest enough and forthright enough person to say she would. I mean, how many politicians really do that? They might pretend they had a different position way back when, but they won't come up and say, "This is what I did believe." And frankly, that's one reason why people don't trust politicians very much.

Holmes: Yeah. Mea culpas.

Laubscher: Because people figure that out.

Holmes: Mea culpas are certainly in short order.

Laubscher: Yeah. And I have had to do a lot of them in my life, and it's always a better way to live, even if it's difficult. So—

Holmes: And so in 2000—
Laubscher:  

—the Wharf people were happy. The kind of funny irony of this, to me, is that they decided the cars had to—because they are single-ended cars, almost all of them, they have to turn around somewhere. So you need to either go around a block, or find some other way to turn the cars around. And the easiest thing to do—because I think at the time, Jefferson was a one-way street westbound anyway—was to send them west on Jefferson, right up against the Pier 39, Pier 41, which was where the Alcatraz Ferry was at the time, and then take it down as far as you were going to take it, and then turn it up one of the intersecting streets, and then back down on Beach Street. And there's motels on Beach Street, and there's some shops, but Jefferson is the strip.

But then the question was, well, where are we going to turn it around? And you couldn't go to Hyde Street, because that street is too steep up that block, and there's cable machinery underfoot. That would have been the ideal from an operational standpoint, because you would have come right up against the Hyde Street cable car. For some reason, they didn't want to do Leavenworth, which was the next street over. It might have been that the owner of the Cannery [Shopping Center] then, Chris Martin, didn't want it there. Our goal was always to get it as far through the Wharf as we possibly could, to be a circulator within the Wharf at that end of the line. The next street was Jones. They picked Jones because it had a parking lot on one side, and the Anchorage Garage on the other, so it was kind of a blank wall on both sides. In other words, the most worthless block, that's where we'll put the terminal.

Well, as soon as the terminal went in, the owners of the Anchorage, when they started to see the foot traffic of all the people gathering to get off and on the streetcars there, ripped out the ground floor of their garage and put in a Starbucks, and a Walgreens, and other tourist- and neighborhood-serving businesses, and they have made—well, it's got to be well over $1 million in revenue that they wouldn't have otherwise had. Because the streetcars were there. And I just find it amusing, frankly, that so many people fought to keep it away from their business, and the business that drew the short straw made the most money.

By the way, one of the things we did get put in there was an emergency track. Obviously, streetcars run on tracks. If you don't have a track, you can't turn the streetcar around. What if one breaks down? You have got to get in there and tow it out of there, and everything else has to wait. So there was a natural space in front of the Pier 39 Garage on the right of way of Stockton Street, right of way the city owns but wasn't using—that last teeny block between Beach and the Embarcadero before Jefferson even starts, right in front of Pier 39. And so they put a little connector track in there. But the Wharf merchants insisted—I don't even know how they even thought of this—but they insisted that that track not have an electric switch on it, so that an operator couldn't
just easily turn any streetcar around there. They mandated that it be for emergency use only.

Well, the Wharf got crowded. Sometimes in the summer, people spill out onto this trackway from the sidewalk just because there is so many people down there. And Muni sometimes would turn these cars back—some cars back—at Pier 39 to restore the balance on the line and the schedules, keep everything from backing up on the Wharf area. They still do this. And the Wharf merchants, every time it happens, every time any Wharf merchant sees a car turning there, they'll call in and say, "You stop this. You better stop it!" And depending on whether they get through to the mayor's office or somebody else, there's some huffing and puffing, and then it stops for a while, and then it starts again. But they don't understand, and I've explained this. I spend a lot of time explaining to them, which sometimes has gotten me labeled as an apologist for Muni—anybody who knows me would know is probably not true.

06-02:47:51
Holmes:  They could read the transcript. Yeah. [laughter]

06-02:47:53
Laubscher:  Yeah. But I mean, I try to explain to them, "Hey, look: this is helping you. It's not hurting you." "Yeah, but you are letting all those people off in front of Pier 39 when they would have otherwise gone to the middle of the Wharf." Well, a lot of them get off at Pier 39 anyway, because they want to go there. And I've said to the Wharf merchants, "You ought to do a Wharf walkabout. All you have to do is stencil something—some symbol on the sidewalk—and put up a few signs. Maybe the 'crab trail' or something, so that if you are at Pier 39, go this way to see the real Wharf," or whatever. I mean, I have given them more pro bono PR advice, but it's a different kind of group. And I've accepted that.

We have a good relationship with the Wharf merchants now, and they support extending the line through to Fort Mason, because it was their leader at the time, Al [Alessandro] Baccari, who is kind of a fixture of North Beach and Fisherman's Wharf; old Italian family, came to us in 20—gosh, time flies—2002 or 2003, something like that and said—or maybe it was even 2001; it's all in the books—saying, "Why haven't you guys"—I mean, it was right after the launch. The line had only been open a year or two, and he said, "We need to extend it to Fisherman's Wharf," and I said, "Why?" I said, "You guys did not support that. I mean, the Wharf wasn't there." "Yeah, but now, it's so popular, and I realize that Fort Mason, they got all that conference space over there, we got these hotels that don't have conference space; this would be a perfect connection. And all those people who go to these conferences over there, there is only one restaurant there at Fort Mason and it's vegetarian!" It's the way he said it. It was like it was a curse word, right? "It's vegetarian!"
So he saw a natural affinity, and Al is a persuasive guy, and I thought about it, and I thought, yeah! So for the last 13 years of my life or so, [laughter] I have been tilting at that windmill to get it back to Fort Mason. And we have got it through the environmental review process, and Nancy Pelosi helped us get the money, the federal money, to do the environmental impact statement. In the light of no good deed goes unpunished, we had to deal with opposition from some property owners on Marina Boulevard who are convinced, wrongly, that extending it to Fort Mason is just the first step to putting streetcar tracks and wires in front of their homes, and taking it to the Presidio, which I don't believe will ever have the day in, day out density to justify a streetcar line. It's very low density out there, and since they have already turned down the Fisher Museum and then the Lucas Museum, there really aren't any big attractions—other than, of course, Crissy Field, which is fabulous, but is not a residential or work-related destination, and we do not believe that this should be a tourist line. And we certainly don't believe it should be running out to the empty Presidio at night, or at times when people don't want to go there. That's too expensive. You use shuttle buses for that. And we do think that Fort Mason would be a great location to relocate some of the Presidio shuttles to that already exist and go up Lombard Street—not Marina Boulevard, because we don't want to anger the people of Marina Boulevard—and run into the Presidio that way.

And we are still fighting that battle, and we'll continue to fight it. It's been a comedy of unintentional things getting in our way. But we continue to advocate for that, and we continue to think it's a good idea, and other property owners, like Ghirardelli Square, think it's a great idea. We believe that the F Line fundamentally changed the economics of Fisherman's Wharf.

06:02:52:22
Holmes:

Has there been—not that anybody would try to do a study—but has there been some serious kind of calculations or discussions on before and after? Has any of the merchants done that?

06:02:52:33
Laubscher:

No, and I am surprised there haven't been. I mean, this is something, frankly, that we believe that the economic parties at interest ought to pay for, not a small nonprofit. We know anecdotally, and everybody acknowledges, Jesus, it's popular. Everybody rides it. Cars are packed day and night, all hours, et cetera, et cetera. It's great. Or, as Yogi Berra would say, "Nobody goes there anymore—it's too crowded." I mean, the cars are packed; therefore, there must be something wrong. They don't operate well or something. No: people want to ride these, and so they ride them. And they stand in line, they wait for a couple of full cars to go by if it's a busy period so they can get on a car. If a substitute bus shows up, they are angry and don't ride it. I mean, this is all anecdotal, but it's been shown over and over, and over.
Now, doing this, we felt—and this has really been our big cause for the last 10 years, or really 15 years, ever since the F Line opened—I remember going, I believe it was to the groundbreaking of the Hotel Vitale in 2003. There was a big ceremony, and we were invited because we were going to get museum space, a little museum space, in the back of it. And Mayor Brown was there, and it was right at the end of his tenure. And some of us were talking about the E [Embarcadero] Line, the second line, and he came up; he kind of came by and said, "Don't worry—you'll get your E Line." And it took but 13 more years after that to finally get it.

I do want to mention that briefly, because that has been a huge part of our vision. Originally, Muni's own vision was an E Line going from Fort Mason to the Caltrain depot. This was a time when South Beach had nothing on it, and South Beach was derelict—empty warehouses, all this other stuff. But the old freight tracks were there, and the original vision, which was promulgated by others even before Muni, going back to the early 1970s, was to use the old freight tracks, string a wire over them, and just buy some antique streetcars and run them back and forth. That was the real Mickey Rooney/Judy Garland approach to it. And I think it was that concept that I embraced and actually thought we could make happen. Of course, we learned how much more complicated it is to really run something permanent and ongoing. The railroad tracks were derelict, they were not in the right location for this kind of thing on the street, blah, blah. But Muni dutifully drew it up as an E Line from Fort Mason to Caltrain, and then a separate F Line from Castro to the Ferry, and the two didn't share trackage. That might have been a physical connection, but they didn't share trackage.

So as it turned out, because of the subway capacity problems, and the need for a better turnaround, and everything else, Muni—and again, the late Doug Wright was seminal in this—took the E Line concept, essentially, and broke it in two. The south part was an extension of the metro subway, to be served by light rail vehicles. The north part was an extension of the F Line. And there was not to be a physical track connection between the Ferry Building and where the subway came up, which was at Folsom Street. So that's three blocks—three pretty long blocks—that were not going to have any streetcar track on them. And I thought that this was a really bad idea. The Muni planners did not ever want the E Line or old streetcars to run side by side with new streetcars, even though every day, they were doing exactly that on the J Line. Coming from out at San Jose and Geneva Avenues, where the car barn was, all the way to get to 17th and Castro, they were on the J Line, mixed with light rail vehicles. That's a—what? That's probably four miles of joint operation.

The Muni staff had said, "No, we don't want to do that." And it was a combination of two things. One: there was a fellow who was an official at
Delancey Street [Foundation]—he was on their board; he's still around—his name was Rick Mariano. He happened to be married to Katherine Feinstein, who was the daughter of Dianne. And Rick was a former Delancey Street resident who had remade his life, and later became a property developer—a very successful one. And Rick understood immediately the advantages of having historic streetcars ultimately come down that extension. His boss, Mimi Silbert, who was tremendously powerful in this town, understood it, too. And so I found out later that inside Muni—and not in approving terms—they were talking about the "two Ricks" who were ceaselessly lobbying to connect the tracks. Muni first threw up a nonfunctional track connection—a single track that was going to be used in both directions—just to get cars between the two lines, but not ever to carry passengers on it. And we fought against that. That was a diversionary tactic. Then Doug Wright again, convinced Art Agnos as mayor to champion this connection. And against Muni's wishes, it was built.

But every step was like pulling teeth. When we finished the connection, the tracks were extended. When they built the extension to Fisherman's Wharf, they also built the tracks right down to around the subway portal on either side, where the tracks came up from the subway, just to Folsom Street, and then they stopped. No connection. And we said, "Well, when are you going to connect them?" And then we heard, "Oh, well, you can't do that, because there is a super elevation problem, and the tracks coming out of the subway are going to be banked like this, and it won't connect." And I tell you, the one thing I have learned in 30 years of doing this is you better learn your own—you better educate yourself technically, because there are going to be people who try to bullshit you shamelessly on details that even the most rudimentary technical knowledge will tell you are not true.

06-03:00:35
Holmes: But they're hoping that you don't know that.

06-03:00:38
Laubscher: What's that?

06-03:00:38
Holmes: I said they're hoping that you don't know that.

06-03:00:40
Laubscher: Well, and let me tell you: I have seen this. I have seen Muni people do this; in public hearings and other places, throw out totally bogus technical statements about why something cannot be done. Not politically, not because we don't want to do it, not because it would cost too much, not because there's this or that, but because it's technically impossible, or infeasible, or this like that. And it's just not true.
This wasn't even difficult. And the connection is there; it's used now by the E Line streetcars every single day. It works flawlessly. It's just garbage. But it's that resistance inside the organization that's not conducted with integrity. And I say this to all these people; I have said it to a series of general managers at Muni over the years in introductory meetings as politely as I can. I said, "Let me explain to you what we do." If they are not from Muni before, or they come from out of town, I said, "This may be an unusual thing for you. We are an advocacy group. And yes, we have a special interest. We're also here to support you in other ways. And I would like to support you personally, pro bono, on some of your other transit agenda items. I know something about these subjects. If we agree on them, I would be happy to support you on them behind the scenes, or do other things. In exchange, all we ask is that you be honest with us about your plans, positions for the historic streetcars and cable cars. If you oppose something we are proposing, please just say so. Just don't shine us on with no intention of actually doing what you say you are going to do." And every single time, it's been kind of this nodding: "Oh, sure. Absolutely. Of course." And half the time, that's been insincere on their part, and the other half of the time, it's been sincere. With Ed Reiskin, it's sincere, and that's great. That's where we are today. But I have seen the other side of that, too.

And so the E Line, which does share track with the F Line, it does go all the way to Fisherman's Wharf, and then goes down to the southern end of the waterfront connecting with what is today now the new Mission Bay development. Now, was that started in 2008, or—

Well, over the years, because the tracks were in and they built the platforms—it requires low-level side platforms, and they built those into the stations along the southern edge in about 2003 or 2004—we have had the capability to run it, but it's been like pulling teeth to get the cars out there. Part of the issue, and this is legitimate, is there wasn't enough equipment.

I was going to ask about that, yeah.

We had pushed for years to get, under the end of the N Line, which is—you have got Caltrain there, the Caltrain stop, and then you—the tail tracks go in the middle of King Street and disappear sort of under the freeway ramps, where 280 takes off. And there is room under there. Right now, it's just a pair of stub-end tracks, which require double-end streetcars. We have been pushing going back to the early 2000s—2001, 2002 when we started talking about this—to have them build a track loop down there so you could turn any streetcar around down there. Michael Burns, when he was general manager, even ordered studies done, which now nobody can find, but I saw them. They
had conceptual drawings with where the freeway piers are, and how to go around them, and I think they had twelve options. And it never got built.

So then it became, “Well, we don't have any place to turn the cars around, so we have to have double-end cars, and we don't have enough double-end cars.” And that led to [laughter] another effort on our part to get more double-end streetcars restored, and that ended up getting four more of these 1948 Muni cars, which had been kept—two of them were totally derelict. But we had clawed to keep the bodies of those cars around when Muni wanted to scrap them because we said, "Nobody makes double-end streetcars anymore. There is no surplus double-end streetcars available, because almost nobody ran them in the first place.” So we ended up getting those four cars restored, and that finally gave us enough cars to start E Line service.

06-03:05:50
Holmes:

And this restoration, was Market Street Railway again fundraising to do this?

06-03:05:55
Laubscher:

No, no. Again, it's the same thing. If you would start a new route and buy buses to run that route, this is the same thing. And we have made the case, and continue to make the case, that costs of all transit vehicles, whether new or restored, continues to go up, for a variety of reasons, including federal requirements and other things. But on a per-passenger mile basis, or any basis you really want to lay out, these streetcars, which get renovated once in 25 years of service life—of heavy service life—cost you no more on an amortized capital basis or a total cost of ownership basis than a bus would. And less than a light rail vehicle would. So those are the kind of cases we always have to be able to make.

So it's not a frill. There are those in the transit industry—there are a lot of them, sadly, and politicians who support them, not so much in San Francisco, but in a lot of cities—who view transit as the ride of last resort. Transit is for people too poor to own their own cars, too poor to take an Uber now, or something like that. That's never been true in San Francisco. And it's still not true. So it's, again, emphasizing the health of this thing.

Now, we have been fighting over and over, and over to get the E line implemented. We finally got, in—oh, what was it? August of last year, it started—I think it was August of last year, it started on a weekend-only basis to demonstrate it. And then starting in April of this year, again, intensive lobbying, a seven-day-a-week basis. But it's still what I would call a "single-shift operation." That is, one shift of operators. An operator gets in the car; temporarily, they are housed down at Muni metro center. They get in the car and bring the car to Caltrain, and then put it in service. And at the end of their shift, eight hours later, they pull it in.
So your total operating time on the line is really only about nine hours. And that means that the cars start at about ten in the morning. So you miss the morning commute. You miss all the people coming up on Caltrain who could stop and take this. You miss morning commuters in all the buildings in Mission Bay, for example. But you do have, right now, the T [3rd Street], light rail lines, both running along that southern corridor, at least as far as Fulsome Street. So the E only really provides direct service from there up to—if you are going to the northern waterfront, if you are going to the Exploratorium [the Museum of Science, Art and Human Perception], the Alcatraz Ferry, some of the businesses and office buildings on the northern waterfront, it's easier to take the E than it would be to take the T, and get off and transfer to the F, go into the subway, come out, and get off.

What we want to do with the E—and the phrase we use is "longer makes it stronger"—is to actually extend it. You almost need a map to look at this, but the T line is on a temporary route right now. It comes all the way up 3rd Street from my neighborhood, six miles. It comes all the way up 3rd Street, and then jogs over to 4th, and then currently goes into the subway, where it miraculously transitions into the K Line. I mean, it's actually the same streetcars share the two lines; they just change the signs in the middle of it.

But the plan with the T Line—and here is Rose Pak again—has always been to put it into the central subway. It was conceived of and will be a through line running directly north-south. It'll go up 4th Street and into the subway under Bryant Street, and it'll be in the subway all the way up to Chinatown. When that happens, the current ability to ride up 3rd Street through Mission Bay, past the hospital, the Warriors arena, the Pier 70 complex, the Giants complex, UCSF Hospital and campus, UCSF housing, all those attractions, all those new trip generators—you won't be able to ride the T up 3rd Street and then up the Embarcadero. You are going to have to transfer. People don't like to transfer. So we have been pushing that when the T goes into the central subway, it keeps going straight; that the E pick up as supplemental service from the southern end of Mission Bay, Dogpatch, right up through all these new developments, and then, yes, you still get Caltrain, you still get the ballpark, you still have that route you have now, all the way up to the Wharf. And then extend the E to Fisherman's Wharf, so you end up with a six-mile long all-waterfront line that connects every single attraction on the Wharf.

Now, the E is already earning its stripes north of the Ferry Building, where the F cars were just overwhelmed. We have an imbalance of ridership on the F. There is so many people on the waterfront that—

06-03:12:29
Holmes: Yeah. Doesn't the E supplement with the F now?
It does, it does. And one of the reasons we were arguing for the E for years is that Muni, right after the F Line opened to the Wharf, started running shuttles that they didn't anticipate running, using the loop track around our museum at the Ferry Building, Mission, and Steuart, and then running up the Wharf as extra service between the Ferry Building and the Wharf, because there weren't enough F Line cars that went all the way up to Castro to handle that. So the E Line just takes—and the way we argued for it was to say, "You are already paying for these shuttle runs. You should just extend them all the way down to Caltrain, and that's the E Line." Now, you need to add a few more runs to cover the extra distance, but that's essentially what's happened.

And I think it needs a different southern terminal that it has. It needs to go further south. I mean, Caltrain is somewhat of a trip generator, and there are apartment buildings and things like that that are trip generators, but there are so many more just a few blocks to the south. If you just look at the build-out of Mission Bay, it's incredible.

Well, and that's one thing I wanted to also ask. When we look at the F Line and that Embarcadero stretch of the F Line, it very much dovetailed with the revitalization of the waterfront. It helped, and was a very significant complement to that revitalization. The question now looking forward is how the E Line can also dovetail with that revitalization going south. And thinking of the new Warriors arena, the Giants ballpark, Mission Bay, Pier 70, as you have mentioned, do you see in further years that this is going to be a significant part of that?

Well, that's certainly my belief. Sometimes I feel a little bit like—I don't know. When we had the vision for the F Line, it wasn't just me. Because I mentioned and gave proper credit to the people at Muni who put it in their planning documents before I ever got involved with it, too—all these other people. I didn't have some grand vision here—I picked up the wrench and said, "All right, let's build this thing." You know?

I learned the hard way how hard it was to explain, even for a communications professional, what this could be. I am not very self-aware of how I am, how I come across to people, but I have learned over the years that people say, "You are so damned enthusiastic about this. I mean, boy, you really care about this. You really make it come to life." And I think, yeah, but it ain't working for some people, because no matter what you say, they have to see it. I tried to explain how this could be when we were in the conceptual stage—Mayor Feinstein got it. A lot of people did not get it. It was kind of like, "Oh, no. This is not going to work very well. Oh my God! You might lose some parking. Does anybody really want to ride that old junk?" And the thing is,
[laughter] when we were pitching the Wharf on the final destinations, they had the five summer Trolley Festivals, and they saw them building the track on Market Street.

When we go now to talk to people about the E Line, they see the F Line. I remember going in to see Monique Moyer, who was newly minted then as the Port [of San Francisco] director. She just left after a long tenure. This would have been back—yeah, it was right after the F Line opened to the Wharf. And I said, "Now we want to extend, to the benefit of your properties in the Port, down to the south, and run it along the way." And I will never forget this. Monique's a very smart woman, but her reaction was, "Well, why would I want to do that?" "Because the F Line has brought vitality along its entire corridor, and it's been very quick since it's opened." And I said, "The E Line will do the same thing." She said, "Well, I can't even get on the F Line to go to have lunch at the Wharf. It's too crowded." And I really thought, Congratulations! You just entered the Yogi Berra hall of fame! Nobody goes there anymore—it's too crowded! Wait a minute! Of course, I didn't say this out loud; I was dumbfounded. I wanted to say, "Are you kidding me? You are telling me that this thing has greatly enhanced traffic flow to the north of the Ferry Building among all your Port properties, which over time is going to translate into a lot more rent and all this other stuff that—and you're ready to blow it off to the south."

And even today, there is still some of that. I mean, the Giants support us; have been supporters of us. They do want to see it continue to the south, because they know there would be an existing stop that would serve their new development south of the ballpark. Yeah, you could get off at the 2nd and King stop right in front of the ballpark and walk across the Lefty O'Doul Bridge and get down there probably just as fast as you could ride the streetcar if you're a fast walker. But it's the visual connection that people get. People get on those cars, they want to ride the car. They love the car. Where the car goes, that's where they'll go. And if they see something cool along the way, they'll get off. That's how it worked for the Castro. The Castro wasn't anywhere near the kind of visitor destination it is today before the streetcars went up there. "How am I going to get there? I don't know how to get there."

Holmes: That's very true. It's very, very true.

Laubscher: Just let me say—and the western Wharf has atrophied. And that's why the Ghirardelli Square people, the new owners of Ghirardelli Square, are major supporters of our move to extend to Fort Mason. They get it. Even though you got the High Street cable car coming a block away that does deliver a lot of
people, the cable car's capacity is kind of limited, and operationally, Muni further limits the capacity by—well, that's another whole story. They don't operate the cable cars the way they should, and that's something that we would like to get more involved in in the future. We are already getting more involved in it.

But just to finish up on the E Line, I see this vision of these fabulous 1950s—or 19th century, rather—brick buildings, and early part of this century, and the old Bethlehem Shipyards Union Ironworks that are being seismically reinforced now finally, after it was long thought that it was economically unfeasible to do that. The rising economy has made these kind of projects feasible. And right next door on the rest of Pier 70, Forest City is a major global developer; putting in thousands of housing units, and office space, and everything else in a mixture of historic and new buildings. It's going to be fabulous. And next to that is the old power plant, which is another beautiful brownfield site that is right on the water. I mean, all of these things are within walking distance of the 3rd Street light rail corridor, and that track's already there.

So when you look at this, you say, "Wow." I'd call all those attractions pearls along our waterfront, and the E Line is the string that makes the necklace. Because you have Fort Mason on one end, Pier 70 on the other end, two incredibly historic institutional uses, and all have been revitalized. And then everything else, from Ghirardelli Square, to the heart of the Wharf itself, to newer attractions like the Exploratorium, the cruise ship terminal, and then you just continue all the way down. And that doesn't even count about what they might ultimately do with Pier 30, or the land inside. There has been a lot of flailing around on that. But something will come to that space. It's just too valuable, you know?

06-03:21:36
Holmes:

Yeah, I think the pearl necklace type of imagery and metaphor that you use is pretty apt. And having oral histories with people such as Jim Chappell, who we went into detail regarding the history of trying to redevelop that waterfront and bring economic vitality back to the waterfront. I mean, it's extremely difficult, and a lot of people I don't think fully comprehend the scope involved. And part of that is if we could make it accessible, which you are touching on with the E Line—

06-03:22:12
Laubscher:

Which is exactly what the streetcars are there to do. If you go down to what will be Crane Cove Park, it's going to be a fabulous public park for visitors and residents alike using the old antique shipyard cranes, which are being left in place, and the old ways are going to be left there as a launching pad for kayaks. It's going to be a fabulous thing, and they are about to break ground on it. You go further south, and there are other parks right on the water that
are almost inaccessible, that nobody knows about, but would be an easy walk from an extended streetcar line. And people say, "Well, you have got the T Line." Well, nobody wants to take the T Line unless they have to take the T Line. I mean, if we haven't established by now that the streetcars are in and of themselves an attraction that gets people onboard that will not ride a bus and will not want to ride light rail lines—you know?

And that goes back to what I talked about before, of this philosophy of the streetcars being the ride of last resort. If you go into Muni's headquarters, you will see a disproportionate number of big murals that they have showing their history and everything else that they have got all over their space. A disproportionate number are the historic streetcars. Not the historic streetcars in the 1920s and 1930s, but today. If you look at their reports, their annual report, their collateral, the promotional materials they do, a heavily disproportionate number are historic streetcars. So somebody in there loves them, and thinks they are great positive PR. And yet, you get into the operations side, there is always somebody in there saying, "I don't like them. I don't want to use them."

When we were trying to build along the Embarcadero—it had already been approved, but there were some delays because of the Embarcadero Freeway teardown, and they had to reengineer or redesign the whole center section. And there was a party where one very high Muni employee who later left the organization, maybe because of substance abuse problems—I'm certainly not going to name him, but he was a somewhat erratic person is the reason I say that—and at this public event was rather under the influence, said to somebody who I know personally and trust, started blathering about he personally was going to kill the F Line extension to Fisherman's Wharf because it was all bullshit, and I don't care what those people want. We are not going to run that. I mean, this was something that millions of dollars had already been spent on, and yet here was somebody with some authority in the organization saying, "We are going to shut it down." And it's so odd, because this is—and Ed Reiskin really gets this—it's one of the best things that's happened to Muni in a PR sense in the last 30, 40 years. So you wonder, why not celebrate and make the most of this thing instead of digging your heels in every step of the way?

What I've learned is that persistence pays. You can not do this if—I mean, and I had no intention of ever getting in—I signed up for this for a summer, and that was thirty years ago.

06-03:26:00
Holmes: [laughter] Over Thirty years ago
And it was over thirty years ago. But I found out if you really care about something in this town, no matter what it is, you have got to just stay with it. One of the models I looked to was a man named Karl Kortum, who was a mariner, was a sailor. And he had visions for bringing together a collection of historic ships at the old Hyde Street Pier. And people laughed at him, “Oh, that crazy Carl,” you know? Today, San Francisco Maritime National Historical Park is a reality because of one man, Karl Kortum. Now, others supported it, others got on board. And I never knew Karl very well. I met him a few times; he was a crusty guy. But Karl was also indirectly responsible for saving streetcar No. 1, and the oldest streetcar, No. 578, which was restored by Muni in 1956 as a gimmick, publicity stunt, for the 50th anniversary of the 1906 earthquake. So those two cars, the two oldest in Muni's fleet, survived both because they were kept around for one-time celebrations.

But car No. 1 was only there because it was given to what was going to be a railroad museum that Carl envisioned as part of his grand aquatic park plan. And the railroad museum was going to be in the old Haslett Warehouse, which is now the Argonaut Hotel, and also the Visitor's Center for the National Maritime Historical Park. And Muni said, "We don't want those cars. Fine. Shove them over there." They shoved them out on a pier, and they were going to get rid of the title to them, give them away. They didn't care. This was their patrimony. And when that plan fell through—not for any want of Karl’s trying—Muni grabbed the car back and said, "Okay, we'll restore it for the 1962, 50th anniversary of Muni." And that's why that car was still around. If that car hadn't been around, I don't know that I would have felt like—I don't think they would have run the weekend service on the J Line, and I don't think I would have looked at this thing and said, "Hey, we can do something like this."

So I will not take credit for this whole F Line thing any more than to say I saw what others had done, and coincidentally, something another had done that made it possible for me to do what I ended up doing. And then you throw on top of everything else the fact that car No. 1 was restored under the auspices of a man named Charles Smallwood, who was another big, rotund guy who died too young. Both he and Maury Klebolt, I think their weight hastened their demise.

But Charlie was a San Francisco resident, and a native San Franciscan, a rail fan, and he worked for the old Market Street Railway. He wrote the book, literally, on the history of Market Street Railway [The White Front Cars of San Francisco], and I use that book as my bible to talk about the history of our namesake organization. But Charlie, in his work life, was a mechanical guy who ended up being a maintenance supervisor at cable car, and he was the one responsible for so many of these individual restorations that laid the groundwork, equipment-wise, for the F Line. And one of the sweet spots in
my life was when we found that last surviving Market Street Railway streetcar in the Sierra foothills and went up to get it. I asked Charlie to come with me, and I have a picture of him we just published in our issue that's at the printer's now, of him and Maurice Klebolt beaming and holding up a tattered old Market Street Railway logo shield against the side of this derelict streetcar. And I just happened to come across all the photographs of Charlie just looking so happy. He died the next year.

But if he hadn't done what he did, I couldn't have done the things that I was able to do. And I keep hoping that others will pop up and say, "Well, he did that, so I am going to do this. I'm going to take it the next step." Or: "We're going to find a similar project." You know? And in fact, San Francisco has always fostered that kind of thing, not always successfully. There have been a lot of visionaries or people with good ideas that just couldn't get them over the hump. But I choose to believe that those kind of ideas have a better chance in San Francisco—even today, with all the bureaucracy and all the other things that got put in there—than they would have in other cities.

06-03:31:42 Holmes: You were mentioning the Maritime Museum, which struck me that Market Street Railway created its own museum down off of Embarcadero. Can you discuss that creation a little bit? Because I think that also, outside of developing the streetcar lines, offers good insight into the operation and staffing of the nonprofit Market Street Railway.

06-03:32:12 Laubscher: Yeah. I mean, we were always a behind the scenes organization. We didn't have a public face, except the streetcars themselves. And we would put cards up in the streetcars; they call them "car cards"—advertising-size cards that go above the windows on the inside of the streetcars. And we would explain what that car was, what its provenance was, and put our little logo on it, and that was about it. We were not good at self-promotion. I was more interested in getting the job done than crowing about it.

And again, the late Doug Wright, who became my closest friend but didn't start out that way, really saw the value in this as an enrichment for the city, and he saw how it would tie into the waterfront, and revitalize the waterfront, et cetera. And he was separately working, as I mentioned, on this project to bring Muni revenue by taking this old bus turnaround, which was a vacant lot—I mean, a paved lot with bus wires over it—at Mission and Steuart, right across the street from the old Audiffred Building, which was a historic landmark built in 1889 that somehow survived the earthquake and fire, and had not yet at that time—. Anyway, Boulevard is now in there, and of course, it's one of the great restaurants in San Francisco. Doug said, "With the freeway down, this is incredibly valuable."
Some people in Muni—including, interestingly, Peter Straus, who was still planning director after all these years—strongly opposed giving up the lot and turning the buses around on the street. Basically, Doug's contention was, look: you just restring another block of trolley wires. Instead of having all the buses stop at this one terminal, which nobody rides to anyway because it's the end of the line, you stop some buses at this curb a block away, some at this curb a half-block away. You take out the automobile parking, it becomes a bus zone, just like terminals all over town for other bus lines. Peter thought that was going to be the end of the world operationally. It turns out it hasn't been. It did free that land, and that land, the northern edge of that land, became our right of way for the F Line through the—between Steuart Street and the Embarcadero, because now we are just at the southern edge of the so-called "dedicated park property." Justin Herman Plaza. And then the rest of it became a developable hotel site.

And the city solicited bids. It was an open and transparent process. The only codicil in there was that the proposers should accommodate a small museum to San Francisco transit. It wasn't stipulated that we would run it. Muni could have run it itself, if they wanted to. There were no further terms and conditions. And as it turned out, the winner, Joie de Vivre Hotels [Joie de Vivre Hospitality], which at the time was owned by Chip Conley, a home-grown San Francisco chain. He has since sold, but he made a tremendously generous offer, which was rent-free occupancy of this 20 x 50 foot corner spot. And then we were named as the operator.

So it was a tremendous opportunity, but we had to raise $350,000 just to build it out. And again, I'm terrible at fundraising, but we managed to get that done. Ten years last September, we opened the museum. We have had mixed success with it. I mean, we are very glad we have it, because now it's our front door. It's our face to the city. We put in rotating exhibits explaining various things about San Francisco's transit history, and trying very much to engage people in appreciating what transit has done to build San Francisco, because without it, without the kind of effective transit we've had over the years, we'd never have a city like this. I mean, the city would be completely different than it is now.

And where do you get the material for the exhibits?

We partner with the Bay Area Electric Railroad Association, which operates the Western Railway Museum up there in Rio Vista Junction. We partnered with San Francisco Public Library, which has a good photo archives collection. We have gotten donations over the years from a lot of rail fans who collected ephemera and artifacts, who didn't know what to do with them, and they found, to their shock, as they got older that their children had zero
interest in having their collection passed on to them someday. So we have gotten a lot of stuff, and we've catalogued it, and it's been enough to equip a museum.

We call it a "museum"; it's really turned out to be more like a visitor's center for the historic streetcars. And we do have a shop with merchandise we designed ourselves. Again, we don't want commercial stuff that you can find at the Wharf or elsewhere. We want it to be a unique destination. We finally got it to the point of breaking even. We never had hired staff before. Everything was done totally as a volunteer effort.

06-03:38:52
Holmes: And are these volunteers usually members of Market Street Railway?

06-03:38:57
Laubscher: Yeah. We prefer you to pay at least $45 a year to be a member. If somebody wants to volunteer without being a member and they have a good skill we can use, sure. Absolutely, we take that. But neither myself nor our longtime office manager, Alison Cant, ever took any compensation. In fact, I gave them into the six figures over the years of my own money just as a supporter. But then we got to the point where, as we got more involved with these intense interactions with the city around renovation contracts in particular—

I haven't covered this before, and I won't bore you with it, but it is something that needs to be added. I mentioned the sequence of additional streetcars the city had to get. And this is actually kind of important to complete that story. They had bought these Milan trams on kind of an emergency basis in 1997, and then when the—as soon as the Wharf extension opened, they knew they weren't going to have enough cars again. Luckily, we had been following, I personally had been following, the group of 25—24, 25, 26, something like that—PCC streetcars that had been operating in Newark, New Jersey since the mid-1950s. These cars had been bought secondhand from Minneapolis when they were almost new, and in Newark, they ran on an old canal bed. No street running at all. And they were kept in what was called the "city subway," which was a rather short underground section in the center of town, and they were stored there overnight, so they never were out in the cold, and they never had road salt under them. So they were in really remarkable shape for their age.

And Newark finally got around to buying new light rail vehicles, and they made these available. We worked like hell to convince Muni that they needed to put a bid in for these, they needed to be right up front on them. In dealing with New Jersey, they said—and it's actually a state agency that owns the cars, not the city of Newark—they said, "Well, we want to reserve some for museums and other purposes. We want to keep a few around. So we'll make 18 of the total available." And Muni signed a contract for 18, which I thought,
this is going to solve our car problems forever. And then we find out that because somebody—some mid-level, lower-level person in Muni—did not check a box and make a required payment or statement, or something at a certain time, they had abrogated the contract. Muni had, unintentionally. And Newark came around and said, "Well, guess what? We’re going to start a heritage line based on your F Line in Bayonne [New Jersey], so we’re taking back 7 of the cars. We’re rescinding 7 of the cars. You can have 11." And I was really furious, because you work very hard to advocate, to touch bases, and yet, you try to trust the agency to do the right—to handle the details and take ownership, and they didn't. Somebody screwed up.

So we ended up with 11. And in the event, it turns out that the Bayonne cars, the Bayonne thing, never came to pass. Meanwhile, the cars had sat out in the snow for years, because they no longer had their covered storage, and deteriorated. So we ended up with 11. And those cars, again, when they got here, the then-general manager, Michael Burns, who I respect, made a decision to say, "We are just going to slap a coat of paint on them, and they run, and we’ll"—you know, they had to do a couple of small, minor modifications—"and then, we’re going to run them. I want them on the street now. We are desperate for cars."

Well, by the time they got through the process, it still took a couple of years to get them out. And once they got out, they had changed the management by then, and the fellow who had come in—not to replace Burns but as the number two—loved to throw his weight around. He looked at the cars and said, "Well, the inside of these cars do not meet my standards. They need to be upgraded." So they sent them back again. And this is a company in Pennsylvania that had done the renovations. Then they stripped out the bad upholstery—or the tacky-colored upholstery—and they made the inside of the cars look great, brought them back. And then they realized the wiring was not good in the cars. So they ended up sending them back again for a third rebuild. This cost much more money than it should have.

And again, it was a question of kind of taking our hands off and trying not to alienate people by looking over their shoulder and say, "You should do this; you should do that; you should do this," because I know how much people resent that. I'm not trying to pretend that we never made mistakes or anything else, but we had been through one set of renovations with the first group of cars. We knew what they had done wrong. We knew that they had not been inspected properly or scoped properly, which is why the renovator sent back products to San Francisco that leaked, that didn't have—some of the cars didn't have properly-sealed roofs, and all that other stuff, and then leaving the Muni maintenance staff to have to deal with it. I learned to be a champion of the maintenance staff, because that's really the most important group there. If
the cars don't run properly, if they leak, if other things happen, then you have got a problem.

So these cars went through three mini-renovations instead of one comprehensive renovation, which kept them off the street. But now, we have those cars, and they are finally running reliably. And that's a total of 32 of these streamlined PCC cars, and we still have another 20 of them out at the storage area which do not run, some of which have been picked for parts, and some have been vandalized because security wasn't great; there were lapses in security. And probably half of those are restorable. But that's enough cars to get us through our extensions.

And in thinking about extensions, whoever your successor is who wants to pick up the mantle then—do you think that's enough cars for the full waterfront extension as we discussed?

Yeah, it is. Especially if some of the historic cars are restored, made compatible, easy to maintain. And you could use a lot of the components that are used in the Milan cars in those cars, too, so that you reduce the amount of uniqueness, but they still have their distinctive looks, and operations, and feel. It's important that a streetcar feel like a streetcar. Like when Philadelphia took their old PCCs and put this modern propulsion and stuff under it, it just feels a lot different.

I have always felt that any giant mechanical object needs to be seen in operation. I mean, it might make a piece of beautiful sculpture as a static display, but it's not the same thing. And I remember as a kid going to the Smithsonian when I was 11, 12, and the then-new National Museum of American History had opened on the [National] Mall, and standing in front of that giant locomotive in the basement that they had to—they literally built the building around the locomotive—and how fabulous that was. But it wasn't as exciting as seeing the old, dilapidated steam engines that they were using on what's now Caltrain—the Peninsula Commute service when I was a little kid—and those were little teapot steam engines compared to these giant things. And when you see a steam engine in full roar, and you feel the ground shake, and you hear it, and you smell it, I mean, that's a sensory experience that no static display can ever connote.

I thought that the streetcars were the same thing. When you are on car No. 1, or one of the other two early Muni cars, you are back in the 1910s—or you could be in the '20s, '30s, or '40s, because those cars all ran throughout that whole era—and you feel and experience what a commuter did, what my mother felt, or my grandfather, when they rode those cars. And I think there is a little magic in that. So when people, say, come into our little museum and
express disappointment—and this happens fairly often. They'll walk in, and it's a 20 foot-wide space, fifty foot long. At the far end of it is a replica that our volunteers built by hand—an exact replica—of a cab, of the end of one of the old-fashioned streetcar types that's no longer—of which there are no longer any examples. But you see this streetcar, and we have fake tracks laid into the floor at a flat level that suggests the streetcar coming at you. And they'll look at it, and they'll say, "Where's the museum? Is this it? Where is the museum?" And if I am there—and I have also asked our clerks to say this: to turn around and point out the door and say, "That's the museum," because the museum's in motion. That's what we are here for, and the whole purpose. And I do hear people say, "Well, why don't you"—this is rail fans especially—"Why don't you set up something, and get some land, so these cars can always be on static display?" And I say, "You missed the whole point."

Now, in the longer run, we are collaborating with a great group called Geneva Carhouse Restoration [Geneva Car Barn and Powerhouse]. I can't remember what the exact name is, but where the streetcars are normally kept, an area that's now being rebuilt by Muni, where the track work is being done, so the cars are temporarily over at Muni Metro East on 3rd Street, off 3rd Street. But their normal home is the area at Geneva and San Jose, which was first made into a car house in 1900. And there is an old brick building right on the corner that was a Muni division right up until—I think they abandoned it after the 1989 earthquake. After the 1906 earthquake, the bricks—it's an un-reinforced masonry structure, and the bricks were actually separated. You can look and see the zigzag offsets that the earthquake caused. And Muni stuck giant timbers into the window—not Muni; I'm sorry, it was United Railroads [of San Francisco] back then—stuck these timbers into the windows to keep the windows from collapsing on themselves, and add some rudimentary structural stability to this thing. There's a door carved in the side at the second floor level of this thing, and they cut out a bunch of bricks and put a door there that's still there—a rickety old wooden piece of wood that was an emergency entrance to the yard for scabs during the 1917 streetcar strike, which was a bloody, long-term strike. I mean, this is a very historic building. And Muni never kept it up. It was really dowdy and old.

Muni wanted to tear it down, and we opposed that, and other community people opposed it, because we knew what they wanted to do. The way it's laid out on the street, you weren't going to be able to put—they said they were going to put more streetcar storage tracks in there, but we took one look at the configuration of the trackage, and the curves you've got to have to connect to the street, and all that other stuff, and said, "That footprint of that building is too close to the street to allow tracks to be put there." I know what they were going to do with it: they were going to make it automobile parking for their employees. And they got stopped. But they managed to turn it over to the
Recreation and Parks Department, and now it's going to be a community center, if they can raise money for it.

But people had come to us at the time and said, "You need to save this," and "This needs to be the museum," and "You need to display all the cars." And I said, "No. The idea is to run the cars, not to put them on display."

But something happened after that, and that is that a man who is a true San Franciscan named Cameron Beach who had had a whole career in transit outside of San Francisco, was the chief operating officer in Sacramento, and had a huge interest in San Francisco streetcars. And I was introduced to him through people who knew him from the Rio Vista Museum, and he came on our board. He would drive down from Sacramento just for our board meetings, which in that time was every other month. Now, it's quarterly. And there, he met another board member who is a friend of mine, Carmen Clark, who had—was a career transit executive, and had been the head of the [San Francisco] County Transportation Authority. I knew Carmen because I was on their first Citizens Advisory Committee when this County Authority was founded as a funding agency in 1989. And I introduced the two, they fell in love; they got married, they had seven wonderful years together.

He retired from Sacramento, and—I think because of his passion and knowledge—got appointed to the MTA [Municipal Transportation Authority] board, Muni's governing board, and left our board as a necessity for that. But we became closer and closer friends. And we collaborated on a lot of projects, and he was very helpful. He never violated his duty as a director, board member of MTA, which is explicitly not to interfere in day-to-day operations, but we talked about a lot of things, and he would point me in good directions, and give me good counsel as to what we could get done, and what would be harder. And he always wanted to see that yard and that whole area, he wanted to see that building restored and something good come of it.

So when he died suddenly of a heart attack five years ago now, the first thing I said was, "We need to name that facility for him." So that's now the Cameron Beach Yard. And because it has his name prominently—he was loved by his fellow directors at Muni, which meant he got a bigger sign [laughter] with his name on it. And I would love to see someday when they restore that building, there are a few tracks right up against the building that are intact, and certainly perfectly usable, but are almost never used because the building is seismically unstable, and nobody wants to park expensive vehicles under those bricks. But once that's done and the bricks are stable again, I could see fencing off a couple of tracks anyway and maybe having a small display area, or something like that. I may not be around to see it by the time it gets done, but you always have to have some other thought about what's next.
But the only way I would get involved in this kind of stuff now is if it had a real people component, because you have got to tell the story through people. You can’t tell it just through equipment, artifacts. There is a limited audience for that.

It’s very important to note that the old Geneva Carhouse building used to be attached to some brick and wood sheds, which provided a protective cover for the old streetcars when they were out of service, like overnight. This is critical, because the streetcars can shake off rain when they’re actually running on the street, but if they’re sitting in an open yard for hours or days between scheduled runs, the rain works its way into every little crack and crevice in the wood or metal, which greatly accelerates rot and rust. The old sheds were torn down in the mid-1980s, just before they could fall down on their own, after a new facility for the modern streetcars, Curtis Green Division, was built across the street. So the old streetcars were kept out in the open in the Geneva Yard. We had a member of our board at the time, George Miller, whom you know from his work at the Bancroft, who kept pushing on Muni to put up a protective shelter for the cars. He went out on his own and got an estimate from a reputable construction company back in the early 1990s, I think it was, that was something like a quarter of a million dollars. He told Muni he’d pay for it himself. Well, that got the bureaucracy going, finally. Of course, they couldn’t just accept an outsider’s offer – they had to study it to death, then designed a Taj Mahal, with huge doors and all kinds of amenities that weren’t necessary, which in turn made the project unaffordable. But because of George’s persistence, even after he retired from our board, we kept pushing on this. He had a great ally in the late Art [Arthur H.] Michel, who was a retired Muni streetcar mechanic, served as our president for a time in the late 1990s, knew the damage uncovered storage was doing to the streetcars, and supported George in his efforts. Finally, Muni built the canopy — the covered storage — and it cost $10 million, not the $250,000 the construction company initially told George many years before. So it’s important to note that volunteers like George and Art are really the difference makers in our organization. George has been a generous donor through the years as well.

06:03:57:12 Holmes: In our last fifteen, twenty minutes or so, Rick, we’ve sat now for six to seven sessions going through your life.

06:03:57:21 Laubscher: Yeah. Can I just take a break before we start?


[break in audio]
Holmes:
Are we good? So in reflecting back on Market Street Railway, San Francisco, because of the efforts of yourself and others, it's really one of the few cities that still has vintage transportation, right, if we think of streetcars and cable cars. What are your thoughts on the civic participation and support of that, particularly in a city that's always seemed so—and even today—so polarized? That it seems like if you think of the broad coalition of support that you built, what do you think that says about San Francisco today, or at least about the affinity for streetcars, or moving museums?

Laubscher:
I really don't know whether we could do something like it, today. The world has changed a lot. When I think of how we got the Trolley Festival started in the 1980s, in 1983, there was no environmental impact statement; there was no long period of planning and study. It was the mayor saying, "I want to do this," and her department saluting—not always following orders, but saluting, and a couple of activists kind of poking on the outside with some influential neighborhood groups. It was pretty simple. The process to do something like that today is so much more involved. And it's so much easier to stop. There is a whole industry of consultants now, and activists, and others. I say "industry," I don't mean to say that they're all paid, and I don't mean to say that they are motivated by money alone. But we have made the world much more complex than it used to be.

I remember [laughter] one of the little foibles back then in the '80s—as I say, there was no place to turn streetcars around up at the end. You had to have double-end streetcars that could just change ends and go back the other way, being operated from the other end. And I remember saying that—because I was a nerd, am a nerd, on some things; I retain some odd details—and I said, "Well, what you need is a track wye." And a wye—spelled W-Y-E—is what it sounds like. It's a mechanism for turning any vehicle around. When you make a three-point turn in your automobile on a cul-de-sac or to turn around, that's a wye. You pull forward, turn ninety degrees, then you back out, go that way, back up, and then you go back the way you came. Well, you need an arrangement of tracks to let you do that. And Muni had installed these themselves in the late 1950s on two lines, the J and the M [Ocean View Line]. When they finally got rid of their old boxy iron monster double-end streetcars, the kind that I just idolized as a kid, they had these PCC cars, and they were single end, so they had to put these wyes in. And on the M Line at least, they had just finished extending that line, so that wye switches and stuff, they didn't need anymore.

So I said, "Well, just pull up the M Line switches and stick them in there." At first, there was a lot of resistance and all that other stuff, but they had a track crew, and they did it. It took a while to convince them that they needed to do it, and there were kind of this excuse and that excuse. But those weren't
procedural. Those weren't statutory. Now, it's kind of like, "Well, does that trigger an EIS [environmental impact statement]?") And "Is that a CEQA [California Environmental Quality Act] matter?" Is it this? Is it that? And if it wasn't, somebody, whether it's the owner of the corner store, or the neighbor across the street, or somebody else, could pop up and say, "Oh, yes, it is." And now we need a hearing, and now we need this.

If I sound critical of what the process has become, I am. And I am because the intent of these things, which was good—the intent of environmental laws is very noble and positive—but whenever you have a law, you have lawyers. And whenever you have lawyers, you have people who will ask the lawyers to say, "How can I use this law for my stated goal?" which isn't necessarily congruent with what the intent of the law was. So you end up with environmental impact studies, and you see this especially in developments now, where these laws are being applied to things that were never intended by the framers of the laws, if you go back and look at the debate about the law originally. And in CEQA in particular, the California Environmental Quality Act, which is an add-on to the federal regulations, there has been a lot of talk about—and, I think, some action—to grossly reduce the number of things that it applies to, because it's being used for purposes that were never intended.

So anyway, the bottom line there is that those things have all added together, and I have noticed them over the years, that everything we try to do—incrementally now—is that much more tied up in paperwork, and what I would consider marginally productive planning.

Holmes: Well, and thinking about and building on that, over 33, maybe 34 years, you have been, since 1982, dealing with this vision of Market Street Railway, and to bring vintage streetcars back to the streets of San Francisco. What are some of the things—and particularly as a businessman, as a journalist, as a PR executive for one of the largest corporations in the world, you have dealt with San Francisco government for a very long time.

Laubscher: [laughter]

Holmes: What was something that actually surprised you, and that you actually learned something new in dealing with these transportation issues—I mean, that's even noting your time and experience in the Chamber of Commerce, your work with SPUR. What is something over these years, in working with Market Street Railway, that you learned something new about city government?
Laubscher: Well, I am not sure it's new, but it's certainly reinforced: that old, hackneyed phrase, "One person can make a difference." That's true in so many different ways. Yes, if you have a champion for something, often, the quest is quixotic, and frustrating, and doesn't bear fruit, but you have at least tried. But more than that, I think it is the enablers who are so important. What has happened in our society is it has become so much easier to say no than to say yes. And I don't see that slackening, unfortunately, but I think it needs to slacken.

This is only vaguely related, but it ties in to my history at Bechtel. I remember early in President [Barack] Obama's term, when he talked about economic recovery, shovel-ready projects. We are going to build, build, build! TIGER [Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery] grants, all this sort of stuff. And the signs went up. And if much happened, I didn't see it, because "shovel ready" turned out not to mean "shovel ready," because the environmental process and other processes, even for things that are relatively benign—I mean, we are not talking about cutting through sensitive habitat, bulldozing new freeways, or anything like that. You are talking about repaving projects, to some extent, and other kinds of state of good repair kinds of projects. But so many things are now tied up in process as opposed to meaningful goals. In other words, the process itself has become a project.

I saw this so much in our efforts to deal with the National Park Service—and Muni, but mostly the Park Service—on this Fort Mason extension. Early on, I went to the late Brian O'Neal, who was the superintendent of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, which had jurisdiction over most of the federal land that this would run through. And Brian was always a doer. He was always somebody who got things done. I would be there, I would go to a meeting with his staff, and his staff would say, "Well, you can't"—for example, the railroad tunnel we are going to use comes out in Fort Mason Center, and it's got a big retaining wall on one side that holds up the dirt, the Great Meadow, and on the other side, there is a retaining wall that holds up nothing, because the dirt that had been on that side of the retaining wall was removed in 1938 to expand the flat area of Fort Mason, but the wall was never taken down.

And so they said, "Well, all you are going to be able to do is run the cars to a single-end, single-track terminal at the end of the street there, right up against Marina Boulevard, and then send them right back through the tunnel, because you can't take the wall down." "Well, why can't you take the wall down?" "Well, it's a historic resource." And I said, "Well, if you take the wall down, what are you going to see?" "What do you mean?" "What's behind that wall from any angle that you view it?" "The other wall." "Which looks exactly like this wall, except that this wall has no functionality, and hasn't had any functionality." This was, what—2003, something like that. So, "Since 1938." "Yes, but it's a contributing resource, as defined under section 106 of—." I said, "Well, who decides that?" "Well, the staff does." "I see. So you are
God?" I mean, I was not a popular guy among some of these people, because I could get pretty blunt about it.

I went to Brian, and I said, "You know, Brian, I think we are going to drop this." He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Look"—and I related that little story. And I said, "If this is the rules we're going to have, that you can't take down a wall that serves no function and is blocking the view of an identical wall, which is what you would then see, why—I mean, this is Alice in Wonderland." He said, "Oh, Rick, you have to understand. The rules are whatever we decide they are. And if we decide that that wall should go away, that wall should go away." I said, "But that's—why have the rules at all if you are going to make arbitrary decisions about this?"

Then we got into a discussion, and he was a really thoughtful guy. But he had accepted that ever increasingly-complicated process that put a ton of people to work. This EIS took two and a half times as long as the Park Service pledged it would take. They changed contractors in the middle. They used an outside contractor, who I thought was a staff person, who did everything he could to delay and defer this thing, because, I found out later, his employment was based on this project. It wasn't a lifelong civil service person. And I don't want to sound like I'm kvetching and moaning here, but these are real-world situations that you see, and I see the same thing inside Muni, and I'm sure it exists in agency after agency. And I come back to an immortal line from one of my quote-machine movies that just come to mind, Blazing Saddles, where the governor [Governor William J. Le Petomane, played by Mel Brooks] says to his aide, "Are we really accomplishing anything, or are we just J-ing off?"

You know? After a discussion that talked about, frankly, process more than result.

So when you ask what I've learned or what my opinion is, yes, it's fairly strong. I don't mean anything malicious or negative about the people who participate in the process. It's all they know. But what they have done—"they" collectively, and this is a universe filled with consultants, including companies like Bechtel, which I once worked for, although that's a very small part of their business—they kind of have all gotten pulled into this planning morass that says we have to move very slowly, and very deliberately, and we have to listen to the public, and all the other stuff.

But the public is really in a copasetic or mutually-dependent relationship, because "the public" isn't really the public. "The public" are a few activists who spend their time nerding out on these projects. I know that sounds unfair and cruel, but that's what a lot of them do. You go to any City Hall hearing, and you will see the members of the body—whether it's the Planning Commission, the Board of Supervisors, the Muni Board—you'll see them glaze over when certain people walk to the microphone, because they are
entitled to their three minutes, and they will talk on every topic, every
meeting. Because that's their right. And when you are new to a commission,
you start to listen sincerely, and after a few meetings with the same people,
you pretend to listen. And then after a while, you don't listen at all. You pick
up your phone and start answering e-mails, which is—you know? And then
somebody new who doesn't understand what's going on comes in and says,
"How disrespectful to that member of the public!" But it's a giant kabuki, and
everybody participates. And it's not truly public outreach that's meaningful.

Then on top of everything else, we have come to a conclusion where we have
to have consensus. This word, when I hear it, drives me nuts, because it
implies—it's defined as either unanimous consent, or at least acceptance,
unanimous acceptance, consensus, of a particular path or way forward. And
there is no such thing in San Francisco. There are always going to be people
who are unsatisfied. And yes, there is a process where you have got to say,
"Okay, you want zero; you want everything. Where do we find a middle
ground?" which is what the development process for new buildings and things
like that typically involves. But the amount of time it takes, the amount of
money it costs—and, importantly, those who want zero have learned that time
is money, and by obstructing, using CEQA laws and other things to their
benefit, using the process to stall, stammer, and delay, you can kill projects
that would otherwise be good projects for the city.

Holmes: That got me actually thinking about the city—it's perception and reality when
it comes to policy. If we look at San Francisco, most will say that it's a very
liberal, if not far left, type of city. Yet when you think of—and particularly, as
you just described, in some respects—that conservative streak of San
Francisco is still there, particularly when we see it resistant to change.

Laubscher: Absolutely!

Holmes: Well, what are your thoughts on that? And in some ways, how do you see
even Market Street Railway fitting in to this aspect?

Laubscher: I may have told this story before, but—I think I did earlier in our
discussions—but when I was new at Bechtel, I drew the short straw, and I had
to tell Steve Bechtel, Sr. that a building that he owned [laughter] was going to
block his television reception from Sutro Tower. There was no cable in the
building at the time; there was no internet, anything like that. And everybody
was terrified of telling the old man about this. Steve, with those sparkly eyes
of his, just looked at me and said, "Well, that's progress." Here is one of
the richest men in California being inconvenienced by this thing, and, "Well,
that's progress. We've got to build. We've got to build."
I acknowledge that I have a bit of that bias in me—maybe more than a bit. Davy Crockett: "Be sure you are right, then go ahead." The process is designed to figure out what's right, not what everybody agrees on, because what everybody agrees on is usually a pretty weak brew. But is this good for the city? Where is the vote? If it's 6 to 5 on the Board of Supervisors, that's still a vote. That's still a majority. Let's get on with it.

And I think the conservative streak in this city runs very, very deep if you define "conservative" as being "resistant to change." The Irish, who dominated the Mission District when my German forbearers came to San Francisco and moved to Dolores Street, ended up leaving the Mission District of their own volition, for other districts, for suburbs, for other things like—other parts of San Francisco and west of Twin Peaks was built, because they could get a little bigger piece of land, get a single-family home instead of a pair of flats. You know, moving on up, to cite The Jeffersons TV show. And the Latino community largely moved in.

And now that the Mission District is changing and the attractiveness of being close to the shuttles to Silicon Valley, and the fact that younger people don't want a house with a yard out in the suburbs and the long commute, or anything like that, under the free market, they want to buy into the Mission, and revitalize some of the storefronts as restaurants. My gosh, I was down at the Blue Note the other day down in Mission near the foot of Bernal Heights, and that's a great restaurant, and how much all of those places have changed, you know? This was all working-class neighborhoods, absolutely. Not anymore. And of course, the people who have been there for 40 years or 50 years, families or a couple generations of families, say, "Wait a minute! You can't change this! It's ours!" Well, yeah, but the Irish were there before. "Well, no, no. This is a cultural thing, and you don't understand."

I'm empathetic to that. I truly am empathetic to that. But how do you enforce it? I mean, this city has committed some true atrocities in its planning, if you go back to the 1950s, you know?

Sure. The Fillmore [neighborhood] and the urban renewal programs—

Fillmore. The Western Addition. The banishing of black families—who, by the way, moved in on the backs of Japanese Americans who were shipped off to relocation camps during the war, leaving their property vacant and making it available to the war workers, who were overwhelmingly African-American, who had come in. That's a disgusting piece of our history, which also, by the way, cost us what should have been the busiest streetcar line in San Francisco—was the busiest streetcar line in San Francisco—the old B Geary Line, which was ripped out as part of that whole process because they turned
Geary Street into Geary Boulevard through the Western Addition, and didn't want to put the tracks back. And Mayor [George] Christopher, who had run on a platform of saving the B Geary Line, reneged on it, and the man named Justin Herman, who has his name on that plaza that I couldn't go through, earned that designation by forcing African-American families out of San Francisco. It's a dark spot on our history.

And there are those who would tell you that the changes that are going on in the Mission are equivalent to that. I'm sorry, but I don't agree, because one is—the housing stock is being maintained. Nobody's tearing down single-family houses to build high-rises. They are tearing out gas stations, and Burger Kings, and things like that. They are converting old warehouses, and other things like that, and industrial zones are becoming residential, like SoMa [South of Market], like Dogpatch, like Mission Bay, and that's all good, in my opinion. I don't know how you preserve, as if in amber or under glass, a particular culture by fiat. Willie Brown tried to reestablish the Fillmore jazz district, and it turned out that not enough people wanted to listen to jazz. Unfortunately, because I am one of the ones that does love to listen to jazz.

But this is a dynamic city, and if you go back deep into the history of San Francisco, and you look at the old pictures from the immediate post-Gold Rush era, if you look at the city that was on Market Street until the earthquake, right up until the earthquake, it was a terrible, awful tragedy, but it created the basis for the downtown we have now. You were looking basically at wood-frame buildings with a few so-called "skyscrapers," like the Flood Building, just going up. But that changed a whole lot of things. And we have kind of continued to evolve.

When people say to me, "You need to build more streetcar lines; you need to keep pushing; you need more lines; don't stop with the E Line or the extensions to"—I say, "Where? Where would you like to go? Who is going to take the"—and nobody is going to build surface rail lines in this city, or really almost any city anymore, that aren't exclusive to the transit vehicles, because you just can't make it pencil out in terms of operating time or cost if you don't have an exclusive right of way.

I mean, I just looked at a picture this morning that I posted to our Facebook group that I found of Van Ness Avenue in 1936, the year before the Golden Gate Bridge opened, and it was a part of it I had never seen before. Usually, you see City Hall, and the War Memorial and the opera house [San Francisco War Memorial and Performing Arts Center], and things like that. But this was taken from Broadway looking up toward the Bay at a fairly high angle, and the street—it's empty. There's a couple streetcars rolling along on the Van Ness tracks, a few automobiles, and that's it on this big, wide thoroughfare. And the thought of Van Ness Avenue ever looking like that today—ever since
the bridge opened, really. It's a different era, and we are still only 49 square miles.

So we have to figure out what our city can support, what it can physically hold. We in San Francisco are a lot like Manhattanites. You know, the famous Saul Steinberg New Yorker cover, a Manhattanite's view of the world [View of the World from 9th Avenue] where 10th Avenue is half a world away, and New Jersey is "Here be dragons," and then anything beyond that is Never-Never Land, right? Most people think of their places, their towns and things, that way. But New Yorkers and San Franciscans, I think, even more so. I mean, look at how they blew off Brooklyn for so many years as the hinterlands, the sticks. And now Brooklyn is one of the hottest areas in the country, because Manhattan has sort of priced itself out. And as small as that island is, and as high as they have built, there are limits to what you can do there.

I worry that we have done that inside our little 49 square miles. We don't have anywhere near the transportation infrastructure that Manhattan does, and maybe we are a fifth of it, maybe we are a tenth of it, in terms of really being able to move mass numbers of people. And what we have is absolutely pushed up against its upper limits—BART, Muni Metro, other lines like that. And yet, we keep throwing up new high-rise towers, new office buildings. The streets aren't getting wider. In fact, our policies are to greatly restrict and prolong the use of the automobile. I mean, not "prolong," but punish the use of the automobile, and yet, we are a regional center, no capacity on Caltrain, no capacity on BART—no residual capacity—during peak hours. So if you want to come to San Francisco, you don't have a lot of choices. And if you take your automobile, you are going to be punished for it. The streets, the number of lanes, get reduced considerably to make more room for bicycles; that's a good thing. Take away street parking, that's probably a good thing. But the collective result of all of this is to kind of create increasing gridlock in the city, and I wonder how attractive it's going to make the city to people of future generations.

Holmes: Well, speaking of future generations, you spent much of your life as a—what was it—fourth generation San Franciscan?

Laubscher: Fourth.

Holmes: Fourth-generation San Franciscan. As a journalist, as a businessman, as a very active citizen—which was even recognized in 2011 when you won the Silver SPUR Award for your civic activism—if you had one departing thought, or
wisdom or hope for those future generations, what would you hope to pass down and see for the future of this city you have worked so hard to rebuild?

Well, I think it is to try to understand each person in his or her own way, what makes San Francisco unique and appealing to them, and then fight like hell to either preserve it or enhance it, whatever that may be. We all have our different views of the city. It's so multi-faceted, it just depends the way you turn it and the way—the prisms you view it through, and things like that. But how can we contribute positively to the future of our town, which is not just stopping change, but harnessing change to be an enabler of a better city.

When I look at San Francisco today, I have memories going back to the 1950s; I have curiosity about the days before that. I am a people-oriented person, so it's hard for me to get past the way people treated each other back then: racism; misogyny; all the kinds of things that we as San Franciscans are very concerned about; homophobia; all of those kind of things that were part of our city then. If I could be a time tourist, I would like to go back and visit some of those eras, but I wouldn't want to live there. We have made so much progress in those areas in the last 30 or 50 years. But what I would hope is that we recognize also that the things we have done to make the city more appealing and livable to people within the context of our specialness—and yes, we do think we are special—that we look for more opportunities to do the same thing in a positive way, rather than just kind of—you know, as William F. Buckley said, "Standing athwart history, yelling Stop."

Not all change is bad, and when I look at things like the Ferry Building, I salute the people who had the vision to make that happen. Willie Brown as a leader in that, and I respect him for saying, "Let's get this done." And what the Ferry Building is today compared to what it was when I used to walk through that warren of little corridors to get to the World Trade Club, which was the only thing I thought that was positive about the Ferry Building, it's unbelievable how beautiful and wonderful it is. When I look at City Hall, again, that's another Willie Brown thing, where it was a warren of little cubicles and these beautiful light courts on either side of the rotunda that were—you know, you didn't even know were there; were covered with acoustical tile, and were these little bureaucratic warrens. Now it's wide open and back to the vision that was set in 1915 when it opened. And it's seismically safe.

Then you go around, and you go back further, and you look at William Matson Roth, who took the old Ghirardelli chocolate factory and turned it into something that had never been done before, really: a retail complex that incorporated and embellished history. And then you look at so many projects not only here but elsewhere that came off the history of Ghirardelli Square, but recognizing that times and desires and needs change. That happened 50
years ago now, and retail isn't what it used to be. So as we look forward, it's what are we going to do with all these stores around Union Square? Will they always be retail? Is that always going to be? No, because human actions and activities change. Desires change. Patterns of life change. And a city, a great city, has to adapt to that.

The trick is, can it do it and keep its character? That's why—we haven't had time to get into this, but—we fight to keep the cable cars relevant to San Francisco instead of being a Disney ride. That's going to be maybe my next act, is try to improve the operation of those, which is more a people thing than a mechanical thing. But to restore them to an appropriate place in a city that is now a world city, in the sense of attracting inward investment from all over the world, a safe haven for people who want to invest their money from other countries in real estate in the United States, which is very controversial here in San Francisco, but there are no laws against it. And with generations of tourists from countries that never could afford outward tourism before, or allow it, like China, for example. We are a destination.

If you go to the top or the bottom of the crooked street in Lombard now, and oh my God—I was talking to a friend of mine the other day who used to live on that street. He was like, "Thank God I didn't own property there and I got out of there," because it's Disneyland, with people standing in the middle of the street, oblivious to automobiles, taking selfies. Of what? Of a few hydrangeas and a bunch of curvy bricks. Well, that's not just that—it's a world-class destination now because it's in all the guidebooks, and if I don't tick my box, I can't check it off my bucket list. And that's a new San Francisco, even though that particular feature has been with us almost 100 years now. And the Golden Gate Bridge, same thing. Good luck trying to go visit your friends on a Sunday afternoon in Marin County, because the bridge is completely jammed with people trying to get off to Vista Point, which is full.

And this is what naturally happens to a beautiful place in a beautiful state, on a legendary coast. I mean, San Francisco literally is legendary in China as "Gold Mountain," going way back. It's become legendary around the world. I have got a shelf of books right there from Herb Caen, a man who helped make it legendary, even if it was only to sow the seeds locally that others later transmitted internationally. But we have a very special place here, and I think that if I have a fear, it's that someday, it's going to pass into the hands of people who don't really appreciate it. You don't have to be from one community or another to appreciate it. I think that Ed Lee as mayor has a deep appreciation for San Francisco even though he wasn't born here. He has a different viewpoint coming in as a tenants' rights activist in Chinatown, and working for a community that was very much discriminated against that now is one of the strongest political forces in the city. But that's a community that
loves this town. They had maybe different icons than other people do, things that they think are important to save, and we need to save them. That’s why someone like Rose Pak was so important in this town.

And so on, and so forth. You can happen to hopscotch around town, to Telegraph Hill, to Noe Valley; even the west side of San Francisco now has strong defenders in the Western Neighborhoods Project celebrating its history. That doesn't mean we shouldn't change, but it means we should take what we have, embrace the past, and harness the past to serve the present and the future. And that's really what I always thought the streetcars were about. It's not enough to recreate the past. It has to serve a meaningful purpose for the future. And they do.

06:04:39:14  Holmes: All right. Well, thank you so much, Rick. It’s been great

06:04:39:17  Laubscher: Gosh, we can't be done. Thank you Todd.

[End of Interview]