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George Wilmarth Nickel, Jr.

FOLLOWING THE CATTLE KING:  
A LIFETIME OF AGRICULTURE, WATER MANAGEMENT, AND  
WATER CONSERVATION IN CALIFORNIA'S CENTRAL VALLEY

Interviews Conducted by  
Jamy O. Faulhaber  
in 1998, 1999, 2000, and 2001

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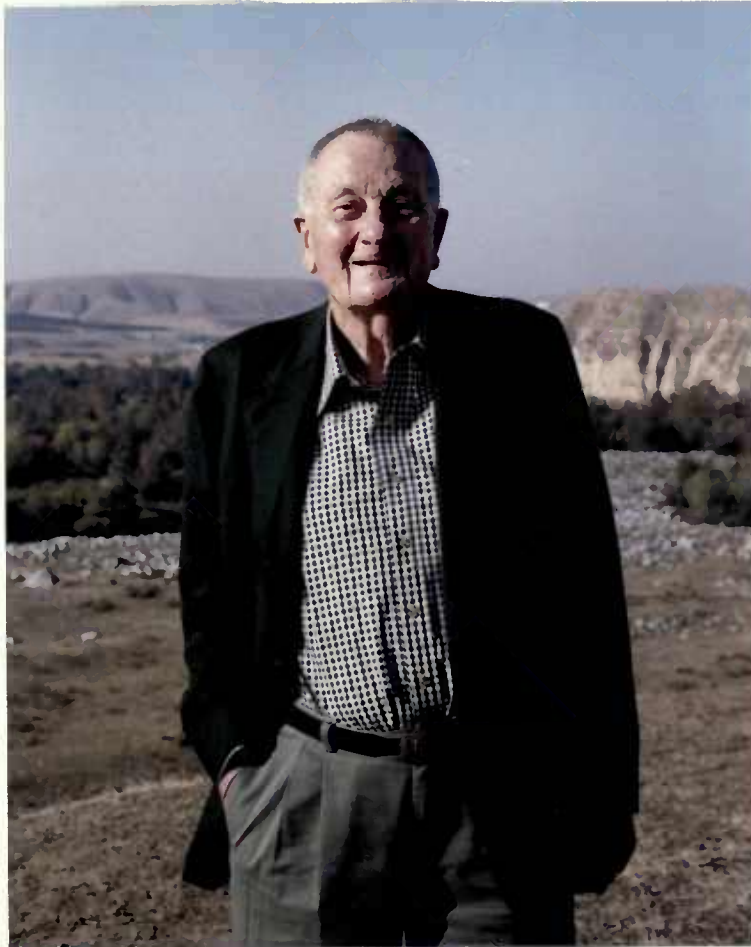
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George W. Nickel, Jr., at the Rio Bravo Ranch (Sierra Nevada foothills in the background), Bakersfield, California, 2001.

*Photograph courtesy of Greg Iger, Bakersfield, California*





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Central Valley rancher, land  
developer and water expert

*Following the Cattle King: A Lifetime of Agriculture, Water Management, and Water Conservation in California's Central Valley*, 2002, vii, 184 pp.

Childhood and family background in San Francisco and the Central Valley; reflections on great grandfather Henry Miller, including Miller-Haggin Agreement, 1888; UC Berkeley B.A., 1939; history of Miller & Lux; early career at Miller & Lux, 1940s; building Monterey Airport during WWII; uncle James Leroy Nickel, Jr.,--mismanagement of Henry Miller Trust and Miller & Lux; *Nickel v. Nickel*, 1954, and other lawsuits; San Luis Canal Company and San Joaquin Canal Company; flood control, water rights, agriculture, and land development in the San Joaquin Valley; development of Buena Vista Lake and Rio Bravo; California State Reclamation Board, 1959-1966; environmental issues on the Kern River; Nickel Family LLC; travel and flying adventures.

Includes interviews with Adele Nickel, William G. Parrott, Douglas Moody, and Dr. Benson Roe.

Introduction by Jamy O. Faulhaber.

Interviewed 1998-2001 by Jamy O. Faulhaber, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.



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Bakersfield, California

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Dos Palos, California

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Los Banos, California

Spain-Air Chemical Corporation, Inc.  
Dos Palos, California

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Dos Palos, California

Thomason Tractor Company  
Firebaugh, California

TRI CITRUS  
Porterville, California

Western Farm Service, Inc.  
Dos Palos, California



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## INTRODUCTION and INTERVIEW HISTORY by Jamy Faulhaber

I was about fifteen when I met George Nickel for the first time. Piloting his own plane, he landed on our airstrip in my hometown of Dos Palos to pick up my father and me for a trip to Sacramento. Both George and my father had been named by Governor Pat Brown to seats on California's State Reclamation Board (George served from 1959 to 1966), and this time they had invited me to go along and spend a day sight-seeing in the state's capital. It was a hot summer's day, but in spite of the intense heat and the early morning hour I was eager to shake the dust from my shoes for a day in the big city with none other than the man I had heard my dad talk so much about, George Nickel.

To me, a teenager growing up in the Central Valley in the 1960s, George was an almost mythic figure. He was frequently on the front page of all the newspapers, making headlines. It was a period when Miller & Lux, his family's land company, was constantly in the news because of litigation brought against the trustees of the company by George and other great-grandchildren of Henry Miller, and also because of the dissolution of the Henry Miller Trust and the distribution of its assets among the heirs. George was one of those heirs. Throw in the fact that Henry Miller, George's great-grandfather, who at one time along with his partner, Charles Lux, had owned all of the land where I grew up and at their zenith upwards of 1,000,000 acres in California, Oregon, and Nevada, and you have a figure of immense interest to a shy awkward teenager, bored stiff during the long hot summers spent in the Central Valley of California.

I would tag along to Sacramento with George and my father whenever I could convince them to take me. On those flights to the capital I would listen to the two of them discuss water and flood control in the state, and of course, the agendas for the Reclamation Board meeting they were about to attend. George would always fly low, close to the ground, so that we could see what was going on in the valley, what crops were being planted, the new lands being developed for agriculture, the growth of towns, and communities, and populations. Those discussions made a lasting impression on me, not only because they reflected the importance of what they were doing in Sacramento, but because I could listen to George rattle off facts and figures from memory as if he were reading them from a college textbook while managing to pilot the plane as if it were an afterthought. George W. Nickel, Jr., was a fascinating figure then and remains so today, well into his eighth decade.

Now move forward about thirty years. It was 1997, and it had been many years since I had any news of my father's friend George Nickel. So imagine my surprise when my husband, Charles Faulhaber, only a few weeks into his new job as director of The Bancroft Library at UC Berkeley, called to say that he had had a lengthy conversation with George, who was coming to Bancroft with his editor to do research for a book he planned to write about his great-grandfather, Henry Miller, of Miller & Lux. (There are roughly 700 cartons of Miller and Lux papers housed at The Bancroft Library.) It was a welcome opportunity to renew our acquaintance. Charles set up a luncheon at the Faculty Club with Bancroft staff where we were able to discuss the proposed project and catch up after so many years.

I immediately suggested to George that he do an oral history to set down what I felt was his great contribution to our state through his work on the Reclamation Board, but I must not have been persuasive at that lunch (February 26, 1997) because it wasn't until June of 1998 that George finally agreed to do

the oral history, with me as the interviewer. What I was about to discover was that George Nickel had much more to tell than just the story of the Reclamation Board and his achievements there.

This oral history was appealing to The Bancroft Library for two principal reasons: first, because of George's heritage and the history of Miller & Lux in California, and secondly because of George's contributions to the state of California through his work on flood control, his expertise with all matters pertaining to water, including complex water law, and his involvement with agriculture and commercial land development in the San Joaquin Valley.

Born into a family of substance but during difficult times for Miller & Lux, George's parents, George and Ernestine (McNear), had their "ups and downs," as George often would say. George was born in 1917, a year after the death of his great-grandfather, Henry Miller. They never knew each other, but after having read a great deal about Henry Miller, as well as his own autobiographical dictation, a sort of oral history of his own (on file at The Bancroft Library), I came to realize that George was very much like Henry Miller, and in many ways was following in his footsteps.

*The Cattle King*, by Edward F. Treadwell (Fresno: Valley Press, 1933), Henry Miller's personal attorney, lays out Henry Miller's story well. A second book recently published (2001) by the University of California Press, *Industrial Cowboys: Miller & Lux and the Transformation of the Far West, 1850-1920* by David Iglar, analyzes from a more scholarly perspective the strategies and circumstances that allowed Henry Miller to tame California's environment for economic gain. *Flooding the Courtrooms: Law and Water in the Far West* by M. Catherine Miller (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1993) talks about the voluminous litigation launched by Henry Miller to protect his lands and water rights, which in the process established much of the water rights law in the state of California. Articles found in the appendix of this oral history summarize the Miller & Lux history. I shall not dwell on it except to say that George Nickel and his great-grandfather, Henry Miller, shared an uncommon spirit of character, marked by tenacity, many would say stubbornness, which provided them with remarkable energy to persevere against apparently unsurmountable odds. Both took incredible risks unflinchingly because they saw opportunities that most of their contemporaries couldn't see. Both leveraged themselves financially to control land and water, because that was where they saw the future. Both had an intuitive understanding of water engineering and management, complex water law, and water conservation, that made them outstanding figures of their time. Both lost wives and children to tragedy and illness, yet they forged on. They never gave up, even when plagued with debilitating illnesses.

Henry Miller and George Nickel leave legacies through their children and their accomplishments that are important to anyone who is interested in agricultural and water history and, in particular, the history of the Central Valley of California. They have both left their mark on that history, and it is fitting that their achievements should be noted.

Appropriately, George has just informed me that he has received an invitation from the mayor of Brackenheim, Germany, birthplace of Henry Miller, inviting him to attend a ceremony this July commemorating the 175th anniversary of the birth of his great-grandfather. Henry Miller was the best known emigrant and patron of their city. There is no question that George will attend.



Delta Ranch, Los Banos, California, George W. Nickel, Jr., 1960.





## Interview History

The first interview of the oral history was recorded at Paradise Flat at Lake Tahoe on July 23, 1998, during the Nickels' annual July visit. There followed a series of interviews, each about an hour long. The last interview, with Mrs. George W. Nickel, Jr., was completed on August 18, 2001. The interviews took more time than anticipated due to the declining state of health of my parents and my mother-in-law, all of whom passed away during the period. George's health was not as good as he would have liked either, as he told me on many occasions; but no matter how he felt he never canceled or postponed an interview.

Also included in the oral history are two interviews with George's wife, Adele Rock Nickel, affectionately called "Dodo" by all who know her well. In the first, recorded on July 26, 2000, at her family home on the beach in Carpinteria near Santa Barbara, she talks about how she and George first met, how they married, and how together they raised a family of eight after both lost their spouses. The second interview recorded on August 18, 2001, at their home in Bakersfield provides greater insight about their travels, their life in San Francisco and Bakersfield, and the challenges they have faced together since their marriage in 1955.

Finally, this volume includes short interviews with three of George's oldest friends: Dr. Benson Roe, Douglas Moody, and William Parrott. They grew up together, and their recollections about life with George are both revealing and entertaining as they talk about their youth and their lasting friendship. The interview with Douglas Moody took place at the Myopia Hunt Club outside of Boston on a very hot summer day in June, 2001. Repeated efforts to engage the tape recorder, in high humidity, failed; therefore, the interview was reconstructed from my detailed notes taken during our conversation, which were later reviewed by Mr. Moody.

I spent a great deal of time in research at The Bancroft Library using the Miller & Lux papers to understand better the company operations. I uncovered much material that specifically mentioned George W. Nickel, Jr., and correspondence authored by him. I turned up more than I expected, especially regarding the 1950s when George was working in Los Banos for his uncle, James Leroy Nickel, Jr. Most fortunately for me, George was a prolific letter writer, probably following in the steps of his uncle, who insisted that detailed weekly reports be submitted to him on the operations in Los Banos.

George also had significant personal correspondence, legal documentation, business communications, and family letters which provided me with interesting and valuable information from which to construct interview questions. Both George and Dodo worked diligently to turn up everything they could to confirm dates, expand on topics, and verify facts whenever documents were available. The effort was tedious and time-consuming, and I am deeply grateful for their help.

Dr. David Iglar, author of *Industrial Cowboys: Miller & Lux and the Transformation of the Far West, 1850-1920*, met with us on more than one occasion to aid in our research on the Miller & Lux documents at Bancroft and provided valuable information, very interesting to George and me both, concerning the history of Miller & Lux. We thank him greatly for his assistance.

If I have a disappointment it is that I could not persuade George to talk about the hard times. As he said, there were many "ups and downs and arounds," but he didn't want to talk about them. It's his nature. He wanted to produce an oral history that he felt would be constructive, and thus, many of the

stories which are so very interesting because of his ability to overcome adversity and go on to find the next opportunity, oftentimes against daunting odds, are not recounted here.

Many events discussed in this oral history occurred more than fifty years ago. Recalling those details was difficult, as one might expect. Therefore, I did what no oral historian should do and talked too much, adding what I felt was important detail to recognize George Nickel's accomplishments and prompt his memory. Because of delays between interviews there were frequent repetitions. I made an effort to merge and consolidate sections when content was not affected in order to improve the flow of the story. The transcription was streamlined to eliminate colloquialisms and pauses.

I conducted other interviews with George's business associates and family members, not included here, that I hope will result in a second volume at a later time. In particular three of those interviews focused on George's expertise in the area of water rights and a sale of water rights negotiated about the time this oral history was concluded. Jim Nickel, George's son and president of the Nickel Family LLC, struck a deal to sell the Nickels' Lower Kern River water rights to the Kern County Water Agency for nearly \$10,000,000. Jim Nickel, Tom Clark, director of the Kern County Water Agency, and Ed Tiedemann, an attorney with Kronick, Moskovitz, Tiedemann, and Girard in Sacramento, all gave very interesting and detailed interviews commenting on this sale of water rights and their business relationships with George Nickel.

Dodo and George Nickel are incredibly gracious hosts. It strikes you from the first minute you meet them. Throughout the interview process they always insisted that I stay with them wherever they happened to be, either at their home on the Kern River in Bakersfield, at Paradise Flat at Lake Tahoe, or at the beach in Carpinteria. We would end the day with one of Dodo's famous "Dodo Drinks" which consists of club soda, a bit of vodka, and a squeeze of lemon while we discussed the events of the day, the current political situation in Washington and California, and of course, always, the future of agriculture and water in the state.

I would like to thank Heidi Nickel Michael, George and Dodo Nickel's granddaughter, who provided the data for the family tree, most of which she compiled on the occasion of her wedding to Peter Cannon Michael, grandson of Henry Miller Bowles and Constance Crowley Bowles (now Mrs. Julian Peabody).

The Regional Oral History staff gave me constant help and support in preparing this oral history. I am not an oral historian by profession and wanted only to tell the story of a man I admired. They helped me to do that. Laura McCreery edited and organized the text, offering valuable suggestions and corrections. She also prepared the index. Shannon Page pulled the volume together and is responsible for its production. Willa Baum, former director of the Regional Oral History Office, provided sage and practical advice when I required perspective. The ROHO staff made this oral history possible. It should be noted that I transcribed the interviews rather than use a professional transcriber. The transcription process was most helpful to me in refining questioning techniques and in capturing the key points and meaning as presented by the person being interviewed.

In closing I thank George and Dodo Nickel for deciding to undertake this oral history. It took time, their time, and it required them to tax their memories to take them back more than sixty years to the time when they first met on the beach in Carpinteria.



The Regional Oral History Office was established in 1954 to augment through tape-recorded memoirs the Library's materials on the history of California and the West. Copies of all interviews are available for research use in The Bancroft Library and in the UCLA Department of Special Collections. The office is under the direction of Richard Cándida Smith, Director, and the administrative direction of Charles B. Faulhaber, James D. Hart Director of The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

*March 20, 2002*  
*Berkeley, California*

Jamy O'Banion Faulhaber  
Interviewer/Editor





Dodo and George Nickel with Jamy Faulhaber on the terrace of their home in  
Bakersfield, California  
September 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1998



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- The four best friends, Pebble Beach, California, on the occasion of Bill Parrott’s eightieth birthday, August 1998.



## INTERVIEW WITH GEORGE W. NICKEL, JR.

**I FAMILY BACKGROUND; EDUCATION; EARLY LIFE**

[Interview 1: July 23, 1998]

**Early Years Near Los Banos, California; Parents**

Faulhaber: This is Jamy Faulhaber. I am the interviewer for the George W. Nickel, Jr., oral history. We are here today at Paradise Flat on the shores of Lake Tahoe, and this is the first interview in a series of many with George Nickel. The date is Wednesday, July 23, 1998.

George, this is one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen. As we look out over Lake Tahoe I would like you to tell me about Paradise Flat.

Nickel: It's a beautiful area here on Lake Tahoe north of Emerald Bay and Bliss State Park and south of Meeks Bay.

Faulhaber: How did you come to be here?

Nickel: The property is owned now by Tracy Shilling, who is the daughter of Frances Pennoyer, J. P. Morgan's daughter. So the whole history of this place goes back a lot of years. It is really a pleasure to be able to have it during the month of July every year. We have been coming here now for over forty years, so we know the place well.

Faulhaber: Let's begin our story talking about your family. Where would you like to begin?

Nickel: Well, maybe when I get born, on November 18, 1917. I was actually born in the hospital up in San Francisco. My mother wanted me to be born there because it was a better hospital than what was available in Los Banos. In those days we were living on a ranch called the Ortigalita Ranch in Los Banos, and so after coming into this world I went back to Los Banos. I think in those days we took the train. We lived at the Ortigalita Ranch, which is due south of Los Banos, for another couple of years. After that we moved to a Miller & Lux ranch called the Delta Ranch. Prior to our moving there my father arranged through Miller & Lux to have a ranch house built there, known as the Delta Ranch House. That old Delta Ranch House is still there, and it is now owned by my cousins, the Bowles Family. It's nice that it is still there together with

other improvements around it. We lived there a period of time before moving to San Francisco.

Faulhaber: Now you were the second of four children.

Nickel: Yes, I was the second of four children. My mother and father were George Nickel and Ernestine McNear. They were a very prominent family in the San Francisco area.

Faulhaber: Your mother and your father were both from San Francisco. How did they meet?

Nickel: I don't remember exactly, but they were both around and about San Francisco. My father had been at the University of California before he ended up graduating from Yale. I think children of prominent families just got together socially.

Faulhaber: Tell me more about your mother's family.

Nickel: My mother's name, as already stated, was Ernestine McNear before she married my father. Her father was very prominent in the international grain business among other things. There are still lots of recollections of the McNear family in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Faulhaber: Is it safe to say that the McNears were probably one of the original pioneering families in San Francisco?

Nickel: Yes, they came initially to San Francisco in about 1848, I believe, around Cape Horn.

Faulhaber: And what about your father's family, the Nickels?

Nickel: My father's mother was the daughter of Henry Miller, of Miller & Lux, who was known as the Cattle King. He was an amazing man. Her name was Nellie, and she was one of three children that Henry Miller had. A son, also named Henry, suffered ill health and passed away when he was quite young. In addition there was Sarah Alice. As the story goes, in their early teenage years they were great horseback riders. One day they were having a race between ranches that Henry Miller had in the Gilroy area. Sarah Alice's horse took a spill and dumped Sarah Alice on her head with a blow severe enough to kill her. So my grandmother, Nellie, was the only survivor.

My grandmother, Nellie Miller, married my grandfather, J. Leroy Nickel. He came from the East Coast, and I have forgotten right at the moment why he happened to be visiting on the West Coast and how he began a romance with Nellie Miller. They had four children. Yes, my father was the oldest, and then there was Henry, Beatrice, and James Leroy.

**Great-Grandfather Henry Miller, "The Cattle King"**

Faulhaber: Would you like to talk about your great-grandfather, Henry Miller?

Nickel: Yes, I am always very inspired by recollections of Henry Miller. He was an amazing man, and his life is set forth in the book written by Edward Treadwell, called *The Cattle King*. In any event, Henry Miller came from Brackenheim, Germany, and his real name was Kreiser. He left Germany, where he had been working with livestock, when he was quite a young man. But he saw the future for himself in the United States because of what he heard was going on in the way of development, like the Gold Rush, which started in 1849 in California. In any event, with I think about five dollars in his pocket he managed to get on in steerage on a boat which went to New York, and he began his life in the United States in 1847. He went into the butcher business in New York as an employee and did very well with it there. So he accumulated a little initial income and became quite familiar with a man by the name of Henry Miller. Henry Miller was to set forth to San Francisco. He had purchased a ticket that took him ostensibly from New York down to the Isthmus of Panama, where the parties left the boat and got across the Isthmus of Panama any way they could, I think on horses and foot. Then they took another boat on the west side of the Isthmus of Panama on to San Francisco.

In any event Henry Miller, the first Henry Miller, had fallen in love with a lady in New York, and he decided that he would not utilize his ticket. So Henry Kreiser bought the ticket and decided that he definitely wanted to go to San Francisco. In order to use the ticket he decided to become Henry Miller. So actually from that time on he assumed the name of Henry Miller. Many years later the State of California officially changed his name to Henry Miller.

Faulhaber: Do you have any recollections, or are there any family stories about how he finally met your great-grandmother?

Nickel: I am not really familiar with how that romance occurred. Oh, wait a minute. I do have some recollection. When Henry Miller got to San Francisco he got into the meat business, butcher business, along with other businesses, and one of the men who helped him finance some of the initial things he did was a fellow by the name of Charles Lux. Charles Lux and Henry Miller married sisters, the Misses Sheldon from Rhode Island.

Faulhaber: That was a long time ago, well before you were born, obviously. Did you ever know your great-grandfather?

Nickel: No, my great-grandfather, Henry Miller, died in 1916, and I was born in 1917. My older sister, Sally Nickel, was born while he was still alive. I believe there was quite a little write-up in the papers about that because Henry Miller had already become an amazingly successful man in the agriculture and financial worlds by that time.

Faulhaber: Are there any family stories about him that you recall?

Nickel: Well, there are a lot things that were recorded in one fashion or another about Henry Miller. I think the book that I referred to, *The Cattle King*, does a pretty good job there. But there is lots more than that. I remember reading, as a boy, more things about him. He took good care of the people that worked for him and the various ranches he had. He always had an open kitchen area to take care of people. Whether they had a job or not he would feed them. He really was very much inclined to take good care of people working for him.

My first impressions and recollections of my grandfather, Henry Miller were when I was only two or three years old living with my mother, father, and my older sister, Sally, sister Mary, and brother Beverly at 1400 Floribunda Avenue in Burlingame. Although my father was a direct descendant of Henry Miller, it was my mother, Ernestine Nickel, who was an even greater admirer of Henry Miller. Even though I was only two or three my mother did not hesitate to tell me what a fine great-grandfather I had. It obviously made a fine impression on me because my mother told me that Henry Miller always cared for the welfare of the people who worked for him. This, she noted, included feeding hungry workers who might be temporarily unemployed. This story made such an impression on me that even as a five or six year old I would keep an open eye out for any hungry-looking men who might be passing along Floribunda Avenue. I even found two or three whom I brought home to give something to eat. Since they weren't employees of Henry Miller, my mother did have to tell me to be very careful to check them out first before bringing them home for something to eat.

Faulhaber: How many ranches did Henry Miller have when he died and how many acres did he own?

Nickel: Henry Miller owned about a million acres of land and most all of it was in California; however, he also had large ranch holdings in Oregon and some in Nevada, and he had very nice ranch operations on these properties. He was able to move his cattle to wherever the feed was growing because he had so much land. It was said that he could ride from Canada to Mexico and be on his own land every day. Whether or not that is factually correct, I don't know, but that is the rumor, that he had enough land to do it. So he would go by horseback, buggy, or train or whatever else would get him between the ranches.

### **Paternal Grandparents; More on Parents**

Faulhaber: When he died, your grandmother, Nellie, was the only surviving child?

Nickel: I believe that is correct, that she was.

Faulhaber: Did she actively participate in the running of the business, or did her husband, your grandfather, take up that role?



Nickel: My grandfather, J. Leroy Nickel, became the head man. Unfortunately he was not well qualified for the position from the standpoint of education or experience, but I think that Nellie Miller Nickel was a wife and not an operator.

Faulhaber: Can you remember her at all?

Nickel: Oh, I remember her well. I spent lots of time on weekends at the Nickel home on Middlefield Road in Menlo Park. They had a very nice home on about forty-eight acres, as I remember, and lots of greenhouses where they had experimental plants, fruit, and vegetables. In any event it was a pleasure to visit there. My grandfather was retired in a relatively short period of time. He didn't have the proper background to run the operations, and Miller & Lux was \$28 million in debt about fifteen years after Henry Miller died. So then there was a need for a recovery, and there is a long story about all of that.

Faulhaber: I'm sure we will get to that story. It is an important one and one that needs to be told, obviously. Going back to your grandmother, can you describe her to me? What was she like?

Nickel: She was not very large, and she was dark haired. She was a very bright, interesting lady, and I certainly loved her and enjoyed getting to know her over the years. Also my grandfather was there quite awhile before he died.

Faulhaber: So you had plenty of time to spend with them, to get to know them?

Nickel: Yes, and I had lots of contact with my cousin, Henry Bowles, who was the son of Beatrice Nickel Bowles.

Faulhaber: Were you two about the same age?

Nickel: We were very close to the same age, and were often together there at the Menlo Park area property, which incidently was right next to the Flood property, which was just to the north of it. The Flood family is another famous family in the San Francisco Bay Area for lots of reasons.

Faulhaber: That area is now *Sunset Magazine* headquarters?

Nickel: No, no, *Sunset Magazine* headquarters was back towards Palo Alto, not very far from there. But the Flood property has been largely subdivided and developed. *Sunset Magazine* headquarters was nearby going directly toward Palo Alto. It certainly is a beautiful place. The buildings were designed by the famous architect Cliff May. I had the pleasure of having Cliff May design my present home in Bakersfield on the Kern River.

Faulhaber: We need to talk about that too, but we can do that further on in the interview. It's a magnificent spot. You knew your grandfather. Was your father anything like him?

- Nickel: My father really wasn't, apparently, terribly close to his father and mother. He wasn't there a great deal at the home. My father loved to play golf more than almost anything, so that took a lot of his time.
- Faulhaber: Did he spend any time involved in the business? Would you like to talk a little about that, his involvement?
- Nickel: After I was born we lived at the Ortigalita Ranch a year or two, and then we moved to the Delta Ranch. My father was the head of the Delta Ranch operations of Miller & Lux at that time. At one time all of that was part of the original properties that Henry Miller acquired called the Santa Rita Ranch. Later there were various portions of it broken up and given different names, including the Delta Ranch and the San Juan Ranch, where I have substantial personal holdings now.
- Faulhaber: What other interests did your father have?
- Nickel: My father liked other women besides my mother. He got around quite a bit and had himself a good time. One of his best friends was S. F. B. Morse, who founded the Del Monte Properties down there at Pebble Beach. The two of them went to Yale, graduated from Yale together. S. F. B. Morse was best man when my mother and father got married, which is quite interesting. S. F. B. Morse was an amazing man.
- Faulhaber: And your mother? Describe her.
- Nickel: My mother was a beautiful lady, physically very attractive, very bright and constructive and a wonderful mother. She sure meant a lot to her four children. I can remember her taking care of all of us. She got me into a gymnasium program when I was six or seven years old. She wanted me to straighten out a few limbs, I guess, and in any event she took very good care of all of us. One of my fondest recollections of her is standing with her in front of the Campanile at the University of California at Berkeley when I graduated from UC in 1939. That's a very good picture of her, but we have lots of very good pictures of her. What she did in the way of substantial and worthwhile things, when my father wasn't doing well, was amazing. She got into the dress business and had a very successful operation in Burlingame first, and then subsequently she had a lovely shop in the City of Paris in San Francisco, called Ernestine's. Then she also was in the real estate business. My father was spending too much of his time and money on golf, and I think on some other ladies at times.
- Faulhaber: Sounds to me like she picked up the reins.
- Nickel: Yes, she did. She was a wonderful lady.
- Faulhaber: Did she have a college education?
- Nickel: She went to some sort of a finishing school. But she did have a good education, and she was great with horses and that sort of thing too.

**Early Education; Summers at Mt. Diablo; Siblings**

Faulhaber: Did your mother take an active part in your education?

Nickel: Oh, yes. She made sure that we were properly exposed to education, and she made sure I went to the Belmont School for Boys when I was about eight years old, I think. I had been going to a public grammar school in Burlingame, called McKinley, on Old Highway 101. I think maybe the darn thing is still there. I don't know, but I did go on to the Belmont School for Boys, and that was very good background. I made some friends who are still great friends of mine today.

Faulhaber: Now that was public school?

Nickel: No, the Belmont School for Boys was not public. It was a Catholic school, and I was fortunate that my mother made sure that I took an interest in my studies. My second year of Belmont School for Boys, I was declared the most outstanding student at the school. So that took me totally by surprise. I didn't expect that.

Faulhaber: Was she a strong disciplinarian?

Nickel: Yes, she wanted good behavior, and I never had any trouble with her.

Faulhaber: How did you spend your summers when you were growing up?

Nickel: One of the things I specifically remember as a young boy was the lovely home that my mother's family had up at the Mt. Diablo area. They had a home right on the golf course there, and they had us as a family group up there practically every summer. It was a lovely place.

Faulhaber: This would have been during the twenties and thirties, more or less?

Nickel: Yes, that's right.

Faulhaber: How was Mt. Diablo during the twenties and thirties?

Nickel: It was quite small then. Mt. Diablo Country Club, with the golf course, was an outstanding area as far as recreation was concerned. I learned to swim there. They had a swimming pool. I remember another thing that they had every year at Easter time. They would release rabbits, and the young group was let go on the golf course to chase rabbits and to catch them. So I ended up bringing rabbits home and growing them.

Faulhaber: How large was your grandmother's home? Was it a ranch or was it a true home in the city sense?



- Nickel: It was a large home, and they had an area for help above the garage. Then they built a big barbecue area along the creek that went alongside of the ranch. It was really a fine place for recreation.
- Faulhaber: Were most of your summers spent at Mt. Diablo, or did you spend summers down on the ranches as well?
- Nickel: Well, in the early days, it was Mt. Diablo, and I am talking about mostly in the late twenties.
- Faulhaber: You would have been how old?
- Nickel: Well, let's see, I went to high school when I was twelve years old and so that was in 1930. So it would have been before then that we were mostly at Mt. Diablo.
- Faulhaber: Were you accompanied by many of your cousins or just your brothers and sisters?
- Nickel: No, cousins too. My mother's sister married a man by the name of George Swift Train, and they had two boys. They were frequently with us up there too. One of them was my age and the other was just a little younger.
- Faulhaber: Have you maintained contact with them over the years?
- Nickel: Unfortunately it hasn't continued to any extent. We are friendly but don't have any contact.
- Faulhaber: This was your mother's side of the family.
- Nickel: Yes, my mother's side of the family.
- Faulhaber: Tell me about your brothers and sisters. You had an older sister, a younger sister, and a younger brother. Who were they?
- Nickel: My oldest sister's name was Sarah Miller Nickel. She always went by the name of Sally, though. She was two years older than I and a wonderful, wonderful lady, very prominent in the San Francisco society and active with charities. They had a lovely place up here at Lake Tahoe where I visited with them.
- Faulhaber: Whom did she marry?
- Nickel: She married William Wallace Mein, Jr., better known as Tommy. My sister, unfortunately, passed away a couple of years ago. Tommy Mein is still alive.<sup>1</sup> In fact he will be having his eight-eighth birthday in September. Then my next sister was

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<sup>1</sup>Sally Nickel Mein died Sept. 30, 1995. Tommy Mein (William Wallace Mein, Jr.) died Dec. 15, 1998. Mary Nickel Lombardi James died Jan. 15, 1993.

Mary. She had a couple of marriages, and she passed away about four or five years ago. She had her ups and downs and arounds but was a wonderful fun lady and had a lot of interests in Hawaii. She had three children.

Faulhaber: And your brother?

Nickel: And my brother was John Beverly Nickel. He was about six years younger than I. He was the youngest. He was a fun fellow, wasn't a great student or anything, but he did come to work down at the Los Banos area. In those days we didn't have a very good relationship. I made a concentrated effort to get my brother into something that would make him a little money, and in fact not too long before he passed away I got him into the concrete lined ditch business which was successful.

Faulhaber: Did he marry?

Nickel: Yes, he married. His wife is still alive, but he is not. He was a very poor airplane pilot. This is a very sad story, but back in 1954 when this happened we were just in the process of solving some real big problems with my uncle, J. Leroy Nickel, Jr., and others that were involved in doing some wrongful things with the company business, Miller & Lux, Inc. I had just worked out a program to take care of the farming in Buena Vista Lake down in Kern County, about 30,000 acres of land there. I had succeeded in getting Francis Houchin removed from the agricultural operation there and had gotten Crocket & Gambogy from Tulare Lake involved. They were having a meeting in San Francisco to complete the contract. So I had hastily gone to San Francisco. There was to be a function up there, I think it was a "waltzing" party of some sort, in San Francisco. And so my wife and brother were in Los Banos, and my brother, Bev, had promised me that he would drive my wife up to San Francisco. In any event, his wife was already up in San Francisco, and he was late doing some work or whatever it was there in Los Banos. So he decided that he was going to fly my wife up, and he did the most foolish thing in the world. I don't know how he ever talked my wife Charlotte into getting in the airplane, but he took off at Los Banos and went up into the fog and in just a short time after he got up there, he lost control of the airplane. It crashed and killed them both. It was back in November of 1954.

Faulhaber: What a terrible tragedy. You had five children and he had children as well?

Nickel: Oh, yes, they had Nina, and Jack, I think two children.

Faulhaber: Have they maintained a relationship with the Nickels?

Nickel: Yes, the two children are very nice. We don't see them a lot. We see Jack more than Nina, but she is a very nice lady, too.

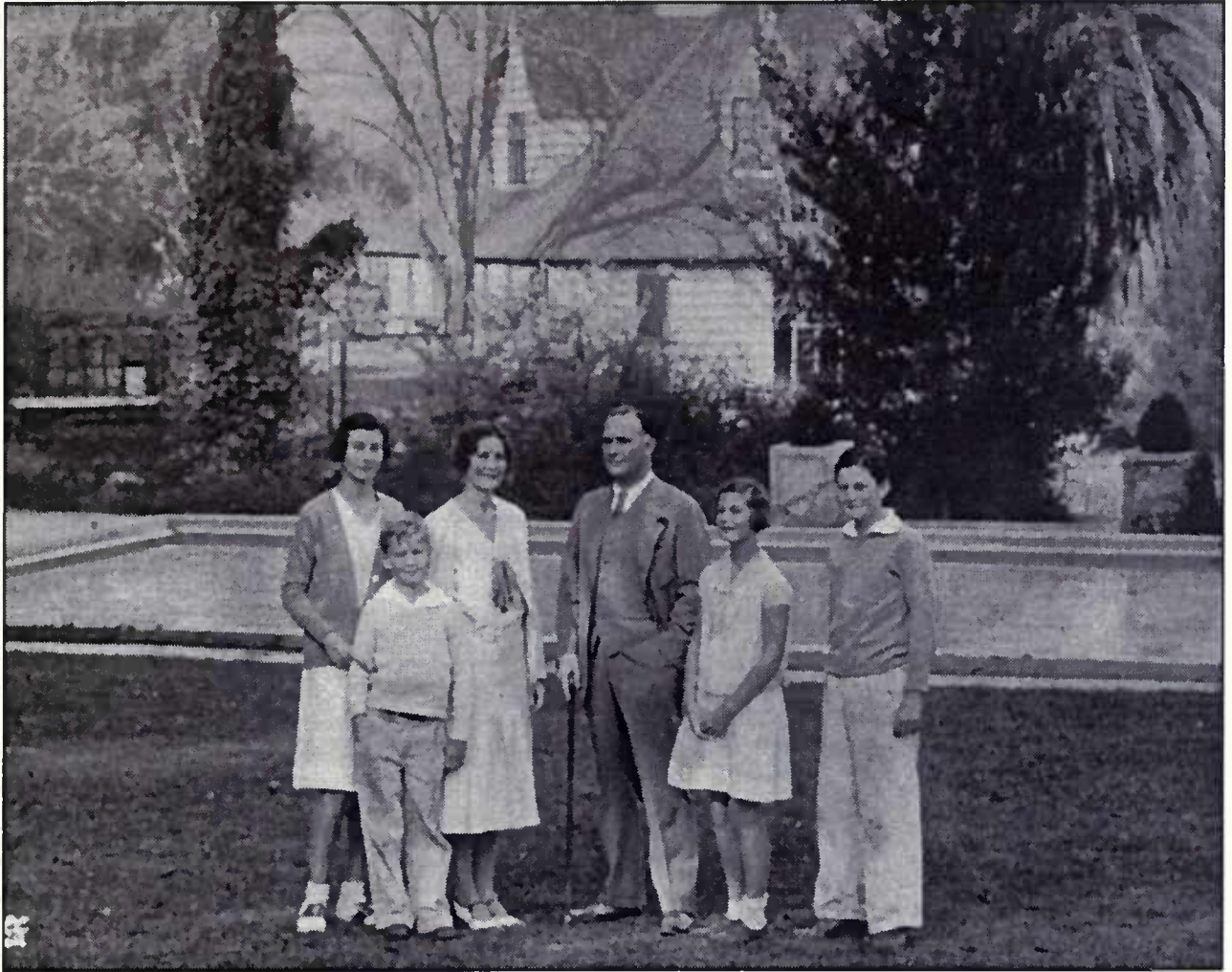
Faulhaber: A terrible tragedy.

Nickel: Yes.

Summers in the Central Valley; Extended Family

- Faulhaber: Well, we have talked about your sisters and your brother, your parents, your grandparents, and your great-grandparents. Are there any stories you would like to tell about growing up? Stories about them in particular, funny or otherwise?
- Nickel: [laughter] I don't know quite what to zero in on, but I did enjoy working in the summertimes when I was going to UC Berkeley. I was working down in Buttonwillow, in Kern County, and my job was to check up on the agricultural tenants of Miller & Lux on their grain harvests. In those days they were still harvesting with sacks instead of in bulk. So I would check them out--and the number of sacks, and where they were being stored, and then record it all. I really had a very good relationship with the farmers in the Buttonwillow area. A number of them were Italian people whose ancestors were brought over by Henry Miller when he needed extra help. There were people by the name of Chicca and Belluomini and Torigiani. I became acquainted with all of them and still am. They are fine families who ended up with quite successful farming operations. They are all on former Miller & Lux land. And we had some fun get together. I organized a big function at the end of the grain harvest each year, and we would have a big barbecue out there at the Miller & Lux facility in Buttonwillow.
- Faulhaber: Actually, it is good that you are bringing this up because I forgot to ask you about your aunts and uncles. But before we talk about your uncle, James Leroy, please tell me about your aunt Beatrice. Did you have close contact with her, Beatrice Bowles? She was married to George Bowles.
- Nickel: I didn't have too much contact with her over the years. I did know her husband, George Bowles, somewhat, when we, as a Nickel family group, were living in the Los Banos area. My uncle, George Bowles, was a great duck hunter, and he and a man from back East by the name of Addison Stillbow, developed the Stillbow Duck Club out there along the Santa Fe grade area.
- Faulhaber: These are stories to be remembered! Now Beatrice and George had three children, and your cousin Henry Bowles was one?
- Nickel: Yes, that's right. He married a lovely lady, Connie Crowley. I had the pleasure of being with Connie Crowley just the other day here at the Metcalfs'. In any event, Henry and I were initially very good friends. Then we got into litigation. I wanted to straighten things up and get my Uncle Leroy properly disciplined. And Henry, unfortunately, gradually went onto the other side of the thing with the people of money in San Francisco. But he was, Henry was basically a nice man. He died when he fell off a cliff in San Francisco Bay on an island that was owned by the Crowley family, the family of his wife. That was quite awhile ago now, of course. He had a sister who married John Lawrence, the brother of Ernest Lawrence, who developed the cyclotron at the University of California at Berkeley.





The family of Ernestine and George W. Nickel at the family home, "Los Cinco Centavos," in Los Altos, California, 1930. L-R: Sally Miller Nickel, John Beverly Nickel, Ernestine (McNear) and George Nickel, Mary Ernestine Nickel, George W. Nickel, Jr.



Faulhaber: Her name was?

Nickel: Amy, and she was an interesting lady. I didn't get along with her too well because of the litigation. And finally Beatrice and George had a son. His name was Corky. He was quite a bit younger. And unfortunately, I was on the other side of the fence with him on some of this litigation and other stuff too. But he is--turned out to be--a fine fellow. I don't see him a lot, but I respect him.

Faulhaber: Were you all close growing up?

Nickel: Henry Bowles and I were close, in fact we worked together on the first efforts to straighten my Uncle Leroy out. That's a story I would like to tell later on.

Faulhaber: That will be an interesting session. We talked about your father, his sister, Beatrice, and now your uncle, James Leroy. Talk to me about your uncle, James Leroy, before all of this happened. Were you close to him?

Nickel: Not particularly. But when I was at the University of California in 1936, 1937, 1938, in the summertime, I was able to get a job at Buttonwillow checking on the grain harvest of the Miller & Lux tenants. So that is when I became acquainted with Elmer Houchin and learned that he was involved in dealings with my uncle.

Faulhaber: Going back to your Uncle Leroy, you didn't have much contact with him until you were grown?

Nickel: Yes, that's right, until I worked. When I graduated from UC Berkeley in 1939, I got a job there in Los Banos with Miller & Lux through my Uncle Leroy.

### **Schooling in Burlingame, Los Banos, Palo Alto**

[Interview 2: September 23, 1998]

Faulhaber: I am with George Nickel in Bakersfield, sitting here alongside the Kern River. Our topic of conversation this morning is going to be formal education.

Well, let's talk about your education. Even though we might be backtracking, I am going to ask you to go back to the very beginning and talk about where your education began.

Nickel: Well, I thank you, but before I tell you that story I should tell you that the reason we moved to Burlingame was so that my father could be near his doctor and hospital in San Francisco. Prior to that time we had been living in Los Banos, where my father was working. We were living on the Delta Ranch. An unhappy workman shot my father through the chest. By some miraculous event, he was found bleeding in his conveyance

wagon by more friendly farm workers, who put him on a Southern Pacific train to San Francisco so that he could get to the hospital. He survived even though the bullet passed completely through his chest area. So that is how we came to live at 1400 Floribunda Avenue in Burlingame.

I recall that I started out at the McKinley School in Burlingame when I was either five or six years old. It was a public school right on the old El Camino Real, which is I guess what they called the highway in those days. I had a fun time starting out at school with neighbors who were living just north of our home. Our neighbors were kind of important to the history of my family. It was the Tevis family. Tevis, together with Haggin, was one of the co-founders of the Kern County Land Company. The Tevises that were living behind us were his son and grandsons, I believe. Will Tevis, one of the neighbor's cousins, became a famous horseman and polo player.

I also remember a very fine young lady, my age, by the name of Polly Clark. She became a great horsewoman, and we used to ride through the Burlingame hills. She and I also became fine ballroom dancers. When we reached the age of about eleven years, we won the Junior Dancing Championship at the Burlingame Country Club and at the local Gymkhana Club.

Another memory I have about Floribunda Avenue is of the famous banker, W. H. Crocker, who was a great admirer of Henry Miller. In the early morning train hours W. H. Crocker and his companions would ride their horses by our Floribunda home and throw candy off to me and my associates. A short distance from our home Crocker and his associates would come to the Burlingame Southern Pacific train station, where they would dismount and leave their horses with the help and leave on the train to San Francisco.

The two Tevis boys went to the McKinley School with me the first two or three years. I think I was there for first, second, and third grades. Then I was transferred to the Belmont School for Boys which was down to the south of Belmont, the city, right along the El Camino Real. I was transported down there in a bus, I guess, or a big car with some of the fellows who were also going down there with me. That was just for the first year. Those going down with me there included my great lifelong friends, Bill Parrott and Doug Moody, but there were others too. The Dohrman brothers were also with me there. Their family owned Dohrman's department store in San Francisco. In any event, after traveling by bus a year, I was put up for boarding at the Belmont School.

I am not exactly sure about its history, but I remember the Catholic church was very prominent in the school. And even though I didn't become a Catholic, I got to be an altar boy, one of those that helped the priests with their preparation for religious work. I have never forgotten that they drank a lot of wine, and that made them more religious, I guess. In any event, the Belmont School for Boys was a lot of fun, and I went there, for at least three or four years, I think.

Faulhaber: Was it through eighth grade, about?



- Nickel: Not quite through eighth grade because we went down to Los Banos in 1928 or 1929. That is when we had a tutor for teaching the four Nickel children, my sisters Sally and Mary, and my brother Bev, and me. Bev was pretty young, and I don't think he got too much into the teaching there. But it was fun because we lived at the old Canal Farm headquarters of Miller & Lux, Incorporated.
- Faulhaber: I don't want to interrupt you, but can you remember how you were able to find a tutor that would travel to Los Banos?
- Nickel: My mother was the one that found the tutor. She didn't think that we would gain as much from going to the local public schools there in Los Banos. So she sought out and got the tutors. I think we had two different ones during the period of time that we were there, and good ones, too.
- Faulhaber: Did they come from San Francisco or Burlingame, where you were living before?
- Nickel: I think they came from the San Francisco area, and I am embarrassed to say that right offhand I don't remember the names, but I guess I could search them out if it's a matter of any importance.
- Faulhaber: You were tutored for approximately two years before you went on to high school?
- Nickel: It was at least a full year and maybe two years. At least a full year, and then I finished up with Belmont.
- Then also, I will never forget that my friend Bill Parrott and I had a kind of an adventure. We decided that we would take a can of beans that we bought across the street from the school and, I don't know how we happened to be that dumb, but we decided to cook them up in a tree. We got a good little fire going under the beans up there, and then before long we got the whole tree on fire. We managed to jump out of the fire, but it caught the hillside and burned things up pretty well. We weren't given any accolades for that, but we--.
- Faulhaber: This was at the Belmont School?
- Nickel: At the Belmont School. Yes, we managed to burn up the hillside.
- Faulhaber: But not the school?
- Nickel: Not the school, no. That's right, and I think our families got to pay for the damage there. But in any event, Belmont was a fun time in my life.

But then, as I said, after I finished at Belmont we went down to Los Banos, and my father got involved in selling Miller & Lux lands, which was the reason we went down there. But it was kind of a fun time too. There was still lots of duck hunting going on. My father was a duck hunter, and my uncle, George Bowles, was quite a duck hunter. They had, indeed, a good hunting situation there.

Faulhaber: Was there any pheasant hunting down there at the time?

Nickel: Not at that time. No, the pheasant hunting occurred in later years. The pheasants had to be brought in.

Faulhaber: The pheasants were brought in. I always wondered about that. But the ducks followed their natural migratory pattern?

Nickel: Oh, they did, yes. The duck hunting was wonderful in those days. The limit, I remember, was twenty-five ducks per day or about as many more as you wanted to shoot illegally. I remember my mother took me out duck hunting when I must have been about ten years old, I guess. Ten or eleven. I think I shot a duck finally. [laughter]

Faulhaber: What else can you remember about the Canal Farm Ranch at that time?

Nickel: It was one of the old headquarters operations for Miller & Lux, Incorporated. There was a big building there that we lived in. It had formerly been utilized for the main office areas, the part downstairs, and then there was another substantial house adjacent where the company put up employees. We made some utilization of that, and in fact that was where we had our schooling in that big old building. Then we had a little canal that ran right through the area. We enjoyed that canal, which was full of birds. We put some ducks in, little ducks, that we would capture in the field. Another thing I really remember was that my mother loved mushrooms. That was educational too. In any event we went out, and she taught us how to pick wild mushrooms. We certainly found plenty of those out in the fields not too far removed. In addition to that we did a lot of horseback riding there, and that brings back further memories of the Tevis family. Will Tevis was a great polo player up in the Burlingame area and played all over the world. He also bought horses that were to become polo ponies, and he would come down to our ranches and buy some of the horses that were utilized in the herding of cattle. And so we saw quite a bit of Will Tevis there. He did buy a number of horses.

I also remember that when we were there the May Days in Los Banos were a great occasion and were started at the Canal Farm by Henry Miller. Once a year they would have a parade and get all of the employees and others together for a little celebrating. As I look back on that, I think my father was going to be heading up the May Day parade one time when I was there in the early days. But his horse went over backwards on him, and so he was in pretty poor shape for heading up the parade. [laughter]

But at the Canal Farm it was lots of horseback riding, and we had the opportunity to work with the Miller & Lux cowboys in moving cattle around. And then as far as education was concerned, we had the tutor, a couple different tutors, when we were there. I think they did a pretty good job on the bunch of us because I was ready to go to high school then, when we moved away from Los Banos.

Faulhaber: How old were you when you went to high school?

- Nickel: I was twelve years old, and I remember having a little difficulty talking Palo Alto High School into letting me come at twelve years old, but my mother was a very persistent person and succeeded in getting me in. I guess I did all right because of the tutoring. I got a good start in Los Banos.
- Faulhaber: About what year did you move back to Palo Alto?
- Nickel: We didn't move exactly to Palo Alto, but we moved there in 1930. My father had purchased a property there, out of Los Altos. Los Altos was about fifteen miles, I think, from Palo Alto, at least from where we lived. He bought a nice old house there. I think it was about forty-five acres or something like that. It had a nice orchard and swimming pool and so on. In any event he had, with a little imagination, I think, decided to call it Los Cinco Centavos.
- Faulhaber: After Nickel, a five cent piece, a nickel.
- Nickel: Yes, after Nickel. That was kind of fun. I remember we, my older sister and I, had to get ourselves to Palo Alto High School in the mornings, and we would have to take a trolley car. It would get us most of the way, or we would occasionally get the train, which would pass down the railroad tracks accommodating both the trolley and the major trains. I think it was around three miles or so from our house. So we had a little hike in and out when we didn't get a ride. Then as time passed I remember my mother got a Model A Ford that we utilized to get back and forth, and I also got a driver's license when I was twelve years old, which is a little hard to believe. But I had an aunt who lived in the Atherton area, and she was a great pal of the police captain there. Somehow or another I was able to get a driver's license at twelve years old. So there was more driving as time passed than there was riding in the trolley to get to the Palo Alto High School.
- Faulhaber: If you entered at twelve, you spent four years at Palo Alto High School then?
- Nickel: I spent four years at Palo Alto High School and graduated when I was sixteen, then went on to the University of California at Berkeley.
- Faulhaber: What do you remember about Palo Alto High? What was going on then?
- Nickel: Well, Palo Alto High School was a fine school. I think it can be proud of its fine reputation. It was not large then, as it became in later years, but it was a very good school. Lots of the students from there went on to Stanford. I had the opportunity to go to Stanford, but I chose the University of California at Berkeley for several reasons. From the standpoint of my family it was a great deal less expensive. It only cost us about \$26 a semester. It's hard to believe.

Stanford was more expensive, but more important than that to me was the fact that if I had gone to Stanford, why, I would probably have been living at home, as it was close to the university. And I think it was kind of nice to get away from home, which

certainly, I think, was the correct conclusion because I really enjoyed my years at the University of California at Berkeley.

Faulhaber: When you were at Palo Alto was there any teacher or any course in particular that influenced your academic performance?

Nickel: I have to scratch my head about that a bit. There were some good teachers. I remember one of them was not only a teacher but the head of the swimming team program there at Palo Alto, and that included not only the swimming team but also the water polo team. I was captain of the swim team and also of the water polo team. I fully enjoyed that. I think the man's name was Frasier, if I am not mistaken. But I thoroughly enjoyed Palo Alto High School and accumulated a lot of friends that I saw a lot of in following years.

Faulhaber: You continued on to high school with your friend Bill Parrott?

Nickel: No, I didn't continue with Bill Parrott. I don't think any of the Belmont School fellows went to Palo Alto High School with me, but when I got to Palo Alto High School, I saw a great deal of my lifelong friend, Dr. Benson Roe, and we became well acquainted initially because our families and our fathers were well acquainted. Dr. Benson Roe went to Palo Alto High School with me and then went on to UC Berkeley with me, too.

Faulhaber: And your good friend Doug Moody? When did he appear?

Nickel: I first knew Doug Moody when we lived in Burlingame back there in those years. Our families were very good friends, and I saw a lot of him around the Burlingame Country Club where my father liked to spend time. He played lots of golf, and there is a good golf course there and a nice gathering place, club house. And my mother and father introduced me to a lot of young people who became my lifelong friends there, including Doug Moody.

Faulhaber: What did you do with your summers while you were going to high school?

Nickel: My summers? Well, I think in the freshman year I worked on an adjacent ranch harvesting the fruit there and on our own little forty-acre area. The second year I started working on the engineering teams of Miller & Lux down in the Los Banos area, and I lived at the Canal Farm Inn, as I recall, and on the Santa Rita Ranch, which was the famous old initial ranch of Miller & Lux.

Faulhaber: What kind of engineering work were you doing?

Nickel: I was primarily surveying for property descriptions, for sale of land, but then it also involved water system needs, canals and drain ditches, and that sort of thing. It was a good experience and gave me the opportunity to become basically acquainted with the engineering involved. I also worked as a cowboy there one summer, which was very interesting. I learned that cowboys work pretty hard too.

Faulhaber: Were you doing your cowboy work in the Los Banos area?



Nickel: Yes, it was when I was staying one summer. I know I stayed at the Santa Rita Ranch. The other times I was primarily at the Canal Farm working on the engineering crews.

Faulhaber: It sounds like you did spend a lot of time down in the Central Valley when you were in high school, at least during your summer vacations?

Nickel: Yes.

Faulhaber: Did your family travel very much outside of California when you were growing up?

Nickel: My mother and father went to Hawaii on a number of occasions. They were great friends of the Fagan family. The Fagan family had some beautiful ranch properties in the Hawaiian Islands.

Faulhaber: Probably would have been the Big Island?

Nickel: No, it wasn't the Big Island.

Faulhaber: Maui?

Nickel: Yes.

Faulhaber: There was a lot of cattle ranching there.

Nickel: Yes. They had a big ranch there, and of course in those days they went over in a boat. I guess the boat going over to Hawaii was lots of fun.

Faulhaber: You never went with them?

Nickel: No. I never went with them. I was never invited.

### **Attending the University of California at Berkeley, 1930s**

Faulhaber: Ah, that's another thing [laughter]. So, you went on to UC Berkeley in what year?

Nickel: 1934. I was just sixteen years old, which was thought to be a little young, but I didn't have any problems. I got along fine. When I went there in 1934 in the fall, why, 3.2 beer had just become legal. So even at sixteen I drank a lot of 3.2 beer, and at the end of 1934, Prohibition was abandoned, and there was not just 3.2 beer, but there was anything they wanted to serve. I think we all drank a little too much to try to show that it was nice not to have Prohibition, I guess.

Faulhaber: When you entered the university where did you live?

- Nickel: I entered the university, and I promptly joined the Chi Phi fraternity. My father had been a member of the Chi Phi fraternity when he started his college career at the University of California at Berkeley before he went on to Yale. And, the Chi Phi fraternity was a fun place. I lived right in the fraternity there for the time I was there.
- Faulhaber: Where was the Chi Phi house at the time? Was it on campus?
- Nickel: It was on Hearst Avenue, just immediately across from the campus. After I graduated and left the university, the university bought that Chi Phi house and others there along Hearst Avenue, but during the time I was there it was [on Hearst] the entire time.
- Faulhaber: Did you live all four years at the Chi Phi house?
- Nickel: Yes, I did.
- Faulhaber: What friends of yours followed you to UC?
- Nickel: Following me to UC, Benson Roe, the famous Dr. Benson Roe, was one that I specifically remember. And Douglas Moody came too, to the university there. And, gosh, there were lots of others.
- Faulhaber: Did your good friends follow you to the Chi Phi house?
- Nickel: I wanted to get Benson Roe into the Chi Phi house. I was a year ahead of him at the university, but he ended up joining the house that his father belonged to which was the Psi U house. I tried to get Doug Moody to join the Chi Phi house. I thought he would because he was a very close friend of mine, but he ended up in the Deke House because they gave him such a good time over at Sally Stanford's establishment in San Francisco when he was being interviewed for becoming a fraternity man. He spent a night with at least one of the attractive girls over there, and he became a member of the Deke House.
- Faulhaber: They won him over.
- Nickel: They won him over. [laughter] Still later he later became best man when I got married.
- Faulhaber: What other friends did you make when you were at UC?
- Nickel: Oh, I made many many friends at UC. In my fraternity Ray Leonard was one of my very closest friends, and he became a very successful attorney out of the Oroville area. He was one of the close ones. And then I made great friendships when I joined the Skull and Keys Honor Society. There were lots of people I knew outside of that. But I remember that they were sure a fine group and included among others, John Meek, who became the captain of the UC football team that won the Rose Bowl in 1938, the only time the university won the Rose Bowl. That was the big year, and it was a really fun year. Actually I had so many friends at UC Berkeley. Another great friend of mine was Alex Wilson, who was sort of a stand-back man for the UC football team, but he was a heck of a fine fellow even though he didn't get to play in the big ones. And Jack

Breeden was another one who did play on it. Then there was Vic Bottari who was a very nice guy, and there were so many others.

Faulhaber: You were active in sports too, at UC?

Nickel: When I started out there as a freshman and came in at sixteen years old, I played on the freshman water polo team and did well there. My principal swimming sport was the breast stroke, and I recall that I had an opportunity to have a get together with a friend of mine who was also on the water polo team. We had the opportunity to swim a little competition, for the pleasure of it, with Jim Wirsen, who was on the water polo team with me then. We competed in the 200 yard breast stroke. And it's hard to believe, but we broke the then-established world record on the 200 yard breast stroke. I always kept ahead of him through all of our high school years--when we competed when I was at Palo Alto High School--and he, I believe, was at Alameda High School. In any event I did manage to keep a little ahead of him, and unofficially we broke the world's record. I subsequently dropped out of swimming when I got ill in the second half of my freshman year. Anyhow, Jim Wirsen continued on with swimming and water polo, and he officially broke the world's record in the 200 yard breast stroke and was awarded a big "C," which you wouldn't ordinarily win in swimming at UC, because it wasn't considered one of the major sports. You would only get a circle "C". In any event it was fun to have, at least unofficially, done something like that.

Faulhaber: Didn't you also crew at Berkeley?

Nickel: I started out to try the crew after freshman water polo in the first half of the year; however, that's when I managed to catch the flu, which became pneumonia. Then I got measles, and I was in such bad shape that I had to rest at home in Palo Alto. I had to drop out of the university for the second half of my freshman year. When I returned, I did not go back to rowing. In following years I was a crew manager. I don't know why I did that instead of going back to the rowing itself. But it was fun to be a crew manager too, and in any event I did not row on the crew, but I had some very good friends who did, like Ben Roe. Lawrence Arpin was one of my very closest friends. He was the stroke of the crew in 1938 when he got into an accident with a sailboat for some reason or another. In any event, after the accident his position as stroke on the California crew was taken over by Gregory Peck. I wanted to let you know that Gregory Peck did follow Lawrence Arpin as stroke of the California crew. Gregory, of course, went on to become a famous movie star, and I guess still is. It was nice getting to know him slightly. I haven't really seen him in recent years, but that's when I first met him.

Faulhaber: You would have left the university then in the spring of 1935 because of illness. Did you come back in the fall of 1935 to continue?

Nickel: Yes, I came back in the fall of 1935 to continue and certainly enjoyed my years at the university. In fact I think I enjoyed them so much that instead of graduating in 1938, which I could have done, I stayed until graduation in the spring of 1939. Finally I didn't live in the Chi Phi house anymore, but I rented a small apartment along with my good friend Doug Moody and my good friend Jim Boyd. Jim also was in the Class of '38 and



was there for some further studying. I think he graduated then too. But we had a great time in the apartment we had there. I don't know if you want me to go into detail on that or not.

Faulhaber: Well, I would be interested to know what the University of California was like in those years.

Nickel: Well, the University of California was delightful, I think. I enjoyed myself very much, and I think I actually learned a great deal in my last year there. I learned more of the pleasures of really studying hard, and I ended up with almost straight As toward the end there. I would be glad to encourage youth today to really get some greater pleasure out of studying than a lot of them do, than I did. I think that the use of the library became very vital to me then, in those days. In any event the university gave us a great opportunity for learning, and I think that it certainly was something I have always enjoyed and been proud of.

Faulhaber: Were there any professors that were outstanding in your opinion?

Nickel: Yes, there was, in the history department, Professor [Robert J.] Kerner. He taught European History, as I remember, and he also had a beautiful daughter at the university, too. She was in the Kappa Kappa Gamma house, and her first name was Rose. In any event, her father was really a wonderful professor whose lectures I really enjoyed.

Faulhaber: Did you decide on a history major because of him?

Nickel: No, I think I had already become a history major, and I might even confess that I might have taken that on in part because it was maybe not quite as demanding as engineering, which if I had studied would have meant working a little harder. In any event I did get a lot of engineering background through some of the things I took at the university.

Faulhaber: These were the years before World War II. Was there any understanding at the university of what was actually going on?

Nickel: There was some concern, definitely, about what was going on. Professor Kerner gave us some good background on the problems there in Europe. But, I'll have to admit at the university we were not that concerned about the war. Maybe we should have been. I don't know. I think I was more concerned about joining those fine honor societies, the Skull and Keys, Beta Beta.

Faulhaber: What was your social life like?

Nickel: It was really lots of fun. The Skull and Keys organization had a gathering, I think it was maybe about once a week. I remember when my great friend, John Meek, who was the captain of the Rose Bowl team for UC, was president of the Skull and Keys Society. And, of course, we drank a lot of beer.



Graduation from the University of California at Berkeley, in front of the Campanile, George W. Nickel, Jr. with his mother, Ernestine McNear Nickel, May 1939.



- Faulhaber: Is it fair to say that a lot of your social life revolved around the fraternity and corresponding sororities as well?
- Nickel: That's right, and drinking a lot of beer. I remember that we had great fun when we went down to the man who became such a great restaurant man. I knew him well. In fact he used to come duck hunting with us and one thing or another. You know, down there on Broadway. I remember when I graduated my mother, and my lady Charlotte, who was subsequently my wife, and I went there following graduation. They had a wonderful drink that we all enjoyed particularly. Trader Vic's!
- Faulhaber: Trader Vic's! Of course. It's now in Emeryville. It started in Oakland. It went to San Francisco, and it still exists in Emeryville.
- Nickel: Yes, right on the coast there.
- Faulhaber: Right on the water.
- Nickel: Yes, that's right. Trader Vic's. Lynn Bergeron.
- Faulhaber: I can't remember, but he was famous. You are right. Looking back on your experience at Cal, what was it that made the greatest impression on you? What did you take away that was most valuable?
- Nickel: Certainly friendship was one of the most important things, and I think good education. Among other things, I got started in business while I was still there at the university. Through a friend of mine who was at Stanford and who had started a program at the sorority houses at Stanford selling Coca Cola and sandwiches, I got an idea. I decided that if his program could be done at Stanford, it could be done at Berkeley, too. So I initiated this program of taking care of the sorority houses with Coca Cola and sandwiches and one thing or another. I was joined by two of my good friends, Homer Angelo and George Smith. We really did very well. Coca Cola was the big thing. We got a concession arrangement with the Coca Cola Company. In fact I even thought about going to work for Coca Cola on a regular basis, but then I loved the ranching business too much. But that was one of the fun things at Berkeley, learning how to do a little business and how to collect money from all those girls.

### **Marrying Charlotte Davidson, 1940; Life at Canal Farm Inn**

- Faulhaber: You met both of your wives at UC. Your first wife was Charlotte Davidson. Talk a little bit about her.
- Nickel: Of course, she was a lovely lady, and her sister was at Berkeley ahead of her. In fact her sister, Eileen Davidson, was there at that time when I entered the university. She came in and was Sweetheart of Sigma Chi, which was a great honor. In the sorority houses

they pick, I have forgotten exactly who picks them, one lady coming in at that time to be the Sweetheart of Sigma Chi. She got all kinds of recognition and parading around. Eileen was there a couple of years ahead of Charlotte. And Charlotte joined the Alpha Phi house, as her sister had, and became a great friend of my sister, Mary, who also came to the university and joined the Alpha Phi house. It was through my sister, I guess, that I saw quite a lot of Charlotte, and I kind of dropped my romance with a girl at Stanford when I found Charlotte. We fell in love, and neither one of us saw much of anybody else thereafter.

Faulhaber: Was this your last year at Berkeley?

Nickel: Yes, it was.

Faulhaber: And I should ask, when did you graduate and then when were you married?

Nickel: I graduated from Berkeley in 1939, in the spring, and Charlotte and I got married in January of 1940. So that wasn't too long thereafter.

Faulhaber: After you were married, what did you do and where did you go?

Nickel: Well, we got married at the lovely new home that Charlotte's family had built in Riverside. Her father was a famous engineer. Among other things, he was responsible for the creation of Palm Springs, initially. He did all the engineering and everything there. But Charlotte and I went on our honeymoon in Palm Springs at the same place Dodo and I continue to go now, the Smoke Tree Ranch, but I remember we didn't stay too long there. It wasn't exciting enough for us so we headed back to Riverside and stopped to see our great friends, John and Mary Meek, who were married about a year or so before we were. As I have already mentioned earlier, John Meek was the captain of the Rose Bowl team for Berkeley in 1938 and was a great friend of ours. When we stopped to see them, we were coming from Palm Springs. I remember telling them that I thought we should have a child fairly promptly, and they thought that was possible but unlikely that things would happen that quickly. But in any event it took Charlotte and me only nine months, one day, and an hour and a half after we got married to have our first daughter, Sally, which was pretty good, I thought.

Faulhaber: You won your bet [laughter].

Nickel: Yes. This brings back memories of Mary Meek. Her maiden name was Mary Holden. And I knew Mary, actually, before I went to UC Berkeley. For some reason or another we were both learning to dance at a program in San Francisco. That's when I met Mary Holden. Then at UC Berkeley, when we were entering, why, she flunked the English A test that everybody had to take, and I also flunked the English A test. I flunked it on penmanship. I don't know what Mary flunked it on, but in any event I think we had to put up fifty dollars, and if you did real well in your early testing of the situation you were able to get half your money back. So Mary and I really worked on this thing, and we both got out and got half of our money back. I think it was twenty-five dollars we got back. But aside from that I recall that the English teaching at Berkeley was





Wedding photo of Charlotte Jean Davidson and George W. Nickel, Jr., January 28, 1940.





excellent. I think I learned more about proper writing than I had ever learned before, and it has been a help to me ever since. So I have always been kind of glad that I flunked that test initially.

Faulhaber: You were just married at this time, 1940. The Depression had been in full swing. Were times tough financially?

Nickel: Oh, yes, times were tough financially. It was something that we put up with without crying about. We just simply made things work. I think my salary was just over \$100 a month or something like that when we were married, maybe it was \$125. I think I got a five dollar raise to \$130 a month. We had a very inexpensive rental in that unit there at the Canal Farm Inn because nobody else wanted to rent something where a lady had just been murdered [laughter].

Faulhaber: I imagine not. Then you were newly married, making \$130 a month, and living in Los Banos at the Canal Farm in a room where someone had just been murdered.

Nickel: That's right. Well, it was more than a room. We had a little living room and a bedroom and a tiny attached kitchen.

Faulhaber: What was life like at the Canal Farm Inn in 1940?

Nickel: Oh, it was very pleasant, and as I said, the lack of having much in the way of finances didn't bother us too much. I had lots of friends who came down to come duck hunting. In fact some of them were a little broke, so we even let them sleep in the living room. We enjoyed life. Also, I was very busy with the job there with Miller & Lux, and I had the early opportunity to see quite a bit of property because it was my job to oversee the tenant farming operations. So I got a look at everything that was going on and met a lot of people and kept track of their production of farm products so that Miller & Lux got its fair share. That was important.

Faulhaber: What was the state of Miller & Lux in 1940?

Nickel: In 1940 Miller & Lux was still trying to retire a very big debt that it had with the banks up in San Francisco. I think it was a combination of them that we were making payments to, and to accomplish this Miller & Lux properties were being sold at just very nominal prices, as low as \$10 an acre. The administration of the company was lousy. On that level, my uncle was involved then as president of the company, and he was pretty busy getting his share of income out of a lot of things he shouldn't have been getting income from, like mineral rights off of the properties as they were sold. Then he got involved with others that were selling Miller & Lux properties, and he would share in commissions and share in a lot of other things that he shouldn't have been sharing in.

Faulhaber: In 1940 things were tough all over, certainly for Miller & Lux. How did the Depression and the problems of the times affect California agriculture?

Nickel: They, the farmers, were not making any great amounts of money, and there was such a depression in Oklahoma that we got all kinds of Oklahoma farmers moving into the Kern County area, for instance, and back in those days, why, picking of cotton was all by hand. It was in the early 1940s when mechanical harvest equipment was first initiated for cotton. That subsequently, of course, made a great deal of difference. But even during those early days of mechanical picking there was a lot of learning to be done. Then there were some subsidies from the government on cotton that helped the overall situation out. But farming wasn't a big booming deal. It gradually improved because of the need for the products.

## **II EARLY CAREER WITH MILLER & LUX; THE WAR YEARS TO THE 1950S**

[Interview 3: May 6, 1999]

### **Los Banos, a Miller & Lux Town**

Faulhaber: I am here with George in Bakersfield, California, at his wonderful home along the Kern River. This is a continuation of the interview done in September of 1998, and it takes us back to the year 1939 to Los Banos, California. Let's continue discussing what your life was like as a young man of twenty-two, recently married, awaiting your first child and living in Los Banos. It is early 1940, probably around February or so. What was Los Banos like at that time?

Nickel: Los Banos was a small community, I think only something over 3,000 people. It was largely made up of people associated in some fashion with Miller & Lux, having to do with land sales. There was also quite a lot of canal company activity particularly with the San Joaquin Canal Company. But the water programs were handled out of Los Banos.

Faulhaber: Is it safe to say that Los Banos was a Miller & Lux town?

Nickel: Yes, I think Los Banos very definitely was a town that was sort of initiated by Miller & Lux, and Miller & Lux was active in creating things in the town.

Faulhaber: Was there another dominant employer in Los Banos at the time? Or was Miller & Lux pretty much the main entity?

Nickel: Miller & Lux was the main entity in the town. There were some farming individuals that were becoming more important, but Miller & Lux, I think, was the focus.

Faulhaber: Was the dominant industry agriculture?

Nickel: Agriculture and water related to agriculture, yes.

- Faulhaber: Did farmers dedicate most of their energies at that time towards raising livestock or were they farming crops in the forties?
- Nickel: There was a combination, but crops, as far as the Los Banos area was concerned, were becoming more important than the livestock business. But there was still quite a lot of action in livestock too.
- Faulhaber: What kind of livestock?
- Nickel: There was the cattle business, cow and calf operations, sheep, and then the dairy business was beginning to become important. As far as feeding cattle was concerned, there really weren't any big feed lots in the Los Banos area.
- Faulhaber: What kinds of crops were being raised at the time?
- Nickel: The crops being raised I think were mostly grain crops, barley and some wheat. But I think barley was predominant. Then there was some alfalfa, but it wasn't a big acreage.
- Faulhaber: Flax?
- Nickel: There was some flax seed, but that was not a big deal, no.
- Faulhaber: What was Miller & Lux doing with its lands at the time?
- Nickel: Still busy selling land. In 1940 Miller & Lux was still in debt on its bond issue, and so there were more sales being made to pay off the bond issue. Then, as far as the farming activities were concerned, Miller & Lux would lease out the land to tenants on a sharecrop basis ordinarily. Miller & Lux wasn't doing any farming.
- Faulhaber: At all?
- Nickel: I don't think there was any farming at all.
- Faulhaber: As a way of opening up the topic about your first duties at Miller & Lux, I thought I would read an interesting document which describes your first job with Miller & Lux when you began in June of 1939. Basically it describes the Miller & Lux activities and provides other interesting facts. For example:

The location of Miller & Lux at the time was at 830 Sixth Street, in Los Banos, California. It lists your birthday, for the record, November 18, 1917. And it describes your duties as assistant lease manager.

It says the date that you were employed was June 1, 1939, and that the date of your present job taken up was July 1, 1940. Your average pay was \$150, and your average hours per week worked was fifty. It lists your prior work experience as "while in college, the registrant worked for this corporation during the summer vacation months." And it lists your education as a Bachelor of Arts degree, University of California, 1939.

Well, why don't you talk about those job duties. What did you start doing in 1939 when you arrived, and how did your duties evolve during the next five to ten years?

Nickel: In 1939 my employment was under Mr. George Antoine. I was given the responsibility of checking up on the Miller & Lux tenants who were farming on a percentage basis ordinarily. I would keep track of what they were doing and make sure that Miller & Lux was getting its share of income or crops or whatever it might have been.

Faulhaber: In other words it was a crop share arrangement by which they would give Miller & Lux a percentage of the crop?

Nickel: Yes.

Faulhaber: Also, I should ask a point of clarification because it is important. This job description says that Miller & Lux was directly farming about 11,000 acres. That doesn't sound correct.

Nickel: No, that is not correct. Miller & Lux wasn't directly farming anything. It was all done through tenant operations, and so I think the indication is whoever wrote that letter probably didn't know any better as to whether it was tenant farming or Miller & Lux farming. It was kind of a combination.

Faulhaber: It would seem, then, that it was more advantageous to Miller & Lux to have tenants farming their land rather than farming it themselves.

Nickel: Miller & Lux didn't have the capabilities to operate. That's right.

Faulhaber: How much of the land that Miller & Lux owned was in pasture or planted to alfalfa?

Nickel: Well, that's quite a different deal. The land that was in native pasture was a substantial acreage, and I don't have those figures directly in front of me here, but it was a very substantial acreage. Your question, then, was--

Faulhaber: On alfalfa. I tend to couple them together, but it is obvious that they are not similar in nature at all. Was alfalfa being planted basically as feed for cattle?

Nickel: The dairy business, of course, was then and is today one of the prime users of alfalfa. Much more alfalfa was used for that than for cattle being raised for slaughter.

Faulhaber: In the early forties there was a lot of documentation about the fencing of pasture. Did that take up a lot of Miller & Lux time, leasing pasture land and making certain that the fencing was properly executed, or was that something that you weren't involved in?

Nickel: Well, that was important in spots in order to protect the Miller & Lux land and know what was going on, but it wasn't a big conflict.



Faulhaber: A great part of your time was taken up with land leveling, grading, engineering. Your background is very interesting on that point. Would you care to talk about how you developed an expertise in engineering with a B.A. in history from Berkeley?

Nickel: I worked in the summertime for Miller & Lux on the surveying crews. Certainly that helped with basic engineering. Then as far as land leveling is concerned, we are talking about 1940, about then. I saw the potential of leveling land to make it more farmable and to produce better income. So I did get involved with my University of California friend, Lawrence Arpin. We bought some equipment, and he and a fellow named Lloyd Watson worked together on equipment. My position on the thing was primarily to help put up the money for the equipment we bought. Initially I didn't have much to do with the direct operation of the equipment business.

### The Monterey Airport; Land Leveling and Farming in Los Banos

Faulhaber: It seems to me I read in some of your correspondence that you were responsible, along with Lawrence Arpin, for the construction of the Monterey Airport during World War II. Could you talk about that?

Nickel: After Pearl Harbor, which was in December of 1941, everything seemed to change. The United States needed help with all matters about airplanes and whatever else. I lost Lawrence Arpin's participation because he had an appointment from the University of California ROTC and was called into service as an officer in the navy.

But there was a lot of work needed on airports, and I had the equipment for that. So I got my uncle, Leroy Nickel, interested and convinced him that participation would be worthwhile for Miller & Lux. I was somewhat surprised when he told me to go ahead and make an effort to get the contract. So when the opportunity came to build the airport over there at Monterey, I was able to get a subcontract on the east/northeast/west/southwest runway to move all the dirt. My responsibility was for the grading of the land for the airport. The end result was that I made very good money then from the operation, enough to pay for the equipment which I then sold afterwards to Miller & Lux. The equipment purchase was all paid for by the profits from that Monterey Airport operation. In addition to that there was \$20,000 to \$30,000 more. So it was a very good thing for Miller & Lux and continued to be, and we were able to go right in to land-leveling operations as a result of that operation.

Faulhaber: It takes a long time to build an airport. Did you and your family leave Los Banos to live in Monterey?

Nickel: Yes, we lived in Carmel, my wife and I. We had one daughter and another daughter while we were there. We had a fairly nice home in Carmel. It was kind of dangerous driving around there at night because at night you weren't permitted to have any lights on at all. So I had to get back and forth to the Monterey Airport without lights. I was



lucky I didn't have any trouble. The reason for no lights was that there was a Japanese submarine that did some bombing or shelling out in the area. I think it only happened once or twice, but still it was something that was of concern.

Faulhaber: I would imagine. How long did it take to build the airport, and how long did you live in Carmel?

Nickel: I think that we were there for a couple of years.

Faulhaber: So you probably went back to Los Banos in late 1943?

Nickel: I think that's right.

Faulhaber: When you went back, can I assume you went back with all of this land-leveling equipment and started to put it to use at Miller & Lux?

Nickel: That is correct. Having heavy equipment for doing land leveling and doing levee work really improved our farming operation and also made possible water spreading programs and that sort of thing.

Faulhaber: Was any one else in the San Joaquin Valley undertaking land-leveling projects at that time?

Nickel: It was relatively new. Particularly the land leveling and the technique for it. I developed techniques for land leveling which involved knowing what kind of slopes you should have on a field from one end to the other, what kind of side slopes you could put up with, as well as what kind of fall there should be in the ditch systems, how to measure dirt, and how much extra dirt you have to move to have a balanced operation. This all got to be a very interesting program that I sort of pioneered in the area. We had some registered engineers working for Miller & Lux that just weren't capable of doing that kind of work. So I did all of the land-leveling work.

All I needed in the way of help was the engineers in the field that would place the stakes where the individual elevations were taken. Then they, the engineering crews, would bring back all of the readings off of the stakes. I was able to put the readings on maps and do the work of finding out what the grade levels were and that sort of thing.

Faulhaber: What are the long and short term benefits of that kind of investment in land? Is it basically for water reasons that land is leveled or are there other benefits?

Nickel: Oh yes, there are lots of other benefits. It makes possible the growing of crops that you couldn't otherwise grow, be they cotton or alfalfa or most anything else. It allowed Miller & Lux to get away from pasture land to crops that were more productive and income producing.

Faulhaber: Did you use farm personnel to do the work or did you do that yourself?

- Nickel: We had personnel that worked for us operating the machines, yes, and there was some supervision by a couple of key men in the field.
- Faulhaber: Were other farmers undertaking this kind of leveling and engineering work?
- Nickel: Yes, there was some other activity developed and it continued to develop as time passed. It was found to be productive and so was being done by other areas there too.
- Faulhaber: Was it expensive work to carry out?
- Nickel: No, it wasn't very expensive. It's amazing how much we got done there for small cost as you look back on it.
- Faulhaber: Good return on your investment?
- Nickel: Oh, yes.
- Faulhaber: What other activities and other responsibilities did you take on in addition to your land-leveling responsibilities?
- Nickel: Well, there was then the actual farming, and in addition to land leveling we did a lot of heavy work in water spreading on grassland that had never been farmed. I learned a lot about that flooding operation from Dan Newton, a University of California friend, as well as others who farmed in Tulare Lake. In Tulare Lake they did a lot of water spreading. I learned some of their key programming and was able to do that on undeveloped land that Miller & Lux had. It really paid off as a start because you could flood the land and raise grain very profitably. Then as time passed we would go into the leveling of the lands. One of the areas is what we call the Pick Anderson field. It certainly became a fine farming operation right along the south side of the San Joaquin River there.
- Faulhaber: What advantages do you realize from the spreading of water? What does it do for your land?
- Nickel: Well, with the spreading of water, the idea was to have water available in the ground to grow the following crop, which in our case was almost always barley.
- Faulhaber: So its allows the moisture to penetrate the soil for better germination of seed?
- Nickel: That's right, and another thing it did was that there was quite a little perched alkali in that country soil. Perching the water on top would move the alkali on down and make it more productive soil.
- Faulhaber: I think I read in one of the memos that it helped with noxious weed control? Is that correct?
- Nickel: Oh, yes, you could get rid of some of the weeds you didn't want by drowning them out.

Faulhaber: We will return later to water issues, but before we go much further, I would like to bring up your role concerning the preservation of the Miller & Lux records. There was a letter that you wrote to the director of The Bancroft Library in 1940. It would have been probably right after you arrived in Los Banos.

Nickel: Oh, I got there in 1939.

Faulhaber: It seems that you were responsible for the gift of the Miller & Lux records to The Bancroft Library that arrived in 1940. Would you like to comment on that?

Nickel: Yes. That came about because of what I found in some of the old Miller & Lux storerooms out there by the Canal Farm Ranch area. They had been dumping records in there and not taking care of them at all. I saw the dates on them and thought this is something that has some significance and history connected with it. So I became acquainted with a fellow by the name of Frank Latta. He came from Bakersfield and had been working on the history, background history. I don't know exactly how I got in touch with him. But in any event, he came, and I showed him what we had in the way of records. He was very impressed with the need for preserving them. I followed through, like you said, to make contact with The Bancroft Library, and there was interest developed in the whole thing, and over a period of time we ended up by getting many of those records all taken up there for preservation. It was nice to be able to save them, and I have been very impressed with The Bancroft Library, having seen what's there, I guess part of the time with you.

Faulhaber: It's all there. Indeed. Well, we have talked about land leveling. We have talked levees and ditches, some of the types of crops that Miller & Lux had been cultivating at the time, and the tenant farming.

### Duck Hunting in the Central Valley

Faulhaber: What else were you doing in the early forties?

Nickel: I shot ducks!

Faulhaber: I am glad you brought up that topic. Duck hunting was a big social event in the San Joaquin Valley.

Nickel: My father liked duck hunting when we were living down there in Los Banos, and for that matter even after that. There was a man associated with Miller & Lux who lived in Gustine by the name of Bert Acker. What a wonderful hunter he was! So I had the pleasure of associating with him on some duck hunting. During those years there was a lot of open Miller & Lux lands that could be flooded with water. And then there were quite a few Miller & Lux lands that were eventually sold to duck hunters for duck hunting.

Faulhaber: You had a very sophisticated system of duck blinds.

Nickel: Oh, yes. Over a period of time we built duck blinds, and it was kind of interesting. There were a lot of money people that got involved in duck clubs down there, including my uncle, George Bowles. He bought a Miller & Lux property along with a fellow named Addison Stillbow. So it was called the Stillbow Duck Club and is fairly close to South Dos Palos. I believe I mentioned this before.

Faulhaber: You did. Let's continue on the subject of building a duck club. Culturally and socially it would seem around duck season, which was always around about the beginning of October, wasn't it, there was a guest list prepared. Everybody seemed to have their allotted time to bring guests down to Los Banos to shoot ducks. It seems it was a big event every year.

Nickel: Well, I think, maybe you are making reference to the family duck club deal. We had a fine piece of land for duck hunting, open grassland, just to the east of the Los Banos Game Refuge and public hunting area. So it became my responsibility to set that up, the land for duck hunting, by putting in blinds and levees to be able to spread water. It turned out to be a very nice hunting area. I might also mention that it was right next to what was called the Pebble Beach Duck Club, which was just to the south, where a lot of the very wealthy men from Pebble Beach would come over and do some duck hunting. They had a nice building there too for putting up people. But then the family duck club was to the north of that and was right close to our Delta Ranch headquarters area there. So it was decided to improve the old ranch house that was built originally for my father and mother and for those of us who came along at the right time. It's still there today, and it's fixed up and it's owned by my cousins, the Bowles family. They still do a lot of duck hunting.

Faulhaber: When I think back to those years, I was a small child, but I remember these massive flocks of ducks. Was Los Banos on the migratory path?

Nickel: Oh, very definitely, and I guess it still is. It really was great. I surely enjoyed the duck hunting myself. The hunting area was fixed up, and my father and uncle would take turns having friends down there. They loved to come down and drink a bunch of booze and play a little poker and bridge and do some duck hunting. But a lot of them weren't very good duck hunters. So I had the pleasure of going out and shooting the ducks for them. It was a nice part of my responsibility there.

Faulhaber: And did you eat all of these ducks?

Nickel: Oh, they were great for eating. There in San Francisco you know the famous restaurant called Jack's which, is just off of Kearny street, did a super job cooking ducks. And they didn't just stop there. They made sure they got the ducks and not only from the wealthy San Francisco business types who would bring their ducks there for cooking, but they went so far as to buy a few ducks that were illegally shot to make sure they had ducks there when they wanted them. They even went a little beyond that. They had a nice big upstairs area there for some of these duck hunters to use who liked their girls as





Duck hunting in Los Banos, California, 1960. L-R: (standing) Jim Nickel, George W. Nickel, Jr.; (kneeling) Jock Selfridge, Sam (Labrador retriever), Miller Nickel.





well as their ducks. And they would have them upstairs at night. It really fit in to the duck season all right.

Faulhaber: Another custom I remember reading about, a Miller & Lux custom, was the raising of turkeys to give to friends and employees at Thanksgiving and Christmas time. Was that part of your responsibility as well?

Nickel: Yes, it was, and it isn't a program that I particularly liked, but I was asked to take care of it, and I did. It was right there at the Delta Ranch. It turned out well. We had a lot of turkeys for our employees at Thanksgiving time and Christmas, and also for members of the family.

Faulhaber: It wasn't a great money maker, though?

Nickel: Oh, no.

### **Learning About Water; the Dairy Business During the War**

Faulhaber: Let's turn to your involvement with water. I remember from many of the early letters you wrote that your passion for water began when you started to see the potential as a college student working summers with Miller & Lux. When did you really develop your passion and understanding of water and what did you do in those early years to further your knowledge?

Nickel: We had a situation where most of the Miller & Lux land was open grassland where they pastured cattle, which earned very little income. And there was an abundance of water in those days so that a lot of it was just wasted down the San Joaquin River. So I saw the opportunity to do some flood irrigating with that water and didn't have to level the ground initially or anything. It was a water spreading operation to raise grain crops. After you put the water on in the summertime, you get it off in time to plant the grain in the fall. I got a lot of information along that line by watching what was going on in Tulare Lake, which had always had a big water spreading program with good controls on water. I was able to incorporate that into some of these development programs on Miller & Lux lands, which really paid off over a period of time. They are still very successful today. We ended up by putting in the key levees and the water system and then leveled the land as time passed between one area and the next.

Faulhaber: There was a lengthy memo on an issue concerning the Chamberland Slough. Did that have to do with flood irrigation, too?

Nickel: Yes, Chamberland Slough was a slough that took off of the San Joaquin River right at the northeast portion of our lands there in what we call the Pick Anderson area, and the abundance of water fluctuated, of course. Sometimes we didn't have available as much as we would like for flooding operations. The end result of the Chamberland Slough

thing was that the water was passing out of the San Joaquin River and going into grassland on the north side there that belonged to other farmers. But in any event, I got a big bulldozer in there and just closed off the water from going down Chamberland Slough so I could use it for flood irrigation on our land on the south side of the river. Apparently the owner found out about this from his men working there on the other side of the river, and he got very annoyed with the fact that we were taking the water that he might need, or thought he might need to some degree. But they didn't have any farming operation on that land. It was just a matter of cattle. All they needed was a little water for the cattle to drink. In any event it got to be kind of a messy deal, and I finally made peace with the people on the other side of the river. They got the water they needed, and everyone was happy.

Faulhaber: This seems to be a period when water becomes very important to almost everyone who's farming in The San Joaquin Valley, in particular in the Los Banos area. I note in some of the correspondence a dissatisfaction with water operations in general, the San Luis Canal Company, and I would suppose probably the San Joaquin Canal Company. I thought we would make this a topic of our next interview since water becomes a greater part of your life as we end the forties and go into the fifties. But I thought it worth making a notation, just so that we don't get into the subject right now.

Nickel: Oh, that's fine. Yes, I had a lot to do with the San Luis Canal Company.

Faulhaber: You were a director as I remember.

Nickel: And president and so on.

Faulhaber: I recall from this period of time that you wanted to get into a dairy farming operation, and you tried to involve other family members in this operation. Would you like to talk about that?

Nickel: Yes, it was always a great regret on my part that I wasn't able to persuade my Uncle Leroy and educate him well enough to realize what the potential was for him and my father and their sister, Beatrice. We had the opportunity to pick up a dairy here and there. We had plenty of alfalfa to feed the cows, and there were some real tax advantages then to being in the dairy business. By operating the dairies the three people I am making reference to--Leroy, my father, and Beatrice--could have made a very attractive income. And by the way, it wouldn't have hurt us either, those of the next generation. But I couldn't convince them that this was something very good to pursue. So we lost out.

Faulhaber: The San Joaquin Valley is dotted today with large dairy operations.

Nickel: The dairy deal is an amazingly big thing now, yes.

Faulhaber: And lucrative?

Nickel: I think generally it is pretty lucrative. Of course, the price of hay is important.

Faulhaber: Switching subjects. Between 1940 and 1950 you and Charlotte had five children. Sally was born in 1940, Susan in 1942, Jim in 1943, Nancy in 1949, and Miller in 1950. What was it like raising a family in Los Banos during the forties?

Nickel: Oh, we enjoyed our life there very much. In Los Banos we created a lot of friendships. The Lindemann Family was one that continues to be very friendly, and there was the O'Banion Family. You're quite well acquainted with the O'Banion Family since you are an O'Banion. They were nice farming groups there, and I could go on and on about people that we got to know. They had children, and we had get-togethers. I liked Los Banos.

Faulhaber: Did your children go to local schools?

Nickel: They started out in local schools, plus Santa Catalina for the gals, over there in Monterey, was a fine school. When we finally left Los Banos, they went to other schools.

Faulhaber: Did they spend much time in the Bay Area? Did they go to visit or were their lives primarily centered in Los Banos?

Nickel: When we got to the Bay Area, it was a whole different world, of course. But getting back to Los Banos, one of the things that I particularly enjoyed with the children was the 4-H program where they raised cattle right in our backyard area where we had permanent pasture. They would feed the cattle and learn about what it cost to do it. Then they would compete in the 4-H shows at the county fairs. My daughter Susan won the grand championship of the 4-H with her steer one year, which was really wonderful. Then our daughter, Buzzie [Cynthia], became the winner of the contest of the Merced County Fair for showmanship, which was a great honor, too. That was an important thing, I think, in growing up there.

Faulhaber: A good place to raise children?

Nickel: I thought so.

Faulhaber: Let me ask you a few questions about the war years. The U.S. entered the war in 1941. How did that change the way Miller & Lux operated?

Nickel: Well, the big change came about because of my getting the operation over there in Monterey, with moving the dirt for the Monterey Airport and then getting the company directly involved with the equipment farming deal. That sure made a big difference.

Faulhaber: Was there any direction at all from the government about what you should grow?

Nickel: There wasn't too much. What it did primarily was it got Miller & Lux into the farming business directly, instead of by having tenant operations only.

Faulhaber: So you started to farm a lot more of the land on your own?

Nickel: Yes, that's right.

Faulhaber: What kinds of crops did you plant?

Nickel: Initially a lot of grain because of the flood irrigation. Then as time passed we got land leveled, and we got into alfalfa and cotton. Cotton then, you know, in the early years, was picked by hand until it was taken over by machines. That made a world of a difference in cotton.

Faulhaber: There had to be a labor shortage during the time. I am guessing most everyone was off fighting in the war. How did you end up picking your cotton?

Nickel: Well, hand picking was what we had until we got the machines. And that certainly was a terrible way to have to make a living or employ anybody. So we didn't raise a lot of cotton in those years before cotton pickers became available.

Faulhaber: Did you have trouble procuring enough gas? Was gasoline a problem on the farm?

Nickel: Oh, gasoline was a problem, and you had to have allocations for agriculture and that type of thing.

Faulhaber: How easy was it to secure equipment for farming?

Nickel: In those days it was pretty tough because the war was going on, and there wasn't much equipment being built for farm operations.

Faulhaber: Was there any kind of a system by which the government directed you to plant certain types of crops or was it pretty much what you had always grown?

Nickel: Well, there were government regulations. I am just a little vague in remembering just when they all occurred. But cotton, subsequently, was regulated on what you could plant. You had to be involved with historic plantings and that sort of thing, otherwise there was too much over-production.

### **Working for Uncle James Leroy at Miller & Lux; Legal Concerns**

Faulhaber: When you started to work for Miller & Lux, the president was your uncle, James Leroy Nickel, Jr.

Nickel: He was vice president.

Faulhaber: He was managing the farming operations, or in charge of them, or what was his position when you started?

- Nickel: He was obviously getting to be the boss because the bond issues were getting paid off. And so it was just a timing situation. In fact, it wasn't long after I started work after graduating from UC that he did become president, yes.
- Faulhaber: So he, in essence, was your boss.
- Nickel: He sure was!
- Faulhaber: He is going to be an important figure in your oral history, and of course, also in the history of Miller & Lux. I thought we might take some time to talk about your Uncle Leroy. As I recall, he was the only family member that really participated in Miller & Lux.
- Nickel: In his generation that's true. My father was involved in land sales to some degree over a period of time. He also was, when he first got married to my mother, involved in the cattle operations and all and lived there at the Delta Ranch, which I think I mentioned earlier. They built the house there.
- Faulhaber: But eventually your father became disassociated.
- Nickel: Yes, he was a great golfer, and he went off into the golfing world more and more and actually had a magazine called *The Fairways*.
- Faulhaber: So the business was in the hands of your uncle, James Leroy?
- Nickel: That's right. He became the man who controlled the organization, and I made every effort to get along with him as best I could, and actually liked the guy until I learned some things about him that were not good at all.
- Faulhaber: How did he get along with your father and your Aunt Beatrice? The three of them were the primary beneficiaries of the Henry Miller Trust.
- Nickel: I don't think he got along particularly well with either one of them because they didn't get as much out of the company as they would have liked while they were the recipients of the so-called income.
- Faulhaber: Ultimately he was the only family member, until you came along, that was involved with the operation of Miller & Lux. Did he have any special background or education that suited him for the job?
- Nickel: No, I don't think he did. And you know, I don't recall if he had any education that prepared him for the operation.
- Faulhaber: In one of his letters he makes reference to the fact that he joined Miller & Lux in 1919. He must have been awfully young.



- Nickel: Well, let's see. I was born in 1917, and you say he joined there in 1919. He was quite a lot younger than my father.
- Faulhaber: He was young when he started with them.
- Nickel: Relatively, yes.
- Faulhaber: It's possible he had no formal education.
- Nickel: I don't know.
- Faulhaber: Was he married?
- Nickel: He eventually got married.
- Faulhaber: Did they ever have any children?
- Nickel: No, they didn't have any children.
- Faulhaber: Did they spend much time in Los Banos as a couple?
- Nickel: I think she was hardly ever there.
- Faulhaber: There is no reference to her at all in any of this correspondence. Did he spend a lot of time down in the Valley?
- Nickel: No, he didn't. He became the godfather for my son, Jim. In those days we were really making an effort to get along with him as best we could.
- Faulhaber: In those early years how did you get along with him?
- Nickel: Well, I tried to do what he wanted me to do to the extent that it was feasible and worthwhile. But he was not very open minded about the opportunities that existed, like you know I mentioned to you, the dairy business and the farming business generally and the water business. It's just too bad because he could have been a lot more progressive. And as I'll probably be telling you later, he also was rather involved in some improper things that I didn't know anything about initially.
- Faulhaber: What's interesting is that you were the only other family member that he allowed to work for Miller & Lux.
- Nickel: That's correct.
- Faulhaber: Obviously, you had some unique qualifications having spent a lot of time as a young man working for Miller & Lux in high school and then through your college years. But as you recall we just read a letter that your Uncle Leroy wrote to Henry Bowles, your



cousin, after he came back from World War II denying him employment. That must have caused a lot of animosity in the family.

Nickel: Yes, it did.

[interruption]

Nickel: We were talking about Leroy and my business contact with him. I said I made every effort to try to get along with him because he was the boss, and I wanted to get him to do things that were progressive for the company. I look back to the day when we first found that he was improper in his business relations particularly in Kern County. That is when my friend, Muir Woolley, was down here. That was way back in forties. Muir Woolley was a classmate of mine at UC Berkeley and also the nephew of Judge Woolley, one of the three trustees of the Henry Miller Trust.

Muir Woolley was doing some legal work in Kern County for an oil company or two, putting together deals. He had become an attorney down there in the area near Taft, Tupman, and Buttonwillow, and came upon information about oil leases which showed that Leroy Nickel was working with Elmer Houchin. Leroy was getting paid off on various Miller & Lux deals on oil matters. So he had a nice spread there and only had to collect the money which he would share with Uncle Leroy. So that Uncle Leroy wouldn't have a problem tax-wise, Elmer Houchin would get the money taken over to the gambling joints in Europe, like that famous one in Monte Carlo. I don't know how Uncle Leroy did with his gambling, but he spent a lot of money over there in Europe, and he didn't have to report any income.

I think it's a shame about Elmer Houchin and the stealing and all. I became acquainted with Elmer Houchin when I worked in Buttonwillow in the summertimes when I was at the University of California. He was a very personable guy and very bright. I think that if Leroy Nickel had been a little more clever and backed off of this business of stealing and all, Elmer Houchin could have been brought around too.

Faulhaber: I apologize for interrupting, but do you think that because he was involved in these shady deals, that might have been the reason that he didn't want any other family members, other than you, working in the family business?

Nickel: I think that's true, particularly my cousin, Henry, because Henry was with Muir Woolley and me when this thing developed.

Henry and I had a mutual interest in trying to do more with Miller & Lux. So I related to Henry what I had started to discover about Leroy and Houchin and told him about my contact with Muir Woolley. So Henry came down to the Bakersfield area and met with me and Muir Woolley. Muir gave us quite a lot of information on the leases that Leroy was involved in with Houchin, particularly on the oil deals involving Miller & Lux land. They were taking advantage when they knew there was going to be drilling activity and oil exploration. They would buy Miller & Lux land, or Houchin would, based on its value as farmland. Of course, they were getting the oil rights at the same

time, which I think was rather inappropriate. But in any event Houchin was frequently getting more income out of the oil rights than what he paid for the land. Henry and I decided that we might follow up and do something about Leroy.

But that night we all had a few cocktails, a few too many, and Muir Woolley took the train back to the Bay Area and went to sleep on the train, leaving all of the papers there on the seat that he vacated. We had given him correspondence and factual data all relating to what was going on in the Miller & Lux land sales and leases, including letters that I had written on the subject of what seemed to be wrong with the Miller & Lux operations with Houchin. The papers were picked up, and the Southern Pacific people who found them saw Leroy Nickel's name and address on them, and delivered them all to him. So that's how he knew he was being investigated and was in a difficult situation. Anyway he turned around and fired me the next day.

Faulhaber: And all hell broke loose.

Nickel: And so when I got fired, I didn't know what would happen there next, but I guess Leroy got nervous about getting rid of me and thought that he had better get me to shut up, I think. So he reemployed me shortly thereafter. I decided that I should do my best to try to get along with him. He said he really wasn't doing any of these wrong things. Even though I didn't entirely believe him, I thought the best thing to do was to keep my mouth shut.

Faulhaber: And stick close? How was he considered as a businessman? Did people look on him as being competent or was he seen to be more of a San Francisco money manager rather than a San Joaquin Valley farmer?

Nickel: He just wasn't adapted to farming in the San Joaquin Valley. He liked the oil deal because that was just a matter of getting a right of gift here and there. He got some of the oil rights with Houchin and that sort of thing.

Faulhaber: Was he well respected in the San Francisco business community? Socially, maybe, more so than professionally?

Nickel: I don't think he was a great asset, although I think he was all right. He wasn't nearly as social as my father was.

Faulhaber: Those years, the forties, were marked by extensive correspondence between the two of you. You seemed to bend over backwards to do as he asked, plus to provide him with a lot of detailed information with respect to the workings of Miller & Lux. Did it pay off for you in the long run to have worked so hard to try to gain his favor?

Nickel: Well, I saw the opportunities for Miller & Lux to do well and that eventually I would have more to say and more to accomplish. And I did as a matter fact. I accomplished a hell of a lot. So I guess that I figured that was the best way to go. I sure didn't have any other plans at the time.

Faulhaber: Miller & Lux was to become your way of life.

Nickel: Yes, that's right.

### Discovery of Questionable Dealings at Miller & Lux

[Interview 4: December 7, 1999]

Faulhaber: We are at the Cottonwood Ranch in Bakersfield, California, and this is our fourth interview. During our last interview we finished by talking about your uncle, James Leroy Nickel, Jr. I know this is a very important story for you, the mismanagement of the Henry Miller Trust and the mismanagement of Miller & Lux. In 1954 a lawsuit is filed by you, your brother Bev, and sister Mary to remove your uncle, James Leroy Nickel, Jr., and other trustees from their positions as trustees for the Henry Miller Trust, charging them with fraud.

I think my first question would be to take you back to the first time you discovered what you thought might be an irregularity. As I recall it was during your summer breaks in Buttonwillow when you were in college. Would you like to start the story there?

Nickel: Yes, I think this background is informative. I worked there in the summers of 1936, 1937, and 1938. My work assignment was as a checker on Miller & Lux tenant grain operations. I became well acquainted with the farmers in the area and had the opportunity to study the extensive land holdings of Miller & Lux in the Buttonwillow area and had some chance to see the 30,000 acres which made up the Buena Vista Lake area owned by Miller & Lux through Buena Vista Associates. I learned that the entire farming operation of Buena Vista Lake was on a minimal lease program with Elmer Houchin who subleased to farmers in the Buttonwillow area. I learned from some of the participating Buttonwillow farmers that they paid at least 33 1/3 percent crop rental to Elmer Houchin and that he paid only about 20 percent rental to Buena Vista Associates, a wholly owned subsidiary of Miller & Lux. Regarding farmers from the Buttonwillow area who subleased through Elmer Houchin in the Buena Vista Lake area, I became well acquainted with many of them and established a friendship which survives today. These Buttonwillow area farmers are Italian offsprings of people that my great-grandfather Henry Miller brought to the area when he needed help operating his properties back before the turn of the century. These fine Italian farmers were able, as time passed, to buy Miller & Lux lands in Buttonwillow at very low prices through Elmer Houchin, who acted as a real estate broker and got sales commissions from Miller & Lux of up to and sometimes more than 15 percent. The specifics were learned through litigation involving Leroy Nickel and the Houchin estate after the death of Elmer Houchin.

During the referred to fraud litigation we learned through examining Elmer Houchin's records that he was often sharing his easy profits with Leroy Nickel, on the farming deals, land sales, and mineral rights and oil income from the sales of Miller & Lux lands. However I didn't learn enough about the improprieties when I was working in Buttonwillow. I thought it would be more constructive to be helpful to farming and other programs and concentrated my efforts along that line.

Faulhaber: You took up full residence with Miller & Lux in 1939 when you married your wife, Charlotte, and began your life in Los Banos. What happened next? I know these were war years. You were newly married. You were having children. You ended up helping the war effort by building the Monterey Airport, or helping to build it. What happened during the forties? Did you notice or observe anything that seemed to you irregular?

Nickel: Yes, I graduated from the University of California in 1939. Then I became a full-time employee of Miller & Lux, not in the Buttonwillow area but in the Los Banos area.

Faulhaber: So you became an employee?

Nickel: Yes, and concentrated on the Miller & Lux operations out of the Los Banos office, which extended into Fresno County as well as Merced county. I spent my time working vigorously there and didn't have any direct contact with the Kern County area, Buttonwillow and Buena Vista Lake. I, of course, was there when Pearl Harbor occurred in 1941, on December 7.

Faulhaber: It's appropriate because today is December 7, 1999. During those years you were away from Miller & Lux for the period when the Monterey Airport was being constructed. But when you returned, probably around the middle of the forties, 1944 to 1945 or so-- did you pick up on anything that raised your suspicions?

Nickel: I became acquainted again with the Buttonwillow area, and I did some land leveling for some of the Italian farmers there. So I was acquainted again with what was going on down there and more acquainted with the Buena Vista Lake deal. I learned that the same thing was going on with Elmer Houchin having the low rental and getting the local farmers to be paying the higher rental. It seemed odd to me. I think I did do a little complaining to Leroy about it, but never got anywhere.

Then I did a lot of improving of the Miller & Lux lands that had not yet been sold, farm lands up in the Los Banos/Dos Palos/Firebaugh area. Some of the best land that Miller & Lux kept was the result of these improvements. So that all worked very well. I did get some recognition from Leroy and his right-hand man, A. R. Olsen, on the results because I also did a lot of the farming. It was grain farming with flood irrigation. Flood irrigation works very nicely if done before you have finished the final leveling work, so that you can completely control the water so that it flows down planted rows. I made good money for Miller & Lux back in those days.

Faulhaber: About this time a lot of this land that you had improved was being sold. It became an issue later on as the family started to look at their inheritance. Around 1950 you, along



with your cousin Henry Bowles and other family members, begin to express dissatisfaction with Leroy's management. There is a family letter that is written on August 7, 1950, which is signed by a number of people in the family. It is an important letter because it is the first time there is any formal expression of dissatisfaction with the way the Miller & Lux corporation is being managed and with the way the Henry Miller Trust is being administered. We have that letter, and it is in front of you, a summary that is. I am wondering if you could comment on it, and speak to why that letter was important.

Nickel: Yes, that was an effort to get Leroy to allow some family participation and oversight in the company. My cousin, Henry Bowles, was in direct contact with Hiram Johnson III, his attorney, who worked with us on the letter that was put together and signed by almost all of the beneficiaries of the Henry Miller Trust except of course, Leroy. It was a letter that asked for participation. It didn't say anything about Leroy doing anything illegal. We wanted to get some cooperation if possible and not have to challenge him at that time. I think it was a pretty good letter.

Faulhaber: What were the major concerns that were expressed in that letter?

Nickel: The major concern was that the time had come for the people who had rights under the Henry Miller Deed of Trust, both the life tenants and the remaindermen, to have a voice in what was going on in Miller & Lux and in the Henry Miller Trust, and of course, the Buena Vista Lake deal. So that was the main request in the letter, that we be able to participate as trustees, as board members, and officers of the corporation of Miller & Lux.

Faulhaber: Who signed that letter?

Nickel: That letter was signed, I think, by almost all of the beneficiaries. Maybe there were one or two that didn't. It was kind of interesting. Both my father, who was a life tenant, and Henry Bowles' s mother, who was a life tenant, signed it, which I think was rather important.

Faulhaber: And you and Henry signed it too?

Nickel: Yes.

Faulhaber: What was your uncle's response to that letter?

Nickel: He response was disappointing. He said that he really wasn't doing anything wrong, that he was doing everything right and that there wasn't any need for changing the trustees and the board of directors. So it wasn't a very satisfactory answer.

Faulhaber: At that point did he consider your recommendation that members of the family be put on the board of Miller & Lux?

- Nickel: Not right then. As time passed, as I recall, there was a move to put Henry Bowles and me on the board of directors of Miller & Lux, but we were never given much responsibility.
- Faulhaber: There were some points that were legal points. As I recall I saw a legal response that came back to the signers of the letter. Do you recall any of that? I think it was a twenty-page letter written by the attorney from Miller & Lux back to you all, justifying the legal points.
- Nickel: That was by Vincent McGovern, I think.
- Faulhaber: Exactly. Did it seem odd to you that he would respond that way?
- Nickel: Well, he was working for Leroy and he was just taking orders.
- Faulhaber: So Leroy felt that a legal response was necessary?
- Nickel: I think that's true. And what he overlooked was the fact that we would further explore what was going on with him and Elmer Houchin.
- Faulhaber: What did all of this do to your relationship with your uncle? Obviously he had seen those documents that Muir Woolley had left on the train in which you were questioning his management. Then the family wrote him a family letter. How did the two of you get along after all that?
- Nickel: I made a real effort to get along with Leroy because he did have control of the company and the assets. I named my son Jim after Leroy and made him the godfather. I made a constant effort to try to get him to work with the family, and I thought I had made some progress. I certainly had made progress on the farming operations and land development operations, things that really made a big difference. Leroy was putting up with me even though I had previously given him a little trouble. But then I continued to do a little further research into the lease activities and so on. I also noticed that Elmer Houchin had passed away in 1953 and thought that there might be an opportunity to get better lease activity out there in Buena Vista Lake. So I made a real effort to get somebody in there of great consequence to further develop Buena Vista Lake.

#### **Appointment to the Board of Directors of Miller & Lux, 1951**

- Faulhaber: I am going to stop you from telling that story right now because I want to go back to 1951. You and Henry Bowles are put on the board of Miller & Lux in late 1951. But there is an important meeting. It's a family meeting that takes place in June of 1951. Your uncle is in Europe. It has become his custom to spend four or five months a year there, and the other two trustees of the Henry Miller Trust, Judge Woolley and Mr. Olsen, call a family meeting. It's a very positive meeting. Actually you wrote a very



lengthy memo about that meeting. Because of your uncle's poor health, it was thought that that meeting was being called to discuss future management. Do you remember that meeting at all, the purpose of it, and what came out of it?

Nickel: Well, the meeting was somewhat constructive about getting the family more involved in the overall program. But it didn't really lead to getting anything done. I guess the two trustees involved, Olsen and Woolley, must have been a little nervous and were trying to get things organized so that Leroy wouldn't get into difficulty. Of course, he did subsequently.

Faulhaber: But you and Henry were appointed to the board of directors around October or November 1951. How did you feel about that?

Nickel: We felt like it was good and decided to make an effort to participate and do some positive things. We didn't last too long, as I recall, because we had differences with Leroy. I guess it was then that the San Joaquin Canal Company owned by Miller & Lux was under attack by the Central California Irrigation District. It had been formed to acquire the canal company because they [the customers for the water] didn't feel it was properly run. This was something that I became very interested and involved in. I tried to improve the overall picture, but here again, Leroy was so unconstructive that it didn't happen.

Faulhaber: We were talking about your election to the board of directors of Miller & Lux. Your uncle had resisted for so long putting you and your cousin, Henry, on that board, why do you think he finally changed his mind?

Nickel: I guess he thought it was good politics to satisfy Henry and me and the other members, life tenants, and remainder interests in the Henry Miller Trust.

Faulhaber: Did he make you promise to be "good boys"?

Nickel: I think, indirectly, he certainly did.

Faulhaber: Was he uneasy about having the two of you joining the governing body?

Nickel: That's true. But he didn't let us do a whole heck of a lot.

Faulhaber: Did it really change anything, being on the board of directors?

Nickel: No, I don't think that it really did.

Getting back to the San Joaquin Canal Company, I was also put on the board there. I did everything I could to make a better deal for Miller & Lux with the Central California Irrigation District, the company that wanted to buy the San Joaquin Canal Company from Miller & Lux. Because I was against this sale Leroy didn't care about getting a fair price for it. So he got me off of the board of directors of the San Joaquin Canal Company. During that time was when I first became acquainted with the

attorney, C. Ray Robinson. He did a super job representing the Central California Irrigation District and in negotiating for his clients a much lower price than we should have been paid. When the sale came to a vote with the board of the San Joaquin Canal Company, why, I was the only one on the board that voted against it. So I immediately got fired from the San Joaquin Canal Company board. But what was so important then in the overall picture was my realization that this attorney, C. Ray Robinson, was a brilliant man and that he might be a good person to represent me and other members of the family if he were to take Leroy on. So I subsequently did get together with C. Ray Robinson. He was very important in straightening the mess out.

Faulhaber: 1953 was an important year because it is about this time that the San Joaquin Canal Company is sold. You were taken off the board because you didn't vote for its sale, and you leave the employment of Miller & Lux. Why did you decide to leave at that point?

### Developing Buena Vista Lake, 1953

Nickel: Well, I was going to take Leroy on, and I had made a real effort to get a proper tenant down there for the Buena Vista Lake operation, a 30,000-acre operation and really a good one that could have been made a lot better. I made contact with Russell Giffen, who was the biggest and brightest, most successful farmer out on the west side of the San Joaquin Valley and the Westlands Water District. I had the good luck to get him interested in a lease on Buena Vista Lake that would have been very good as compared to the deal that we had with Houchin that was getting us no place. But Leroy wanted Houchin's nephew to come in as the tenant, I guess so that he could continue his deal. Because we subsequently learned that the monies that Houchin was passing on to Leroy were passed on to him in France, giving him the opportunity to do a lot of gambling over there, and that's why he spent so much time, we discovered, in Europe. In any event, I succeeded in getting another tenant. I had lost Russell Giffen by then. He was tired of not getting anywhere. But we ended up by getting the firm of Crocket & Gambogy in there. I was able to get a lot of very constructive things done in Buena Vista Lake.

Faulhaber: This was sometime later, though, when Crocket & Gambogy came in. I would like to go back to a very interesting story. You had left Miller & Lux. Am I to assume that you and Russell Giffen were going to work in the Buena Vista lease together? Was that part of your plan?

Nickel: Well, I had no definite plan then, but I think I would have been at least able to oversee it, to see that he did a good job.

Faulhaber: What did your Uncle Leroy think of your proposal to involve Giffen in this?

Nickel: He was absolutely opposed to it. He liked the Houchin deal because obviously he could continue what he had with Elmer Houchin before he died.

Faulhaber: The proposal you wrote was very convincing. It certainly would have been financially a much better deal than the one the Houchin family was proposing. On what basis did Leroy reject your proposal?

Nickel: He indicated that he was satisfied with the Houchin program. He didn't think that there would be anything good about getting anybody else. He just had an absolutely firm position there.

Faulhaber: Did he ever sign a lease with Francis Houchin?

Nickel: No. I managed to stop that deal.

Faulhaber: How did you stop it?

Nickel: By bringing in better deals and also by challenging Leroy. I think it was about that time that we brought the suit against him. It was at that time. That's right.

Faulhaber: Before that you and your brother, Beverly, had hired the law firm of Heller Ehrman to at least write two or three legal letters outlining your position and why the Giffen proposal was better than the Houchin proposal. How did he react to those letters?

Nickel: I don't know why he was so adamant on the deal. He just damn well made up his mind. It was at that point we were taking him on and getting him out of management. C. Ray Robinson, our attorney, was very successful in getting Leroy moved out by court action.

Faulhaber: Was the Buena Vista Lake lease the catalyst that launched the lawsuit in June of 1954? There must have been something that was the primary motivator for wanting to stop him so quickly. As I recall this motion was filed on a Sunday in June at a judge's house, so there was obviously a sense of urgency.

Nickel: Oh, yes, there was a sense of urgency. It had to be done, or we were going to have Houchin's nephew in a continuing poor deal. And I saw the real opportunity for development of Buena Vista Lake and the handling of water rights there and how to improve the whole deal with levees and all kinds of different activity, which I subsequently did. I made it into one of the finest farming operations in the San Joaquin Valley.

#### **Nickel Versus Nickel, 1954**

Faulhaber: The lawsuit that you launch is filed on June 13, 1954, by C. Ray Robinson. You and your brother, Bev, and your sister, Mary, are the plaintiffs, and the trustees are the defendants. I can read from the legal document what the allegations were and what the suit actually was about, but would you like to talk about what it was you were trying to accomplish with this first suit? There were many afterwards, but this first one was

really the lawsuit that put the stake in the ground for all of the litigation that was to come.

Nickel: The suit needs further examination by me to be frank with you.

Faulhaber: I can read what it said. It was launched to remove the trustees, the three trustees, because of conflict of interest on Judge Woolley's--he was the estate attorney for the Houchin estate--and for mismanagement on the part of all three of them. So we haven't gone into the details of the suit, but at least the legal documentation supports the fact that the primary reason was to dismiss the trustees and to charge them with creating dummy organizations, obtaining land from Miller & Lux, conveying land to oil companies and other buyers and lessors, in other words, for mismanaging the assets of not only the corporations but also of the trust. That will be the subject of our next interview. But I was wondering if you have any remarks as we close this interview as to that time. It was obviously a difficult thing to sue your uncle in a court of law. How did the rest of the family feel about this?

Nickel: It was kind of amazing. We had such a good suit, and we had been done so much damage. But the people in San Francisco, moneyed people, that were involved in the financing of Miller & Lux in the tough days were all on Leroy's side, which was a little hard to believe. I always thought that some of them were involved in some of the payoffs. Regardless of what it was, they didn't give us their support. But C. Ray Robinson, our attorney, did a super job in getting the job done. We got three court-appointed trustees that did a good job. They were not influenced by moneyed people in San Francisco.

Faulhaber: The suit was called *Nickel v. Nickel*. Basically three of the four Nickel remaindermen, you, your sister Mary, and your brother, Bev, filed the suit against your uncle. I know it is difficult to recall at this time, but was there any thought at that point to bringing in the other side of the family, the Bowles remaindermen? Or did you simply not have the time?

Nickel: We did not have the cooperation that we would like to have had from Henry Bowles and his brother and sister and his mother, who was still alive. So it was just surprising to me. We had a time element, and we needed to get the deal going. So we did. I was surprised and disappointed that we didn't have more cooperation from the Bowles side of the family, and also my older sister, who was married to Tommy Mein, was influenced by the moneyed people up there. They didn't want to see some of the old bankers attacked who were later brought into the suit. That's what happened.

Faulhaber: Just a few words of background. The first suit, *Nickel v. Nickel*, was filed in 1954. There were a number of amendments to the suit. It is a very long trail of litigation. From 1954, how many years does it take before all of these suits are settled and the proceeds are finally distributed to the family?

Nickel: The Houchin settlement was offered in 1953 to 1954.



Faulhaber: Almost immediately after the filing of the lawsuit. It was in late 1954.

Nickel: It was a multi-million dollar settlement, but in spite of that, I still had a lot of trouble getting the Bowles family group and my sister and her husband to cooperate. Even today it is hard for me to understand why they were so reluctant to move forward with something that was so important and necessary. It is one of the frustrations of life, though.

Faulhaber: As the attorneys dig deeper and deeper into the supporting documentation, they find a lot more than they ever expected, more proof of fraud and mismanagement. How many suits were eventually filed, do you recall?

Nickel: No, I don't. But I remember meeting with Henry Bowles shortly after the tragic death of my wife and brother. He came and met with me, and I did my best to have him cooperate in the overall thing, but I couldn't gain his cooperation. He just refused to go ahead with the litigation. But fortunately we had the court appointed trustees. So we went ahead and got the Houchin settlement resolved and a lot of other things.

Faulhaber: Our next interview will go into depth about what happened next, the litigation. So we will end our fourth interview here.

[Interview 5: March 22, 2000]

Faulhaber: It is March 22, 2000. We are in Bakersfield at the Cottonwood Ranch in George's office.

Our last interview ended with a brief statement about the impending litigation that was launched on June 13, 1954, by you, your brother, John Beverly Nickel, and your sister, Mary Nickel Lombardi. There was a lawsuit filed to oust the three trustees of the Henry Miller Trust, accusing them of fraud. Your attorney, C. Ray Robinson, filed this action on a Sunday, at the home of a judge, Judge Foley, because of a legal deadline having to do with the probate of the Elmer Houchin estate.

Why was the suit filed, and what did you hope to accomplish by filing it?

Nickel: That was C. Ray Robinson's program. We had great respect for him and obviously wanted to get the three trustees removed because they were not only dishonest, but they were also holding us up on getting things done in areas like Buena Vista Lake. I wanted to get the Houchin deal out of there entirely and bring in some people who would do a decent job and whom we could count on to be totally honest. We were able to get a much better farming operation in there. That was Crocket & Gambogy then.

Faulhaber: Just for the record, who were the three Miller & Lux trustees named in this suit?

Nickel: There was J. Leroy Nickel, Jr., A.R. Olsen, and Judge Woolley. They are the ones that had been there at their pleasure for some period of time.



Faulhaber: Who was Elmer Houchin?

Nickel: Elmer Houchin was involved with Leroy Nickel going back a long ways. He had actually worked for Miller & Lux before he became a real estate agent handling land sales. I think he was involved with cattle deals and so forth. Elmer Houchin was a very bright and capable man.

Faulhaber: He was a land agent wasn't he?

Nickel: He became a land agent, definitely, because Leroy wanted him in there as a land agent so that they could control deals together.

Faulhaber: I recall from the original lawsuit that a part of the charge had to do with Houchin selling to himself, and I guess to your uncle, a number of very valuable properties at greatly reduced rates. Was this ever proven?

Nickel: Oh, yes, that was proven. It was a real game that they had going. That was also supplemented by the program in Buena Vista Lake on the farming where, through Leroy Nickel, the land would be leased to Houchin regularly at a very low figure, say 20 percent crop rent. Then he would turn around and lease it to the farmers in the Buttonwillow area, usually for around a third, and the spread in between those two deals was part of the money that he shared with Leroy to some degree.

Faulhaber: How much did C. Ray Robinson sue the Houchin estate for?

Nickel: I believe it was something in excess of \$10 million.

Faulhaber: Actually I am just looking here in the documentation. It looks like it was \$30 million. They said the estimate of the total value of the estate at the time of his death was between \$25 million and \$60 million. How did C. Ray Robinson come to the \$30 million figure?

Nickel: I think that he was able to make reference to a lot of those land transactions that he uncovered and in addition the farming deals. I don't have in front of me how those numbers were built up, but they were fairly reliable.

Faulhaber: When that suit was filed on June 13, 1954, what did the judge do that day?

Nickel: The judge recognized the time problem because the Houchin estate settlement was due the next day or two. So I think C. Ray Robinson, the attorney for us, was able to show the judge how important it was to have a fair review of the situation and got him to decide to hold things up.

Faulhaber; Did the judge throw out all of the trustees?

Nickel: The judge did throw out the trustees, yes, at that particular time.

- Faulhaber: And did he appoint a court representative, a receiver?
- Nickel: Yeah, it was Bourquin, Mitch Bourquin. He was the initial one.
- Faulhaber: Your suit was filed on behalf of all of the beneficiaries of the Henry Miller Trust, which included the life tenants, your father George Nickel and your aunt Beatrice. Even though your Uncle Leroy Nickel was a life tenant, he wasn't included because he was named in the suit. Therefore he could not take his place as a plaintiff. Also included were the Bowles children, Henry, George (Corky), and Amy Bowles Lawrence. Did they go along with you as their representative or did they hire their own attorneys?
- Nickel: Oh, they hired their own attorneys and were not as cooperative as we had hoped that they would be. It was kind of hard to understand why they weren't more cooperative except for the fact that they were part of the moneyed people up in San Francisco, and I think they wanted to protect their friends. That became more and more evident as the time passed. It was a sad thing but anyhow those are the facts of life.
- Faulhaber: Who was the Bowles's attorney?
- Nickel: John Francis Neylan was the Bowles's attorney, and he was certainly tied to the San Francisco moneyed people.
- Faulhaber: Did your father and your aunt Beatrice retain Neylan as well, or did they have their own attorneys?
- Nickel: They had their own attorneys.
- Faulhaber: So in essence there were a number of attorneys involved?
- Nickel: Yes.
- Faulhaber: On July 1, 1954, Judge Herman van der Zee appointed three trustees to manage the trust. Mitchell Bourquin, of course, was the first. Who were the other two?
- Nickel: The other two were Louis Ferrari and Jess Steinhart who was later replaced by Sam Ladar.
- Faulhaber: Who were these people, and what did you think of their capabilities?
- Nickel: They mostly had backgrounds in the banking business. They were mature people that were basically retired to some degree from what they had done historically. But they wanted to be fair and honest and look into things. I think they were fairly decent people.
- Faulhaber: Did they help in the process of trying to discover what went on?

Nickel: Yes, they gave authorization for attorney C. Ray Robinson, who was representing my group, to do more. In addition to that they gave approval for me to proceed to get some better farming deals made particularly in Buena Vista Lake, which I succeeded in doing in 1954.

Faulhaber: It was interesting to me to read that even though the three trustees, your Uncle Leroy, Mr. Olsen, and Judge Woolley, were taken out of their positions as trustees, they were still retained to continue with the operation of Miller & Lux. How did that work? Was it easy for you to continue to work with them given the circumstances?

Nickel: Well, I was put in charge of the farming operations, and I didn't have much interference from them then because things were going better, and I was able to take over.

Faulhaber: How did the three trustees who were tossed out get along with the three court-appointed trustees? Was there a good working relationship?

Nickel: I think they resented the court-appointed trustees. I know they did, yes.

Faulhaber: How were the court-appointed trustees received by the Bowles side of the family?

Nickel: Not well. No, the Bowles side of the family really disappointed me because my first cousin, Henry Bowles, and I were the original family members that discovered Leroy's stealing. We started the investigations.

Faulhaber: Why do you think the Bowleses disliked the court-appointed trustees?

Nickel: I think that John Francis Neylan, their attorney, had a lot to do with that, getting them to have some cooperation with the moneyed people in San Francisco and that sort of thing. It certainly was disappointing. I just have to make that assumption.

### **Settling with the Houchin Estate**

Faulhaber: On November 17, 1954, the Houchin heirs come to a settlement with you. The agreement seems to be to give half of the Houchin estate back to Miller & Lux. This is barely five months after the suit was filed. Why did they settle so soon?

Nickel: Well, they knew that they were very liable, and they wanted to get the thing settled. They knew they would still have money left, money of their own, from the oil deals and elsewhere, and so they thought, I think, that the sooner they could get out of the thing the better off they were.

Faulhaber: How much were they willing to return in simple dollars?

- Nickel: That I think was spelled out a little later because this first deal was not accepted by the hard power group. I think if it had been settled in the beginning we would have had more money, but in any event, the dollars were later set forth when the thing was finalized.
- Faulhaber: Why wasn't this settlement, or this agreement, accepted quickly?
- Nickel: Well, I can't really understand why it wasn't accepted by the family. We certainly would have been better off, but I guess Leroy Nickel was able to persuade the Bowles group and my father, I guess. They slowed the whole thing down.
- Faulhaber: Was the value too low, what the Houchin estate was offering? Were there other legal problems?
- Nickel: I think it was just more about being nice to Leroy. It is still hard to believe that they hadn't wakened up by that time, but they gave him more comfort than they should have.
- Faulhaber: I read in a newspaper clipping that the Houchin estate and the final settlement actually happened on February 25, 1956. This was quite a time after the Houchins originally said they would settle. Can you tell me what the actual settlement was for, in dollars and cents and lands that were actually transferred back to Miller & Lux?
- Nickel: Yes, there was a cash deal, and I don't know how it was arrived at. But obviously it must have required a lot of study. I personally was not directly involved in that calculation, but the cash provided was \$2,138,669. That was the cash, and the oil holdings were valued at \$2.5 million. I can't recall exactly how that calculation was made. The land that was deeded back from the Houchin estate included the Carmel Ranch and other properties. It is all spelled out in the settlement and that would be the best thing to make reference to.
- Faulhaber: It seemed to me that the settlement was substantial and significantly improved the assets of Miller & Lux.
- Nickel: Yes, it sure did. And the Buena Vista Lake thing was so important to accomplish. Of course, I got that done early in the game there in 1954.
- Faulhaber: What we haven't touched on but what was a big part of this settlement were the oil properties that came back to Miller & Lux. They came back actually as real estate but there was reference to the Paloma Oil Field, not to mention an interest in an oil well that is well known in California, the McKittrick 400. Would you like to talk about those assets, the oil properties?
- Nickel: The McKittrick 400 was up there to the southwest of Buena Vista Lake. That was one of the early discoveries of oil in that part of California. I have to assume that we had some mineral rights in that general area. I don't pretend to know, frankly, what they all were, but we still had all of the mineral rights in Buena Vista Lake, too, which you know covered over 30,000 acres.

- Faulhaber: I noted that about this time the members of the board of Miller & Lux appointed you again to the board. The date I had was January 21, 1955. At that time you were farming most of the Miller & Lux properties. Why did they appoint you to the board this second time, and how active were you able to be given your other duties?
- Nickel: I think they appointed me to the board simply because I was doing important things in the farming world for the good of all concerned. They wanted to have me on the board to have regular reporting and that type of thing. What was your other question?
- Faulhaber: If you were able to participate actively as a board member given your duties as a farm manager?
- Nickel: Well, I was able to report on the farming deals, and getting that Buena Vista Lake farming program was certainly important. I spent a lot of time and effort on that with the Crocket & Gambogy organization, making them do a lot of work on irrigation wells, drain ditches, and levees.
- Faulhaber: Can you remember who else was on the board of directors at the time?
- Nickel: I don't remember specifically. I think we had better look at the records because frankly I am not sure.
- Faulhaber: Let's consult the records to see who was on the board at that time. I think it's important historically.
- Nickel: Yes, on the board at the time I came on was Louis Ferrari, Mitch Bourquin, Sam Ladar, and Morse Erskine, and they appointed me to the board.
- Faulhaber: And they expanded your duties to include Buena Vista Lake.
- Nickel: Yes, that is correct. That certainly was the big payoff for the company.
- Faulhaber: Your position on the board of directors was obviously key, but you were still actively involved in the farming operation. How was the litigation going at this point? We are talking about January of 1955, about six months into the litigation.
- Nickel: Well, C. Ray Robinson still had authorization to follow through on the litigation that he had initiated against the moneyed people in San Francisco who dealt with Leroy.
- Faulhaber: I noticed from the files that at the end of November a family compromise was signed. It was a lengthy document, legal in form, that seemed to try to bring the family back together. Would you like to talk about that agreement and what it was designed to accomplish?
- Nickel: Yes, there was the desire to get the family working together. I'm not saying that it succeeded as well as it should have, but it was an effort that I certainly participated in. I





Bakersfield Inn, Bakersfield, California, presentation of check from the Houchin settlement, February 1956. L-R: Henry Miller Bowles, C. Ray Robinson, George W. Nickel, Jr.



would need to review the agreement. I have read it recently, but I should do it again, I think.

Faulhaber: Well, I have it in front of me, and I think it is very interesting to review the key points. [pause]

Let's go ahead. In your own words, after having read the compromise agreement, what did it say, and in particular who were the people that wrote it?

Nickel: The attorneys again wrote it. As I have stated, C. Ray Robinson was the attorney for the Nickel group of remaindermen. And I have a hunch that John Francis Neylan must have approved the thing for the Bowles group. And as far as the others are concerned I can't recollect.

Faulhaber: Well, all of the parties involved signed it, your aunt Beatrice and your father, who were called the life tenants, the Bowles remaindermen, and the Nickel remaindermen. So that does indicate that all of their individual attorneys probably had to participate.

Nickel: I think that is for sure.

Faulhaber: Why was it important? What did it do?

Nickel: Well, it was important because it made the Houchin settlement possible, and the money was paid directly because of this thing. I think the Houchins figured that that was the best they could do, and they would go along with it then. But if the settlement had been delayed further, I think that the Houchin dispute would have had to have been tried in court to get it settled.

Faulhaber: What else did that agreement do, the compromise agreement with the family?

Nickel: Well, I think it was important that Henry Bowles and I were put on as trustees as well as Mr. William Wallace Mein, Sr. As I look back on the problem that existed thereafter, Henry Bowles was very much on the team of the moneyed people in San Francisco, and so he and Mr. Mein were sort of on one side of the issue against me. So a two-to-one vote.

Faulhaber: There was an interesting provision in the family compromise agreement with respect to your Uncle Leroy, what he had to relinquish. Would you care to talk about that?

Nickel: Well, he had to relinquish any properties that he had taken from Miller & Lux however he got them. I don't think that needs to be spelled out. Whatever they were he was supposed to deed them back. Just what they were I don't frankly know right off hand. I think that one of them was the Fruitvale property, which had some oil interests on it, and that was not far from downtown Bakersfield. I think that that man Anderson, R. H. Anderson, had been involved in that too.

Faulhaber: As part of this I noted with interest that your Uncle Leroy also agreed to resign from all of his posts and employment at Miller & Lux in exchange for the family not suing him further. Was that one of the key points of the agreement?

Nickel: Oh, sure, I think that was very important for him because he was so guilty. And this is admitting his guilt. He also continued to get money as the other members of his generation did, but he wasn't around very long because he committed suicide.<sup>1</sup>

Faulhaber: As a direct result of this agreement in February of 1956, the Houchin settlement was finally accepted and the assets and the money was paid, but the suit was expanded at that point. It was eventually called Miller & Lux versus R. H. Anderson. I don't know that we have touched on who R. H. Anderson was. Would you care to talk about him and why he was sued as part--?

Nickel: Well, he was a partner of some type with J. Leroy Nickel, Jr. So he participated in things that weren't proper, and I don't have the details in front of me, but he was involved with Leroy. I don't think it amounted to so very much money. But anyhow, he was improperly involved.

Faulhaber: Eventually this suit was expanded to included damages of \$100 million. There were several hundred additional defendants, many of them oil companies. I gather the suits sought the restoration of the oil revenue from those Miller & Lux lands that were sold off. I think that should be a subject of our next interview as well.

### Marriage to Adele ("Dodo") Rock Selfridge: Combining Families

Faulhaber: I have to ask you, about this period, in 1955, you started to court your second wife, Adele ("Dodo") Rock Selfridge. This was a very turbulent time. How did you find enough time to court her?

Nickel: Dodo was to be my second marriage. I needed to have help caring for my five children, and I was lucky to find a lovely lady to come in and take over the fine job my first wife had done. My second wife happened to be a sorority sister of my first wife, and she also happened to have lost her husband to an unfortunate health problem. So she was available. She also had three children and could see the potential, I think, of having a father for them, too. So it really did work very nicely, and she was a good friend of mine at UC Berkeley. Also, as I already stated, she and my first wife were sorority sisters, and my sister Mary was in the same sorority too. Anyhow, I was very lucky.

Faulhaber: You joined forces, and you had eight children to raise. That must have been quite something.

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<sup>1</sup>James Leroy Nickel, Jr. (Uncle Leroy) died on May 28, 1959.





Wedding of Adele Rock Selfridge to George W. Nickel, Jr., home of George's sister, Mrs. W. W. Mein, Jr. (Sally Miller Nickel), in Woodside, California, June 18, 1955. L-R: Jock Selfridge, Jim Nickel, Miller Nickel, George W. Nickel, Jr., Adele Rock Selfridge Nickel, Cynthia Selfridge, Kinzie Selfridge, Susan Nickel, Nancy Nickel, Sally Nickel.







Family photo at the home of Sally (Nickel) and William Wallace Mein, Jr., Woodside, California, 1958. L-R: (standing) Nick Mein, William Wallace Mein, Jr.; (seated) Sally Mein, Sally Nickel, Ernestine Carpenter (George's mother), Dodo Nickel, George W. Nickel, Jr.; (seated on ground) Thomas Tucker Mein.





San Francisco Cotillion, Palace Hotel, San Francisco, debut of Kinzie Selfridge and Susan Nickel, 1960. L-R: (seated) Kinzie Selfridge with John Luce; (standing) Dodo Nickel and George W. Nickel, Jr.; (seated) Susan Nickel with John Meek (standing); (seated in front) Sally Nickel with Philip Marskey.





- Nickel: It was. I think it turned out very well, except I couldn't talk my youngest son out of smoking cigarettes. If I had, he would probably still be alive today, but there just was no way we could talk him out of smoking cigarettes.
- Faulhaber: This was Miller.
- Nickel: Miller, yes.
- Faulhaber: You had eight children ranging from how young to how old?
- Nickel: Let's see. Sally was born the year that Charlotte and I got married, and that was in 1940. So Sally would have been fifteen years old. She was the oldest. Then the second one in our fivesome was Susan. She was two years younger. So she would have been thirteen. Jim came along a year later or thereabouts. So he would have been about twelve. Then we had Nancy in 1949. Nancy was quite young. Nancy would have been about six years younger. And Miller would have been about five.
- Faulhaber: And how about Dodo's children?
- Nickel: Kinzie was her oldest. Kinzie was a little bit younger than Sally, say two years younger. So she would have been about thirteen. Cynthia, or Buzzie, whichever name you use, was a couple of years younger, which would make her about eleven. And Jock was about five years younger, about six.
- Faulhaber: So they were all about the same age.
- Nickel: Yes. It worked out fine as far as activities were concerned and everything. Sally, of course, was a little older than the group, and she was a lot of help too. Sally really pitched in and helped in all directions. Dodo and I had weekly meetings with the whole group. We would sit down and review everything that happened during the week. We wanted to be sure that everybody was happy and well and also behaving. We started to play a lot of ping pong. That sure was a lot of fun, doubles in ping pong. We had a big porch that accommodated the ping pong table very nicely. The house that we lived in was an old Miller & Lux house down on what we called the Hereford Ranch. Prior to my loss of Charlotte we had moved that old beatened-up house up to the Delta Ranch adjacent to the big Delta Ranch headquarters house there and fixed it up. I think we had five bedrooms, and it worked out fine.
- Faulhaber: How was it raising eight children in Los Banos? Were the schools good?
- Nickel: Yes, I think the schools were reasonably good; however, we did get our children off to other schools. Santa Catalina was one that Sally and Susan were in before the loss of Charlotte. I think they stayed about one more year, and then they came back. It wasn't too long after that, that Sally was ready to go to college. She went to the University of Arizona. Susan, before she went to college, went to Castellaja up by Stanford University in the Palo Alto area. Then she went out to college. She didn't finish, but anyhow she went on to college at the University of Nevada. Kinzie went to UC Davis

and Buzzie went to Berkeley, Davis, and Stanford. Jim went to the University of Arizona. Jock had been going to Cate School in Santa Barbara. When he graduated from there he went back East to one of the famous schools on the East Coast. It was Dartmouth. He only stayed there one year, and so he came back and I'm not sure I remember what university he went to. We left out Miller, I guess. As I recall he never got around to attending college.

Faulhaber: They started school in the Los Banos area and then went off to private school or on to the university. How many years did you and Dodo live in the Los Banos area before you went to San Francisco?

Nickel: Let's see. We got married in 1955, and we were in Los Banos about six years before moving up to San Francisco. I think Sally got married when we were still at the Delta Ranch to a wonderful man that she went to the University of Arizona with, Phil Marskey. He was a wonderful man, became an attorney. And he, like Miller, smoked. I think that smoking was also very bad for Phil Marskey. So he passed away before any of us wanted him to. But he and Sally had adopted their children. They adopted two girls who have turned out to be wonderful girls, now married girls.

Faulhaber: How many grandchildren do you have?

Nickel: I believe at the present time we have sixteen grandchildren.

Faulhaber: And great-grandchildren?

Nickel: We have either six or seven. And we are going to have more!

Faulhaber: That is quite a legacy.

### **More Litigation for Miller & Lux; The San Joaquin Canal Company**

[Interview 6: April 18, 2000]

Faulhaber: The date is Tuesday, April 18, 2000. We are in Bakersfield, California, at the Cottonwood Ranch, in George's office. The subject of our interview today is the continuing litigation that came out of the first lawsuit that was filed in June of 1954.

For the sake of the record, so that you don't have to comb through the legal briefs, I will just summarize these two cases. There were two. The first one, of course, was *Nickel v. Nickel* that was filed on June 13, 1954, which basically asked that the three trustees of the Henry Miller Trust be removed, charging them with fraud.

The second suit was called *Miller & Lux Incorporated v. R. H. Anderson and Grace C. Anderson et al.* It was filed three months after the court-appointed trustees were in place and after they had done an investigation which disclosed other wrongdoings. Based on the discovery the Anderson suit was filed in late 1954, and the judgment was for \$10 million dollars. It named sixty individuals, partnerships, and corporations, and it charged them with misdeeds and wrongs having to do with illegal transfers of land either by sale or by lease. Then later in 1957 there was a second suit that was filed. It was called *Miller & Lux Incorporated v. Allen L. Chickering, Charles R. Blythe, Harry H. Farr, J. J. Hunter, and the Bank of California.* It alleged that the directors, officers, and agents of Miller & Lux purchased a large number of the corporation's bonds and notes at less than their face value and enforced them against the corporation at their face value in violation of their fiduciary obligations. This litigation went on from 1954 to 1963 and finally was dismissed because the Supreme Court of California refused an appeal. I would like you to comment on the litigation, anything you feel is relevant and in particular if anything came out of it.<sup>1</sup>

Nickel: I am aware, of course, of what you have set forth. The litigation was an effort to get to parties other than my uncle, Leroy Nickel, who certainly was found at fault in every conceivable way. This further litigation was begun because the big moneyed people that were involved with the Henry Miller Trust and the corporation definitely took advantage of the corporation and the trust. We felt that they should be liable for some of those problems.

One of the biggest problems that was faced in the litigation was that it was against some of the biggest moneyed people in San Francisco, people that were highly regarded up there. It was a battle against people with superior financial power. It was sort of sad that we didn't win because the facts of life were that they carried a lot of guilt.

Faulhaber: Was any money ever recovered from them, in either suit?

Nickel: No. There was no money recovered in the following two suits.

Faulhaber: Yet the litigation went on for a considerable amount of time.

Nickel: There was a tremendous effort made by attorney C. Ray Robinson, who continuously represented me and other members of the family. Just how he was able to afford to spend as much time and effort as he did on this thing, I don't know. But he sure made a strong effort. Unfortunately, he was not rewarded for his efforts, nor were the rest of us.

Faulhaber: He spent nine years on the litigation. The legal bills must have been astronomical. How was he compensated?

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<sup>1</sup>See oral history of John Bales, *Litigation and Law Firm Management at Pillsbury, Madison, & Sutro: 1947-1987*, p. 52-55 for additional details.

- Nickel: He got a percentage calculated out of the Houchin settlement, which was the first litigation which we referred to. I think it was a calculated figure of approximately 15 percent of what was alleged to be the recovery.
- Faulhaber: Of course, he stood to gain a great deal if the \$110 million lawsuit that was put forth based on the Anderson and the Chickering lawsuits ever was settled in your favor. But I gather from what you said neither of these lawsuits was ever settled for any monetary damages.
- Nickel: No, that's correct. Mr. C. Ray Robinson did get his expenses paid for, and I think he got some compensation along that line, but it certainly was nothing significant as compared to what he would have gotten on a settlement.
- Faulhaber: Did this final appeal to the California Supreme Court in 1963 end the litigation once and for all? Was there any further litigation after these three suits we have just discussed?
- Nickel: No, there was none after that time.
- Faulhaber: Our subject now is the San Joaquin Canal Company. We have touched on it in previous interviews. It was a very important part of your life when you lived in Los Banos. You served as a vice president, I believe, or a director of the San Joaquin Canal Company, and you were not happy at all when it was finally sold. I would like to go back and ask you to give some background information, as much as you know on the San Joaquin Canal Company, why it was important to the Central Valley, and why it still is important today. The first question then is about the origin.
- Nickel: The origin of the San Joaquin Canal Company was because of the efforts of my great-grandfather, Henry Miller. He did an amazing job of establishing water rights in California. That included his efforts on the Miller-Haggin Agreement, which was here in Kern County, in addition to what he did with the San Joaquin Canal Company.
- Faulhaber: Do you have any idea about who built the canals and the system that eventually became the San Joaquin Canal Company?
- Nickel: Yes. Henry Miller was directly involved in the construction of the main canal system that originated out of the San Joaquin River. The so-called outside canal brought the water all the way down to the area of Gustine. He was, as I recall, responsible for the creation of those big water diversions.
- Faulhaber: Why was this system built?
- Nickel: It was built to irrigate the lands that were adjacent thereto, and it was the development of the whole country down there in the San Joaquin Valley that they were able to bring water to.
- Faulhaber: Do you have any idea about what year it might have been built?



- Nickel: Well, let's see. Henry Miller died in 1916. The Miller-Haggin Agreement I know was in 1888. That of course was on the Kern River, so I would guess without looking at the records that it would have been in the same general period in the 1880s.
- Faulhaber: Who did the San Joaquin Canal Company serve? Who were the clients?
- Nickel: Well, initially the clients were basically Henry Miller and his lands, but he served other lands along the line there. I need to do a little further checking on that because there were other substantial holdings that got some service in addition to Henry Miller's lands.
- Faulhaber: When Henry Miller bought this land was it basically grassland?
- Nickel: Yes. Initially I think it was grasslands for cattle feed and that gradually spread to the production of crops such as alfalfa for cattle feed, but there were also grain crops.
- Faulhaber: When you were working in Los Banos and on the Board of Directors of the San Joaquin Canal Company, who were the consumers at that time? Who were the clients?
- Nickel: Let me get one thing straight about my being a director of the San Joaquin Canal Company. That was at the very last part of the life of the San Joaquin Canal Company. I had taken a firm stand against the way it was run by my uncle Leroy Nickel and his trustee, a fellow up in San Francisco, A. R. Olsen. I think they did a terrible job of running the thing, and the reason I finally got put on the board of the San Joaquin Canal Company was because I was making a real effort to bring more money into it through my friend, Ralph Hammonds, who was a big operator above the water system covered by the San Joaquin Canal Company. I had a very good program underway, and I think my uncle finally thought that he should have me on the board to see the deal through, maybe as an alternative to selling the canal company.
- Faulhaber: You mentioned there were management problems. What were they doing incorrectly?
- Nickel: Well, they were just ignoring the needs of the farmers as much as anything, the people that owned land there and wanted to farm. They didn't take care of the ditches that served the farmers. They took the position that they were community ditches and that the individual farmers were responsible. That was a very peculiar way to get the job done. It just didn't make much sense. They didn't do anything much to insure the water needs of the farming area. The rights of the San Joaquin Canal Company were based on water yields in the San Joaquin River. There are good years and bad years, and when you had a bad year, unless you had some supplemental water in the form of well water in those days, you were putting crops in jeopardy or losing them because there wasn't enough water. They didn't do anything to develop underground water to provide supplemental water.
- Faulhaber: What happened when there wasn't enough water, especially in the hot summer months?



- Nickel: Well, in those years they would just lose the grass for the cattle, and lose their crops, and it would be sort of a disaster.
- Faulhaber: The San Joaquin Canal Company got into a lot of trouble simply because they couldn't deliver this water in key months. What were the clients, or rather the farmers, able to do to get the water they needed?
- Nickel: They listened to my suggestions about trying to get a supplementary water program going and about doing something about the ditches. But my efforts got practically no place. My uncle Leroy Nickel was spending his time having fun, spending illegal money in Europe for part of the year, and his vice president, A. R. Olsen, just wouldn't listen to anything that I suggested to improve the canal company position.
- Faulhaber: There must have been a revolt among the farmers. If you lose your crops because you can't get enough water in the summer, eventually you go out of business. What did the farmers do about the situation?
- Nickel: Well, they eventually looked for supplemental water, and they arrived at the conclusion that they could form an irrigation district that could buy or take over the San Joaquin Canal Company. It was as that idea developed that attorney C. Ray Robinson came in to give a helping hand, and things really began to move then.
- Faulhaber: So was C. Ray Robinson representing the farmers' group that basically wanted to condemn, if that's the right word, the San Joaquin Canal Company?
- Nickel: Well, they talked about condemning if they couldn't get it some other way by purchase. So that was the threat to my uncle and others that were the operators of the San Joaquin Canal Company. So condemnation was a very real threat. They formed the Central California Irrigation District, which did finally become the owner of the San Joaquin Canal Company.
- Faulhaber: Do you feel that the threat of condemnation resulted in the San Joaquin Canal Company being sold cheaply?
- Nickel: I think it had a great deal to do with it. They had financial statements to study which they used to value the canal company. My uncle, Leroy Nickel, had some say in valuing it, and the Central California Irrigation District did likewise. You could be sure they were not the same figures. They were sharply different.
- Faulhaber: I read in one of the memos that the San Joaquin Canal Company was actually a public utility regulated by the Public Utilities Commission, the PUC. How did that come about? It was a "for profit" company, but it was only allowed to make a certain level of profit. Do you have any background information on why it was set up that way?
- Nickel: I think that came about when the government became more involved in getting water into the system from the San Joaquin River and spending money there. The federal and state governments got involved in the overall thing, and they decided that it would be

proper to exercise the rights of the government by handling the canal company as a public utility.

Faulhaber: The San Joaquin Canal Company was a public utility and had to operate under the umbrella of a public utility, but at the same time the federal Bureau of Reclamation was doing business in the area providing water to consumers, clients, in the same area where you were operating. Was there a conflict between the San Joaquin Canal Company and the Bureau of Reclamation, and what role did the Bureau of Reclamation play in delivering water?

Nickel: Well, the Bureau of Reclamation definitely brought more water into the area by the work that was done on the Delta-Mendota Canal. They made water available not only to the San Joaquin Canal Company but to others that could be served from the Delta-Mendota Canal. Of course, the Delta-Mendota Canal still exists, but back then it put the Bureau in a position of doing a little bargaining with not only the San Joaquin Canal Company but the other canal companies in the area which were not public utilities. They were farmer-owned canal companies.

Faulhaber: Did you consider the Bureau of Reclamation a competitor? I guess my question is did they cause you problems?

Nickel: No, I think that they were an asset to the water system generally, and, of course, they had rules and regulations that caused the San Joaquin Canal Company to have to adhere to better programs, generally, I think. They were an asset to the area.

Faulhaber: You did a lot to try to increase the income of the San Joaquin Canal Company. One of the big proposals you put forward was a proposal in conjunction with Ralph Hammonds so that he could buy excess water from the San Joaquin Canal Company. Would you talk about that idea and what you tried to accomplish?

Nickel: That certainly was a very worthwhile proposal. Ralph Hammonds was a man I came to know very well. He was the biggest operator at that time in the area that is west of the San Joaquin Canal Company area in what is now called the Westlands Water District Area. In those days he was just farming by operating wells, and they did a good job of farming. But when you are operating under just wells and don't have a recharge program it is difficult. So I worked with him on the idea that we would take a look at the San Joaquin Canal Company's water entitlement, which varied a great deal according to what the flow on the San Joaquin River was. There were lots of years when there would be a surplus of water entitlement over and above the needs and requirements of the operators in the San Joaquin Canal Company area. When that happened, the water would just go to waste, go to waste by going on down to the San Francisco Bay Area or wherever it went. So Ralph Hammonds worked with me on the concept of buying water when there was a surplus. He would get the water, and the San Joaquin Canal Company would get payment for water that they otherwise would have lost. In addition to that I got Ralph Hammonds to agree that he would put in wells in the San Joaquin Canal Company area to make water available to the operators of lands within the San Joaquin Canal Company. When there was a surplus of water, they didn't

need those wells, but when there wasn't enough water, Hammonds would then pump water to replace the water he had taken in other years, an exchange program.

Faulhaber: So the concept was that he would buy water from the San Joaquin Canal Company when there was a surplus in exchange for water that he would pump from his wells into the San Joaquin Canal Company to help out when there was a deficiency. Then in essence it was an exchange agreement. It sounds like a great proposal. Did this deal have to be approved by the Public Utilities Commission?

Nickel: The Public Utilities Commission had a right to oversee the whole thing and to see that it was run fairly. I don't think there was a real big problem with them.

Faulhaber: Were you successful with this proposal?

Nickel: No, I wasn't successful because it was at a time when the Central California Irrigation District was being formed. The attorney, C. Ray Robinson, had a great deal to do with putting that together. The farmers in the San Joaquin Canal District had made up their minds that they wanted to buy it. They were tired of the way it was run. C. Ray Robinson, the attorney, saw the potential of being able to buy the San Joaquin Canal Company reasonably, and an effort was made in that direction, and finally a sale was made.

Faulhaber: So it was a great proposal at the wrong time?

Nickel: The sale of the San Joaquin Canal Company was a poor proposal in my view. It was just a shame. The canal company could have been run so much better for the good of the owners and landowners, but they were neglected. When you look at what they were going to get for water, what they were paying for water, which was around a dollar and a half an acre foot and you compare that with what you pay today, which can run clear up to one hundred dollars an acre foot, why you can see the great value of what the San Joaquin Canal Company holders got through the sale.

Faulhaber: Actually my reference to the great proposal was to your proposal to Ralph Hammonds. It would have been a great income producer for the San Joaquin Canal Company, but the timing was bad because of the purchase. Is that right?

Nickel: That's correct. If it had been earlier, I think there would have been a good chance of getting it done.

Faulhaber: I want to mention Sam Hamburg, because from correspondence I have read, it sounds like you were trying to do the same thing with him.

Nickel: Well, Sam Hamburg was a Jewish farmer, a very fascinating man, and he obtained some land above the San Joaquin Canal Company system, like Hammonds there. He didn't have adequate wells for farming it. So he did a little politicking around and managed to get the head of the San Joaquin Canal Company, Mr. T. C. Mott, and also Olsen, the vice president of Miller & Lux, involved and was able to buy some water along the lines

that Ralph Hammonds would have liked, buying the surplus water. However, he didn't have the same idea of being able to work out exchanges of water at advantageous prices. But it's true that Hamburg was the first one to get some water that way.

Faulhaber: The mechanics of how water is allocated is a fascinating topic. When the San Joaquin Canal Company had a bad water year, in other words, the water just wasn't there to distribute, how did you go about allocating the supply?

Nickel: Well, the San Joaquin Canal Company ostensibly treated the landowners equally, all having an equal right to get water. It would get distributed along that line, if there was a short water year.

There was one big exception to that procedure, which was one of the reasons that C. Ray Robinson was successful in getting the purchase of the San Joaquin Canal Company worked out. That was the rice farming. One of the parties who was very much involved in the rice production was A. R. Olsen, who was the vice president of Miller & Lux and was in control of things along with my uncle Leroy Nickel. He worked out a program so that even in a dry water year, the rice farmers would get their full water supply, and if you know what rice takes in the way of water, it takes a rather large amount of water, like maybe six acre feet per acre as compared to an acre and a half for grain and three for cotton. Olsen gave the rice farmers enough water to raise a rice crop.

A. R. Olsen had a good friend who was a large landowner in the San Joaquin Canal Company area by the name of Harry Fawcett. They were partners in rice growing, and they had a good thing going. It just was so bad that happened.

Faulhaber: This had to have made the other farmers madder than hell.

Nickel: It made the other farmers very disgruntled and properly so.

Faulhaber: These kinds of arrangements had to affect the eventual sale of the San Joaquin Canal Company, because I would imagine the farmers thought any deal was better than the one they were getting. Would you like to comment on the timing of the sale and the value of the company when it was sold?

Nickel: Yes. I think it's an interesting history, and as we have already discussed, the farmers in the San Joaquin Canal Company area had good right to be a little disgruntled because they weren't treated properly. The canal company was not run properly at all. So what happened was, there were gentlemen in the area, farmers there, that decided that something had to be done to acquire the canal company and run it better. So in 1951 they formed the Central California Irrigation District with the help of Attorney C. Ray Robinson, a brilliant attorney out of Merced. He really did a fine job for them and the overall picture. The Central California Irrigation District was formed with the idea that they would buy, if possible, the San Joaquin Canal Company. If not, they would file for condemnation because of the poor operations.



Faulhaber: Do you recall the names of the farmers that were involved in that original organization, the Central California Irrigation District?

Nickel: Yes. Rudy Lindemann was very important. The Wolfsen brothers were very much involved, too. Harry Fawcett was another one. Then there was a man down there outside of Dos Palos who was so important too.

Faulhaber: Was it Fay Batten?

Nickel: No. Floyd Redfern was a very important person here and a very fair-minded man, the kind of man who would only get into something like this if he felt it was necessary. And then there was Herman Willis, who was a rather controversial type. But there were lots of people who were justified in having a problem with this overall thing. This controversy then bounced around back and forth, but it was kind of interesting. Attorney C. Ray Robinson thought that if the Central California Irrigation District went through a big legal effort for condemnation it would be very expensive and the outcome uncertain. So he suggested that there be a purchase program worked out with the San Joaquin Canal Company if that were possible. And so as the leader of that group he was successful in getting my uncle Leroy Nickel, A. R. Olsen, and Judge Woolley to agree to a sales program. They bounced around on what it would be worth and had different opinions, of course, but it was finally sold for \$4.2 million, a bargain. It was sold on March 16, 1953. I think it was bought through a bond issue.

### The San Luis Canal Company

Faulhaber: The San Luis Canal Company operated pretty much in the same area. You were on the board of the San Luis Canal Company as well. Can you give some background information on where it was, and who it served?

Nickel: Yes. The San Luis Canal Company was adjacent to the San Joaquin Canal Company, but it was not a public utility. It was a mutual ownership deal. Each landowner had a vote based on acreage or assessed value depending on what point in time we are talking about, but it had water rights on the San Joaquin River as the San Joaquin Canal Company did. But it was entirely separate. I think a lot of the San Joaquin Canal Company farmers would have preferred that kind of ownership.

The San Luis Canal Company needed a lot of development and organization. I became very involved in it because Miller & Lux had the biggest ownership in the San Luis Canal Company area. So I did become a director and president of the San Luis Canal Company for a period of years. We achieved a lot in the way of developing the water system and putting wells in to supplement the water, the same type of thing that Ralph Hammonds would like to have seen worked out with the San Joaquin Canal Company. We did a lot of work on drainage that needed to be done, and concrete lined canals, and new wells, and that sort of thing. It was an operation along the lines of the



San Joaquin Canal Company when it finally became the Central California Irrigation District.

Faulhaber: Can you describe the geographic area that the San Luis Canal Company covered as compared to the geographic area at the San Joaquin Canal Company?

Nickel: The San Luis Canal Company was not as big as the San Joaquin Canal Company. I think the acreage in the San Luis Canal Company was around fifty thousand acres, maybe bigger than that. But when I got into the picture a large part of the San Luis Canal Company area had not been developed into farming at all. It was just grasslands along the San Joaquin River. That's one thing that I found to be a very interesting development program. I had friends who did a lot of farming in the Tulare Lake Area, where they did a lot of flood irrigation, and so I was able to develop a good deal of Miller & Lux land on that basis of flood irrigation before it was leveled. I produced some darn good grain crops with that program.

I developed the land-leveling program for Miller & Lux with the equipment I had used to help build the Monterey Airport during World War II. That equipment also made possible the development of our lands in the San Luis Canal Company area. I then did land leveling following the flood irrigation programs.

Faulhaber: So all of this benefitted the San Luis Canal Company as well?

Nickel: Oh, sure. It gave the San Luis Canal Company a place to put the water and a way to get paid for the water. It certainly was a good deal for Miller & Lux, as Miller & Lux had some of the best land in the San Luis Canal Company area now owned by my cousins and myself.

Faulhaber: How much of the geographic land covered by the San Luis Canal Company belonged to Miller & Lux in the fifties when you were there?

Nickel: That is a good question. You know the land was being sold right about that time, I think about the time I came to work for Miller & Lux, which was after I graduated from the University of California at Berkeley in 1939. I became involved in observing what was being done on the Miller & Lux lands and doing surveying and that type of thing. At that point I would guess that Miller & Lux might have owned 40 percent of the entire San Luis Canal Company area. If it was 60,000 acres overall, why, Miller & Lux would have owned about 24,000 acres.

Faulhaber: I recall that Miller & Lux owned something like 84 percent of the stock of the San Joaquin Canal Company. Does that mean they owned the stock, but that they didn't have that much of the acreage?

Nickel: In the San Joaquin Canal Company? Oh, that's right. The percentage of ownership was much less. There was a nice block of land, but I would only be making an offhand guess. When I went down there in 1939, I would guess that Miller & Lux still owned 30,000 acres or so, maybe a little more than that.

Faulhaber: I read that the San Joaquin Canal Company extended as far as the Mendota Dam. What were the other geographic parameters of the canal company?

Nickel: I think Gustine was the far end of it, the Gustine committee. Then on the west side of it the main canal came along the edge of the elevation that would permit the water to flow there, and that was right along the edge of the Westlands Water District and the land that Sam Hamburg had.

Faulhaber: So basically the towns of Mendota, Firebaugh, Dos Palos, and Los Banos were included in the geographic area?

Nickel: The San Joaquin Canal District was nearby the towns you mention.

Faulhaber: Do the San Luis Canal Company and the San Joaquin Canal Company still exist today?

Nickel: Oh, yes. The San Luis Canal Company is doing fine.

Faulhaber: And the San Joaquin Canal Company was sold to the Central California Irrigation District.

Nickel: I think the Firebaugh Canal Company still exists today, too.

### Developing and Farming Buena Vista Lake; Cotton Allotments

Faulhaber: The subject is Buena Vista Lake. You have often said that in your opinion Buena Vista Lake was one of the finest agriculture tracts in California, and if it had been properly handled and developed at the time, it would have been one of the finest assets that Miller & Lux possibly could have held. You were hoping to be involved with Buena Vista Lake when you were living in Los Banos in the 1950s. You talked about an agreement you reached with Russell Giffen to farm Buena Vista Lake and your lack of success in convincing your uncle Leroy to proceed with that agreement and his subsequent re-leasing of land to the Houchin family. I would like to talk about Buena Vista Lake because of your involvement with it over the years. Where is Buena Vista Lake geographically?

Nickel: Geographically, it is south and a little west of the city of Bakersfield about twenty-five or thirty miles. It is just off the Kern River as it goes downstream before you come to the Elk Hills area, where all the big oil field activity is in the state. The Buena Vista Lake area is on the east side of that.

Faulhaber: Where is it in relationship to Tulare Lake?

Nickel: It is substantially to the south of Tulare Lake, I would guess mileage-wise about forty miles.

Faulhaber: Obviously at one time it was a large lake, but it became extraordinarily fine agriculture land. By its name, "lake," one would think it to be in danger because of the water flowing into it. How was the water managed and controlled to allow the land to be farmed?

Nickel: It took a period of time to develop Buena Vista Lake. Initially it was just what you said, a lake area that picked up Kern River water, the natural flow of the Kern River water. When there were big flows of Kern River water coming down they didn't have the capacity and the channels for it to continue north. So the logical holding place was Buena Vista Lake. Buena Vista Lake, its storage capacity and water rights, was further developed in the Miller-Haggin Agreement of 1888, which was between Henry Miller and the founders of the Kern County Land Company, Haggin and Tevis. There were several understandings reached on water rights.

In addition to that Henry Miller insisted upon a regulatory storage deal for some of the water he wanted to use further to the north in the Buttonwillow area. So he negotiated the deal with the founders of the Kern County Land Company, Haggin and Tevis, where they got established water rights on the Kern River that were better than they might have otherwise had.

But part of his agreement with Haggin and Tevis was that the Kern County Land Company Group would participate in making the Buena Vista Lake Area a real holding area, which required the development of the east levees of Buena Vista Lake. It required about a twenty-foot levee to hold water in and that was water that Henry Miller had a right to based on the Miller-Haggin Agreement. It was high flow water, and so the water was diverted there, to Buena Vista Lake. The lake held, I believe, 232,000 acre feet of storage back in those days. Henry Miller irrigated out of the lake, then, in the Buttonwillow area to the north past Highway 46 and all the way down to Tulare Lake.

Faulhaber: Buena Vista Lake was approximately 30,000 acres, as I recall?

Nickel: Yes. I think the area was that. I think the actual land that was under water was around twenty-three to twenty-four thousand acres.

Faulhaber: By means of this levee, how much of Buena Vista Lake then became farmable?

Nickel: Well, Buena Vista Lake did not become farmable except to the extent that it wasn't covered with water for storage. The Kern River doesn't have a regular flow of water every year. You have the high flows and the medium flows and the low flows. And so what would happen there in Buena Vista Lake, after you had a high flow year, was that water would be taken out for consumption downstream but some would be lost to evaporation. Evaporation is a big factor there because here in Kern County your evaporation will be around five and a half feet of depth a year.

Then as the water flowed out it would be possible to farm right behind that water. In those days they would have milo maize and other crops like that for the summertime

because you could plant the land as the water went out. You would get a real big crop without having to do any irrigating then. The land would hold the moisture so all you had to do was plant the crops.

Faulhaber: How were you able to control the water so that the land was able to be farmed other than just by guesswork?

Nickel: Well, initially, it would be just like you said, guesswork, because there were no levees there except the east levee that was done under the Miller-Haggin Agreement. The rest of the area didn't have any levees or anything, but as time passed the time came when I was able to negotiate the program with Crocket & Gambogy, the farming organization that came in to lease the lake in 1954. But before that, the land had been, just like you said, farmed by whatever nature did. That was the way it was done when the Houchin organization was in there farming or subleasing.

When the Crocket & Gambogy organization came in 1954, part of the agreement that I worked out with them was putting in levees to contain the water in three separate lake areas and that made it possible to store water in years when you didn't have a max flow. In years when you had a maximum flow you were pretty well restricted. But in other years you could use the lakes for storage. There are two lakes on the north side of the Buena Vista Lake area. The big lake was to the south of that. It became possible then to move water around from one lake to the other.

Faulhaber: It was kind of guesswork. In other words you put the seed in the ground, and you hoped that the water wouldn't be so overwhelming that it would destroy your crops. Is that fair to say?

Nickel: When you are putting the seed in the ground for a summer crop you wouldn't ordinarily have a problem with water until the fall of the year after you had harvested.

But the negotiations that were so important there were to get the levees in there and methods for moving water. Then having wells, too, to irrigate in low-water years was important because your water situation there jumped from very dry to very wet. So you had to have a combination of programs to take care of it.

I personally worked hard on that concept for some time even with Elmer Houchin, who had a particular program with my uncle, Leroy Nickel. They were friends, and my uncle was getting paid off by Elmer Houchin on various deals. But when that lease ran out in 1953, Elmer Houchin had just passed away, so I recommended to my uncle Leroy Nickel that he accept the program I discussed with Russell Giffen, who was the famous cotton farmer in the San Joaquin Valley, the biggest cotton farmer in the world, I guess, at that particular time. I am talking about 1953.

Russell Giffen really appreciated the opportunities I pointed out to him there in Buena Vista Lake. He was ready to commit to putting in the levees for proper water control and to put in additional wells. He was ready to spend millions of dollars there because he knew that it was a property that would produce fine crops. In addition to



that he had extensive cotton allotments which were very important in those days because without them you couldn't plant cotton and get the payments that went with them.

So I had all that pretty well worked out with Russell Giffen. I sold him on the idea of really coming in there and spending money and developing it. I brought this whole program to my uncle Leroy Nickel, and he ended up by turning the whole thing down and just making a very poor deal with a nephew of Elmer Houchin, Francis Houchin. Francis Houchin had no commitments to spend any money there to develop Buena Vista Lake. All he was going to do was farm some cotton and some grain.

Leroy Nickel was just impossible to understand and put up with. I don't know why he had this continuing commitment with Francis Houchin except that maybe he felt somewhat guilty about having gotten all kinds of money from Elmer Houchin on oil land and deals there in Buena Vista Lake. Such a stinking deal. It's hard to believe. Leroy Nickel got paid off on that agricultural money from Buena Vista Lake. In addition he got all kinds of deals with Elmer Houchin on oil leases on Miller & Lux land.

Faulhaber: Is it fair to say that Buena Vista Lake really wasn't developed until the Houchins were out and Crocket & Gambogy came in?

Nickel: Yes, that's correct. Unfortunately we lost Russell Giffen. I think he just had too much of Leroy Nickel, and he decided he did not want to make a further lease attempt. Consequently, I went out and beat the bushes to find a big farming operation that would come in and appreciate the opportunity and give us a decent rental program and development program.

I did a lot of looking around and finally found the organization of Crocket & Gambogy. They were about the second largest operator in Tulare Lake, next to Boswell. Anyhow, Crocket & Gambogy came in and agreed to spend millions of dollars on levees and water development, and that paid off. That lease was executed in the fall of 1954 on the day that my wife and brother were killed in an airplane accident. That is the day that we entered into the Crocket & Gambogy lease in San Francisco.

Faulhaber: A bittersweet day.

Nickel: Oh, boy.

Faulhaber: Crocket & Gambogy invested a lot in Buena Vista Lake. What did they get in return? What did the lease call for in payment to them?

Nickel: I believe it was a 25 percent cropshare lease.

Faulhaber: So they took 75 percent and paid Miller & Lux 25 percent.



- Nickel: They grew the crops. So they had all of the expense. They put a lot of money into the levees and the wells, and they did a good job for us.
- Faulhaber: How much income flowed to Buena Vista Associates or Miller & Lux from the lease?
- Nickel: Well, I think it was probably Buena Vista Associates, which was a corporation totally owned by Miller & Lux.
- Faulhaber: How much income did Miller & Lux receive, on the average, from Buena Vista Lake through this lease?
- Nickel: Gee, I'd like to be able to give you the figure right off the bat. I think it was around \$600,000 a year.
- Faulhaber: How long did Crocket & Gambogy continue to farm Buena Vista Lake? Was it just a few years, or did it go longer?
- Nickel: I think it was probably in the range of ten years. Maybe not quite. What happened there was that Crocket & Gambogy was farming in Tulare Lake too. Sandy Crocket was the one that ran the organization. In fact I think he bought out Gambogy in the process of dealing with us. In any event he got into financial problems in Tulare Lake. So he ended up selling out down there in Tulare Lake to the J. G. Boswell Company. Then the next thing he did was agree to sublease to them in Buena Vista Lake. And that's where we got the J. G. Boswell Company into farming the Buena Vista Lake area.
- Faulhaber: Who owns Buena Vista Lake today?
- Nickel: Buena Vista Lake today is owned by the J. G. Boswell Company except for the minimum acreage which is outside of the lake in some of the higher land that we as a family group still own. I think it is around 600 acres.
- Faulhaber: Obviously this was a prime piece of property. Why did Miller & Lux finally decide to sell Buena Vista Lake to the Boswells?
- Nickel: Well, the Boswell Company did a good job of farming in Buena Vista Lake and appreciated that they had a heck of a good piece of property there and decided that they would like to own it. So Jim Boswell, Jim Boswell, Sr., decided that the thing to do was to offer to the Henry Miller Trust heirs, the Bowles family and the Nickel family, an opportunity to take stock in the J. G. Boswell Company for their share of interest in the Buena Vista Lake area.

I was personally opposed to that because I was much more interested in having money for development out in the Rio Bravo Ranch area, which I was in the process of buying. So I absolutely refused to sell my percentage interest. But the rest of the family who owned the remaining seven-eighths interest took Boswell's stock, and I took cash from Boswell which I needed for my other operations. I think that the rest of the

family thought they had made a good deal, but the truth of the matter is it would have been better if they hadn't done it. But that is water under the bridge.

Faulhaber: Does the rest of the family still own Boswell stock as far as you know?

Nickel: I think some of them do and some don't. Boswell stock has had its ups and downs. I think that they have done some fine farming and have some operations in Australia of considerable magnitude. Some of them were good, and then some of them were bad, and so their income bounced around quite a bit. I think some of the family has sold out, and some of them definitely still have Boswell stock.

Faulhaber: Does Boswell still own all of that acreage in Buena Vista Lake?

Nickel: Yes. Boswell definitely does, and they are very happy they do. It is the best farming operation they have in California.

Faulhaber: I would like to return to the subject of cotton allotments, because these allotments were very important in the fifties when Buena Vista Lake was being farmed. For those of us who don't understand the concept of cotton allotments, can you give background on what a cotton allotment is, and why it is important?

Nickel: What happened historically is that cotton came on into California in the early thirties, and it became quite a successful program. Then all of a sudden there were so many getting into the cotton farming business that it was hurting their opportunity to make money. So the federal government came in and said that those who had cotton operations over a period of, I think, three years were entitled to continue to farm a percentage of whatever they had been farming to cotton. They also were entitled to government payments.

It was a complicated deal that was worked out. If you didn't have cotton history or hadn't been farming cotton you couldn't get into it at all, and there was no government payments. In fact if you didn't have cotton allotments there were restrictions about even being able to farm at all. So that became a most important issue in Buena Vista Lake.

That's where Russell Giffen's operation would have meant so much to us because Russell Giffen was probably the biggest cotton farmer in California, and he had cotton allotments and would have brought them down into Buena Vista Lake in great abundance. But because my uncle Leroy Nickel had an arrangement with Elmer Houchin, he wanted to stay with the Houchins, and he did. He turned down the wonderful program I put together with my efforts with Russell Giffen and went into a very scrubby deal with a nephew of Elmer Houchin, Francis Houchin, who had very little cotton allotment. It wasn't a good program at all.

So after that first year with Francis Houchin, which would have been in 1954, everybody recognized that it was a poor deal. At that point I found a better tenant for Buena Vista Lake, and that's where Crocket & Gambogy came in in the fall of 1954.

Faulhaber: As I recall the land in Buena Vista Lake that was owned by Elmer Houchin came back to Miller & Lux because of this suit.

Nickel: In the litigation Elmer Houchin's estate paid about a \$10 million payment to Miller & Lux.

Faulhaber: And a portion of that was land in Buena Vista Lake.

Nickel: Yes. I think it was about 1,800 acres around the edge of Buena Vista Lake.

Faulhaber: Buena Vista Lake is still being farmed today. Is it being farmed in cotton?

Nickel: Oh, yes. It definitely has cotton and a great deal more. It has tomatoes, various vegetables, alfalfa, grain crops, and corn crops. It's a beautiful operation. I will give Boswell credit for that. It is really something to be proud of.

Faulhaber: Obviously over the years the water situation with the flooding has been controlled. Is the water still managed in Buena Vista Lake through levees?

Nickel: Through levees and the use of Isabella Reservoir, which is extremely important. Negotiations on the trade of water is all part of the package. The unfortunate part of the whole thing is that Boswell owns the Buena Vista Lake land and our family is out of any direct ownership.

Faulhaber: As I recall you did negotiate very well for water rights and capacity in Isabella Reservoir, and we will talk about that in our next interview.

### **Constructing Isabella Reservoir; Flood Control and Water Rights**

[Interview 7: June 1, 2000]

Faulhaber: It is June 1, 2000. We are in Bakersfield, at George's home on the Kern River.

This is our seventh interview, and the topic today is the Isabella water project, known as the Isabella Reservoir. It follows our last interview, which had to do with Buena Vista Lake. The water issues at the time Isabella Reservoir was built were important. The first was the issue of controlling Kern River water in years when there was flooding, and the second was storing water for future use, when there was a surplus.

Today's interview will have to do with a project that was instituted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the early fifties, which resulted in the construction of Isabella Reservoir. I am going to ask you to talk about the history of Isabella, why it was constructed, and who were the main beneficiaries.

Nickel: The need for Isabella Reservoir on the Kern River was to a great extent flood control. Historically, before the reservoir was built, the Kern River overflowed and there was lots of flood damage downstream in the Bakersfield area. Also the river continued to overflow on down to Tulare Lake, and there was substantial damage in those big water years to the lands to the north of Tulare Lake and actually in Tulare Lake itself. The Buena Vista Water Storage District area, which is also in Kern County, was also affected.

Faulhaber: Before Isabella Reservoir was constructed how was flood control managed?

Nickel: Flood control was very limited before Isabella came in. There was some flood control for the benefit of the Buena Vista Water Storage District in addition to regulation of water in Buena Vista Lake. Buena Vista Lake, through the Miller-Haggin Agreement of 1888, was used for water storage for the benefit of what became the Buena Vista Water Storage District area. It also took care of some high-flow waters that would have been damaging downstream. So it was a combination of regulated irrigation water and some flood control.

Faulhaber: How did the U.S. government become aware of the problems in Bakersfield? They committed \$21 million to build Isabella Reservoir.

Nickel: Well, there was so much damage that occurred in those big water years that it was pretty obvious to the United States government, as well as to the people that were adversely affected, that something had to be done. I think that there was probably some help by our congressional representatives. But I don't recall that right offhand.

Faulhaber: Who were the primary beneficiaries of the Isabella project?

Nickel: The primary benefits flowed in three directions. In the Miller-Haggin Agreement the big interests on the river just downstream from the mouth of the Kern River Canyon were initially those that became the Kern County Land Company interests. They formulated the district known as the North Kern Water Storage District, which was the district that was most involved with the Kern County Land Company lands. Then downstream it was the Buena Vista Water Storage District that got the benefits from flood control and other regulation that would have not have occurred in the Buena Vista Lake area if Isabella hadn't been built.

Faulhaber: Were there beneficiaries other than these two entities, the two water districts?

Nickel: The other beneficiaries were what we refer to as the downstream landowners, who were downstream north of the Buena Vista Water Storage District and all the way down to and including Tulare Lake. Those lands also received quite a lot of harmful flood damage in big water years, and so they also were benefitted by the storage in Isabella Reservoir, but not as much as the Buena Vista Water Storage District and the Kern County Land Company interests to the south.

Faulhaber: Were these primarily individuals or were they other water storage districts?



- Nickel: Some were individuals, but the two entities that were involved were the Tulare Lake Basin Water Storage District and the Hacienda Water District.
- Faulhaber: We turned up an interim agreement dated December 31, 1962. It is an interesting agreement because it obviously took the U.S. government a long time to come up with a permanent contract to resolve the storage issue in Buena Vista Lake. But as you just noted, the interim agreement was between Buena Vista Water Storage District, North Kern Water Storage District, Tulare Lake Basin Water Storage District, and the Hacienda Water Storage District. Do you have a feeling as to when the Department of the Interior finally came up with a permanent agreement which you all signed?
- Nickel: I believe that it was in 1964 when everything was entered into. I am currently looking for the contract to be sure we have the correct date.<sup>1</sup>
- Faulhaber: Can you recall what the primary provisions were of the agreement? I understood that the government wanted to recoup some of their \$21 million investment. From the documentation that we have just reviewed it is obvious that some of the cost had to be allocated to the flood control project because that was the primary reason for the construction. But every indication is that you all were charged based on the percentage of storage that would be allocated to you for conservation purposes. Is that correct?
- Nickel: Yes, the U.S. government determined how to split the benefits. But a portion of it was allocated to the benefit of flood control itself in the city and elsewhere, the City of Bakersfield, primarily. But then the United States government also came up with a figure that dealt with water conservation for the benefit of the downstream users of the water. I don't have those figures right in front of me.
- Faulhaber: Do you recall the percentages that each district received?
- Nickel: Insofar as the amount of money that the government charged?
- Faulhaber: I am thinking more about the percentage of storage that you bought.
- Nickel: Yes, that's right. 80 percent of the storage benefitted the Buena Vista Storage District and the North Kern Water Storage District. The division was 32 percent for the Buena Vista Water Storage District area, and 48 percent for the North Kern Water Storage District. And then there was an allocation of 20 percent of benefits to the lands north of the Buena Vista Water Storage District.
- Faulhaber: The contracts indicate that there was a distinction between what they called "first point" ownership and "second point" ownership, first point being the Northern Kern Water

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<sup>1</sup>Agreement was dated Oct. 23, 1964 United States Department of the Interior, Bureau of Reclamation, Kern River Project, California. Contract among the United States of America and North Kern Water Storage District, Buena Vista Water Storage District, Tulare Lake Basin Water Storage District, and Hacienda Water District.



Storage District, and second point being Buena Vista Water Storage District. Can you explain what first point water rights are versus second point water rights?

Nickel: Yes. Those water rights were settled in the Miller-Haggin Agreement of 1888 by my great-grandfather, Henry Miller. He was bound and determined to make it a fair proposition. The allocation of water that flowed to the Kern County Land Company was mostly the land belonging to Haggin and Tevis in the Miller-Haggin Agreement. They got the first 300 second feet [cubic feet per second] of natural flow, and then the division was made between the two entities. I am embarrassed to say that I am not sure what that percentage was, but we have those figures.

Faulhaber: The "first point" water rights then had to do with taking water at the source. Is that correct?

Nickel: Well, what became the North Kern Water Storage District was the Kern County Land Company interest basically, the Haggin and Tevis group. They had fought with Henry Miller over whether or not an appropriative right was superior to a riparian right on the river. The Kern County Land Group claimed that they had a right, an appropriative right, which is just a take of the water that would not necessarily be on the land adjacent to the river but to lands where they would divert the water by canals. Henry Miller took the position that it was riparian water rights and that the first interest in the water should go to the lands adjacent to the river. His lands were adjacent to the river in this contest.

Faulhaber: So on that point, second point water rights would have been riparian?

Nickel: Historically that is correct in the Miller-Haggin Agreement of 1888.

Faulhaber: And first point would have been appropriative.

Nickel: That's right.

Faulhaber: You were explaining to me something that I found very interesting. Oftentimes when water is transported from the source, any distance at all, there is a loss due to evaporation and seepage into the underground.

Nickel: Percolation, yes.

Faulhaber: So the term "undiminished distribution" of water is very important. Was that concept important from the standpoint of second point water rights?

Nickel: Yes, Henry Miller negotiated that in the Miller-Haggin Agreement. The waters allocated to what was then Miller's interest were to receive the given amount of water that is set forth in the agreement according to riparian water-right theory. Water was to be delivered to Henry Miller's operations in "undiminished quantities." The transportation losses, to the extent that they existed as the water came down the river to Miller's land, were to be all absorbed by the Kern County Land Company group.

- Faulhaber: Going back to the percentage of storage that was calculated for the Isabella Reservoir project, the Northern Kern Water Storage District had 48 percent, and the Buena Vista Water Storage District had 32 percent. How were those percentages arrived at?
- Nickel: They were arrived at by what happened in the Miller-Haggin Agreement of 1888. In the Miller-Haggin agreement the riparian water rights were declared superior. The Kern County Land Company would have liked to see the agreement based on appropriative water rights; however, it is interesting to know that the Kern County Land Company also had lots of riparian water rights. Anyway, a negotiated figure was arrived at that came up with the 32 percent and the 48 percent figures.
- Faulhaber: So these negotiations really did stem from the original Miller-Haggin Agreement?
- Nickel: Yes.
- Faulhaber: Isabella Reservoir still exists today. It has made flood control possible in Bakersfield. The control of water now is much smoother. The farmers must be very pleased with the results. Do you own any percentage of Isabella Reservoir today?
- Nickel: Personally?
- Faulhaber: Yes, personally.
- Nickel: No, I have rights that pass on through to me for the lower river rights, which are for the lands north of the Buena Vista Water Storage District, where I had the Hacienda Water District and other lands. I ended up with 20 percent of storage in Isabella Reservoir. This was all basically the Hacienda Water District, lands that I own south of Tulare Lake.
- Faulhaber: You have spoken often about underground water and how important it is to farming operations. When Isabella Reservoir was built it was my understanding that many of the canals and the ditches were concrete lined. Did that affect the underground water supply and the normal percolation of water down into the ground as it traveled from one point to another?
- Nickel: As time passed the ditch systems were improved, sometimes with concrete and lots of other methods because there was more control of water. You didn't have the big slugs of water that you couldn't handle. It certainly was important. The control of the water to the underground was actually helped by the better ditches. In subsequent years there has been a recovery of waters that have been spread to the underground. We now have the "2,800 Acre Water Bank" in Kern County. Underground storage is becoming more and more important all the time because there is better knowledge of what should be done along that line in the way of spreading water for later recovery.
- Faulhaber: So even though Isabella was constructed for benefits of water conservation and flood control, the effort to maintain the underground water source was still continued?

- Nickel: Very definitely. Not only because of water in the Kern River but because there is state and federal water that comes into the Kern County area and makes possible this replenishment.
- Faulhaber: Returning to the subject of the final contract to construct Isabella Reservoir, even though we don't have in front of us the actual contract that the beneficiaries, the water districts, signed with the Department of the Interior, what did the ultimate contract say, and in essence, how much money did the water storage districts have to come up with to be able to buy perpetual conservation rights in Isabella Reservoir?
- Nickel: It was a cash payment to the United States, and the Kern County Land Company put up the money for the North Kern Water Storage District and Buena Vista Associates put up money for the second point interests of the Buena Vista Water Storage District. The exact amount I don't have, but it was a cash payment paid to the government through a bond issue by the formation of the Henry Miller Water District in Buena Vista Lake that made that feasible.
- Faulhaber: How much money was the bond issue for?
- Nickel: Just guessing at the moment, I think it must have been around \$12 million. [tape interruption]

### **Flood Control for Los Banos, Dos Palos, and Firebaugh**

- Faulhaber: This is a continuation of our conversation on flood control. We have talked about Isabella Reservoir in Kern County and what that meant for the conservation of water and farmability of land. Now I would like to ask you about Los Banos, Dos Palos, and Firebaugh. At about the same time you were actively involved in flood control projects in Los Banos, trying to save the town as well as the towns of Dos Palos and Firebaugh. What was the situation like there?
- Nickel: The communities that you mentioned experienced their flood problems somewhat differently. In the case of the City of Los Banos, its problem came from Los Banos Creek, not from the rivers that affected the other communities. In Los Banos we did have flooding in the late 1950s, '55 or '56, when the Los Banos Creek got out of control.

I happened to be on hand observing the situation when the creek overflowed. Los Banos Creek flows west of Los Banos, but anyhow, it broke out of its banks and flowed into the area of Los Banos that was on the south side, southwest side, where the cemeteries are and actually flowed clear through the cemeteries and came over to the homes that were to the east of the cemetery, including the home of my doctor, Dr. Lymp.

So I got a bulldozer or two into the area to stop the flood waters from doing damage, and I had some assistance from the canal company operations. They brought in some equipment, and we managed to steer the water into the main canal. We had a lot of cooperation from a number of directions in getting the job done. That was the worst flood that I remember in the Los Banos community. Los Banos Creek otherwise sometimes flooded further to the north and then wasn't a problem to the City of Los Banos.

The other areas, Dos Palos and Firebaugh, are on the San Joaquin River, and in those days we occasionally had some real serious flooding problems along there. The problems got so bad that they really had an adverse effect on the farmlands on both sides of the river. Most of the farmlands there on the west side were adversely affected. I had personal interests there along with my very good friend, Harold O'Banion, who was also on the State Reclamation Board with me. The seepage from the river was tremendous, and the threat of the outbreak from the river was very real. So we had to do something to solve that problem not only for just then, but for the future. At that point we managed to open up the river downstream to take the water on through, and then on the east side of the river we managed to spread some water without creating the hazard on the west side of the river. We very nearly had a complete flood disaster that year, 1958.

Then the city of Firebaugh was also on the river. Just how we were able to contain that, well, we weren't able to contain it totally. There was some water that got into the city, but what this all amounted to was that my friend, Harold O'Banion, and I saw the problem and decided that something should be done about it. The solution was a flood control program on the east side of the river where a channel could be opened up that would carry the water from upstream in the Firebaugh area out of the river.

As time passed and the State Reclamation Board got involved we were able to get an enlarged channel and an outlet from the San Joaquin River. We brought the canal system all the way down to a point north of Highway 152, which is the highway that goes to Los Banos from Madera. We had crossings under the highway. We managed to keep the water on the east side of the river for another four to five miles until we came to the Chamberlain Slough, I think. The Chamberlin Slough was a natural flow stream out of the river to the north and east sides. We were able to get the water down there into that slough. It was a program of containing the water that way, and then eventually the water found its way back into the river.

Because of our interests in this problem, we did get the State Reclamation Board to work with us on it, and got a project going there that still exists today. What a difference it makes along the river when you can get away from all that seepage that otherwise occurs and also eliminate the high buildup of the water.

Faulhaber: Was it the volume of water that caused the seepage?

Nickel: Yes, you get the elevated water and the volume of water which causes the seepage. In fact, even today, downstream from there, there has been a little carelessness on the part



of the San Joaquin Levee Flood Control District. They don't always keep that water moving on the east side and sometimes let it get back into the river where it doesn't belong. I own property along there so I know what the seepage problem can be.

Faulhaber: We will talk about the State Reclamation Board and what you did to further the interest of flood control for the San Joaquin Valley, but I know that since you were living in Los Banos at the time, these floods obviously affected you directly. Was the Delta Ranch ever threatened by floods?

Nickel: No, not the Delta Ranch but lands north and east, yes. I don't think I stressed enough the danger that the City of Dos Palos had from the flow of the east side of the river north of Firebaugh. That river came so close to breaking that it would have flowed right into the City of Dos Palos. It would have created all kinds of damage. Fortunately now we have that contained.

Also on the matter of flood control, by working with the federal government we got a water passageway that brought water around to the west of the City of Dos Palos. Then it flowed north to Kesterson. The problem with the flood waters is that they got in there in that area east of Gustine where the quality of the water became a problem. The state stopped the use of that holding area there, which was kind of too bad from a flood control standpoint, but I guess there were arguments that people thought were good ones.

Faulhaber: Did that become the Kesterson Wildlife Preserve?

Nickel: Yes. It was the Kesterson area that I was trying to think of where they stopped the water for quality problems.

Faulhaber: In the fifties were there any dams in the area? I see a reference to the Mendota Dam?

Nickel: The Mendota Dam goes clear back to the days of my great grandfather, Henry Miller. The Mendota Dam was put on the San Joaquin River to divert water into the canal systems that he built, primarily on the west side of the San Joaquin River. It is still there today, the diversion dam of the San Joaquin River. It has served a very useful purpose and is still there.

### **Creating the Lower San Joaquin Levee District**

[Interview 8: August 31, 2000]

Faulhaber: The date is August 31, 2000. We are in George's office in Bakersfield, California, at the Rio Bravo Ranch. The topic of conversation today is water, in particular the creation of the Lower San Joaquin Levee District, which is located between Los Banos and Dos Palos in the Central Valley. This is an important topic because it has to do with flood



control and George's position as a founding director on the board of the Lower San Joaquin Levee District, which eventually led to an appointment on the Reclamation Board.

I thought as background information I would talk about the resolution that created the district because it is important to the overall context of the interview. The Lower San Joaquin Levee District was created by California Senate Bill 1325 and was approved by the governor on June 18, 1955, and then filed with the secretary of state on June 20, 1955. It was created with a board of six directors, and its purpose as defined by the resolution was as follows:

"The purposes of the district are to give assurances and to effect the local cooperation required by the secretary of the army in connection with the plan of improvement for flood control and other purposes on the lower San Joaquin River and its tributaries. Such local cooperation shall consist substantially of the repair, operation, and maintenance of levees, works, structures, and other facilities in connection with such plan of improvement."

And then to summarize the first minutes of the board, dated March 31, 1956, Resolution No. 1 which set up the board stated that: the Federal Flood Control Act of 1944 authorized construction by the United States of a project of flood control for the San Joaquin River as described in House Document Number 2, 78th Congress, Second Session. The State of California in 1945 authorized the project of flood control and authorized the Reclamation Board to give satisfactory assurance to the secretary of the army that the required local cooperation be furnished by the state in connection with the project. The state legislature authorized the State Reclamation Board to acquire the land, easements, and rights-of-way necessary for construction of the project in accordance with the authorized plan of flood control and appropriated funds to commence acquisition of these lands, easements, and rights of way. The Reclamation Board, however, was not authorized to expend funds upon the project until some other public agency had assumed the obligation of maintenance and operation of the works and assumed the obligation to hold the United States government harmless from damages; therefore, the Lower San Joaquin Levee District was created to assume the obligations as outlined by the federal government. This was important because local control, for flood control, was paramount in understanding the problems of the area. Five local landowners were appointed as founding directors. They were Directors Erreca, Wolfsen, Hodgkiss, Nickel, and Willis.

Again George was one of the founding directors representing the Los Banos/Dos Palos area. I would like to ask you to comment on the district and to explain why the district was important to the Los Banos, Dos Palos, and Firebaugh areas.

Nickel: I would be pleased to make an effort along that line. The reason that I was so active in the overall effort there was because we had, my family and I, extensive land holdings along the San Joaquin River that were affected by its floodwaters when they were out of control. That was a definite problem that needed correction, and it wasn't only our properties that were affected. There were lots of others with thousands of acres

affected, not only along the San Joaquin Rivers but also along the other rivers that contributed to the San Joaquin River, those being the Merced River and the Fresno Slough Channel and the water from the overflow through Tulare Lake. There was lots of water that came down the San Joaquin River in a big water year which created problems along the levees of the San Joaquin River from about the City of Firebaugh on downstream. Those were the areas that I was most familiar with. I could see that they needed correction.

Faulhaber: I read in some of the minutes that before the Lower San Joaquin Levee District was created--many farmers were creating their own levees to protect their lands, but oftentimes in the process damaged the lands of their neighbors. Is that something you recall as having been a problem and would you care to comment?

Nickel: Yes, that certainly was true. The individuals in trying to protect their land really didn't have any other option at that time. That then created problems on adjacent lands that didn't have the relief either in the San Joaquin River Channel. This is why we, as landowner groups, definitely wanted and needed the San Joaquin River contained.

Faulhaber: How effective was the levee district in bringing farmers together to try to straighten out their problems?

Nickel: The levee district was formed in order to satisfy the state. The state had spent millions of dollars to put in levees, and they wanted and needed continued maintenance of the flood control facilities. This really was important. As we look back on the situation now, we had the cooperation of the State of California and the United States federal government in financing the project. We got a program going, not without a heck of a lot of effort and follow through, but once that was done it made a tremendous difference on flood control.

Faulhaber: We have just reviewed the pamphlet that dedicated the Lower San Joaquin Flood Control Project. It was a dedication ceremony dated October 6, 1966. The district was formed in 1956. So it took almost ten years to put in the system of flood control that the Lower San Joaquin District was commissioned to provide. How did you go about it, and what was involved? The project cost around 23 or 24 million dollars, which means contracts and plans had to be let and approved. As a director of the levee district can you comment on what the procedure was to be able to efficiently organize the flood control project?

Nickel: What we did on the local level was to again contact the State Reclamation Board to set forth the tremendous damage that was occurring and even more importantly to show them what tremendous damage could occur if there was nothing done.

I can remember the year 1958 when flood waters along the San Joaquin River got out of control on the east side and west side of the river in the area that I was mostly concerned with. We were very fortunate that the levees didn't break on the west side of the river. It would have completely flooded the towns of Dos Palos, and of course,

Firebaugh, too, which was actually hurt in the year of 1958. We called these things to the attention of the State Reclamation Board.

Fortunately, I was appointed to the State Reclamation Board myself in 1958 or 1959 when Pat Brown became governor of the state. I had great admiration for Governor Pat Brown. We had Senator Colby, who also gave us a helping hand. By my appointment to the State Reclamation Board, I was able to represent the interests of the local area.

Faulhaber: I was just recalling that ten years of work brought three major bypasses. The Eastside Bypass was the one that was most important to the Firebaugh, Dos Palos, and Los Banos area. But there was also the Mariposa Bypass and then the Chowchilla Bypass. The amount of engineering required must have been phenomenal. Did the Reclamation Board provide the engineering expertise?

Nickel: Yes, the Reclamation Board put the programs together, and I should also mention that I wasn't the only local farmer appointed to the State Reclamation Board. Another farmer right on the San Joaquin River was Harold O'Banion, a fine farmer and an excellent man. He was appointed two or three years after I was. We were lucky that we had an opening, and I made sure that Harold O'Banion was given proper attention for an appointment. He was appointed, and that made a big difference in getting the job done with both of us there.

Faulhaber: Did you maintain your directorship on the Lower San Joaquin Levee District as well as the appointment on the Reclamation Board?

Nickel: I was certainly continuing to be very active on the Lower San Joaquin Levee District, but I did retire from that because it was appropriate that I should. But that didn't mean I wasn't active in helping every way I could there.

Faulhaber: It would seem to be a great advantage to maintain that contact with the levee district because a lot of the work being done out of Sacramento was directly affecting what happened in the levee district. Did you find that having two votes on the Reclamation Board helped the project to proceed?

Nickel: Oh, definitely. On any of these boards being able to set forth what was factual and important was very worthwhile for the other members of the State Reclamation Board. I feel that we had a lot of good cooperation and good people on that State Reclamation Board. There were also some very good engineers and attorneys involved.

Faulhaber: It took ten years to build the flood control project, and from the minutes we have read there was quite a bit of controversy. Everyone who had land along the area where the bypass was to be built was concerned about losing land because of the engineering that had to be done. Were public hearings called and were the farmers encouraged to come and express their views?

Nickel: Very definitely. The Lower San Joaquin Levee District encouraged participation and that participation also included the State Reclamation Board members and personnel.

What you say about the controversy was largely on the east side of the San Joaquin River where there had not been any proper projects built to control the floodwaters. It was necessary to have what is referred to as the Eastside Bypass on the east side of the San Joaquin River. It made possible the movement of those flood waters to the north without having to come in to the San Joaquin River at Firebaugh. It certainly made a tremendous difference and has been appreciated by all concerned. Even those that at one time thought that there would be problems on the east side of the San Joaquin River found that they were mistaken, that the Eastside Bypass really took care of the problems properly.

Faulhaber: I would assume that significant money was expended for right of ways. Didn't the Eastside Bypass consist of about 150 miles of levees?

Nickel: No, I don't think it was that long. I don't have the number in my head right now. But it was a good long one. The Eastside Bypass comes back into San Joaquin River where the Merced River enters, which was a good place to come into the river because the San Joaquin River Channel downstream there was large enough to handle those waters properly.

Faulhaber: Did the floodwaters come from Friant Dam?

Nickel: The spill water from Friant Dam was certainly one of the big ones. Friant Dam was efficiently operated. Occasionally it would have high flood years when waters would have to be released, and those release years were part of the big problem, yes. The Chowchilla River area, from the east side there, was also a problem area and also waters from up toward Tulare Lake. Tulare Lake itself had spill water. So there were many waters that needed control.

Faulhaber: So the Eastside Bypass basically solved the Friant Dam problem. Generally has the Eastside Bypass solved the flood control problems since it was built?

Nickel: Yes, the Eastside Bypass has worked well and has been maintained sufficiently to keep it working well because the maintenance district formed for that purpose continues to function.

Faulhaber: The Lower San Joaquin Levee District, then, still is in effect to maintain the levees?

Nickel: Yes, that is correct.

Faulhaber: How is the levee district funded at this point?

Nickel: There is still some help from state and federal money, as I understand it, but there is also some contribution from the Eastside Bypass area. I don't know right now what the contributions are, but I believe there are some from landowner groups.



Faulhaber: Actually I recall reading minutes that stated that all of the lands within the district had to be valued and were assessed. So the local landowners paid an assessment for the flood control project.

Nickel: I believe that is correct. I am sorry I don't have the facts, but it is certainly an important part of maintenance.

Faulhaber: I also recall that there was controversy because some landowners within the district, in particular the Spreckels sugar plant, didn't want to pay the assessment because they were not farmers. Do you recall anything about that situation?

Nickel: I certainly do. I thought it was improper for Spreckels Sugar to maintain that they didn't have a need for it and that they shouldn't be participants, but they became participants.

Faulhaber: Were there other such situations?

Nickel: Well, there were some landowners who would have preferred not to have contributed for the benefits they got, but those things were pretty much all overcome.

Faulhaber: When there were appeals for avoiding assessment, was it the Lower San Joaquin Levee District that made the decision or did the Reclamation Board get involved?

Nickel: You know I am a little rusty on the topic. It was probably a combination of both.



### III THE SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY IN THE 1960s AND 1970s

[Interview 10: October 24, 2000]

#### Appointment to the State Reclamation Board of California

Faulhaber: The date is October 24, 2000. We are at the Rio Bravo Ranch in Bakersfield, California. The subject is the California State Reclamation Board.

George, you were appointed to the State Reclamation Board on March 25, 1959, just a few months after Pat Brown was elected governor of the State of California. You served basically during his entire tenure, submitting your resignation at the end of 1966, which coincided with the departure of Governor Brown in January 1967 and the election of Ronald Reagan. The subject today is the State Reclamation Board and your tenure there. I would like you to give background information on what the Reclamation Board was, why it was set up, and what it really did for the State of California.

Nickel: The Reclamation Board was set up to take care of flood control of the Central Valley of California, which would be both the Sacramento and the San Joaquin River areas. It was a very important board in that it took care of a growing California where flood control became much more important than it had been in earlier days.

Faulhaber: How was the board set up? Was it part of the Department of Water Resources or was it independent?

Nickel: It was independent but it worked with the federal government on programs.

Faulhaber: My understanding was that the federal government was actively involved in flood control in California because most of the money that flowed into California for the purpose of flood control came from the federal government. Is my understanding correct?

Nickel: Yes, that certainly was the case. For many years I think there was an effort to involve the federal government. It was helpful, of course, from the state's standpoint, to get federal money. And the state got lots of federal money.

Faulhaber: Is it fair to assume that it was a close working relationship on matters of flood control?

Nickel: Yes, I think that is a fair statement. The relationship certainly was a beneficial one. If you are interested, I think I have information on the amounts of money that came from the federal government and that type of thing.

Faulhaber: What actual function did the State Reclamation Board perform?

Nickel: As we have said, the function that the Reclamation Board served was flood control on both the Sacramento and San Joaquin rivers and on the adjacent lands and the tributaries to those two rivers.

Faulhaber: Was the State Reclamation Board an operational agency in the sense of performing the work or did the board act as a general manager setting up these levee districts and different organizations statewide?

Nickel: What you just said is correct. The Reclamation Board got the programs set up and then checked them out as time passed, but the operations of the facilities were almost entirely with the state or more likely with the local entities that were developed by the state to take care of the programs in the different areas.

Faulhaber: We talked previously about the Lower San Joaquin Levee District. Is that a good example of a local agency that was set up for levee maintenance and flood control?

Nickel: The Lower San Joaquin Levee District dealt with the San Joaquin River. But the fact was that during my time on the Reclamation Board there was much more flood control performed off of the Sacramento River. But I was pleased that I was on the board to be able to help out on the San Joaquin River, together with one other man that was brought on the State Reclamation Board, Harold O'Banion. We were two of the seven members who were on there.

At that time the San Joaquin River was causing some very severe problems, and I think that our being there made a great deal of difference in that we were able to establish flood control on the east side of the San Joaquin River. Without it the floods would have done a lot of damage in the lands west of the San Joaquin River, lands that included the communities of Dos Palos and Firebaugh. It would have been just dreadful if there had been breaks along the levees of the west bank of the San Joaquin River, which frankly almost happened.

Faulhaber: The Lower San Joaquin Levee District was formed in 1956 or so, and you were one of the founding directors. It was formed to service and maintain the Eastside Bypass area, what was commonly referred to as the San Joaquin Bypasses. Stan Kronick, your good friend who was president of the Reclamation Board at that time, said that during the eight years you served, one of the Reclamation Board's great accomplishments was the San Joaquin Bypass, but it took nearly ten years to complete. Why did it take so long?

Nickel: Well, I think one of the main reasons was that the federal government was not giving us the funds that were required to get the job done. And then there were landowners on the east side of the San Joaquin River who did not want the flood control project to pass through them. Frankly, they all gained tremendously by having it there, and they subsequently learned that. But initially we had a very difficult time getting their cooperation.

Faulhaber: How were you finally able to convince them to cooperate?

Nickel: We had lots of meetings, and we got cooperation from the State Reclamation Board to initiate the program there, the Lower San Joaquin Levee District Project. It turned out to be such a good program all the way through that we finally did get some cooperation from the many landowners involved.

Faulhaber: Some of the documentation we reviewed is interesting in that it seems that the construction money came from the federal government, but it looked to me like the money for right-of-ways and easements came from the State of California?

Nickel: That is correct.

Faulhaber: Who served on the Reclamation Board during that time? We know that Pat Brown was the Democratic governor, and we know that the Reclamation Board generally reflected political appointments. You mentioned my father, Harold O'Banion, and Stan Kronick, who was president of the Board. Who else served with you?

Nickel: Well, during the time that we are talking about here, when Harold O'Banion was also on the board with me, we had Hugo Fisher, who was an important administrator through the Resources Agency, and you have already mentioned Stan Kronick, who served as president of the board the entire eight years that Pat Brown was governor and during the time that I was on the Board. Then there was Colonel McCullum.

Faulhaber: Hugo Fisher was an administrator, not a political appointee?

Nickel: Yes, that is correct. I started to say something about Colonel McCullum, but he was also the general manager of the board during a period of time, and a very good man, I might add too. Then there was Wallace McCormick, who was set forth to be secretary and certainly was a very important member of the board. He lived right on the Sacramento River. He was very knowledgeable about that river. Then there was Jack Madigan, who was vice president of the board. He was knowledgeable as well about Sacramento River issues. Terrell Sartain and Donald Wheeler were both members of the board and again primarily representing the Sacramento area. Just Harold O'Banion and I were the representatives of the San Joaquin River problems.

Faulhaber: There was another man I heard mentioned often by the name of Max Vann. He died, apparently, while he was still on the board. Is that a name that rings a bell?

Nickel: It should, but it doesn't.

**Governor Pat Brown's Influence on State Water Issues**

Faulhaber: The Reclamation Board reported directly to Pat Brown.

Nickel: Oh, yes. Pat Brown was very fine and flexible and didn't take sides with either the Sacramento group or the San Joaquin River group. He was trying to be [fair] to both.

Faulhaber: I know he was a good friend of yours, and everything we read today indicates that he did a great deal for water in the State of California. Would you comment on that statement?

Nickel: On water control Pat Brown was absolutely essential, and he did more for the state than anyone had previously or subsequently. He developed the California Water Plan, which brings water all the way down to the Los Angeles area, you know, through the California Aqueduct. He did all kinds of things in the Sacramento Valley, too, where there was also a great need for flood control. Actually, it was all so very necessary at that time. That's why I first went on the board, because of flood problems.

In any event Pat Brown did a great job in developing the water plan for California. He had one project that unfortunately was voted down in the state legislature. That was what we call the peripheral canal, which would have taken floodwaters around the San Francisco Bay Area and into the conduit that led the water to Southern California. The governor couldn't get approval of that for political reasons. Along the peripheral canal people thought that they were going to be hurt rather than benefitted. I think they were 100 percent wrong, but in any event the peripheral canal was voted down. So this meant instead that those particular floodwaters, the waters that would have traveled in the peripheral canal and reached the California Aqueduct, were dumped into the San Francisco Bay for the benefit of nobody.

Faulhaber: It has often been said that under Governor Brown's tenure many dams and water projects were completed that never would have had a chance of being completed today because of the environmental movement. Would you care to comment on that statement?

Nickel: Well, I don't know how true that would have been in the Sacramento River area. I can tell you that we didn't have a problem like that in the San Joaquin River Area. But in the Sacramento River area there were lots of differences and opinions on what should and shouldn't be built.

Faulhaber: I remember when the members of the Reclamation Board flew to Oroville for the dedication of the Oroville Dam.



STATE OF CALIFORNIA  
RESOURCES AGENCY  
THE RECLAMATION BOARD



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*Governor*



HUGO FISHER  
*Resources Agency  
Administrator*



STANLEY W. KRONICK  
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ALBERT E. McCOLLAM  
*General Manager*



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*Vice President*



WALLACE J. McCORMACK  
*Secretary*



GEORGE W. NICKEL, JR.  
*Member*



HAROLD J. O'BANION  
*Member*



DONALD L. WEILER  
*Member*



H. TERRILL SARTAIN  
*Member*





- Nickel: Oh, yes. The Oroville Dam was one of the great accomplishments that occurred during Pat Brown's administration. It contained a lot of the floodwaters and turned them into beneficial waters.
- Faulhaber: Where is the Oroville Dam in northern California?
- Nickel: Oroville and Marysville are close. It started up there but accomplished a lot below the area.
- Faulhaber: I also recall when the San Luis Dam and Reservoir area was dedicated. John F. Kennedy came out for the dedication. Of course, that was your area of Los Banos. Please talk about that project.
- Nickel: That was essential for the California Aqueduct. The San Luis Reservoir contains the water that is regulated for the California Aqueduct that goes to Los Angeles. It has worked wonderfully well. I had the pleasure of being there when Kennedy came for the dedication. It was an interesting day. A lot of the Reclamation Board fellows were there because it was such an important project for the state.
- Faulhaber: Governor Brown had eight good years to do a lot of things. His oral history comments on many of his accomplishments. When Ronald Reagan took office, did he continue with the water projects that Governor Brown had instituted?
- Nickel: I don't think that he tried to stop anything that had already been adopted, but Reagan was not as active in getting things done as Pat Brown was. He did nothing to help out that peripheral canal issue. It still isn't resolved. I don't think Reagan was spending much time on water projects.
- Faulhaber: Do you have any contact with the Reclamation Board today?
- Nickel: I have very little contact with the Reclamation Board today because we have accomplished what needed to be accomplished in the San Joaquin River area, things that were so important such as the Eastside Bypass. When your dad and I were both on the board we worked hard on that. That bypass steered the water east of the San Joaquin River, north of the Firebaugh area so that the floodwaters are now channeled to the east and then finally brought back into the San Joaquin River many miles to the north downstream. They are brought back into the San Joaquin River where they can do no damage.
- Faulhaber: Was there flood control done in this area of Kern County during the time that you were on the Reclamation Board?
- Nickel: Well, in Kern County we had little to do with the Reclamation Board. The Kern River runs into the San Joaquin River. There were years when it did damage by getting into Tulare Lake, did damage there, and then went downstream joining the Kings River and other waters there that would pass on down to the San Francisco Bay Area eventually.

But the amount of Kern River water that got into the overall flood control projects was relatively small.

Faulhaber: The federal government did step in to help with Isabella Reservoir.

Nickel: Oh, yes. The federal government was responsible for the financing of Isabella Reservoir on the Kern River. It certainly has been a wonderful achievement. I personally got very much involved in the program there in order to get it going and was certainly one of the people who had some influence on getting it done. One of the main reasons for that is that together with other members of my family at that time we owned the Buena Vista Lake area, almost 30,000 acres that was subject to flood control or bypass of Kern River waters in big years. I was one of the primary pushers and founders of getting the Buena Vista Lake area identified as a flood control facility. It worked very well. In subsequent years we were able to find other alternatives, but Buena Vista Lake was a temporary solution.

Faulhaber: I saw a map of the area that the Reclamation Board covered geographically. It is quite surprising to see that it covered almost three quarters of California, dipping as far south as Bakersfield and going almost to the Oregon border. When we talk about flood control we talk about the two big rivers, the Sacramento and the San Joaquin. Those rivers run through a great part of California.

Your Reclamation Board had a big responsibility when it came to the impact water had on the State of California. We have spoken about work that was done in the north and the work done in the Los Banos area. You have recalled that a good part of the Reclamation Board's time was taken up with the Sacramento area, which has often been flooded. Would you care to comment about flood control of the actual city of Sacramento?

Nickel: The City of Sacramento did have some problems that needed solving. The Oroville Dam was one of the big projects that helped Sacramento, and of course, the Sacramento area benefitted from many improvements to the water system around it that made a big difference in flood control.

Faulhaber: Are you speaking of the levees that protected Sacramento? Was it the levee district that had the responsibility for protecting Sacramento?

Nickel: You know, I have quite forgotten whether it was a levee district. It certainly was done with government programs. I know that the towns immediately downstream from Sacramento had a real need for flood control programs that were adopted.

Faulhaber: It is often said that the City of Sacramento sits on a flood plain and that controlling the water, even today, still can be problematic.

Nickel: Yes, I think that is true. It can be problematic, but it is a lot better than it was before.

### Dissolution of the Henry Miller Trust, 1960s

Faulhaber: The topic of conversation today is the Henry Miller Trust. This was a very interesting trust set up by Henry Miller on April 17, 1913. Although not well educated, Mr. Miller understood the importance of estate planning even at that early date and set up a trust that later set trust law, certainly in the State of California if not nationwide.

Basically the provisions of the trust, to put it simply, were that the trust would terminate with the death of the last grandchild. That meant that Henry Miller's daughter, Nellie Miller, would benefit from the income as would her husband and as would her children. But upon their--the children's--deaths, the assets of the trust were to be distributed to the grandchildren. Effectively with the death of the last grandchild, who was Beatrice Nickel Morse, the trust then was dissolved.

In effect Beatrice Morse did die on December 11, 1962, and shortly thereafter the assets of the Henry Miller Trust were valued and the distribution was made. The trust was valued at \$40 million. The controversy over the distribution came up as to the percentages to be distributed to the grandchildren. What therefore resulted was an interpretation of *per stirpes* which later went to the Supreme Court of California for interpretation.

Immediately upon the death of Beatrice Morse, \$32 million was distributed to the eight heirs of the Henry Miller Trust. Eight million was held back pending a ruling, which ultimately went to the California Supreme Court on how the will should be interpreted. That is the historical background. I would like to ask you to comment on this scenario and give us your recollections about what actually happened when the Henry Miller Trust was dissolved.

Nickel: I am familiar with the program and was very surprised by the court action because it was always my understanding that the Henry Miller Trust was going to be distributed to the third generation, following Henry Miller, on a *per stirpes* basis. I am part of that third generation.

Faulhaber: The third generation was referred to as the "remaindermen," if I recall.

Nickel: Yes, that's right. As a group we were referred to in the trust as the remaindermen. The life tenants were those following Henry Miller. First of all, his daughter and her husband, J. Leroy Nickel, and then following them were their three children, my father, George W. Nickel, and my aunt, Beatrice Nickel. Actually the third member, James Leroy Nickel, Jr., had passed away sometime before that, so the money flowed just to my father and my aunt. My father passed away first, prior to 1962, and Beatrice, his

sister, died, I believe, in December of 1962. That was the end then of the life tenant beneficiaries.

The trust then passed to the remaindermen. That is when I thought it was going to go *per stirpes* to the four children of George Nickel, who was my father, and the three children of Beatrice Nickel Morse. That meant there would have been seven recipients, each getting the same amount. Then we found there was a new line of thought on the part of the Bowles family, the children of Beatrice Nickel Morse. They thought they were entitled to half of the estate because the *per stirpes* rule applied to their mother and to my father. Even today as I read back over the trust and everything I don't see how in the world the court ever agreed with that because it looked very clear that the third generation would share *per stirpes*. In any event, whether we liked it or not, the truth of the matter is, it went clear to the Supreme Court, and it ruled that *per stirpes* applied to my father and my aunt instead of to their children.<sup>1</sup>

Faulhaber: The difference was a significant amount of money.

Nickel: The difference was a lot of money. Yes, because when you were talking about a \$50 million estate or something in that range, to get one-eighth instead of one-seventh was a big difference. I got to be on the one-eighth side.

Faulhaber: Did this whole situation cause a lot of ill feeling between the two families?

Nickel: Yes. There certainly was a strong difference of opinion, but after the thing was determined in the Supreme Court we decided that we should get along as best we could, and we did. We divided the agriculture property on a basis that we all agreed to. So it was done sensibly and according to the Supreme Court decision.

Faulhaber: It was a complex situation from the standpoint of division of assets. I would assume there probably was some cash and securities, but I am guessing that most of the value of the trust was in land. How were you able to work out an equitable arrangement between the two groups?

Nickel: We had an appraisal made of the land that we could all agree upon. Then it was fairly easy to segregate the land. And we did successfully, and the division exists even today more or less along that line.

Faulhaber: Can you recall what land was involved and where it was?

Nickel: I know it well because I was in charge of the farming of the whole operation. The land was in both Merced and Fresno Counties. I don't have the actual acreage in front of me,

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<sup>1</sup>See Turner H. McBaine, *A Career in the Law at Home and Abroad*, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 1989, p.114-112.



but it was substantial acreage. The Nickel family got half and the Bowles family got half.

Faulhaber: Now was there land down here in Kern County?

Nickel: There was land down here in Kern County that remained in the trust for a period of time and was not split up in the initial settlement.

Faulhaber: Why was that?

Nickel: Well, the reason for that was that it was primarily the Buena Vista Corporation.

Faulhaber: Buena Vista Associates?

Nickel: No, the Buena Vista Associates Corporation. Dividing it required a split of stock and one thing and another. There was a lot of uncertainties about the farming program and the water rights and all of that sort of thing.

Faulhaber: This would have been after the Henry Miller Trust was dissolved in 1964? You continued then to retain Buena Vista Associates in the form of a corporation?

Nickel: That's correct.

Faulhaber: Can I assume everyone had a percentage of ownership, then, of Buena Vista Lake?

Nickel: Yes, that's correct.

Faulhaber: Were the Boswells farming it at this time?

Nickel: The Boswells were farming it at the time of the dissolution.

Faulhaber: What finally happened then to the land down here in Kern County?

Nickel: The land down here in Kern County, in the Buena Vista Lake area, was sold to Boswell, and there wasn't much beyond that. There were some lands further to the north that didn't amount to anything. They were disposed of. There was an interest in what was called the Carmel Ranch that continued to operate. I oversaw that operation.

### Rio Bravo Ranch on the Kern River

Faulhaber: Your percentage of the distribution was sizeable. Based on your interests in Bakersfield you decided to relocate here?

Nickel: Yes, after the Supreme Court ruling I begun spending more time in Bakersfield.

Faulhaber: I believe you said you moved here in 1966, but you made a sizeable purchase of the Olcese property sometime in 1965. I am guessing that even though you weren't living here you were spending a lot of time in the Bakersfield area.

Nickel: Yes, that's correct. And what you referred to as the Olcese Ranch is what I now refer to as the Rio Bravo Ranch, at least my portion of what was the Olcese Ranch.

I worked hard to get my whole family involved. But I didn't succeed. My interest, the idea that I tried to convey to the rest of the family, was to work on getting the new state university planned for Kern County located on the Rio Bravo property. I wanted the university located here, not only because I wanted it be on the finest spot in Kern County in the Bakersfield area, but because I thought the property around it would become more valuable by reason of the university locating here.

Faulhaber: Can you recall how large the Olcese Ranch was that you purchased?

Nickel: Yes, it was one big family ranch owned by about twenty heirs, at least. It was just operated as a cattle ranch. It contained around 26,000 acres. I bought about 16,000 of it, as I recall. It was the more southerly portion of the property, and the Camp and Mebane Cattle Company bought the more northern part of the property, which continued to be a cattle operation. [George W. Nickel, Jr., sold 6,000 acres to Camp and Mebane around 1975.]

As far as long-range values are concerned, I was able to establish riparian water rights on a great deal of the Olcese property that I acquired. I had good knowledge of riparian water rights because of Henry Miller having established them in the Miller-Haggin Agreement of 1888.

Faulhaber: Your home sits on this land now, right on bank of the Kern River. The property is magnificent in its beauty. You bought the property in 1966. How did you decide where to build your new home?

Nickel: I decided to build the home that I presently occupy on the Kern River several years after acquisition of the overall property. In those years our children and good friends in the Bakersfield area and elsewhere would come to have picnics with my wife and me on the banks of the Kern River. It was wonderful to picnic on the river, and it gave us a good look at the property, which subsequently became the property we built our home on. In any event we did pick a very beautiful spot on the Kern River.

Faulhaber: How long did it take you to build the home?

Nickel: We worked on the program with a wonderful architect by the name of Cliff May, who was world famous and just happened to have been the architect that did the house that we bought in the Bakersfield area, in the Stockdale Country Club area, a beautiful area that was owned originally by the Tevis family of the Kern County Land Company group. In any event we were so lucky to be able to get Cliff May as our architect. I



Cottonwood Creek, Bakersfield, California, Dodo and George W. Nickel, Jr., dove hunting with their Labrador, Nick, 1972.







The Nickel family home beside the Kern River, Bakersfield, California, spring 1978.



George W. Nickel, Jr., with Nick, the Sierra Nevada foothills of the Rio Bravo Ranch, Kern County, Bakersfield, California, 1978.





think from the time we started planning until the time we got the house built it took a couple of years.

Faulhaber: The house has a wonderful orientation in its position along the Kern River. Was Cliff May known for that kind of architecture?

Nickel: Yes, he was. He did architecture pretty much around the world and was famous for what he had done in the Los Angeles area.

### California State University, Bakersfield

Faulhaber: Returning to the subject of bringing the new site for the California State University at Bakersfield, how did this idea occur to you?

Nickel: It occurred to me because I could see the opportunity for development. I thought it should be located in an area that had good growth potential. I went to Palo Alto High School, which is immediately adjacent to Stanford University. Stanford did and is still doing a great job of preserving property and developing programs around it. That certainly made me think about the potential here in Bakersfield.

Faulhaber: Was the city of Bakersfield eager to have the campus?

Nickel: Oh, yes. There was a desire to have the campus in Bakersfield. There were people who could see the opportunity for development around it. I happened to be one. Consequently, I set forth a program whereon I would give approximately 1,000 acres right along the Kern River for the establishment of the California State University campus. In addition to the proposed land grant, I also clearly set forth the Kern River water rights that I would give for use at the projected campus. But that idea also occurred to the Kern County Land Company, which was the old contested rival of my great grandfather, Henry Miller. At least their founders, Haggin and Tevis, were. The Kern County Land Company saw the advantages and really got in and worked at getting the university on their land. They did a lot of politicking. I will never forget how this thing finally got decided.

I ran into tough competition from the Kern County Land Company, which set forth a program to give to the California State University approximately the same amount of land south of the Kern River and downstream from the City of Bakersfield. Compared to me, the Kern County Land Company was extremely wealthy and had lots of political power. They made an effort as good as mine to get state attention for their proposed location.

There is no question that I offered a far more attractive campus location than did the Kern County Land Company. This was even confirmed by state university personnel who set up maps showing the proposed campus layout on my property. Such personnel

also set forth that my proposed state university site had far better weather in the winter months when fog is much more of a problem at the Kern County Land Company location.

Through the help of my good friend, Dean Gay, and a number of other important Bakersfield people it looked as though the state university would be located on my land rather than on that of the Kern County Land Company; consequently, when the state university board of directors invited me to attend their meeting in Sacramento to make a decision on their state university site, I went with my wife, Dodo Nickel, and my good friend, Dean Gay. There were also Kern County Land Company representatives present, including the head engineer and subsequent president, Bill Balch.

The board of directors of the California State University did not take very long to make a decision on which site the state university should be located. Consequently, they had a vote to make this decision. It turned out to be a tie vote, because one of the directors was not present.

The board then decided to bring into the meeting the lieutenant governor, Glen Anderson. I do not know what influence the Kern County Land Company may have had with the lieutenant governor; however, it broke my heart when the lieutenant governor announced that he was going to break the tie vote by voting for the Kern County Land Company site instead of mine.

I have never understood this decision, as there was just never any question but that such a decision placed the California State University at Bakersfield on what was definitely not the best location. It's an uninteresting flat piece of land that has no physical beauty, not like my site offered. After that unfortunate decision had been made, the state university promptly began construction on that uninteresting Kern County Land Company land.

Then the university was able to hire, as president of the university, a man by the name of Paul Romberg. He had moved down from his position as president of Chico State University and was very highly regarded. He became a good friend of mine. I remember that he made an inspection of the site that I had offered for the university, and he compared it to the Kern County Land Company site. Paul, like me, just could not understand how such an erroneous decision had been made by the state university board of trustees. Paul really loved my Rio Bravo Ranch location and would have liked to have done something about a change to my location; however, that was not feasible. Subsequently, Paul Romberg was promoted to president of San Francisco State University.

Faulhaber: When did the university finally open to students?

Nickel: It opened about the time we moved out here to live in our new house, and my building of the Rio Bravo Tennis Club. That would have been in the seventies.

### Acquiring and Farming Rio Bravo

Faulhaber: Well, after the decision was made you had a lot of land. What did you decide to do with it?

Nickel: Although the loss of the state university was critical for me, I nevertheless promptly proceeded with development of portions of the 10,000 acre Rio Bravo Ranch. My first big building program was for the Rio Bravo Resort and Tennis Ranch, and on the west thereof, a beautiful sub-division area where I also initiated some of the first homes. I ended up after it was all done with eighteen tennis courts and a big beautiful hotel-type facility and restaurants.

Faulhaber: How did the idea of a tennis ranch occur to you?

Nickel: We had a great tennis player from here, Dennis Ralston. He had played at Wimbledon. He was a nice guy, and I got to know him. He thought it would be a wonderful idea, too, to have a tennis deal out here. So he gave me some help there in bringing people in to play tennis and big groups. That's the way it started. Then he went off in other directions. But the tennis deal did very well for a period of time, and we had tennis players here from all over the United States and lots of them from Australia. It had its ups and downs because I had other financial problems that didn't relate directly to the tennis ranch. But it made it difficult for me.

Faulhaber: When you bought this property initially, obviously you were thinking of the California State University as a possibility for development. When that didn't materialize and you decided to do your development with the Rio Bravo complex, did you give up farming altogether or were you still farming in the area?

Nickel: I definitely expanded the farming here.

Faulhaber: What was here when you bought the land?

Nickel: Well, there was a little bit of permanent pasture, a very small acreage, and beyond that there was nothing.

Faulhaber: So you had to develop all the agriculture land.

Nickel: I developed all the agriculture lands, and I think it is the most beautiful agricultural area in the San Joaquin Valley.

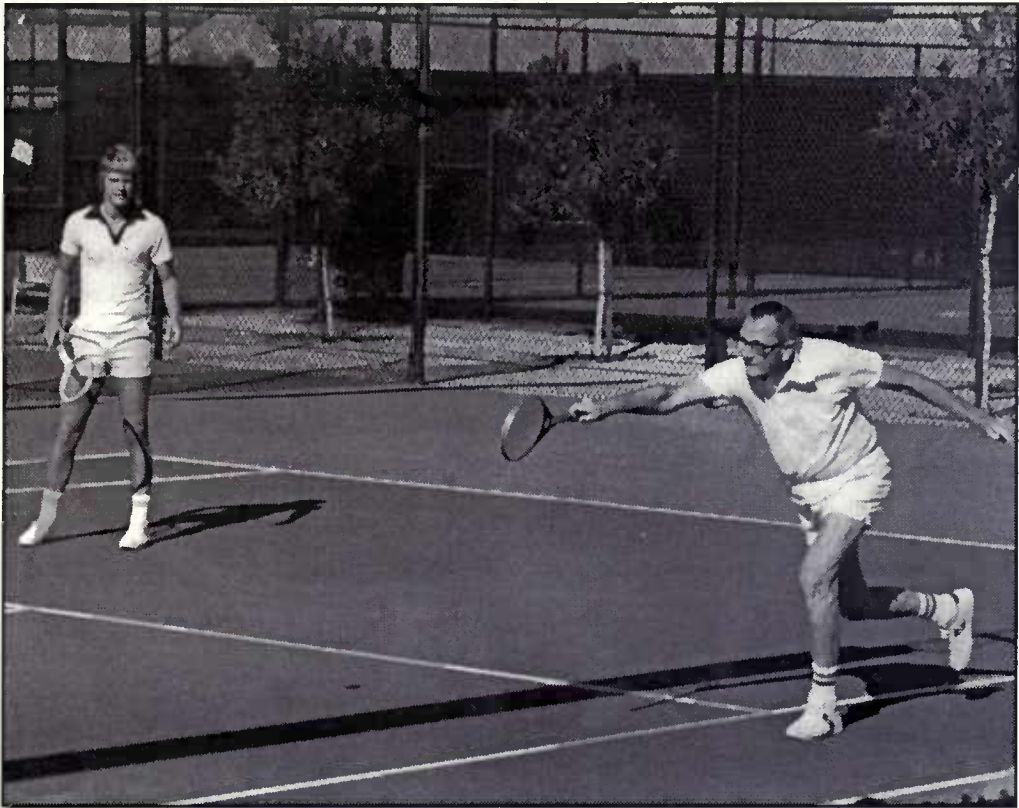
Faulhaber: It certainly is with all of the citrus trees. Did you start out with citrus?

Nickel: I got started with citrus at quite an early date, yes.

Faulhaber: And you had a lot of acreage. Was it all citrus or were you diversified?

- Nickel: We had some almonds, too, and experimented with avocados. We also had some apricots and peaches, but the oranges have really been the most successful here.
- Faulhaber: Mostly trees?
- Nickel: That's correct, and I went into drip irrigation here. In fact I pioneered drip irrigation in this part of the world. I met a couple of men from Israel that had developed drip irrigation there, and it was through my contact with them that I learned about drip irrigation. Now it has expanded all over the United States and Canada and elsewhere, but it started right here with me.
- Faulhaber: Why did you decide to get into trees?
- Nickel: Well, the reason for trees, particularly after I learned about drip irrigation, was that I had a chance to make more money. And they have made money.
- Faulhaber: But with a large initial investment?
- Nickel: It's expensive to get into tree crops. That's right. And drip irrigation, that whole area. But the fact that I had established the riparian water rights on the ranch really made a difference. We have been able to move water around pretty well because of the water rights that I have established.
- Faulhaber: We have been talking about the tree farming that you did in Bakersfield, but you had other lands in the Los Banos area. You had a good portion of the San Juan Ranch, and you had your own holdings. What kinds of crops were you raising at that time?
- Nickel: We were raising cotton, alfalfa, sugar beets, some permanent pasture, and some grain crops.
- Faulhaber: How did you divide your time between Los Banos and Bakersfield?
- Nickel: Well, I had a private airplane which made this feasible, and I did a lot of flying back and forth.
- Faulhaber: Did you have managers on site in the Los Banos area who were running the day to day operations?
- Nickel: Yes, I did.
- Faulhaber: This was the late sixties and early seventies. How was the industry of farming at that time. Was it profitable?
- Nickel: It was profitable if you were able to make good yields, have inexpensive water as we did in our operations, and produce reasonably good crops. It wasn't a big money deal, but it was a moneymaking program.





Rio Bravo Tennis Lodge, Bakersfield, California, Dennis Ralston, and George W. Nickel, Jr., 1977.



Rio Bravo Tennis Lodge, Bakersfield, California, Dodo and George W. Nickel, Jr., 1977.



Faulhaber: As you look back over your business during that period of time, which area was your best moneymaker? Were you doing better with your trees or your row crops?

Nickel: Well, the trees didn't become a factor until they developed at the Rio Bravo Ranch. Up in the Los Banos area there were no trees at all. I did grow some grapes up there, not a large acreage, but it has been a very successful acreage under contract with Gallo.

Faulhaber: Let's talk about agriculture in general. You have been involved in agriculture as part of your heritage. When you were still in high school you would come to the Central Valley and work as a cowboy or do whatever needed to be done to be able to gain experience in the farming business. Please talk about the industry of farming.

Nickel: I know it well. It has its ups and downs. Things are currently on the ups doing very well, but there have been times in past history when we were lucky to hold things together and make a few dollars.

I took over the farming of the Miller & Lux operations before we split up the company and was able to do some things that were very progressive. I grew quite a bit of permanent pasture and brought in the Moffitt Cattle Company to lease it on an annual basis. That certainly improved the land as well as giving us some income. I was active in pioneering sugar beets on our lands. It wasn't an easy crop, but we did pretty well with sugar beets for a period of time. Cotton was not a big producer but made us a little money, and the same thing is true of alfalfa and permanent pasture. Those were the main crops.

Faulhaber: As you look back over the years you have spent in farming, what was your best product or best crop?

Nickel: Over the years?

Faulhaber: Starting from today and looking backwards. If you had to do it all over again, what would you repeat?

Nickel: It depends on how far back you would go. Looking back through the years, it was important to first improve the land so that you could get good production on cotton, for instance. Alfalfa was very important in improving the land, and permanent pasture even more so. In our situation we had inexpensive water and I was able to work with the Moffitt Cattle Company and others who would come in and rent the permanent pasture. It was very easy to irrigate it with cheap water. As I said, it really improved the ground.

But in addition, something I haven't mentioned--Miller & Lux had a lot of undeveloped land along the San Joaquin River, and it was nothing but grazing land then. I managed to take over the total operation there by taking some surveys of the property, rough surveys for elevations and studying how levees and ditches could be constructed having in mind that I would go into a flood irrigation program on the 7,500 acres there along the river.

Once we got started it was following the grain crop as quick as we could. We would flood irrigate in the mid-summer and then get the water off in time to plant grain again. The operation permitted the use of rough land without having to level it first. It did make us very good money.

Faulhaber: So when you look back over those early years, grain was a natural progression from permanent pasture.

Nickel: Well, grain was the only crop on that type of land. I pioneered that kind of program in that part of the State of California, and in fact I don't think anybody did anything as well as that or really even did that sort of thing back then.

Faulhaber: How long did it take you to make the transition from grain to other crops?

Nickel: You had to level the land. So what we did in these flood irrigation programs was establish particular areas that were to be flooded, and then we would take those areas as time passed and level them up for the production of cotton, alfalfa, and sugar beets.

Faulhaber: So agriculture is a slow process of taking the land and improving it for more productive and more sophisticated crops.

Nickel: That's correct, and of course, we were taking land that was mostly just pasture land. Some of it had been farmed before, but some of the larger acreage had never been farmed before.

Faulhaber: As I have talked to you over these last months, one does see the trend of how land in its raw state is transformed through a lot of time, money, and effort to take it from what you have described as a natural state of grazing into a state where it can be farmed for more productive crops.

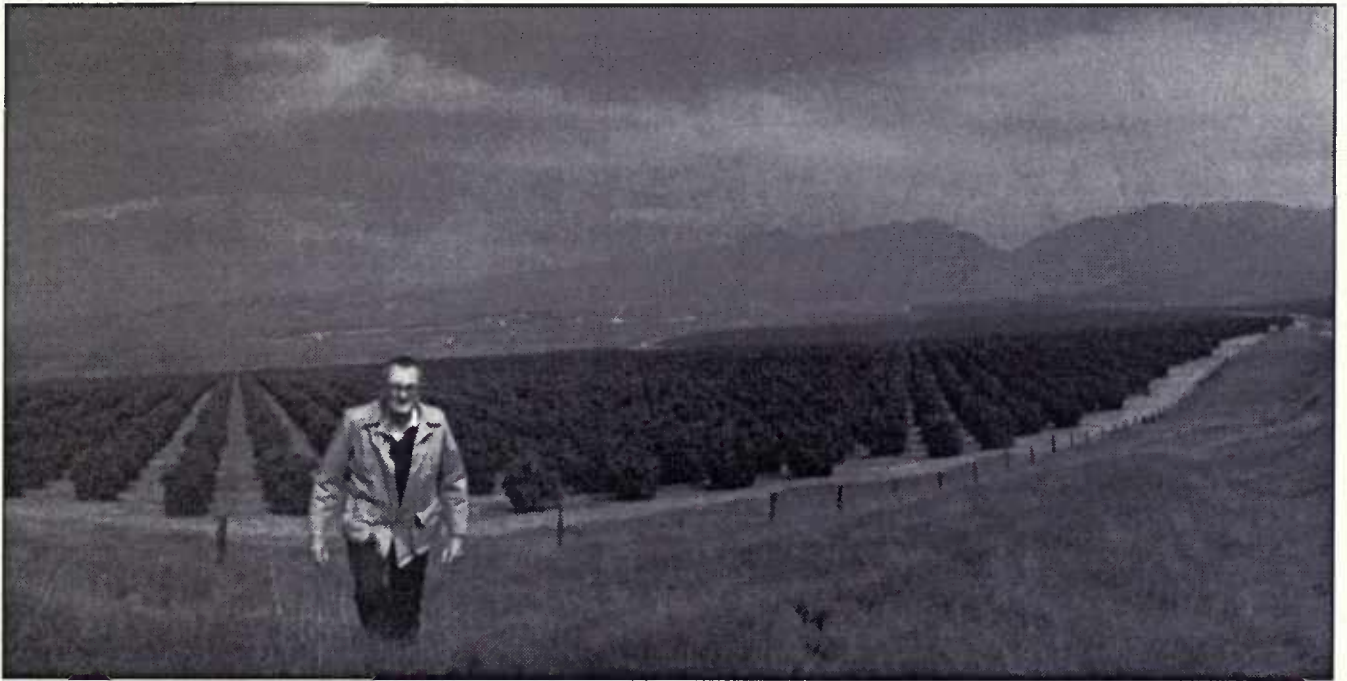
Nickel: Yes, and the nice thing about that flood irrigation program is that it made money. It made darn good money when you consider that the expense was very low.

Faulhaber: The land up north in the Los Banos area is obviously different from the land here in Bakersfield. You have often spoken of the necessity to diversify. Would you talk about that strategy for farming?

Nickel: Well, it depends what area you are talking about. I have been very involved in flood irrigation and that type of thing down here too.

Faulhaber: But you have often said that the key to success in farming is having a diversified number of crops so that if in one year your oranges aren't great producers, hopefully your cotton crop will be. You have also said that not every crop is suited for any piece of land. So planting the right crops based on what the soil will produce is the key?

Nickel: Yes, and of course we have quite different farming operations. For example, the Rio Bravo Ranch is along the Kern River where we have rolling country. You have to have



George W. Nickel, Jr., on his Rio Bravo Ranch, Bakersfield, California, *Forbes Magazine*, March 11, 1985.





a sophisticated irrigation system like drip irrigation here to make it feasible to have the extensive citrus we have. Prior to that we had apricots and almonds and peaches, and they didn't do as well as we had hoped for a variety of reasons. We also have grapes that are doing well.

Faulhaber: In contrast the acreage in the Los Banos/Dos Palos is more in row crops, cotton, tomatoes, and what else?

Nickel: Alfalfa, which is a good rotation crop.

Faulhaber: Do you grow any wheat or corn?

Nickel: Not on that acreage, no.

### The Government's Role in Agriculture

Faulhaber: The government's role in agriculture is always a hot topic. Would you care to comment?

Nickel: Well, yes. Cotton, for instance, was farmed on a basis of allotments according to what your history was before they put the regulations in. Without having a cotton history and the government payments that went with it, it wasn't feasible to grow cotton unless you had that arrangement. We fortunately did have allotments to a substantial extent.

Faulhaber: Why did the government institute a system of allotments?

Nickel: Because the government was interested in seeing us make some money, and that's how the payments came in. They figured that unless there were controls the production would be overdone and the prices would fall.

Faulhaber: So the government was trying to control the supply of cotton?

Nickel: Yes, that's right.

Faulhaber: Was the government successful?

Nickel: Yes, I think so.

Faulhaber: Have you seen the government intervene with other types of programs? For example, have there been programs when the government has paid farmers to take land out of production?

Nickel: There has been some of that, but there isn't much of that now, and I am glad there isn't.

Faulhaber: What is the government doing today to help the American farmer?

Nickel: That's a good question. I am not certain I have very good answers since I am not actively involved with this part of the business today. The government seems to be trying to make a good export market where possible in cotton, sugar beets, and others.

Faulhaber: Before we close the session on agriculture, we are sitting here surrounded by citrus trees in Bakersfield. Can you discuss your current farming operation and your successes?

Nickel: One of the most key things in farming today is having a water supply. I have spent a good deal of my life working on water supply programs and conservation. If you have adequate water you have a good chance of doing well in farming, but without it you don't have much chance for success.

But today getting water from the government and that sort of thing is not cheap, and if you are lucky enough to have your own good underground water or water rights like here on the Kern River, the water rights don't cost you anything basically except for the cost of participation, which in this case is storage in Isabella Reservoir on the Kern River.

Faulhaber: Do you see the battle over water heating up?

Nickel: Oh, yes. The water battle will get worse because there isn't enough water, frankly, for the growth in California. The people growth is just fantastic, and the Los Angeles area is a very good demonstration of that. They are just having a very difficult time finding enough water.

Faulhaber: Recently there was an article in the paper about the Westlands Water District launching a suit because the federal government was not giving them enough of their allotment of water. Could you comment about that?

Nickel: In the case of the Westlands they have a very big contract with the state for California Aqueduct water. They have their native underground water that has always been there, and it really amazed me that they would come up and claim that they have rights to water from the east side of the valley where the water rights exist off of the various rivers, the San Joaquin River, the Kings River, the Merced River, and so on. The lands along there have historically used those waters and are going to continue to as far as I can see. The claim apparently by Westlands is that they should have some of that water that originates on the other side of the valley. That doesn't make any sense to me at all.

Faulhaber: Do you know on what they base their claim?

Nickel: Frankly, I don't see anything good about it, and I am certainly opposed to it because my interests are on the other side, where they say they have water rights. Westlands may claim that the government should have given them more water from the California Aqueduct, some of which went to the east side areas. That is probably one of their fairly legitimate-type claims.

Faulhaber: They seem to be very upset with the federal government because even in good water years they claim they haven't received more than fifty percent of their allotments. Is this problem a State of California problem or a problem with the federal government?

Nickel: I frankly don't agree with the statement that the Westlands only would get fifty percent of their water in a good year. They got all of their water to the best of my knowledge.

Faulhaber: How long do you think it will take to resolve this dispute?

Nickel: Well, the Westlands District has grown so, and they have so many water-using crops that they didn't have historically that the problem is not going to go away very easily. It's too bad. They have been able to buy some water from even Kern County here. When Kern County has a big water year they can let some water go to Westlands. I am involved in some of those deals that have helped Westlands and helped us.

Faulhaber: Do you see more of these kinds of disputes in the future?

Nickel: Well, I see the problem of water shortages is not going to get easier. It is probably going to get worse. And what the answer is I frankly don't know. They may have to go to seawater and the trouble with that is that converting seawater to agricultural water is too expensive. They have done that in Santa Barbara as an experiment, and it went up to about \$2,000 an acre foot. There is no way you can afford that in farming. So I don't think that is an answer unless they can figure out a way to do it more reasonably.

### **The Buying and Selling of Water**

Faulhaber: We are in Bakersfield, California, we are continuing to talk about the issue of water. We have discussed the Westlands situation and the fact that probably more lawsuits will arise because of the scarcity of water in California. I know you have been very active with water rights all your life. You have been successful selling water. I assume you have been buying water. I see numerous references to exchange water contracts and water substitution. Would you talk about the buying and selling of water?

Nickel: We have been talking about the shortages of water and what is done to cure that problem. One of the things that I advocated and worked on extensively, which caught on and got to be a very big program in Kern County, is the spreading of water when there is a surplus. There are some lands here in Kern County that don't have to be farmed, and they will extensively absorb the water when it is spread. Then it will recharge the underground so that the wells can bring it up economically in dry years. It works very well.

Faulhaber: So you can pump water when you need it and leave it in the ground in storage for future use?

Nickel: That's right.

Faulhaber: What happens when you have water to sell? You have a big water year in Kern County but in contrast the Westlands is dry. Would you sell your water to the Westlands in such a year?

Nickel: There has been some talk about the area generally. When there is a good water year here, Kern County interests will have a bigger entitlement on the California Aqueduct than they need. They can then sell such water to Westlands, for instance.

Faulhaber: Or, I am assuming, to anybody else who is interested?

Nickel: Yes, and there are also then sales down in the Los Angeles area including the Metropolitan Water District. So those things work, and nobody is hurt by them. It is a pretty good program. Now the transfer of water is a little bit different, but sort of the same thing really.

Faulhaber: When you have a surplus of water, are there government regulations concerning the sale?

Nickel: The government has not been too big a nuisance on this thing to date. They have let the thing be worked out to the benefit of those involved. So I offhand don't know of anything that the government has objected to.

Faulhaber: So it is a sale like any other? You can find your own buyer and strike your own deal? In other words, there is no governmental interference?

Nickel: Well, water districts are usually very much involved because almost anywhere in California today you will find water districts that work for the benefit of the lands they are in. And so the water district has to approve.

Faulhaber: Sitting here looking at this mountain range and knowing that Los Angeles is on the other side, and knowing that you have in the past sold water to Los Angeles, I have to ask how you get your water over these mountains?

Nickel: Again that is an exchange type of deal giving up California Aqueduct waters. This is the transfer or the exchange that you were asking about earlier. That is the water that gets down to the southern end of the state.

Faulhaber: So the water doesn't actually go over the mountain? Your quantity is exchanged for a like quantity someplace else?

Nickel: Water does go over the mountain because it's the California Aqueduct water, and it has to go over the mountain to reach L.A., and it gets that big boost with the California Aqueduct, which goes over the Tehachapis there. That's the biggest water boost in the world.



Faulhaber: Then it is actually the California Aqueduct that is the conduit for moving the water?

Nickel: It certainly is the big one.

Faulhaber: Lately much has been said about water quality. In reading some of the old Miller & Lux papers we saw the pumped water often wasn't of sufficient quality to mingle with gravity water. Today water quality is very important. Would you comment?

Nickel: Agriculture water is important, and it is true that some of the old-time well areas have water you don't want to use to any extent in agriculture. What has been done successfully is blending water a great deal where you have poor quality water. When you have an incoming supply of water from the California Aqueduct or from the Kern River, you can certainly improve your water and make it work. The water quality, though, is something that does need to be watched.

And then don't forget the human being. The human being is the one who is getting too much poor-quality water all over the state. All you have to do is read the papers about the Los Angeles area. They need better quality water, and that is one reason why they like to get the California Aqueduct water down there to improve their water quality situation. There is so much water now being converted to drinking water. The drinking water sales are exceeding sales of Coca Cola and Pepsi Cola and others. So there is a need for good quality drinking water. That's a program that I am personally taking a good hard look at. We have particularly good-quality Kern River water that I know would make fine drinking water. Anyhow, I am looking into it.

Faulhaber: Sounds very promising, but going back to the subject of agricultural water, when you have water quality problems, what kind of a testing process goes on to monitor water quality for agriculture?

Nickel: The testing programs done by the entities that are in that business is really quite simple. They do water quality tests.

Faulhaber: Is it as simple as dipping in a ladle at different times of day to sample the water, or is it more sophisticated?

Nickel: It is probably more sophisticated, but it is not difficult.

Faulhaber: Would you say that farmers are really concerned with agricultural water quality today from the standpoint of what water runs onto their lands?

Nickel: Much less than the human being is with drinking water. I think that agriculture has the opportunity of blending in most areas. Now there are some areas where they have a problem that is even greater.

Faulhaber: Much has been said lately about agricultural run-off and the polluting effects of the chemicals. Do you have a comment or two about that controversy?

- Nickel: Oh, sure. There is a problem there if you have too much unrestricted run-off. It can be a real problem for wells that pick up some of that water. So it is very important to have that under control as much as possible.
- Faulhaber: How do you control agricultural run-off?
- Nickel: You don't use more water than you should. So much of agriculture within California is within water districts. The water districts almost invariably have a quality measuring program.
- Faulhaber: Do they have records and logs about how much water a parcel of land can absorb?
- Nickel: Yes, that's part of the program.
- Faulhaber: What do you think the great issues concerning water will be in the future?
- Nickel: I think number one, we won't have enough water whether it be agriculture water or human consumption water. And the other thing that ties right in to that particularly from the standpoint of the homeowner use is that we have to do more to control quality. I think that can be done and is to some extent being done. If it isn't controlled it's going to be real bad on people's health.
- Faulhaber: The figure that 85 percent of all the water that is consumed in California is consumed by agriculture is constantly in the press. Is that figure correct?
- Nickel: I don't know.
- Faulhaber: If it is correct, with the growing population of the state, what do you think will happen to the California farmer?
- Nickel: Give me that number again.
- Faulhaber: I have seen it mentioned in the press recently that as much as 85 percent of all the water that is used in the State of California is used by agriculture. If that's true and the population is growing so rapidly, what do you think is going to happen to the California farmer?
- Nickel: I think that the regulations will be such that the farmer will probably get less water than he is getting now, but he will get paid, I assume, enough to make it financially feasible. I don't pretend to have anything specific in mind.

### Developing the Rio Bravo Resort Complex, 1970s

Faulhaber: Today we are going to be talking about the development of Rio Bravo. We have talked about the idea for the Rio Bravo Tennis Ranch, and your alliance with Dennis Ralston and your interest in tennis. But the Rio Bravo Complex was much greater than just the tennis facility. In 1975 you started construction on Rio Bravo, beginning with the tennis club and the restaurant, but that was just the beginning. Would you discuss Rio Bravo, please? It was very important to you and was a great part of your life for many years.

Nickel: Yes, that's true. After failing to get the state university located out here, I obviously needed to try to find other things that would work with Rio Bravo. I loved the area and could see the potential for other things.

I have always been kind of a tennis nut. So I became acquainted with Dennie Ralston, who was from the Bakersfield area and who had played at Wimbledon. We became friends and discussed the potential of having a tennis facility out here. That lead from one thing to the next, and I proceeded with the tennis courts.

Initially we built the adjacent facility with restaurants, bars, and meeting rooms, that sort of thing, and then subsequently we went ahead and built some nice hotel facilities. We were very busy back in those days and had lots of groups from other parts of the United States who had functions that took place here. People from Australia were real interested. We have some great pictures of some of that group from Australia that I have in my office because I really had such a good relationship with those fine guys.

Faulhaber: The second phase of your construction was the construction of the lodge that you just mentioned. I believe that there were 112 rooms initially. You also built some beautiful condominiums.

Nickel: Yes, they were off to the west of the tennis and hotel facility. I had some friends up in the San Francisco area who owned very nice condominiums whom I would visit. They were outside of San Francisco. They were very nice, and it was from there that I came up with the idea. The condominiums here have been very successful.

Faulhaber: After the condominiums you started to develop Cattle King Estates.

Nickel: Yes, that was on the other side of the tennis club area, on the east side in hilly country. I thought hilly countries would make for interesting homes. It did. It is a beautiful area that is filled with attractive homes and a gate system where you have to have private codes to get in and out. It has been very successful, too.

Faulhaber: May I ask how you decided on the name Cattle King Estates?

Nickel: That came from my great grandfather, Henry Miller, who was the great cattleman in his day going clear back into the 1850s. He was known historically as the Cattle King. He was certainly one of the biggest in the United States before he died in 1916.

Faulhaber: The Cattle King Estate homes are luxury homes. How long did it take you to build that complex?

Nickel: Well, actually all I did was put in the road system and the power, septic tanks as well. Subsequently they have changed to a sewer system.

Faulhaber: So you developed the housing tracts but didn't actually build the homes?

Nickel: That's right. I think I might have built two or three homes.

Faulhaber: Is Rio Bravo part of the City of Bakersfield or does it have its own separate designation?

Nickel: No, I annexed the whole area to the City of Bakersfield. In fact when I bought the ranch, the Olcese Ranch, I proceeded with city annexation. It has worked out very well for all concerned.

Faulhaber: What were the advantages of annexing the property to the City of Bakersfield?

Nickel: The advantages were that they worked with us on water, sewage, zoning, and anything else necessary for future years.

Faulhaber: Did property taxes rise because of the annexation?

Nickel: I think that is true, but that was to be expected.

Faulhaber: The Rio Bravo Resort today is also a conference center. Was that part of your original plan, or did that come later?

Nickel: Well, we had large enough rooms for meetings originally. It did stimulate groups coming for conferences and for staying over at the hotel.

Faulhaber: As the Rio Bravo Complex unfolded you also built an equestrian center?

Nickel: Horses and cattle in this part of the country were very important. I always enjoyed riding horses myself, and we proceeded with setting up stables where people could keep their horses and ride on the property.

Faulhaber: Was it a boarding stable only, or did you offer other services and activities?

Nickel: It was primarily a boarding station, but we also had other activities and lessons. Then there were some competitions. I built a pretty area for the shows up against the hills. It made a nice place to sit and view what was going on.

Faulhaber: I saw a picture of you in formal hunt attire. Did you ride to the hounds and sponsor other such events?





Rio Bravo ribbon cutting at opening of Rio Bravo Tennis Lodge, Bakersfield, California, 1976. L-R: Tom Smith, Bill Ketchum, George W. Nickel, Jr., Trice Harvey, Dodo Nickel, Jim Nickel.







The Jacuzzi, Rio Bravo Resort, Bakersfield, California, Dodo and George W. Nickel, Jr., 1975.



1980



# *Picture of The Month*



When George Nickel plays volleyball, everybody listens! . . . .

Rio Bravo Resort "Picture of the Month," Bakersfield, California, George W. Nickel, Jr., playing volleyball, 1980.





Nickel: We didn't do it every year, but it was fun.

Faulhaber: Did your equestrian center emphasize the western aspects of horseback riding, or did you get into the English mode of jumping and showing?

Nickel: It definitely was both. The English riding is very important to horse people in the area here.

Faulhaber: You built an airport. What did you foresee the advantage to be of a private airport?

Nickel: Well, I was a flyer for a good many years with thousands of hours of flight time going from one ranch to another. The airplane made a great deal of difference in my life. It really saved a lot of time for reviewing what was going on. Then it was the same thing here at the Rio Bravo resort area. I thought that an airport would be very useful, not only for me but for others who were coming into the resort. So the airport was built not long after we built the original part of the buildings at the resort.

Faulhaber: Was it heavily used?

Nickel: I can't say that it was heavily used, but we were able to get authorization to have the airport built with an airstrip of about four thousand feet. For single engine airplanes it was adequate. I certainly used it a lot. Then over the years we had flying groups that would use it for starting air competitions across the country. That was always a fun part of the program.

Faulhaber: From start to finish, how many years did it take you to build it all?

Nickel: Well, I think it was over a seven-year period.

Faulhaber: To construct all of this in seven years is remarkable. I would assume it took a great deal of financing. How did you finance the development?

Nickel: I had a very good relationship with the Crocker Bank. I became very well acquainted with the president of the Crocker Bank, Tom Wilcox. He has passed away. They were very helpful, and he was very interested. Then before things really started to go bad for various reasons, why, the Crocker Bank sold out to Wells Fargo. I regret to state that I did not get the same cooperation from Wells Fargo.

Faulhaber: You don't own Rio Bravo today. I know Rio Bravo Resort was a very important development for you personally, and it had to be sold. What happened?

Nickel: Well, the thing that happened was that we had some tough times in agriculture. We had weather problems and production problems. I was fortunate to be able to get some government loans of consequence. Then we had farmers in the area that were jealous of my having gotten some of these large government loans. Some of them did too, but others didn't, and they thought this fellow that had the resorts and all shouldn't be getting these government loans for agricultural operations. They really gave me a bad

time to the point where they got a lot of publicity about the deal. I even ended up on *60 Minutes* [TV news program], which was interesting, and it certainly didn't do me any good financially.

Faulhaber: I know it was a long time ago, but what was the subject of the interview for 60 Minutes?

Nickel: The subject was why I should have had these big government loans, and why they were deserved, and so on and so forth. Part of the loans were because of weather problems. I was able to substantiate that by showing crop damage and so on. But it had primarily to do with the government loans.

Faulhaber: I remember the eighties as being difficult years because my father was farming too. It seemed to me it was a series of things, not to mention the fact that interest rates were so high and property values were falling. Many farmers in the Central Valley didn't make it. That must have been a very tough time for you. How did you eventually work your way out of the hole?

Nickel: It was difficult. I sold quite a lot of the farm land that I had, and I think that had a lot to do with it. Then farming programs turned out to be more successful, and in addition to that I was able to sell the Rio Bravo Resort. I also had a very nice office complex to the south of the Rio Bravo Resort facilities. And I sold that too. So I sold things wherever I could to simply get the government loans straightened out. I am proud to say that I finally got them all straightened out and all paid off. So that was accomplished.

Faulhaber: You recovered. Most farmers didn't. It must be a personal triumph for you.

Nickel: It certainly is a pleasure to have ended up with things under control. We are doing very well in the farming business, and I am active in the real estate business too, building homes and selling ranches. I have been a real estate broker for many years.

Faulhaber: You have a company called Rio Bravo Realty.

Nickel: Yes, I have a Rio Bravo Realty Company.

Faulhaber: You have done a great deal developing housing in the area. Do you plan to continue along that path?

Nickel: Yes, I do. I still have good acreage that is going to be very nice for development. The Bakersfield community is going to start expanding more and more to the east, out in the direction of Rio Bravo. This hasn't been true in the past after the university went to the other side of town, on the west side. It is just amazing the amount of building that went on over there because of the university. So at least I know that if I had gotten it out here it would have been a really good economic booster. But in any event it is getting crowded over on the west side of Bakersfield. So I think there will be more and more expansion on the east side, which is really a pretty area for houses because we have hills.

Faulhaber: We were looking at the area you call Rancheria Estates, which is on the way to your house. The property is spectacular, and the houses can only be described as luxurious. Do you see the area of Rancheria expanding?

Nickel: Oh, very definitely. We have the water. We have the zoning where we need it generally. It's a very nice area for more development.

Faulhaber: And of course you have the Kern River going right through the property. That has to be a great pull for anyone interested in a beautiful river sitting.

Nickel: The Kern River flows twelve months of the year. That is unusual in the San Joaquin Valley.

### **A Hydroelectric Plant on the Kern River; Environmental Issues**

Faulhaber: We haven't talked about the hydroelectric plant you built on the Kern River not far from your home. It is quite a feat of engineering and a smart way to channel power given today's high energy prices. Would you comment on the plant and how it occurred to you to build it?

Nickel: It really is an interesting subject. When I bought the ranch I got the USGS government maps that are available publicly and learned about the elevations on the property and the elevations on the Kern River itself. I observed that the Kern River drops rapidly from the mouth of the Kern River Canyon out of the Sierra Nevada Mountains on downstream. This was further confirmed for me by the fact that the prior owners of the Olcese Ranch had actually diverted a little water out of the river to provide water for their cattle. In any event I got to thinking that I should take a good hard look at this opportunity, and I developed a program where there is four hundred feet of drop from the mouth of the Kern River Canyon down to where I established the power plant. So we have four hundred feet of head for the hydroelectric plant, which PG&E has been operating and is very happy with incidentally. It has turned out to be a wonderful thing because I was able to build a concrete-lined canal from the mouth of the canyon down to the power plant. That in itself was quite an engineering feat. That was not an easy construction job. We got it built, and it will handle 1,600 second feet [cubic feet per second] of water, which is a lot of water for the power plant.

Faulhaber: You built the hydroelectric plant around 1983 or 1984. Was it revolutionary at that point in time?

Nickel: That's right. There was nothing like that existing at that time on the Kern River. There were power plants that existed upstream above the mouth of the canyon that took advantage of naturally occurring elevations there because the river drops very rapidly from Isabella Reservoir on down to the mouth of the canyon. I think there are at least four power plants up there.

- Faulhaber: Yours, however, is in a very nice scenic area more visible than the ones you have just described. Did you run into any resistance when you wanted to build the plant?
- Nickel: You know, I think my main problem was getting the financing.
- Faulhaber: Well, then how did you finance it?
- Nickel: Well, I managed to get a company, Catalyst, Inc., that saw the potential of the power plant and that also wanted to sell me the machinery that is necessary to produce power. So I got some financial help there, and I think a couple of other places. It wasn't easy at all. Anyhow, it got done.
- Faulhaber: Do you still have an interest in the power plant today?
- Nickel: We still have ownership of the power plant, and we get income from it. That has been very nice. PG&E, for instance, was about to get out of the power plant altogether because they had other deals around the country. But now all of a sudden they don't have the other deals that they thought they had, and so they are very eager to stay with our hydro plant.
- Faulhaber: Would you say it is a big moneymaker for you?
- Nickel: It has certainly been a good moneymaker.
- Faulhaber: Do you contemplate building any others?
- Nickel: No. You know, I thought about the potential, but I don't think so.
- Faulhaber: We have talked about the hydroelectric plant on the Kern River, but we haven't really touched on the environmental issues. The issue of access to the banks of the Kern River was a hot topic here at one point. I gather it still is today. Because of your development of Rancheria Estates along the banks of the Kern River, you came under pressure to open up access to the river. Would you talk about that?
- Nickel: Well, that's quite true. One of the first developments I had along the Kern River was what you referred to as Rancheria Estates. It is upstream of Rancheria Road, and the land I developed there were lots that were attractive, right on the river.

As far as the public access question is concerned there are groups in Kern County who are really desirous of having public access and not concerned about private property. In some places where they have moved into private property areas, the result has been very unfortunate for the private property owners. So I got into a contest over this one particular area where nice homes were being built along the Kern River. There was nothing that people there wanted less than to have the public right in front of their back doors. So I got into an argument with them about that. I ran into a situation with a group of people that wanted to have complete public access.



So we all met there right along the river. There was one very nice looking lady in the group who was an attorney. Her name is Teri Bjorn, and she was on the side of the group that wanted to have the public access, but on the other hand she was also a reasonable woman. It was sure nice because she came up with a solution to this particular issue by pointing out that it would be feasible for me to build a trail area where the public could go through to the river above the homes that were being built. I agreed to the thing and built this trail area with the understanding that there would be no vehicles or anything like that, just public access to a portion of the area along the river. It turned out very well. Everyone has been happy with it.

Faulhaber: The Kern River is known for its whitewaters. When we talk about access to the banks of the Kern River, did that mean access for whitewater rafting?

Nickel: That is a rather separate subject. And before we get into that subject, I would like to make one further comment because it is kind of interesting about Teri Bjorn, the lady attorney. I thought so much of her that I was able to subsequently get her into the Bakersfield Rotary Club as the first woman. It revolutionized the Rotary Club here, but it was great because she is such a bright attractive lady. I thought I would mention that.

Faulhaber: So proposing her as the first woman member caused quite a stir?

Nickel: Well, I think there were about nine members of the Rotary Club that left over the issue, but since then we have lots of women in the Rotary Club. This is happening all over the United States now, and we were some of the prime movers in the whole thing. It certainly hasn't hurt the Rotary Club. I think that women are here to stay, and I like it!

Faulhaber: How many friends did you lose over that one?

Nickel: I don't think really anybody of consequence. Some of them were embarrassed but angry at the time.

Faulhaber: Going back to the subject of whitewater rafting, it is big now on the Kern River. At the time of the issue of access to the Kern River, was whitewater rafting an issue?

Nickel: Yes, it was. The public access thing then became a problem. So I worked out a program where we permitted rafting and kayaking on the Kern River if proper conditions were lived up to. It was at a higher elevation along the river than Rancheria Road. So we worked out a program where there would be public access there to do the rafting and the kayaking, but only that. It was all for the use of the kayaks and so on. This stimulated things to the point where I almost had the Olympics on the Kern River when it was in Los Angeles in 1984. I finally lost out to the Los Angeles area, which was a shame because they did not have such an attractive place. Shortly thereafter we had the national championships on the Kern River, and it was a great event enjoyed by all. We are now working to further rafting and kayaking on the river as long as it is done in a proper manner without interference to homeowners.



Incidentally, going back to Teri Bjorn, I gave some land to the city so that people would have access to the river there along Rancheria Road.

Faulhaber: How far do you have to go back up into the canyon to really find good white waters?

Nickel: Well, you don't have to go back into the canyon because we have good white waters below there. The really fast moving white water is further up the canyon. It is very dangerous, and lots of people drown up there. But when you get up there around Kernville, around Isabella Reservoir, it can be done more safely.

Faulhaber: Your hydroelectric plant obviously would be an obstruction for whitewater rafters. Did you have any problems from the whitewater groups when you put in the plant?

Nickel: No. It doesn't affect them. The discharge from the power plant is into the river, and it makes the water more exciting there. It is just above where I live on the river, so I know it isn't doing anybody any harm.

Faulhaber: At certain times during the year you have very aggressive white waters in front of your house.

Nickel: Oh, yes. The Kern River has some big flows at times. The flows of the river sometimes get above 10,000 cubic second feet [cubic feet per second]. That's a lot of water.

Faulhaber: Having noted your enthusiasm for new projects, I have to ask if you ever thought of forming a whitewater rafting company to take advantage of the white waters on the Kern River?

Nickel: Yes, I have done that and did that about the time we almost got the Olympics here. I am working on a program now, but it won't be a private company. I am working with the Kern River Alliance on maybe having a year-round program downstream from Rancheria Road, if it can be worked out.

### **The Rio Bravo Golf Course; Merle Haggard**

Faulhaber: We forgot to talk about the construction of the golf course and that lovely area above it with luxury homes.

Nickel: Yes, I could comment about the Rio Bravo Golf Course because it is really worth talking about. I saw the potential of the Rio Bravo Golf Course because I had the right property to consider for it, and more important than that, I developed the Kern River water rights so that I had water to build a golf course. That, of course, is essential.

This golf course is located on the south side of Highway 178, only a short distance away from the Rio Bravo Resort where the tennis club and hotel are located. It is also

adjacent to where I put in the airstrip--you know, the 4,000 foot airstrip. It is just to the east of that.

I had been around golf a good part of my life. My father was a great golfer. In any event, he and Bobby Jones were great friends, and so I was exposed to what it takes on the golf course to some extent. I thought it would bring more people down to the resort. So I did build a beautiful eighteen-hole golf course using John Muir Graves as the golf course architect. It is a very successful golf course now and has some beautiful homes around it. I subdivided around the golf course for the houses. There are lots more going in now too. So that golf course was a very good thing to do.

Faulhaber: That was considered part of the Rio Bravo development?

Nickel: Yes that's right.

Faulhaber: Switching to another subject, Merle Haggard, the famous country western singer, is from Bakersfield. He had a home very close to where we are now which you eventually bought. Could I ask you to tell that story?

Nickel: Yes. I would be glad to do that. Merle Haggard was a country western singer who was a rather controversial fellow in many ways, kind of a fun guy. I did get to know him a bit. From time to time he made a lot of money with his country western singing. Today he is a great success. I think he took a little bumping up and down and around.

During one of his bumping times when he was bumped up a bit he bought a piece of property that is adjacent to what I bought here, and he decided to build a home there. It really was quite an attractive two-story with a big swimming pool, with a likeness of a guitar at the bottom of the pool. I have forgotten just what it was exactly, but in any event, he did build quite an attractive area there.

I found out that he was having some tough financial times and wanted to sell it. So I went over and met him and looked at the house. It was sort of an interesting place, and I thought that it would be a good idea to buy it. So I bought the house from him and his adjoining land.

My son, Jim Nickel, lived in the house with his wife and family for a period of time. It wasn't a very long period of time. But they didn't like it there as much as I had hoped. I didn't know what to do with the house. It wasn't very salable. Consequently, I did eventually get it sold to a group who used it for a place for people who were in trouble emotionally. I think Los Angeles County joined with Kern County on a financial program where people were taken in there and cared for, which is nice. They haven't really done much to take care of the house. It is sort of run down and they let all of the trees die that we planted around the house area. But it still is an intriguing place, and I would guess that some day it might be jazzed up again.

Faulhaber: Is Merle Haggard still in Bakersfield?

Nickel: No. Merle Haggard moved on up to northern California near one of the big lakes. I think he built a very fancy place up there, but he is on the upswing. I think Merle is making good money.

### Creating the Olcese Water District, 1969

[Interview II: November 28, 2000]

Faulhaber: Today is November 28, 2000, and we are at the Rio Bravo Ranch in Bakersfield, California. Last evening you had a meeting of the Olcese Water District and a dinner here at your headquarters. Somehow it escaped our attention that you were the founder of the Olcese Water District. From what we can determine that district was established in 1969, and it has been very important in your farming operation down here. I would like to ask you to give the historical background of the Olcese Water District, why you formed it, and what it has done for your business.

Nickel: I think that is a very interesting subject, Jamy, and I am willing to do a little research on it and send you a memorandum because it is very interesting how it was done and the need for it and the financing and all.

At the same time I was developing the Rio Bravo Ranch, I proceeded with the initiation and construction of the Olcese Water District, which was provided with a major takeout of water from the Kern River, treatment of the water, and elevation to two storage tanks that directly supplied water to the Rio Bravo Resort and the adjacent subdivision. I worked closely with the City of Bakersfield on getting the approval of the Olcese Water District and the facilities.

Also, I established a good working relationship with the California Water Services Company, which supplies water to most of the City of Bakersfield. Then, in recent times, I sold out facilities of the Olcese Water District to the California Water Services Company, which now serves all of the Olcese Water District land south of the Kern River to an east alignment where the Olcese Water District continues to exist and such existence also extends to my large land area north of the Kern River.

We have now worked out a financial deal for the sale of a portion of the Olcese Water District to the Cal Water Company, which is very big in California. It's a very friendly arrangement. We have kept a portion of the Olcese Water District that covers just our own land, the more easterly portion of the original Olcese Water District. We have all the water rights we need for continuation of development and most all of our agricultural operations here within the Olcese Water District which remain.

Faulhaber: What was the major advantage of forming your own water district?

Nickel: It was so that we could make use of the water rights that I had established on the Kern River. Without that there wouldn't have been any early development of land out in this part of the Bakersfield area.

Prior to the purchase of the Olcese family property I was very active in the development of Kern River water rights on my 16,000 acre Hacienda Ranch, which lies south of Tulare Lake. I learned that the 16,000 acre Hacienda Ranch had potential Kern River water rights under the Miller-Haggin Agreement of 1888. I made good use of this water right position when the United States government was ready to settle the 535,000 acre feet storage in Isabella Reservoir on the Kern River. They sided with me, agreeing that I should receive recognition of the Hacienda Water District which covered the Hacienda Ranch south of Tulare Lake. That is how I was able to negotiate my 20 percent storage in Isabella Reservoir.

In addition to storage rights at Isabella Reservoir I was also able to establish full Kern River water rights for the Hacienda Water District. This was important because these became the water rights that I later moved on to the Olcese Water District to develop Rio Bravo and to use in the farming operation. I could also have used them for the university site.

Faulhaber: Did the development of the Olcese Water District occur at the same time as the purchase of the Olcese property?

Nickel: I had it in mind then because I had already established my water rights on the Kern River. So it was a very good tie-in.

Faulhaber: When you form a water district does it become a public entity?

Nickel: Very definitely it is a public entity. It is a public district controlled by the landowners with water rights.

Faulhaber: So I assume there is a board of directors?

Nickel: Oh, yes, definitely a board of directors.

Faulhaber: And the board of directors probably is constituted by those landowners who participate in the district?

Nickel: Yes, that's correct. The value of the properties is directly related to the percentage of vote.

Faulhaber: So it is fair to say that representation is determined by the number of acres owned within the district.

Nickel: Yes, that's correct.

Faulhaber: You say that currently you have sold some of your interest?

- Nickel: Yes, we sold the more westerly portion of the Olcese Water District to the California Water Company, and it was a good deal for the California Water Company and the landowners involved there. It was a good deal for us, too.
- Faulhaber: You envision, then, a long life for the Olcese Water District?
- Nickel: Definitely.
- Faulhaber: Is the Olcese Water District the primary water district under which your lands operate in this area?
- Nickel: Yes, the Olcese Water District is essential for our future in this particular area.
- Faulhaber: We haven't commented on the fog. But it is November 28, and it is very foggy here in the valley. This is the typical Central Valley tule fog. What causes this kind of a fog condition?
- Nickel: This condition out here at the Rio Bravo Ranch area is unusual. We don't get much fog out here. The fog is usually further to the west of us here in the San Joaquin Valley. Today, as you pointed out, there is plenty. The fog is created by moisture from up in the Sierra Nevada Mountains, and it turns into fog as it comes this direction.

### **Rio Bravo Realty: Developing Housing and a School**

- Faulhaber: Our next topic has to do with the development of your housing project which has been very successful here in Bakersfield. It is near the raceway. I would like to ask you to talk about Rio Bravo Realty and your efforts in developing affordable housing in Bakersfield.
- Nickel: Yes, I have been a real estate broker for many years, mostly in agricultural lands. For the development of housing it was very important to have a broker's license and to form my own real estate company, which is Rio Bravo Realty Company. I have one main man who works for me in the overall management. It has turned out very well. We not only handle subdivision activity here but other land which is agricultural and commercial.
- Faulhaber: Do you see a lot of demand for housing here in Bakersfield?
- Nickel: Oh, Bakersfield is one of the fastest growing places in the United States, which is an indication that we are going to have a lot more development out in our area here because physically it is more attractive than the west side of Bakersfield, much more attractive.



Faulhaber: Your Rio Bravo Realty seems to be more involved currently with residential sales, but do you envision selling more agricultural land or do you see land basically being sold for more residential development?

Nickel: I don't see selling the land out here at Rio Bravo for anything except development of real estate, houses, et cetera. However, that doesn't mean that my real estate company won't be involved in other kinds of interesting development.

Faulhaber: So you are both buying and selling land?

Nickel: With the real estate company, mostly selling.

Faulhaber: What plans do you have in the future for developing more of these housing projects?

Nickel: I have very fine plans for development along the Kern River, which is so beautiful and one of the few rivers in California that you can depend on to flow twelve months of the year. This is possible by reason of the Isabella Reservoir on the Kern River which keeps the water flowing all year. It is making the area here particularly attractive. People like to live on the river. But we also have some very attractive lands up from the river that are extremely interesting to people. Then, of course, we also developed the Rio Bravo Golf Course area that has lots of beautiful housing growing up around it.

Faulhaber: We didn't comment on the gift of land that you made to the city for a school, which later became known as the Cesar Chavez School, a magnet school for science. That was part of your first housing project. Would you comment on that gift?

Nickel: Yes, but it wasn't my first housing project. The first housing was around the Rio Bravo Resort tennis club area, and that was very successful.

But there was the Fiesta development, reasonably priced houses. It is interesting that when I began to plan the Fiesta development it became obvious that the people that worked in this area on the agricultural lands needed it, mostly Mexican people and some quite well paid Mexican people who could afford housing, needed it. We have many of them who ended up here.

It also created in the minds of politicians in the Bakersfield area and the Mexicans that live in the area the idea for a school named after Cesar Chavez. I didn't always agree with some of the things that Cesar Chavez did, you know, in the field of agriculture and so on, but I wasn't opposed to naming it the Cesar Chavez School. He had passed away when we started the school there.

I can recall that I was at the dedication of the property and have a picture of it on my wall. I think it was good politics, and I have lots of Mexican people that I am very fond of that work for me and are friends.

Faulhaber: Is the Cesar Chavez School an elementary school?<sup>1</sup>

Nickel: Yes, it's an elementary school for science, a magnet school, and a darn good school. It has turned out very very well. It handles around eleven hundred students.

Faulhaber: What grades does it serve?

Nickel: I'm not sure if it begins with kindergarten or first grade. But it goes through eighth grade.

Faulhaber: I see that commemorative photograph on your wall of this special occasion.

### Bottling Kern River Water; The Nickel Family LLC

Faulhaber: What kind of projects are you working on now?

Nickel: Right now I am involved in a drinking water program utilizing Kern River water. The interesting thing about Kern River water is that it is probably the finest quality natural stream water in California and maybe anywhere. The reason for that is that it is snowmelt water. It is water that comes when the snows melt, and it is as pure as it can be. It is not like in so many other areas where water goes into the underground and is then pumped out. Once it goes into the underground it is going to pick up all kinds of elements that you don't find in the pure water that we have. So that plus the fact that we have a nice twelve month supply is certainly important.

In addition to that I was responsible for getting a concrete-lined ditch constructed from the mouth of the Kern River Canyon on down to where I put in a hydropower plant. It handles about 1,600 cubic feet a second of water, that's the maximum flow, down to the power plant. The power plant has certainly been a great success. We sell the power to PG&E.

But getting back to the drinking water deal, the concrete-lined canal passes right alongside the area where I am developing the drinking water program. Very simply, dropping the water out of the canal into the treatment plant is physically very attractive, and easy to do. I think I'll have this thing going at least in the upcoming year.

Faulhaber: Are you looking for a partner?

Nickel: Yes, I am.

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<sup>1</sup>School dedication November 17, 1994.

Faulhaber: So this would be a business to bottle water and sell it commercially in the West initially and then throughout the United States?

Nickel: Well, it would probably be sold in Los Angeles first, since we are very close to Los Angeles and have a high speed train program that is about to go in. But even without that we have train transportation and easy truck transportation. The LA basin really needs more good-quality drinking water. So I think we have a real fine market right next door.

Faulhaber: So instead of sending it over the mountain via the California Aqueduct you'll send it over the mountain in cases of bottled water.

Nickel: That's right. It won't have the nice pipeline lift that takes it over the mountains, but trains and trucks can be utilized instead.

Faulhaber: Changing the subject at your suggestion, I will interview your son, Jim Nickel, about the current family business, which is called the Nickel Family LLC. But it is a family operation, which I find extremely interesting because it is juxtaposed against Miller & Lux as you knew it when you were a young man and began to work for the company. You were the only family member allowed in, and my understanding of your current family business is that it includes all of the children.

Nickel: Oh, yes. I wanted to treat our total family group, all eight children, well. My wife, Dodo Nickel, had three children before we were married, and I had five children. We lost our respective spouses in the same year, which was 1954. Anyhow we got our two families together, which was just great. So with eight kids we decided that we would like to make sure that they were all financially taken care of and in good shape. So we have brought them all into our family business, and things are working out well.

Faulhaber: I know you have frequent family meetings. How often do you get together as a group?

Nickel: We have at least four major meetings during the year. Then we have other get-togethers. My son, Jim Nickel, is the head of the company now. He gives information out to everybody. Then we have committee groups that get together. And I think as time passes we will have other members of the family working in the organization.

Faulhaber: Is there active family participation then?

Nickel: Oh, yes. They have shares that give them, I think, about 50 percent of the company. My wife and I have the other 50 percent, but it has been a very good arrangement. I think one that you don't always find where things are planned well in advance.

Faulhaber: It sounds like you spend--you, your staff, and your son--a lot of time preparing these meetings making sure the family is well informed.

Nickel: Absolutely. They are vocal and have their opportunity to be heard and even vote against what they don't like, but mostly it is an interchange of information and very friendly.

Faulhaber: It seems fitting that we should end our discussion of your oral history with a discussion of the Miller-Haggin Agreement of 1888. We have talked so much about water during these interviews and you have often mentioned some of the provisions of the Miller-Haggin Agreement. You still operate under that agreement today, so I thought I would ask you to make some final comments about the Miller-Haggin Agreement--why it was important then in 1888, and why it is still important today.

Nickel: It certainly is an historic document with real significance in California. My great grandfather, Henry Miller, was directly responsible for the creation of the Miller-Haggin Agreement which was consummated in 1888. It came about as a result of a difference of opinion on water rights in California, whether they should be riparian or appropriative. Those are two technically different ways of determining a water right.

Henry Miller took the position, probably because it was important to his land holdings in Kern County at that time, that he definitely preferred the riparian right--which means that the lands that are adjacent and riparian to the Kern River, in this situation, would have preferential position to the lands that would take water from the Kern River that were not adjacent to the Kern River. That would be an appropriative water right.

Anyhow, there was a great amount of time spent on determining which would be the proper water right here in California. The riparian water right was established, incidentally, in England. In any event, after a lot of effort and litigation it was determined by the courts that riparian water rights would come ahead of the appropriative water rights. Then that created the Miller-Haggin Agreement of 1888.

My great grandfather didn't stop there. He saw the importance of working with Haggin and Tevis, who founded the Kern County Land Company, and to work out a program that would be of mutual benefit. So Henry Miller saw the potential of getting better use of Kern River water if he could regulate it and have it so that it was available to his land twelve months of the year instead of as the Kern River runs off.

So he got the Haggin and Tevis group that later became the Kern County Land Company to agree that the Buena Vista Lake area owned by Henry Miller would be the proper area for storage for some of his riparian water and that the Haggin and Tevis group then would have the right to withdraw a given flow of water at different times of the year, all of which is carefully spelled out. And so they came out with a pretty good water deal, and an assured water deal, too.

Henry Miller had another thing that he was bright enough to realize, which was that to have good use of the water in the lands where he wanted it, his share of the water had to be delivered in undiminished quantities as measured out of the Kern River Canyon. That certainly was an important thing to have done. It really didn't have anything to do with the riparian rights.

Faulhaber: Is that agreement still in effect today as an operating agreement?



Nickel: It is respected. As a matter of fact we had a total review and the reestablishment of the Miller-Haggin Agreement 100 years from when it was signed which was in 1988. In that year we had a review of the Miller-Haggin Agreement and a revalidation of it with some new language, which was really interesting. It is a part of California water law now.

Faulhaber: So the agreement continues its existence today as an operational document that everyone involved respects and uses?

Nickel: Yes, and incidentally it was very important to have it reviewed after 100 years from the signing, in 1988, because we then had Isabella Reservoir on the Kern River, and we needed to review what position the reservoir would play in recognition of the riparian water rights and other agreements that had been entered into. So that turned out to be a very good program with storage in Isabella Reservoir. Again we used Henry Miller's condition that water coming down to what were his lands had to be delivered in undiminished quantities.

Faulhaber: So in 1988 the agreement wasn't actually changed but updated to reflect the construction of Isabella Reservoir?

Nickel: Yes.

Faulhaber: Were there any amendments to the agreement during that 100 year period?

Nickel: Just the initial deal involving Buena Vista Lake and that sort of thing. That's about all.

Faulhaber: Just to reflect. The Buena Vista Lake changes came as a result of Isabella Reservoir?

Nickel: Oh yes. That made possible the farming of about 30,000 acres of the Buena Vista Lake area. I had a great deal to do with all of that.

Faulhaber: So the amendments based on allocating water to Buena Vista came before the actual construction of Isabella?

Nickel: During the construction before the thing was concluded.

I think the Miller-Haggin Agreement also opened the door to a program to spread water to the underground for recovery. Here in Kern County that has really helped when we have had a surplus of water in the Kern River. We spread it on open land so that water will go into the underground which is later recovered by wells when the water is needed. This also tied in very well with the California Aqueduct program that brings water through Kern County and on down to Los Angeles with the Breckenridge Pumping Plant over the Sierra Nevadas here. We have had some very interesting things there in coordinating water rights.





#### IV INTERVIEWS WITH ADELE (“DODO”) NICKEL

[Interview 1: July 26, 2000]

##### Meeting George Nickel, Jr., and the Path to Marriage

Faulhaber: We are in Carpinteria, California, at Dodo's beach house on Wednesday, July 26, 2000.

Dodo, I know that you and George were married in January of 1955. I wanted to ask you to recount the history of your relationship, how you met, and how you came to marry.

D. Nickel: Yes. It's quite a long story. Actually George and I met in 1934 first on this very beach, Carpinteria, where we are today. He was down with his family for a summer visit, and of course I lived here, fortunate me. It's a wonderful place to grow up. Our parents had mutual friends. So we were "gotten" together the way parents used to do with children in those days. He was sixteen, and I was fourteen. He had probably been working on one of the ranches and got some days off to come and take a little vacation on the beach.

So we met through mutual friends. To tell you the truth, I don't remember meeting him then. He remembers me, but I don't remember him. I remember him first of all--I guess it must have been at Berkeley in the late thirties. He was a young man of great energy and intensity, and when he concentrated on you, you knew you were being concentrated on. So I was really intrigued with him.

He was rather unusual because he owned a third of a car, and nobody can believe that. But in those days that was prosperity. Also he was one of the few young men that I went out with that took me to dinner. Nobody had, what we used to say, “a window to throw it out of.” It's hard now, I think, for my children and grandchildren to imagine how absolutely poor everybody was. It was the end of the Depression. But we didn't care. It was great. Everybody was kind of in the same boat, and we never worried. I am always amazed now how people worry about sending their children to college when they marry. We never even gave that a second thought. We knew we would handle it.

So on to George. He was very helpful to me. He says he is totally responsible for my choice of sorority because I couldn't make up my mind. He took me down to one of

our favorite places, the Anchor Tavern, where they had wonderful steamed beer and *free* prawns, believe it or not, bowls of free prawns, and I don't mean shrimp, I mean prawns. And so at the Anchor Tavern he helped me make up my mind about which sorority to join.

But, then, actually, I married somebody else who was at Berkeley at that time, John Selfridge, and George did the same. But we kept track of each other, and we would visit with our children, et cetera, back and forth over the years.

Then as the years went by tragedy hit both of us. My husband died of cancer, and George's wife, Charlotte, died in a tragic airplane accident with his brother. I can remember writing him a note to express my great sympathy, and he telephoned me. And then somehow or other I was going out with him. I was living in Berkeley at that time, and he was down in Los Banos. He used to fly up to the city on business. That was pretty romantic, to have a date flying in, in those days. Of course, that was the love of his life, flying. He was very good, and that's a whole other chapter of our lives, the flying adventures that we will go into sometime.

So anyway. Time went by, and we introduced our children. He had five at that point. I had three, and so we decided that it might be a good idea to get married. It was clear to me that I couldn't marry someone who had no children and vice versa for George. It would never have worked. But with the number of children we had, I am sure that all of our parents, although they were very polite and dear, must have thought we were totally insane to even consider putting our two families together. But we thought it was a great idea and still do. I think that is about all it takes, really, for any kind of a successful venture, to think it's a great idea and work it out. We were married, and I don't know how we went on our honeymoon because we parked eight children in numerous directions and away we went. We flew down to Guaymas in Mexico.

Faulhaber: By way of Las Vegas.

D. Nickel: By way of Las Vegas. Oh, I shouldn't forget that. That's one of George's favorite stories. I guess it was an interesting night, although it wasn't exactly one of the high spots of my life. I got extraordinarily lucky and just could not do anything wrong with those dice, even though I knew nothing about shooting dice. So that was pretty amazing. But we were a little insecure about taking so much cash to Mexico, so I remember we literally laughed all the way to the bank with our money, made a quick deposit, and went on to Mexico, where we had a wonderful time.

We flew, and there was a little something wrong with the plane. So when we got there, I remember George thought that he might talk to a Mexican mechanic. So we spent some time one afternoon at the airport, which was a little dusty something, and this mechanic kept dropping things into the dust. George would have to pick them up and say, "Here. I think you forgot to put this in," and so they got the plane back together again.

Then when it was time to go home, we did what they called "flying the highway," which means you don't go off into any wild territory, but you just fly the highway. I wasn't worried at all. It absolutely didn't bother me. I was young and unconscious. But we did have a little problem. And so when we got back into the states we stopped in Newport Beach and had a mechanic there look at the plane. Actually it was a magneto problem. There are two magnetos, and the Mexican had worked on the good magneto.

Faulhaber: You were lucky. You were very lucky.

D. Nickel: So that's the beginning of a lot of lucky flying stories. So then we went back to Los Banos and lived there on the ranch, which was wonderful, except that it was an amazing household with ten of us. I really feel that I was very, very lucky because I had hired a Swedish couple for George before we were married. She was the gem of the world. I think without Karen the marriage wouldn't have survived, nothing would have survived. She was a great help. That first year everybody was home, and so it was off to the bus in the morning dropping their lunch money and their trumpets and their flutes and et cetera. So we did the best we could to make a united family out of all of this, and I think we did a pretty good job.

One of the things that we did was get the children involved in 4-H. I look back at it with total horror because they would start when they were ten, which is not very big, and George would somehow secure these steers that had practically never even seen a person, and they would be lassoed and tied up to a post, kicking and bellowing the whole way. And then somebody would wrestle a halter onto this creature, and the little person would end up six months later in the ring at the fair parading this animal around with a great beautiful performance, totally in control.

It was a great experience, I think, for all of them, and they took turns, usually, on feeding and that sort of thing, which was fine because there were quite a few of them. They always knew whose turn it was. There was no question. Now I think of those little people getting into their rubber boots in the winter and sloshing out in all that manure and the feeding. It was really a good exercise. They had to keep track of all of the money and the feed. So it was a great experience. That was George's idea.

Faulhaber: Did all of the children participate?

D. Nickel: Everybody but Sally who--I think she thought, fortunately for her, that she was allergic to horses, cows, so forth. So it was seven of them. I was in charge of keeping white uniforms available, and that wasn't easy.

Faulhaber: Did all of the children go to the local schools?

D. Nickel: That first year they were all in the local schools. Then George and I felt that maybe there might be a problem with the quality of the education. So we started sending them off to boarding school. Some of them enjoyed it, and some didn't. I honestly don't know, looking back on it, whether going to boarding school is that important. We felt that a good education, quote and unquote, was an essential, and that in boarding school

you got more attention, smaller classes, more emphasis on college prep. But we had every variety of scholar in the family, from not very interested to very, very good. I am not sure that in the long run they wouldn't have probably done as well as they were going to do in public high school. I am not really sure. I'll never know the answer to that. That's a hard decision.

But they did get more of the tools for writing essays in private schools, which is something you need for the rest of your life. You are always writing something to entertain someone, convince them of something, and it's just a very good tool.

### Moving to San Francisco and then to Bakersfield, 1960s

Faulhaber: How long were you in Los Banos?

D. Nickel: We were in Los Banos from 1955 to 1961, and then the press of George's affairs required that he move to San Francisco, which was fine with me. I was thrilled. I loved the country because I had grown up in the country, but if someone says to you that you have to go to San Francisco you are not very cross. I had lived there a big part of my life already. So it was sort of like going back home.

So we lived in the city for five or six years and that was, of course, wonderful, and nice for some of the children because they were able to go to school there, a little longer, maybe, than they would have in Los Banos. Then it became apparent, I guess, that George had done what he wished to do in the city. There was so much going on in Bakersfield at that time and in Kern County that was really exciting, water, et cetera, and he had acquired the Rio Bravo Ranch. So off we went to Bakersfield, and I wasn't too thrilled about that.

Faulhaber: Big change.

D. Nickel: Enormous change. But I had spent that five years in the San Joaquin Valley, and I was used to living on a ranch. So off we went to Bakersfield, and actually that turned out to be a wonderful experience, with the Rio Bravo Tennis Club, and the golf club, and all the wonderful goings on associated with that. Wonderful people from all over the world.

Faulhaber: When you went to Bakersfield you were a long way from San Francisco. Did you spend a lot of time flying back and forth?

D. Nickel: Yes. George had to go up to the city almost every week, and I would fly with him. Of course, we have flown here and there and everywhere together mostly around the State of California, although we also flew to Arizona several times. Those days of flying were so carefree that I think it's hard for anybody that flies now to even imagine it because you barely had to ask any kind of permission to go anywhere. I think we were



supposed to file flight plans but we hardly ever did. Now I notice when we fly, our pilot is talking to someone all the time, asking for instructions. It was so absolutely exciting and carefree, and I still think of that wonderful moment when you leave the earth and defy gravity, and away you go. It's just like you could go anywhere.

George always adored the flying and was wonderfully cool, calm, and collected in times of emergency, of which we had a few. He always handled them so beautifully. I don't know what you call it but I am certainly an unapprehensive person and not a worrier, which is great, especially if you have eight children. It's good not to be a worrier. So we had all these wonderful adventures. One of the things I loved about his flying when we were living on the ranch in Los Banos was when he came home. He usually was flying somewhere on ranch business, almost every day, and we had a strip right by the house. So coming home he would buzz the house to let me know he was on his way, and that was pretty exciting.

Faulhaber: Letting you know that dinner should be ready.

D. Nickel: Yes. "I am on my way. Make way."

One thing I do want to say about George in this oral history is that you will have read about the many things he did, the complicated situations, the wonderful things that he did, and the wonderful things that he didn't get to do for one reason or another. I am sure that he was grossly disappointed sometimes, but when he came home to us he was really extraordinary because in spite of all these complications, he always was full of energy, ready to do things with the children. I never felt that I didn't have all his attention whenever I wanted it. To me it was extraordinary. Now that I am as old as I am, looking at other men, I see that they simply often don't have that wonderful vitality, energy, and interest in their families and wives.

Faulhaber: You look at the time frame and what he was going through personally. For him to be able to leave that at the office and come home and be the father and husband that he was is quite a tribute to the man.

D. Nickel: That was extraordinary.

Faulhaber: Before we close is there anything else that you would [like] to add about your life together?

D. Nickel: We were very fortunate. We also got to go and see a lot of wonderful places and have a lot of wonderful vacations.

Faulhaber: As you look back is there any one period that was exceptionally noteworthy that you would like to mention?

D. Nickel: No, I don't think so. It is like a continuum of a really good relationship that we have. I could not choose. It is like asking you to choose your favorite book. Impossible. I have read too many goodies.

Faulhaber: That sums it up right there.

### Nickel Family Travels

[Interview 2: August 18, 2001]

Faulhaber: I am in Bakersfield, California, at the home of George and Dodo Nickel. Today is August 18, 2001, and we are seated here in the living room of their home on the Kern River. This is a follow-up interview with Dodo Nickel continuing the first that we did in July 2000 in Carpinteria. Today we are going to be talking about some of the wonderful trips and vacations that George and Dodo took during their years together. We are talking about the second part of their life, from the time that she and George moved down to Bakersfield.

D. Nickel: Yes, we had a lot of wonderful trips, to Europe mainly, and one particularly interesting trip to South America, which was a very fortuitous event because George had bought a raffle ticket from a friend at Golden Gate Fields where there was some sort of a charity thing. It must have been about 1960. You buy raffle tickets, and then you forget.

Well, one day he gets the call that he has won the trip. The trip was first class New York to Rio, which was pretty exciting, but at this juncture we weren't really ready. So finally, later in the year--actually it really couldn't have been a worse time because we had just had our eldest daughter Sally's wedding at the ranch, and then moved next day to San Francisco. And here we are in this house with boxes to the ceiling and I think five children going into five different new schools, and George says, "The ticket is expiring." And so I said well, "I, we, cannot go. I cannot do it!" And he said "Yes, we are going." And so we went.

I might put in another comment here because that's a replay of when I started going hunting with George, which I don't think I spoke of before. This was when we were first married. I had never done any shooting, and instead of saying "Dodo, would you like to go hunting with me?" He just said "We're going, here is your gun." And I never regretted it for a moment because we had so many, many wonderful years of shooting together, and I have often given this advice to other people, that if they want someone to do something, and they have a few doubts about what the answer is going to be, don't ask. Just say with enthusiasm "We're going!" So off we went.

So back to South America. We did go, and I was very lucky to get a wonderful person to take over my house and my children, our children, while we were gone. The trip itself was extraordinary because we had a wonderful connection in Argentina with the Reynal family, which resulted in our going on a wonderful flying trip all around the Argentine with Juan Reynal and his wife, Jeannie. He had a lot of ranches, and he also ran the King Ranch enterprises there, and so periodically he would fly around. I think there were seven ranches, and we just happened to land in Buenos Aires, and they

invited us to go, and of course we said “hurray”, and away we went. And it was just a fascinating way to see that huge and wonderful country.

We started out in the ranch that was nearest Buenos Aires, which was really just like a French chateau, fabulous gardens, polo ponies galore that came to eat on call. It was unbelievable. They were standing in a line, all these beautiful horses unrestrained, nothing, and they would call the name of whoever it was “Chico, come get your lunch,” and this horse would trot out and get his lunch. That was an amazing deal there, and then we flew onwards and outwards, more and more into the country, and more and more rugged, and ended up on the border of Uruguay where it was very rugged. In fact, the ladies were going out to swim in the river at that juncture, and we had armed guards in our jeep with us because they were worrying about *bandidos* from over the borders. So that was a wonderful opportunity. We also spent some wonderful time in Brazil and went to Brasilia early on, when that was just being built and moved into. And everybody was very uncertain as to if it was going to work. I believe it has. But it was an incredible venture for that country to undertake.

Faulhaber: Just a question. Juan Reynal was married to an American woman from San Francisco, Jeanne. Do you recall what her maiden name was?

D. Nickel: I haven't got it this morning, but I can look it up.<sup>1</sup>

Faulhaber: You met them when they were in San Francisco.

D. Nickel: Right.

Faulhaber: So that gave you an automatic in?

D. Nickel: To do this thing, and as always if you have friends in a country, it just makes all the difference.

Faulhaber: Well, flying around too. You probably saw most of the country just visiting the ranches.

D. Nickel: Yes, and I remember George being so impressed with the resources of that country. You know, millions and millions of acres of grass and water galore. It has always been difficult to understand why they haven't made better use of their resources.

Faulhaber: You had many more adventures, trips. You mentioned Europe.

D. Nickel: Yes, we went to Europe several times and enjoyed our friends who were there, which always makes for extra goodies. And then also, the last two trips in the nineties were particularly fun for us because we went with some of our children who organized the whole thing for us, which was delightful. They rented villas in Italy, which made it just

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<sup>1</sup>Jeanne Reynal is the former Jeanne Hughson of San Francisco.

absolutely wonderful. We had several cars so you could go where you wanted to go or not go. Italy is a wonderful, gracious, warm country, and we never had a bad meal. That's the greatest recommendation you can give a country. That's it.

Also, down the years, we always went to Tahoe for the month of July with as many of our children as we could gather up, which was wonderful for all of us, because I think being able to spend a period of time together is just remarkable. We were very lucky to get the same house, which was just perfect for us and was built by J. P. Morgan's daughter and then left to her daughter, Tracy Schilling.

We are still doing that and enjoying it, except now there are so many of us that there's no way, José. We are going to be forty-eight people in December with the arrival of our ninth great-grandchild. Anyway, down the years it was wonderful. It's a beautiful, beautiful place, lots of privacy, wonderful beach, wonderful place to have a boat so that everybody could water ski, and a tennis court. We virtually would go and never leave the property, "A" because we were having such a good time, and "B" because hardly anybody invited two dozen Nickels to dinner. Maybe lunch, but not dinner.

And then the other thing that George and I did down the years--which was a wonderful, wonderful vacation and that we both adored because there was good swimming and wonderful weather--was to go to Hawaii. And we went to, I guess, Mauna Kea and always went back there, and then we loved Kauai, which is not as built up. We did spend some time on Maui, but that got to be looking like Miami Beach. But anyway, Kauai was just beautiful. We would go to a place called Kiahuna which had the golf, and the tennis, and the swimming. We would always go with good friends and really relax. The minute you stepped out of the plane into that wonderful warm, but not too warm, moist, but not too moist, air it was just honey.

Faullhaber: You know as you have been talking I realize that there is one subject that I didn't bring up with George. The two of you made a trip to Henry Miller's birthplace in Brackenheim, Germany. I remember reading something about this. It seems to me it was in the early nineties, and George actually wrote a paper about the trip which I have someplace in my archives, but do you remember anything about that trip? It seems to me that you visited with some of Henry Miller's distant relatives.

D. Nickel: No, that wasn't it. The main reason for that trip was the young German girl who had been living with us, Tina Eckert. We had told her that we would come and visit her and her family who, of course, had visited with us several times. So that was sort of what got us going on that trip. We just went to Germany, and we visited them, and they were just fabulous to us. They lived near Brackenheim and got in touch with the then-mayor, Richard Wenniger, and we got total red carpet, wonderful treatment. You know, the visit to the mayor's office, the bows and scrapes, and speeches. It was just fabulous.

We also visited our friends, the Adornos, whom we had met here in California because they had at one point bought farming property in Kern County and also near Blythe. That's how we had met them and always enjoyed their annual visits to





Honolulu, Hawaii, home of Mary Nickel James, tenth wedding anniversary, Dodo and George W. Nickel, Jr., 1965.





Bakersfield. They were extremely generous and wonderful and tootled us around everywhere and gave us such a good time.

Faulhaber: Were they Italian, Adorno?

D. Nickel: No. I think that Edward's father was Italian, but everything else was German. They lived in Frankfurt. They were just wonderful to us.

Now it comes back to me. One of the reasons we went was that Edward was having his 80th birthday party, and they invited us. And so we thought, "Let's go." And we did. They had a wonderful party in a huge hotel, and they were just so thoughtful to us because they seated us with their friends who were particularly good in English, which made it nice for us. They had a very interesting birthday party. We went in to cocktails, and then we went into another room, and we had a musical interlude. Then we went into the other room for a fabulous dinner. So we had to haul our evening clothes with us to Europe, which wasn't so great. We got gussied up for the occasion and really enjoyed it.

But that is the thing I remember now that really got us going on this trip. So we did the birthday party, and then we were able to go to Brackenheim. George only had, I think, one cousin left that they could turn up for us. But they could not have been more hospitable.

Faulhaber: You also mentioned that during that time Nancy and Buzzie were working in New York you and George flew frequently to visit them.

D. Nickel: Yes. That was very nice. George needs an excuse to go on a trip, and it was wonderful to have the girls there because we would visit them. This must have been spread out over five or six years. And so we would go back to New York and do the goodies, the plays, and see the girls, and see some friends. And one thing that I always did, and which I always adored, was to take the boat trip around Manhattan Island. For some reason I have always enjoyed that, and it's beautiful. It gave me a real feeling for Manhattan that you don't get when you are just down in the streets and the hustle bustle.

### The Road to Rio Bravo in Bakersfield

Faulhaber: Well. I guess our last interview ended with your move to San Francisco. We didn't talk a lot about your life there. I don't know if you would like to continue that subject as to the years before you moved to Bakersfield, but I will open that to you. You picked up the family. You moved to San Francisco and you were there, I think, until about 1965 when George's business interests--.

D. Nickel: '66. We were only there five years, and I was delighted because I had spent almost twenty years of my life in that area. I think if one has to live in the city, San Francisco

is it. It's not overwhelming. It's beautiful, with wonderful resources. And so I was delighted actually to be back. We had a lot of old friends there, and the schools were good for the children. And so--happiness. I was delighted.

Actually what happened was that George discovered that what was more fun for him --instead of getting dressed and going downtown to the office every day and because a lot of interesting things were happening in Kern County--was to fly down at least once a week here to Bakersfield and at least spend the night. Once in awhile I would go with him, which was great for me, a little vacation from the household. I can remember he had a room in this hotel, which was sort of his room because he stayed there so often. And I would go out and lie in the sun, which was nice for a San Francisco body.

But when he announced that we really needed to live in Bakersfield, I was just undone. I did not wish to leave at all, and I had thought that all of the other moves in my life had been exciting and challenging. Not this one. And one of the amazing things when I would tell my friends, there would be this huge silence, and they would be trying to think of something encouraging to say, and mostly they couldn't. They would just say "Oh."

So anyway we packed up and were very fortunate after a lot of discouraging house hunting because we found a wonderful Cliff May house at the Stockdale Country Club, at 1011 Tam O'Shanter Drive, which was just a wonderful house. Cliff May is, I think, the typical quintessential architect because he really understands how we live, and we were very fortunate to get this house. We had at this time, I guess, five children left living with us. And so it was great. We were very lucky. And we were in that house for ten years.

During this period of time I recall that George acquired the Rio Bravo Ranch and went through the disappointment of not being able to keep Buena Vista Lake in the family, which was a project he worked very hard on. But he didn't get enough support from the rest of the family. So that was when he was acquiring the Olcese Ranch, now called the Rio Bravo Ranch, which was the springboard for quite a lot of projects.

- Faulhaber: One of the things he comments on in his oral history was his disappointment in not being able to win the [California State] University to his site. You spent a lot of time together trying to make that happen, and I guess ultimately it came down to one vote that he lost in Sacramento.
- D. Nickel: Right. The lieutenant governor was brought in to break the tie, and we felt that he had better connections with others than with us. I don't know how to put it. Also, I think we were a little naive because the architectural committee, of course, was just bowled over by our site, which was on the bluffs above the river and looking at the mountains, and just gorgeous. It would have outdone Santa Cruz and every other site, I think. But there was a lot of pressure from other entities, and so we did not get the site. It would have been a wonderful thing for George and the area. But *c'est la vie*.

Faulhaber: Well, it seems that out of that sprung Rio Bravo, the resort and the use of the land, because when the university fell through, of course, you had the beautiful site.

D. Nickel: I am not totally sure that those weren't going on simultaneously because there was plenty of space to do both of these things. I think that was going on simultaneously, the development of the tennis club then subsequently the golf club and then the residential areas that were contiguous to the golf club and to the tennis club. That's what really took up so much of our time and effort, which was wonderful in a way. We were still pretty young and energetic, and we met so many wonderful and interesting people that would come for tennis tournaments. Then there was a lot of, how do you call it, promotion that brought interesting people. So we were busy, very busy, and it was really exciting.

I mentioned Edward Adorno, who had bought property in Kern County at this time. There were a lot of Europeans who were coming to Kern County and buying farmlands, and so we met a lot of very interesting mostly German and English groups that would come, and we would not have met them otherwise in our lives. So that was very interesting for us.

Faulhaber: I have heard it said more than once that a lot of the touches that were applied to Rio Bravo were yours, certainly in the architecture, in the construction, in the layout and the interior design. Would you like to comment on that?

D. Nickel: Well, we had wonderful architects and a fabulous landscape architect, John Vogley, who absolutely understood the area, the terrain, the use of boulders. He did such a good job at the tennis club that we had him do our house too. I just don't think anyone could have done a better job. Cliff May was always adamant that he had to pass on the landscaping for his houses because, he said, in the beginning he had not asked for a review of the landscaping, and a lot of his houses had been totally wrecked by landscaping that did not correlate at all with his houses. But he was delighted with John Vogley. So I think we were fortunate, or maybe it wasn't an accident that we got people who had wonderful taste and understood the area. I did have maybe the ultimate veto, but I didn't use it very much. But it was nice to have that feeling that there wouldn't be anything that we didn't feel wasn't in good taste.

Faulhaber: I have seen so many exceptional photographs of you and George playing tennis at Rio Bravo. It seems that tennis was a big part of your life.

D. Nickel: Oh, it was, and we had such fun. I think tennis is one of the best games and like golf because it's kind of a group game. You are playing with other people, and that always makes it extra interesting to me because their personalities seep into the game. It also makes it a lot more fun. No, we played a lot together, and we played very well together which I think is a tribute to both of us, probably. I remember reading once that if you were about to marry, you should go on a two-week camping trip alone, and you should play mixed doubles tennis. If you could do that, you had it made. You would have a successful marriage.

Faulhaber: Many of these photographs have well-known tennis stars in them.

D. Nickel: We had a wonderful time because there was something called the Grand Masters Circuit, which I think still exists. All of these fabulous men from all over the world would play, and I think the ones that were the most fun, not to denigrate anyone else, were the Australians, who were really a great group. Frank Sedgeman, Neil Fraser. Anyway, they were always great fun. And of course, they held sway in the tennis world for a long time and had survived well, which speaks well for the game.

Faulhaber: Certainly it does. There was a lot going on, the construction of Cattle King Estates, the resort plus the condominiums. The golf course started to spring up. It seems to me that there was just a flurry of activity in a very few years.

D. Nickel: Like in the seventies, especially in the seventies, with the whole start-up that was so challenging and exciting because, as I say, there were so many interesting people coming into the area as well as the development and the interest of the locals. Anyway it was really a great treat for us, and we were fortunate to have all of these interesting people in and out. And George's vision of a community out here was so extraordinary.

Faulhaber: I should ask you, because I believe I forgot to ask him, about the soccer fields, bringing out the soccer star Pele for the inaugural event. I think George donated the lands for the soccer fields?

D. Nickel: I'm not sure, but he was instrumental in getting that development going, and so I do remember the day of the opening of the soccer fields. Naturally they had children playing on every field. And somebody had this fabulous idea. Pele came in a helicopter. Out of the sky comes Pele, who is everybody's hero, and it practically caused a stampede. But he got up to the microphone and asked all of the children politely to go back to their fields, and that he would come and talk to each group. So the stampede relaxed, and he spoke to the group. He was just incredible because he was so bright and articulate. You could see how he had gotten to be such a world famous soccer player because it's not only a worldwide sport, but he was, as I say, so articulate and charming. So that was a great day when Pele flew in from the sky.

Faulhaber: A topic we haven't touched on were the Reclamation Board years. George served for eight years under Governor Pat Brown. We have talked about some of the social events that went on at the Reclamation Board, ceremonial openings of dams, reservoirs, and more.

D. Nickel: Well, looking back on it, there are two things that stand out in my mind about those years. It was a time when California was very open to change, and they did accomplish an incredible amount of constructive items that were within their field of reclamation. They were able to accomplish so much, projects such as the California Aqueduct, in that period. I think they were fortunate to be on the board at that time because there was so much more open-mindedness.

Faulhaber: I am reminded that Pat Brown was committed to a water plan.



D. Nickel: Pat Brown was absolutely the key to all of that because when he departed everything shut down. Anyway, they did accomplish a great deal, which I am sure that George has gone into, and it was an interesting group. Another thing besides what they accomplished is that we really did have a good time in addition to accomplishing things. So maybe that's the way to live your life, to accomplish things and have a good time also.

Faulhaber: From the standpoint of the Reclamation Board it seemed to make a lot of good sense because they were taking so much of the husbands' time that to include the wives on some of the occasions was good politics. I remember reviewing the agendas. There were times when there were as many as two meetings a month in Sacramento.

Back to Bakersfield. How long have you been in Bakersfield?

D. Nickel: Since 1966. If you do the arithmetic, that's thirty-five years, and we have been in this house longer than either of us has ever lived anywhere. Hardly anybody lives in the same spot these days for twenty-plus years. So we have been very fortunate.

Faulhaber: This is an incredibly beautiful house. It's a Cliff May house. Obviously you were impressed with the first Cliff May house you owned. I would like to ask you to talk about the site, about Cliff May, and how it was constructed.

D. Nickel: What happened was that we were so busy with the tennis club, and the golf club and developments out here that we were going back and forth from the Stockdale area out to the ranch, back and forth. And we thought, "This is ridiculous! We really need to live out there."

So we never skipped a beat. We both immediately knew without discussing whom we wished to do the house. It had to be Cliff May because we enjoyed the house we had been living in for ten years. So we telephoned him and said we would like him to do a house for us. He said that he was getting a little older, and he was pretty busy. So we said "Please, can you come up and look at the site?" Because we honestly felt that if he saw the site, as an architect, he would fall for it. So we got him to come up and look at the site. And naturally he said he would do the house.

Now as far as the site is concerned. That was a problem because there were so many possible places to put a house on this very large ranch with different vistas. Anyway, I had always wanted to be close to the river. The site that we chose is the place that we had used all down the years for our spring picnics when we would all get into a caravan and come out from Stockdale and have a picnic in this area. George wasn't entirely sure, but I was pretty positive about that one. So the house is on the old picnic site, close to the river.

Cliff May was delighted with it. He was a wonderful architect to work with. I understand some people have trouble with their architects. But there was very little that we wanted to change. He was very generous with his time. I think we stayed at his house two or three times so that he could show us things that he particularly liked, and

we went to Borrego Springs to see a house that he had done over there. Then one summer when we were at Tahoe he wanted to show us a house that he had done on the Carson River, and so he flew up, and we met him so that we could look at the house on the Carson River.

That was kind of exciting because when we went back to the airport for him to fly home, we had heard that he was a little absent-minded professor in the flying department. So he got into his plane, and he couldn't start it. So George said "Let me help you." So George got in and started the plane, and Cliff gets in and flies away. And we were so thrilled that he went south because we weren't sure that he wasn't going to go north instead. Anyway, he got home safely. He was wonderful to work with, and obliging with the few changes we made. One of the big things was that he had changed the kitchen situation. I had adored the kitchen that he had designed in the other house and that we had lived with for ten years, and so I said that I wanted that kitchen back, and he couldn't argue with me because he had designed that other kitchen.

Faulhaber: The house fits so well into the landscape that it's almost not noticeable. The sycamores are so large. Were they already here?

D. Nickel: No, the big one down by the river was there, and there is a little grove outside our bedroom. All the others were planted. The cottonwoods were there. It's interesting because we have photographs of this area, and it was just sort of barren, an alluvial fan that also had no boulders unlike most of the other areas along the river. So all the boulders were put in place under John Vogley. He understood the terrain perfectly.

Faulhaber: The landscaping at Rio Bravo is reminiscent of some of the landscaping here. Now with respect to the house I must ask you this question because you have a very large family but you only have one guest bedroom.

D. Nickel: And they [the children] were a little miffed about that.

Faulhaber: Of course, you built the River House, and you had Rio Bravo. So I am guessing that was part of the grand plan.

D. Nickel: That was part of the grand plan, and it happens, I think, to all large families. It just gets so that everybody can't come home and stay. It's impossible. And so we had the tennis lodge, and now we have the river house, which is the old ranch house downstream that the children use. We can put, oh, I don't know, maybe twelve there. So that's very handy. But no way, José. You can't fit them all in.

As I was going to say we are about to be forty-eight. And there is just no way. If you have a big family that happens. You know, it was wonderful early on in the late sixties when we were over at Stockdale. We could fit everybody in. But not anymore. We have proliferated.

Faulhaber: The family photo is getting larger and larger. Well, as you look at these years that you have been in Bakersfield, what have been the highlights?



Thanksgiving family photograph, Nickel family home, Bakersfield, California.

*Courtesy of Greg Iger, Bakersfield, California, 1997*





D. Nickel: I think you asked me that question once before. I have touched on many of them. As I said, it's like asking, "What is your favorite book?" There is really no answer. I think I really have touched on a lot of the high spots. [pause]

In answer to your question. I could never pick out a particular moment. There have been a lot of exciting and wonderful times.

Faulhaber: It's a large family. You have seven children, how many grandchildren and great grandchildren?

D. Nickel: Sixteen grandchildren, and quite a lot of them are married and beginning to have families, and so as I said we are about to have our ninth great-grandchild, which is kind of amazing to say to yourself that you are a great-grandparent, and you really don't feel that you are old enough yet.

Faulhaber: Well, it's a wonderful legacy which will obviously continue. You have a family business now, and from what I see everyone is involved. The children are involved and--

D. Nickel: Yes. That's rather extraordinary because family businesses are difficult, and we've been through a few ups and downs, and I am sure we will have more. I think that it is better to get along than not get along, and probably just as easy. It's where you put your energy.

Faulhaber: It's easy for people to go their own ways, but it seems to me because of your regular meeting schedule of the LLC that it serves an important function of keeping your family together.

D. Nickel: Yes. It does, although I prefer being together not for a business meeting because we get distracted a little. But anyway, that is wonderful. I think it's unusual that George has set things up to give his children so much responsibility and to convey early on as much of his estate as he possibly can to them.

Faulhaber: Well, that's right. With Jim as CEO and his son Jamie, just recently arriving on the scene, it seems like the Nickel business will continue to be a family business. It must be wonderful to have Jamie back taking a part. Do you see an interest from any other of the grandchildren in becoming involved in the business?

D. Nickel: No, I don't think so. I think they have other interests and are established somewhere else. So no, I don't.

You have to have a real love of the land and a feeling of, how should I say, you need to feel that this is a long-term thing. Like long-term forever that you wish to preserve because the land goes with it. And not everybody has that feeling.



**Thoughts on George Nickel, Jr.**

Faulhaber: I will also ask you to comment on the remarkable work that George did with water rights. He was a genius before his time. He always saw the potential of water and the value of water. Looking back on it, what he was able to do moving water rights was sheer genius. This latest sale of water rights to Kern County is a very good example of that. It seems to me that in these bad farming years all of us are having you have another valuable asset sitting out there. Water. Would you like to comment on this and his many years of involvement with water rights?

D. Nickel: No, I think that's his most extraordinary accomplishment that he did have the foresight and the interest because he accomplished things that I don't think anybody else has done. To have personal water rights and an enormous control of certain amounts of water, which I don't think any other individual has had, maybe other companies or water districts, but not individuals. With the changing times I think the sale we made to the Kern County Water Agency was an extraordinary coup because it was like a total win-win situation. It provides us and the family with an enormous amount of security, supposedly forever, and if George hadn't handled and acquired the rights that he did, it wouldn't have happened. He did have this extraordinary vision in this area.

Of course, we are very proud of the hydroplant, too, which is an asset in these days of power crises. But he did have this particularly wonderful ability to use water and understand its uses and understand that it is a very valuable asset and would be increasingly valuable. I feel that it has been managed very well, and I am happy about it because--and maybe you won't want to put this in--I do feel that the way water is becoming almost a public asset, that in years to come there will not be these private ownerships at all. They won't be feasible. So I think he came along at the right time and used it very well.

Faulhaber: Also the sale was to a local water agency. So the water stays here, at home. It's not going to be exchanged for water in Los Angeles or sent to Nevada, it will stay here locally and benefit the county near the lands where it originated. So it seems to me that it was a wonderful sale to make.

D. Nickel: It was, and Jim deserves a lot of credit for the negotiations because it wouldn't have happened without him.

Faulhaber: This is a difficult question to ask but an important one. You have been married to a remarkable man. He is truly exceptional. He has had vision. He has had luck, both good and bad. I think I would have expired after the first ten years of marriage because of his energy. [laughter] When you look back on your life with him, how would you sum it up?

D. Nickel: I think I had very good intuition or whatever you call it to marry George. His energy and his vision were always very intriguing to me. I think I almost fed on his energy. I never thought of it as too much. It just wasn't excessive. It was just so wonderful to

have that well of strength, really, and as I said, I loved that energy. And, of course, I have referred to how exciting it was that he was a flyer and all that represented. He was obviously a risk taker, and some of those risks were too much. But we survived that very well, not very well at the time, but you know now that's ancient history. I think his natural exuberance didn't coincide with the right milieu at that time, to put it mildly. Anyway.

Faulhaber: He was certainly not a risk-adverse person.

D. Nickel: No. No. And I think part of that was that he honestly had a very interesting kind of confidence. To him it wasn't a risk as others thought of it because he always felt that he could take care of it even if he didn't have what he needed at the moment, that he could generate it. This goes back to the very beginning of my knowing him. When he started a project maybe he didn't have the feasibility study or whatever. But so what. "I will get it done." In other words he didn't really think of it as that much of a risk because he was going to generate whatever it took to make the project work. I think that's the key to it. I had seen this work so many times for him that I never doubted him, and it's still working for him.

Faulhaber: He mentioned last night a few crash landings that he had to make on his plane. Were you ever on one of those?

D. Nickel: Oh, yes, I was. And I think I spoke earlier of what a good pilot I thought George was, calm, cool, and collected. And we did have a forced landing once, and I wasn't even frightened. The engine quit because there was a problem with the switching of gasoline tanks. The switching mechanism wasn't working. And so "hello!" the engine stopped. And we are fairly low because we are coming into Bakersfield, and so he was just fabulous. And I was "A" really impressed with him and "B" not worried, and then amazed by two things. First, when the engine dies, it is still very noisy in the plane because of wind resistance and another thing is that you don't fall out of the sky. There is really quite a good glide pattern so that you have a choice when you don't have any power.

So we were looking around, and he was telling me to look for telephone wires and power lines and choosing where he was going to land, which he did. We landed in a freshly planted potato field, and that was pretty interesting because dirt and clods were crashing into the windshield. So we made it, and got out, and looked around. We were in the middle of a potato field in the Shafter area. Some irrigator finally came over. We were congratulating ourselves on being alive and well, and we thought it would be nice if they gave us a ride to town. Not at all. We had to telephone to the office for somebody to come and pick us up.

Faulhaber: George mentioned last night that he had a forced landing with Henry Bowles and Corky and someone else in the plane. I gather they weren't as calm, cool, and collected.

D. Nickel: I remember that distinctly because I went out to the airport to meet them, and they were there. And I guess this had been some kind of a landing gear problem at the Bakersfield

Airport, and they got in safely. But I didn't get out to the airport for an hour after the actual landing. I can remember that they were assembled at the bar of the actual airport. And at this juncture Henry's hands were shaking so much that he had to use both hands to get the glass to his mouth. They had not been enthusiastic about flying with George at all, and it was unfortunate that this happened. I don't think that they ever flew with George again.

- Faulhaber: I also remember seeing somewhere a picture of George and Jim after a forced landing.
- D. Nickel: Same thing. Landing gear problems. We called this plane "Old Tanglefoot" because the landing gear would get stuck halfway up and halfway down. That was pretty rugged for Jim because he was the passenger. If you're the pilot, you're busy and everything, and they were--this is kind of wild, but at the tower they said "George, why don't you fly upside down, and maybe the gear will fall back in, down." And he said "Well, I have never flown upside down before, but I will try this." And here is poor Jim hanging upside down in his seat belt. And they had at least one crate of cantaloupes in the rear. So when they went upside down the crate of cantaloupes went "bang" and did not go through the fuselage fortunately. So eventually he landed with the landing gear still not the way it was supposed to be, but he did it. He did it very well.
- Faulhaber: Well, in retrospect, anything else you would like to add? You have been married many years.
- D. Nickel: We have been married since June of 1955. We just had our forty-sixth wedding anniversary. As I say, that's amazing. That's a long time. We have had a lot of adventures and a lot of wonderful times. And we have been very fortunate to have all of the wonderful children that we had and still have. It was an undertaking, as I think I said earlier, that I am sure our parents thought we were out of our minds to marry. But they were very nice. We always thought it was a good idea, and I am sure there were times when the children thought it was a terrible idea. But I think children, whatever the situation, have to learn to appreciate their parents "in toto".
- Faulhaber: I think they do. As you read the interviews done by the children, I think you will see that.
- D. Nickel: Right. Or I was just thinking children in general. I think the longer you live the better it is because your perspective gets very good. I know in my own case, and this is just a personal thing, but my parents lived long enough for me to do something that I never thought I would ever do early on, which was to thank them for all the rules and regulations, because I thought I was so restricted. Looking back on it I have lived long enough to be very grateful for all those rules and regulations and to say thank you, which I am afraid a lot of people don't get a chance to do.
- Faulhaber: I predict that your children will say the same to the two of you.
- D. Nickel: I hope so.



Family photograph of the children of Dodo and George W. Nickel, Jr., taken on the occasion of the wedding of George and Dodo's granddaughter, Heidi Katherine Nickel to Peter Cannon Michael, at the Rio Bravo Ranch, Bakersfield, California, May 27, 2000. L-R: (standing) Cynthia Selfridge, Kinzie Selfridge Murphy, Jock Selfridge, Nancy Nickel Resor, Jim Nickel, Sally Nickel Zanze, Susan Nickel Duvall; (seated) Dodo and George W. Nickel, Jr

*Courtesy of John A. Wilson, Bakersfield, California*











The four best friends, Pebble Beach, California, on the occasion of Bill Parrott's eightieth birthday, August 1998. L-R: Douglas Moody, George W. Nickel, Jr., Bill Parrott, Dr. Benson Roe.



## V INTERVIEW WITH WILLIAM G. PARROTT

[Interview 1: March 1, 2001]

Faulhaber: Today is March 1, 2001. I am in Monterey, California, with Bill Parrott, a very old and very dear friend of George W. Nickel, Jr. This is an interview for the George W. Nickel, Jr. Oral History Project. Bill, I would like to ask you about your earliest memories of your good friend, George Nickel.

Parrott: Well, I don't remember the baby carriage, although he probably was in one once. But I can remember a cattle drive down at--I guess it was the Canal Farm there. We were probably about seven or eight years old, and I was down there with my mother, who was a good friend of George's mother. They had a bunch of cattle, cows and calves, and they wanted them driven from one of the other ranches down to the Canal Farm. There were a couple of old cowboy types. And they plugged us in there to help them, not that they needed it, but anyway we tagged along trying to drive the cattle to the Canal Farm. It was a miserable cold rainy day, windy. George was there, and then he had a friend, Willard Sperry, who was also there. We were trying to push these animals along as fast as we could, but you don't push cows and calves along. They set their own pace. So we were just feeling sorry for ourselves, teeth chattering and everything else, and we finally managed to get all of the calves. You would run up to them, you know, and try to get a calf to join its mother, and it wouldn't. Or it would run away, and you would have to chase it back. Of course, the cowboys thought all this was great. They didn't even care if it was stormy or bad weather. Anyway, we made it back. I think George will remember it as I do, as kind of a wild west rough ride for us as far as the weather was concerned. So that was one of my early memories of the Canal Farm.

Faulhaber: You were all living in the Palo Alto area at the time?

Parrott: Well, probably on the Peninsula. I don't remember exactly.

Faulhaber: So you just went down to Los Banos for a visit?

Parrott: Yes, right. So that is story number one. Would you want me to carry on to the next? I am trying to do this in time sequence.

Faulhaber: Carry on!



- Parrott: Well, then, I was down again visiting George, and his father was down there with his mother at the Canal Farm at the time. The farm had a big yard. It was big enough for a football field practically. It had a lot of big buildings and barns around it and that sort of stuff. For some reason or other George's father decided to let George take the Model A out and drive it, and his mother heard this offer and quickly expressed herself, saying it was not a good idea. But anyway, his father gave him the key. George was driving and I was sitting next to him in the Model A. As I recall it had three pedals, and the one in the middle was reverse, the one on the right was a brake, then there was a handbrake. I forget what the other one was. The throttle was a handle on the steering column. Well, we were tooling around, George steering around the yard, and then I noticed that we were headed towards the barn, which was as big as a train station or bigger. It was a big solid wooden structure. I forget all the details, but I was looking at George and asking him "What are your plans?" We were going straight towards this thing, not too fast in Model A days, but anyway fast enough, and George didn't seem to want to do anything about it until we hit it.
- Faulhaber: The barn you mean? [laughter]
- Parrott: And we did. Fortunately those Model As were very well built, and we didn't do a hell of a lot of damage, but I think it damaged his pride, and needless to say, he didn't have a very warm welcome when he got back to the house.
- Faulhaber: His mother must not have been very happy? [laughter]
- Parrott: She was saying "I told you so, you know."
- Faulhaber: This comes a bit later, but George mentions in his oral history that he got a driver's license at twelve to be able to drive a Model A to school. Does that bring back any memories?
- Parrott: No, I think you could get a driver's license at fourteen. I never got one even at fourteen. He may have. My mother had her own ideas about how to bring me up. And I guess George's mother did, and it wouldn't have done me any good to argue with [my mother] about it. So I don't have any more memories of being a passenger with George. Maybe just as well.
- Faulhaber: You have just described a scenario when you were about seven or eight. Was that about the time the two of you were at the Belmont School for Boys together?
- Parrott: Yeah, probably.
- Faulhaber: Do you have any stories about the Belmont School to relate?
- Parrott: Well, I think George has got the best one, though I don't have any great stories about that.

Faulhaber: Is it true then that the two of you cooked that can of beans in the tree on the grounds of the Belmont School?

Parrott: Well, we had an idea about cooking something, and starting the fire on the treehouse, on the wood of the treehouse, which obviously wasn't very smart. Then that started the treehouse on fire, and then that started a brush fire. Some how it got out of control but soon was brought under control, no thanks to us. It was country then around the school, out in the boonies.

Faulhaber: Then there wasn't a whole lot to burn except the brush?

Parrott: Except the brush.

Faulhaber: What other stories to you have to tell about George?

Parrott: Well, the next one is about the Shetland ponies down in Menlo when he was visiting his grandparents, Leroy and Mogley. They had some Shetland ponies there, and they looked like cute little docile animals but were the most ornery little--well, I won't use the word I want to. Anyway, we had free use of them. We would go down there, and they would be there waiting for us, saddled and bridled, and we were free to take them and ride them around the Menlo grounds. They had quite a bit of property. I had ridden, but I wasn't an expert rider, and these animals were pretty darned smart. They knew what kind of a pigeon they had on their back. So anyway, we would get on one of these cute animals. One was so bad he should have been whipped. His name was Syrup. There wasn't any syrup about him--

And we would take off, they would take off and run away, and we weren't horsemen enough to be able to control them. So they would just take off and go wherever they wanted, and wherever they wanted to go was usually to try to scrape us off on a tree limb, which they managed to do a few times. So those are my memories of the miserable little Shetland ponies George's grandmother had available for us to keep us quiet during a visit.

Faulhaber: What do you remember about George's grandmother? She was Nellie Nickel, known as Mogley, the only surviving child of Henry Miller. What was she like?

Parrott: Well, she was austere. When you came in her presence you knew that she was sort of in charge. Well, she looked like she had some authority, and she did, and she exercised it. No one ever argued with her. We were brought up to be quiet, seen but not heard. We didn't have to be told twice around her. That is my memory of her. She was, I guess, to use the expression, sort of a grande dame. She dressed very well. She was bright and opinionated. She ran the house and family wherever she went.

Faulhaber: George and I were trying to locate where this property was. His nearest recollection was that it was near where the current Sunset building is. Does that strike a chord?

Parrott: Well, it was Menlo Park, and the families all knew each other in those days. It was right next to another estate, I guess you would call it, that of my cousins the Donohoes. I am sure they knew each other. They all had their own ideas about who the right people were, not that they all weren't respectable, but they didn't make a point of getting together or boozing it up or whatever you want to call it.

Faulhaber: As I recall, you and George came to know each other because your parents were close social friends. You also mentioned that the social circles were pretty small in those days. Given the fact that you went East to boarding school and then on to Yale, did that mean you also managed to spend a lot of time socially during summers and holidays catching up and renewing your friendship?

Parrott: I don't recall too much, but they were always trying to give us some parlor manners and teach us how to dance. We may have gone to the same dancing class or something like that. In the summers we might visit each other. George's Cinco Centavos Ranch had a family next door by the name of Hill with a tremendous pool. I remember going up to that with George. Their swimming pool was practically a lake. Well, Doug Moody would come along. It would be quite a group of us thrown together. Our families would know where we were going and would not have any qualms about letting us go. We were too dumb to raise hell anyway.

Faulhaber: It sounds like your social circles were just small enough so that you really became fast friends. From what I understand your parents were friends, and probably their parents had been friends, and I assume your children are probably friends with the Nickel children.

Parrott: They don't cross paths the way we did, but they all know each other and hit it off.

This is sort of a silly memory. Again it was down on the Canal Farm or on the Delta Ranch. They had horses there that we would ride. We could go out any time and catch them, and put a saddle on, and ride them. And I remember one horse there that we put a halter rope on. I don't know if you are familiar with halter ropes. Well, we didn't put it on properly. We put the snap on and that sort of thing. We put it over his neck. I don't know if it was a slip knot or something like that, but for some reason the horse was tied, and it got scared and started to pull back and started to choke. I remember seeing that, and George remembered that I had just sent away for a big kind of a folding hunting knife. He remembered that I had it and asked me for it. He got the knife, cut the rope, and kept the horse from choking to death. One of those memories.

Faulhaber: George spent a lot of summers down in Los Banos. Did you go with him often?

Parrott: No, by that time I think he was working seriously, pretty much full time, and I can't remember, but I was probably up at my father's place in the Carmel Valley. I do remember going down to visit him when he was working in Buttonwillow. Have you ever been to Buttonwillow?

Faulhaber: I have only been past Buttonwillow, never stopped.

- Parrott: I do remember going down and visiting George at Buttonwillow. Other than that, we didn't see that much of each other. Our families were always close, but we just didn't seem to cross paths so much in those years.
- Faulhaber: You went off to boarding school in the East for high school and then on to Yale. So that would have been eight to ten years of time when you weren't in immediate contact.
- Parrott: Well, I graduated from boarding school in 1936. I was only there three years. It was a prep school. So I must have gone back there in '31 or '32 somewhere along in there. And George, I guess, was going to Cal about that time.
- Faulhaber: How did you manage to maintain contact during those years?
- Parrott: We might cross paths at Christmas or something and very often were invited to the same parties. It was still a small world then. So we would end up crossing paths at parties. We didn't write letters or telephone or e-mail.
- Faulhaber: But you always kept in touch. Well, you went off to World War II for six years as well. There must have been very little contact then.
- Parrott: I was at sea most of the time, and we would get into Pearl Harbor. I didn't come back to the mainland.
- Faulhaber: When did you come back to California to stay?
- Parrott: Well, I got out with terminal leave at the end of 1945. I came back to the States then, and I guess it was '45.
- Faulhaber: Where did you take up residence?
- Parrott: Oh, hell, I guess I went to my father's. He was living in San Mateo. My father and mother were divorced then.
- Faulhaber: So in 1946, I am just thinking, George would have been down on the Canal Farm, married to Charlotte in 1940. Did you renew your friendship upon returning from the war?
- Parrott: Yes, with Benson [Roe] as well. He was in George's class, and I remember going to Benson's family's place with George, I guess his parents' place, up on Mount Hamilton, not long after the war ended. We all went, Benson and Jane, George and Charlotte, and Tidi and me.

Tidi was able to take her legs and put them behind her neck and so could Jane Roe. They then would move around the floor on their knees saying that this was Eastern culture.



I remember late one of those nights we all decided to go swimming. I think there was moonlight and things got a little "boisterous," as I recall.

I remember also that the Roth family also had a place near there, Filoli. Their father was head of Matson Lines. I remember Benson and I went there together to one of our early debutante parties in our tails. George might have been at that one too. It was a great party, done in great style.

Faulhaber: George mentioned social get-togethers in Carmel Valley. Were you part of those?

Parrott: I think Cal had an Easter week down here. I wasn't part of that, but George used to come out to my father's ranch and stay with me for a few weeks or more, and so did Doug Moody, too. Sometimes they would both be there at the same time.

Well, George will remember this. We had a mutual friend from Virginia named Larry Poole. Went to Harvard. He must have been six two or three and built accordingly, with gapped teeth. Brilliant guy, almost a genius. I mean to look at him you would think that he was a real dolt, but he wasn't. Then one night after dinner, as the story goes, when George was there--well, first a little background.

The house was just a simple house, nothing fancy at all. I think the house had been built by a previous cowboy. It was kind of primitive. There wasn't anyone around. It was the Model T era. There were cattle guards and barbed wire gates, and all that kind of stuff. So you could shoot out a window any time you wanted. And I had a lot of guns around, and I remember that just for the hell of it I would be shooting up a hill at something that I thought was a target, and my mother would be trying to sleep in the house. And she would get kind of cross at me and would say "You know you have several thousand acres around here. Why do you have to shoot right outside my bedroom window?"

Well, anyway, Larry decided he wanted to make a noise. This was probably after dinner. It was dark, and my mother had two friends visiting, one a Mr. Mayo Newhall from China, white, but an old China hand, and then a very social type of lady whose name was Mrs. Armstrong Taylor, who was also there. I think she was a Standard Oil heiress, chauffeur driven and all that. Well, they were sitting around after dinner in the living room, and Larry got the idea he wanted to make some noise. So he went inside and got a gun. I had guns. I didn't have them loaded, but he knew enough about guns. So he got it loaded and cocked. Well, I told him "If you have to make a noise, go out on the balcony." But no, he said he could make more noise inside. Well, I wasn't about to wrestle with him. I mean, he probably weighed a couple hundred pounds, and the gun was loaded and cocked. I couldn't talk him out of it and didn't want to wrestle the gun from him. So all of a sudden he pulls the trigger and the bullet goes right up through the ceiling. Well, I will say my mother had a pretty short fuse, and he could tell he had gone too far. She got on the crank phone and immediately tried to call his father in Virginia, and Larry, realizing he was in the doghouse, left, walked out that night. I don't know how he got to Carmel. Well, anyway, George will remember that.



Faulhaber: George was there along with you?

Parrott: Oh, yes!

Faulhaber: So it was the three of you?

Parrott: Well, we had nothing to do with that one, but it did happen. Well, every time he came West, there was a Larry Poole story. The parent types, the grown-ups, were--well, some were not too amused with some of his antics.

Faulhaber: This property was in Carmel Valley?

Parrott: This was Caehagua, way up the valley in the boonies. It's not anymore, but it was then.

Faulhaber: A large property with a couple thousand acres?

Parrott: Two or three I guess.

Parrott: Another story for you. One summer my parents stopped at the S. F. B. Morse River Ranch in the Carmel Valley with George, Doug Moody, and me in tow. We were turned loose and promptly went to the swimming pool. Jack Morse, S. F. B. Morse's youngest son, was there, with two other seniors from Yale, one the boxing captain and the other the wrestling captain, real gorillas. Jack had just returned from Tahiti and fancied himself another Tarzan wearing a pareu, sort of a wraparound loincloth. Naturally the three of us high-schoolers tried to get it off him and almost succeeded until his classmates came to his rescue and gave us the worst lashing we ever had, at least it was for me.

Faulhaber: When you look back at George, those years from 1940 onward were years when he was very much involved in farming. It seems to me from having studied his life that he always knew his life would be in farming. Do you have any observations about his love for the land and what really motivated him about working for Miller & Lux?

Parrott: Well, it was a natural. He had an entree there, family interests and I think good possibilities, George being George. He was ambitious. He had ideas about how to operate it and didn't agree with Leroy. And he was right about that. So I think it always loomed large in his life as an interest. I don't think you can say that he was a land lover, but he did like farming. I wouldn't say that it was in his blood, but he grew up with it and he liked it. He was good at it, and he saw, I think, possibilities there of making some money working that way.

Faulhaber: Miller & Lux went through some hard times. Do you recall him ever talking to you about those hard times?

Parrott: Well, his mother and father were divorced, and his mother had to go to work. I think she worked in real estate for awhile. Hard times. Well, Leroy, apparently, was not a very good manager, and I think he was overbuilding silos or something. You know

what these enormous darn things are. Well, they were just expensive monstrosities that didn't serve any purpose. So I think that Miller & Lux sort of went under financially.

Then there was a rather bitter suit. I think George sued his uncle and won. Blyth & Company was involved. It was sort of a bitter one, but he had every reason to do something about it. So I don't remember much about it. As I said, his father and mother were divorced. His mother [Ernestine McNear Nickel] was a good businesswoman. George got some of his business acumen from her. She was a very nice lady. She was very good with people, a good mother, and a good head on her shoulders. I think she played quite an important part in his life. She was a very likable lady, loved people and parties.

Faulhaber: George always had an instinct for business. You can see it. From the time I started to read about him you could see that he always could see an opportunity. I look at him, and I see a man who is a continual optimist.

Parrott: Like bottled water. George's latest business venture to bottle Kern River water.

Faulhaber: Do you have any observations about that part of his character, his entrepreneurial spirit?

Parrott: No, but I think his life has sort of proven his interest and his success in following his instincts. I remember he and Henry Bowles were very close for awhile. When they were ten or twelve they got very interested in collecting stamps. I didn't give a hoot in hell about stamps, but I remember being down there at Mogley's house, and they would be off in the attic somewhere bickering about which stamp was worth how much. So I guess this bargaining was in his blood.

Faulhaber: He started at an early age. Do you think the legacy of Henry Miller and his success had an impact on George?

Parrott: Oh, it might have given him some ideas. I think he was quite impressed with his [Henry Miller's] character and his success. Whether it encouraged George to try to emulate him--it may have a little bit. I don't know.

Faulhaber: Now as George looks back on his life he is very interested in the subject of Henry Miller and Miller & Lux. He was awfully young. Young children, in my opinion, don't tend to look back on their ancestors, but George seems, from what I read about Henry Miller, to be remarkably like him in many respects.

Parrott: That is probably true. Something gets passed along. They say third generation "riches to rags" or something like that.

Faulhaber: You say you have one last story?

Parrott: George had an airplane for awhile. He used to fly. I guess some of it was business. Well anyway, he flew down here one day, and I met him in Monterey, and we were in a hurry for some reason to go up to the John Gardiner Tennis Ranch about fifteen miles

up the valley. It was a well known tennis clinic at that time. And George was in a hurry. He had a piper cub.

We got in the plane in Monterey and took off. I don't know why George was in a hurry. We didn't have any reason to be. We got to the airfield there. It was a small field about halfway up the valley. It had a ravine at the far end. We came in a little high and a little fast, and we landed long. Well, George realized, once we touched down--I think he had his foot on the brakes even before we hit ground--that he didn't have an awful lot of room to slow up. So we were crow hopping down the rest of the runway, and we managed to stop just in time before going into the ravine. We had just enough room so that he could turn the plane and go back.

Faulhaber: I take it from that story that the two of you were good tennis players.

Parrott: We enjoyed playing with each other. We both had our own system. I liked to play opposite George because he liked to go to the net, and I liked to get up next to the net and wham a ball as hard as I could at him. Sometimes I got him, and our wives were friends. So we used to have nice foursome games.

Faulhaber: Do you think that the Gardiner Tennis Ranch inspired him to do the Rio Bravo Tennis Club?

Parrott: No, I think he always had ambitions to expand the property. You know he sees some land and there is just grass growing. He wants to do something with it, make some money. He knew John. They were good friends, and the tennis ranch--well, he put a golf course in, too. Of course, a golf course upgrades the real estate around it. So you can hear the old mind ticking, and that's the way it worked.

Another story about George involved his bridge playing. He loves bridge. George and Dodo came for dinner and bridge one night when we were living in the City [San Francisco]. George had just had a minor ground accident with his plane and had been given medication of some kind that left him a bit light-headed. All through the evening he kept mumbling something about the *Fresno Bee* [newspaper]. His bridge was about normal for George.

Faulhaber: You have known him all his life. When you look back at him how do you size him up?

Parrott: What I would say is that he is a good old friend. We have had a lot of fun together. Our wives always liked each other. Pleasant memories.

Faulhaber: He has had an interesting business career, a wonderful family. Married once, lost his wife tragically, married another wonderful woman. Put together two families, from five children to eight.

Parrott: Well, I remember going down to Los Banos when George had just married Dodo. They lived in Los Banos at the Delta Ranch with a pool and everything. Dodo was a darn good organizer and very good with kids and people. The kids had only been living

together a short while. Dodo had kept them all together instead of sending them off, although Sally was ready to go to boarding school. But she kept them together for the first year. The kids would come in to go to the table to eat. They all had jobs. They were orderly. No bickering. They certainly learned their manners. She had them trained, and of course, they got along beautifully. George had known Dodo at Cal, and she was a widow. So it worked out very well.

Faulhaber: Well, thank you very much. Is there anything you might like to add?

Parrott: Not for the moment, but I bet I will remember something after you have gone.

## VI INTERVIEW WITH DOUGLAS MOODY

[Interview 1: June 27, 2001]

Faulhaber: You and George [Nickel, Jr.] grew up together and have known each other all of your lives. Tell me the story of how you became such good friends.

Moody: Well, we grew up together because our parents were best friends. I was born in San Francisco at Dandy Sanitarium, and I think George was probably born there as well. Most well-to-do ladies of that era had their babies at the sanitarium there in San Francisco. We were about the same age. George was a year older than I, but since our families got together socially, we were together right from the beginning.

Faulhaber: What do you remember about those early years?

Moody: We used to go to George's grandmother's house in Atherton. They called her Mogley, and I remember that she was a woman who didn't like kids very much. But she and her husband were members of the Menlo Circus Club, which was a swim club. So to get rid of us she used to send us there during the summers. George became a good swimmer, you know, and the Circus Club probably helped.

Now, I had a great Aunt Minnie whom I loved dearly. She also lived in Atherton, and George and I spent quite a bit of time with her. I also had a gay uncle, John [Zeile], who was also very nice to us kids and went out of his way to make sure we had a good time. He was very prominent in art and music in San Francisco, active with the San Francisco Symphony and San Francisco Opera.

Faulhaber: Did you and George go to school together too?

Moody: Actually we didn't. I lived in San Mateo and was sent off to boarding school at an early age. Our parents were very glad to get rid of us by sending us East. That happened to a lot of my friends. We were away at school all year and only came home during the summers. It was a long trip by train, so we weren't able to spend holidays in California.

Faulhaber: What early memories do you have of George Nickel, Jr.?



Moody: Well, George was a year older than me, and he kind of always looked out for me. He was more advanced than most of us and always considered himself to be on the forefront, the first to forge ahead.

I remember that I went to the Menlo School when George went to the Belmont School, and oftentimes he would get dumped off at my house during those school years. George became taken with one of my neighbors and always told the story about how he “took her” in the tree in front of my house. Now I am not sure what he implied by saying he “took her,” except what you would think. But he must have been twelve at the time, and it was something he liked to brag about. She was very generous with her charms.

Faulhaber: You went East, but George stayed in California for high school. Did you have much contact during those years?

Moody: It seems like we always used to end up in dancing classes together. That must have been in the summers, when I was home from school. You know, George was really lucky that he went to Palo Alto High. His parents had fallen on hard times, and so he couldn't continue at the Belmont School. Anyway, his grades were good, and he was quite a swimmer, and as a consequence was able to get into UC Berkeley. We both wanted to go to Yale, but times were hard and our parents had no money. My father had gone to Cal and said if it was good enough for him, it was good enough for me.

However, I had some trouble getting in. Berkeley thought my grades weren't good enough, but when I showed them my accredited courses and the letter from Yale accepting me, they changed their mind, and I followed George to Berkeley.

This was 1936 or 1937, Depression years, and everyone was poor. It cost \$26 a semester to go to Berkeley. My allowance was \$100 a month, and it was enough to pay my expenses and have a good time. George and I would take our dates and go dancing at the Mark Hopkins on \$5 most Saturday nights. A scotch cost thirty-five cents, and we were always able to beat the cover charge.

During those years at Berkeley I was also on the Cal crew, along with my good friend Benson Roe. I was in the third boat, and you probably know that George was the crew manager.

George kind of looked out for me. He got me into all the honor societies. We all went to the football games together. We got into the Rose Bowl one year when I was the manager for the football team. I was best man at his wedding to Charlotte Davidson in 1940 and gave him a bachelor's party at the University Club in San Francisco, which none of us will ever forget. We got a little out of control and someone threw a chair through the plate glass window of the club. The police were called, and we got out of there pretty fast.

Faulhaber: What did you study at Berkeley?

Moody: Engineering, that's where I started, but after a year the dean called me in and told me that my grades had to improve to stay in the program. I stayed at Berkeley two years. During that time I was in the Naval ROTC. I wanted to be a pilot and get a job with an airline, and so after two years at Berkeley I transferred to Boeing's flight training school at the Alameda Airport.

I spent eighteen months in flying school at Boeing and then was accepted by United Airlines and started in their co-pilot school. I was there about four days when a bunch of us heard that Pan Am was starting to hire pilots. So I left United and started to fly for Pan Am. That was before 1942, actually the beginning of 1941.

Faulhaber: 1941, a very decisive year for our country.

Moody: That's right. President Roosevelt wanted the president of Pan Am to serve in his cabinet. His name was Tripp, and he didn't want any part of it. So Roosevelt proceeded to take over United. Actually he confiscated all the airplanes and the pilots as well. I was made a lieutenant and sent to the Aleutians. My squadron was supposed to evacuate the wounded. We were lucky because in the Aleutians there was no disease. It was a pristine paradise and a very good place to be. The Japs had gone, and our fleets were bombing Attu.

After the Aleutians I came back and was sent to New York as part of the Air Transport Command. Then we were sent to Europe to ferry the wounded back to this country. After the war I married my wife, Emily, in 1946 and we moved to Miami, where I began working for Pan Am. Eventually they transferred me to New York, and we stayed on the East Coast living in Darien, Connecticut. My wife Emily had lived in Darien as a girl. Her father worked for Sikorsky [Aircraft Corporation].

Faulhaber: And you stayed on the East Coast, never returning to live in California?

Moody: We thought about it, but our life was mostly here.

Faulhaber: How did you and George manage to remain in contact?

Moody: Well, before I went East I spent a lot of time duck hunting in Los Banos with George and Charlotte. George was the great shot and always got the limit. I remember one time I was taking a load of ducks from Los Banos to I don't know where, probably back to San Francisco, and leaving Los Banos I got stopped by the sheriff. I don't remember exactly how I got myself out of the jam, but he probably ended up with a couple of those ducks on his dinner table that night.

Faulhaber: You have known George all of your life. How do you sum him up?

Moody: Well, he accomplished more than most of the group. He always did something for everybody. I remember him at Pali High [Palo Alto High School] when he was poor, working, while the rest of us just sat around and did nothing. He graduated from

college, which was more than I did. But most of all it has been great to have him as a friend.

## VII INTERVIEW WITH DR. BENSON ROE

[Date of Interview: February 14, 2001]

Faulhaber: I am here with Dr. Benson Roe in the office of the Director of The Bancroft Library. Dr. Roe, I will ask you to comment on your lifelong friendship with George Nickel. The two of you go way back to the sandbox.

Roe: Well, that's true. I remember that I played in the same sandbox with him at the age of two or three and lived for several years in the San Mateo Peninsula area where his family lived. His family and my family were good friends and shared a lot of social activities. It's fair to say that I spent a good many hours in his family's houses, both in Palo Alto and in Los Altos, in Los Banos, and later in San Francisco, wherever they lived. I was a frequent visitor and shared a lot of pleasures and experiences with George and his siblings. I was much closer to George than either of my siblings were to his siblings, just because we were in the same class or one class apart maybe. He was almost a year older than I.

Faulhaber: I recall that you went to different elementary schools, but you both did attend Palo Alto High School. Would you comment on those years?

Roe: Well, Palo Alto High School was a great school and still is, especially for a public school being in a university town. In those days there was relatively little ethnic diversity, so that the student body was very similar to that of a lot of private schools. It was coeducational, which was diverting to those hormone-filled years. George was a big time water polo player and swimmer. I was on both of those teams but didn't rise to his level of success. I spent a lot of time with George. His family bought a large place with an orchard and stables in the hills outside of Los Altos, which they cleverly called Rancho de los Cinco Centavos. They had several horses and a swimming pool, which they generously shared with their friends, and I was a frequent benefactor. I would spend many weekends there.

I remember that George, or rather his family, had an old Model A Ford, which is the first car he ever drove and the first car I ever drove. George was always very enterprising or up to some off-the-wall activity that was marginally appropriate. I remember several occasions, one most vividly; they had six horses and would have friends over. One day we were going riding when the horses had just come in off the pasture. They hadn't been ridden for several months. George sent his friends, the other

four people, up ahead of us on this long road that had a gentle curve up to the top of the hill where we were to meet them. They were ahead of us so that George and I came along on the most spirited horses, to catch up with them. The horses got to racing, and as we got to the top of the hill we tried to rein them in and they just wouldn't rein in. We went roaring past the rest of the crowd and headed them toward the trees, and we went into this grove of oak trees and through a four-strand barbed wire fence, both horses together. Both of us were thrown clear. I was surprised we weren't killed. Neither of us was seriously injured except scratched up a bit, and the horses were somewhat lacerated from the barbed wire. But after we got things straightened up we got back up on our horses and went for a couple of hours of riding and didn't think anything of it.

Faulhaber: George was known for his mischief.

Roe: Oh, he was, indeed, known for his mischief. Another occasion involved a little orchard near the house, which was plowed. One or both of us had been to a recent horse show, and George got the idea that we had ought to try to learn how to jump. Neither we nor the horses had ever jumped before, and there was no proper gear for a jump, so we arranged one by piling up empty fruit boxes between two trees in the plowed orchard. We would charge down between the row of trees and head the horses for the boxes. They were cow ponies who were trained to stop on a dime so they would end their rapid approach just an inch or two short of the boxes to send the rider flying over the top.

We had only western saddles, rather not proper saddles for jumping; so we did this bareback. After God knows how many tries we finally did teach the horses and us how to jump over fruit boxes. Then the other thing was that the horses would, being cow ponies, change direction very rapidly. They would head up to the boxes and then suddenly duck to the left or right, scraping us off on the trees. So we got pretty scratched up by that maneuver. But that is typical of the kind of thing that George would do.

Faulhaber: There were never any broken bones?

Roe: No broken bones. But that was typical of my memories of George. We were always up to some kind of adventure or activity that was of questionable propriety.

Faulhaber: George tells the story about getting a driver's license at the age of twelve because his aunt knew the local police chief. Is that a fact? [laughter]

Roe: I can't substantiate that story, but I do remember we both got our licenses somewhat prematurely in those days. I was thirteen, I think, when I got mine.

Faulhaber: He talks about driving to high school because his home was so isolated.

Roe: Yes, well I lived in town. So I would walk or bicycle to school.

Faulhaber: I know you went off to UC Berkeley together.



Roe: Yes, well, George was a year ahead of me. He went to Berkeley, where he also had an interesting career. George was smart but more interested in social activities than studying. So he took his minimal courses and always had some academic difficulties because he didn't spend enough time studying. He was a great poker player, and played poker at the Chi Phi House. He was very active in many social activities on campus, where we crossed paths to some degree but not as much because he was in a different fraternity, and I also was involved in a different course objective than he was. But we did see a lot of each other both on and off campus.

Faulhaber: He has said often that one of his greatest disappointments was that he could not convince you to join his fraternity, that you had other ideas.

Roe: Well, he was, I would say, my best friend, all during those years, and when I went to Cal, he did his best to get me to join the Chi Phi fraternity, where there were a lot of awful nice guys that I knew. I was very sorely tempted, but the Psi U house was where my father had lived, and where my uncle and my grandfather had been members, and I was persuaded to go in that direction.

Faulhaber: Those years at UC Berkeley must have been very interesting years. They were pre-war years, and we discussed at lunch the campus life at Berkeley. I know George says that he earned extra money by selling soft drinks and sandwiches to the sorority houses, and he also owned a third of a car, which is all he could manage at the time. Do you have any memories of those times concerning George and his entrepreneurial pursuits?

Roe: Oh, George was, well, "entrepreneurial" is George's middle name. I do remember the things that you mentioned. I didn't have a car until my junior year, a secondhand car. I didn't sell soft drinks to the sororities. By that time I was involved with crew, which took a lot of time, and I wasn't able to do too many other things.

Faulhaber: Could you give some background on the crew because as I recall George was the crew manager, and you obviously were a member of the crew.

Roe: Well, I do remember George was the crew junior manager, which was the manager that got to drive the coach's launch. So he watched all of what we were up to. I went out for crew more or less as a chore because my fraternity insisted that we do something on campus, and I hadn't done anything my freshman year. So I went out for crew in my sophomore year with no expectations of doing anything more than being a passive participant, but one thing led to another. I didn't do anything in my sophomore year except be part of the squad, but I did work up to the third boat, and in my junior year I went to Seattle with the junior varsity. We were beaten by Washington by a small amount, but it was my first intercollegiate experience. I thought it was a great week that we spent up there. But you know you have to win, and if you don't win, it's worthless. I was almost thrown off the train for saying that we had a good time.

Faulhaber: But the jayvee [junior varsity] crew won!

- Roe: Well, that crew, was initially the jayvee crew. It really had a good spirit, and it was really running very well. We thought we could put in a good showing at the intercollegiate regatta on the Hudson at Poughkeepsie at the end of the season, but the ASUC didn't provide the funds for the jayvee to go. So we all put on our three-piece suits and went over and solicited offices on Montgomery Street where our parents' friends worked, then sold lottery tickets, and finally raised enough money to send the jayvee to Poughkeepsie.
- Faulhaber: Was George part of this effort to go East?
- Roe: George was not part of this effort because he was going anyway because he was a manager. Then after we got the money for the jayvee to go, the coach took us out to the mouth of the estuary and started the boats in sequence and put the jayvee and the varsity next to each other and said, "Whoever gets to the boathouse first will be the varsity." We beat the hell out of the varsity. So we became the varsity. That was the first time I went to Poughkeepsie.
- Faulhaber: You have kept up your friendship with George over the years considering that the two of you pursued very different kinds of careers. You became a distinguished heart surgeon, and George became a farmer, perhaps better said a rancher and developer. How did you manage to maintain your friendship given those circumstances?
- Roe: Well, needless to say, it wasn't as frequent or as ongoing as I would have liked it to have been, partly because, of course, he was down in the valley, and I was in the city and pretty busy. But we maintained contact by visiting on weekends either at our beach place up here, or we would go down to stay with them in Bakersfield, first in Los Banos, when they were living there, then in Bakersfield. They invited us to Tahoe, where they spent their summers. So it wasn't a day-by-day friendship, but it was a constant relationship that went back a long way. It has been a pleasure to maintain it over these years.
- Faulhaber: As I recall from our conversation you spent quite a lot of time on the East Coast before returning to California. But when you came back to California you had an opportunity, I assume, to maintain closer contact. You watched him over the years. He is quite a risk taker. You have said that George's middle name is "entrepreneurial." Can you comment on some of his achievements?
- Roe: Of all the people I have known, I don't know anyone who has the spirit of optimism and determination to make the most of a situation any more than he does. He has always been a gambler, he has always taken long shots. And of course, when you are a gambler you have to lose some of them, and he has lost some of them. But he has the art of, as the old saying goes, "of falling into a cesspool and coming out smelling like a rose." He has always managed to do so, and I admire him for that. I don't have the same risk-taking bent. Well, on the other hand, I have taken a lot of risks too, but I don't have quite the same zeal for sticking my neck out as he does, although I have done quite a few things professionally along those lines.

Faulhaber: Where do you think that risk-taking spirit comes from?

Roe: Well, it's always interesting to speculate how much each of us is our genetic heritage and how much of it is our environment. George, after all, is a descendant of Henry Miller, who was a big-time entrepreneur, who did great things, but he obviously did it with imagination and entrepreneurialism, if you want to use those words. I am sure that is a factor in George's make-up. His older sister was similarly entrepreneurial, but neither of his two younger siblings were particularly aggressive. George has always maintained pretty tight control over his own children. I am glad to see that things have worked out pretty well, but for a while some of us were concerned that he wasn't letting them get into their long pants soon enough, but that has all worked out very nicely.

Faulhaber: When you were growing up together, did he often mention Henry Miller? You knew Henry Miller's daughter, Nellie, whom they referred to as Mogley.

Roe: His grandmother was often called Mogley. I believe that was a reference to an Indian word. It means grandmother.

Faulhaber: She must have been quite an influence on him, don't you think?

Roe: Well, it's hard to know how much grandparents play a role in your life, but she was a grande dame. She was a no-nonsense lady. When you came into her house you knew you had to behave, and you had to do what she wanted you to do. You couldn't get into any mischief. She was a terror, actually. You didn't want to cross her because if she got cross at you, you really felt the whip, at least the tongue lashing. We used to play bridge with her, George, his cousin Henry Bowles, and I. And who was the third? Billy Parrott, I guess, would come to play bridge with her at her place in Menlo Park.

Faulhaber: Did you have this feeling that Miller & Lux or the spirit of Henry Miller was around all the time--?

Roe: No, I don't recall any references to him except about him by others. My family would talk about the situation with Miller & Lux because it was in kind of a shambles, a huge dynasty and a huge potential, that was what Miller & Lux was. Then during the Depression when land values dropped they became land poor, and there was no leadership in the family to take charge of it. It deteriorated to a very sad and decrepit state which, of course, was very disturbing to George because that was his inheritance, and he saw it being mismanaged and dwindling away into virtually nothing. So that it wasn't Henry Miller himself that was much the subject of conversation at my generation's level but the fact that the Miller & Lux dynasty had deteriorated so was certainly very much in George's mind.

I am sure that your investigation has revealed the curious way that Henry Miller left his estate to a fourth generation, a very complicated trust to which George and his siblings and cousins were the beneficiaries and all the intervening generations were only trustees. The intervening generations obviously resented the fact that this fortune, which should have been theirs, was bypassing them. So they got their digs in and had

various ways of manipulating the management to their benefit, which was a result of a lot of litigation and a lot of ill feeling. But the fact was that it was George's generation that were the recipients of it. My mother had a scrapbook in which she had a headline from the *Los Angeles Times* when Sally [George's older sister] was born. She was the first heiress. The headline said "Heiress to \$20,000,000 is born." I'm not sure of the figure, but it was a notable fortune in those days. Then the other children came along afterwards. That was a big or a devastating sequence of events for their family, but of course, I didn't have anything to do with that except as an observer.

Faulhaber: Just to finish up, you have known George all of his life. You became a distinguished heart surgeon and George went off to farm and develop his lands. Yet in spite of going your separate ways you two have built a lifelong friendship. When you try to sum up the man looking back on all those years, what is the one thing that stands out the most to you about your friend George Nickel, Jr.?

Roe: George Nickel has a very vivid image in my memory, which I think I share with all of his friends and the people that know him. It is a little hard to describe it because we have used the word "entrepreneurial," but that doesn't do justice to the personality. George has always been aggressive and energetic in the pursuit of whatever he is interested in, whether it is his career, just doing something for a friend, or organizing a party or a dove hunt, which I did with him many times. He is in charge. George is in charge, and he does it with grace but with determination. I have never had occasion where I have any controversy with him, but I don't think I would like to be in controversy with him because he is very strong minded, and that has been the basis for his success. He has done a lot of crazy things, and he has paid a high price for some of them, but he has had huge benefit from others. He is a courageous, adventuresome, and determined person, a very colorful character who has been a privilege to know and a privilege to have for a friend. I envy many of his characteristics, but I don't have as much guts as he does to stick my neck out.

Faulhaber: On that note we end our interview.

## APPENDIX

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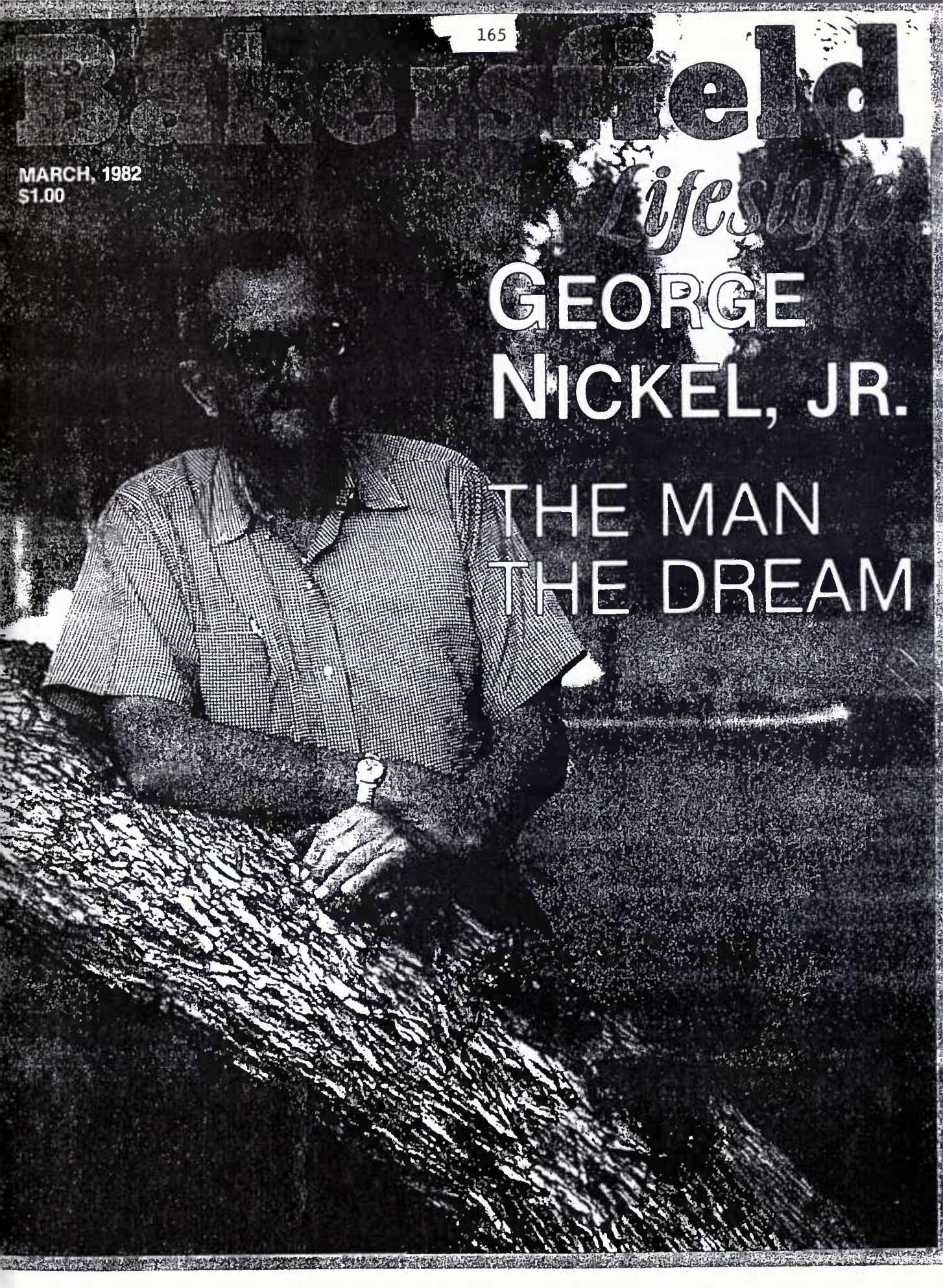
MARCH, 1982  
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# Blackensfield

*Lifestyle*

**GEORGE  
NICKEL, JR.**

**THE MAN  
THE DREAM**





# George Nickel Jr.

THE MAN.  
THE DREAM.

By STEVE WALSH



The office is spacious, yet warm. The walls are covered with maps, mementos and pictures of family and friends. Each a personal reminder of a lifetime hallmarked with achievement and success.

In one corner rests a huge, oversized tennis racket about the length of a baseball bat. A humorous gift from one of his many friends who felt that it might help to improve his game; tennis being especially close to his heart.

At the far end of the room, backdropped with a magnificent panorama of the Rio Bravo Tennis Resort and the snow capped Sierra Nevada mountains, sits his desk. A rich, hand crafted working area designed to ease the labors of a busy executive.

Piled high with reports, letters, documents and proposals, it sits in silent testimony to thousands of hours of meetings, discussions telephone calls, presentations and interviews.

It is an office that has often been filled with the sounds of laughter.

It is the office of one of Kern County's top businessmen and leaders, George Nickel, Jr.

Born in November, 1917. George

Nickel spend most of his youth working the land of his great-grandfather, Henry Miller. Known later as "The Cattle King," Miller had acquired hundreds of thousands of acres in the prime San Joaquin Valley during his career; much of it

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*"I was just doing  
a little cowboying,"  
he said modestly.*

---

in Kern county. It was Henry Miller who founded the enormous conglomerate of Miller & Lux Inc.

Yet even with the wealth and power of his great-grandfather, success was not something that was just handed to George, it was earned with years of dogged, hard work.

Beginning as a common ranch hand on one of the many Miller & Lux Inc. properties. George learned to appreciate and understand the fertile land of the San Joaquin. "I was just doing a little cowboying," he says modestly.

At the age of 22, having worked his way through college. George graduated

from the University of California at Berkeley with a degree in Letters, Arts and Sciences.

"I almost made a career in drama," he remembers, "but it just wasn't my calling I guess. However, one of my fellow classmates didn't do too badly. I'll have to give Greg Peck a call one of these days and invite him up to the Ranch."

George returned to the land he loved and was appointed to oversee all of the agricultural engineering and development operations for the Miller & Lux Inc. ranches. Later, he would head up a \$30 million dollar flood control operation on the San Joaquin River.

It was his dedication to the land, as well as his experience as its caretaker, that prompted his appointment to sit on the State Reclamation Board as Chairman of the Lower River Committee. He served in that position for 8 years.

But even though they were years which were filled with accomplishment, there were also frustrations and disappointments as well. There was a massive suit involving the Henry Miller Trust and a tragic aircraft crash which claimed the life of his wife.

Continued on page 8



**NICKEL, JR.***Continued from page 6*

He pauses for a moment. The memory is still clear. The words are not easy.

Today, George is probably best known for his dream come true—Rio Bravo Tennis Ranch and its surrounding community. Acquired in 1965, the 10,000 acre ranch was purchased from the heirs of the Bakersfield pioneer Louis V. Olcese.

Shortly after he purchased the Ranch, Nickel offered, as a gift, a large site on the property for the then proposed Cal State Bakersfield. However, the generous offer was refused. At first Nickel says that he was disappointed, but now he feels that things worked out for the best.

The Tennis Ranch formally began in 1975, with the completion of the first phase consisting of the tennis facility and restaurant. That was followed shortly thereafter with the construction of the 112 room lodge and 41 adjacent Rio Bravo Condominiums.

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*“One thing I’d like to see . . . are more cultural projects. I have an ideal location for an outdoor theater already in mind.”*

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The next area of development was the prestigious Cattle King Estates where many of Bakersfield’s finest homes are now located. Complete with a security gate system, these impressive homes are nestled among Rio Bravo’s gently rolling foothills. Many have spectacular views of Lake Ming, The K.C. Golf course and the towering Sierra Nevadas.

The management of a project the size and scope of Rio Bravo would be a formidable task for any team of men, yet George masters the helm of Rio Bravo’s many projects with a quiet confidence that has earned him the respect of the people who work with him. They know that George truly loves and believes in Rio Bravo and its people. His enthusiasm is contagious—or else there’s something in the water. Perhaps its a little bit of both. Either way it’s easy to see why Rio Bravo has been growing so quickly.

There was the development of the equestrian center which attracted the avid horseman and women. Later a 3,000 foot runway was constructed to service the many businessmen and women who fly in from all parts of the country to enjoy the fine conference facilities and recreational activities. Naturally, the airport was designed and landscaped to blend in with the surrounding community.

At the east end of the airfield, a championship 7,100 yard golf course is in its final stages of completion. Surrounding the course will be an attractive housing

development covering about 120 acres. Looking ahead, George envisions the construction of numerous commercial and office facilities. “One thing I’d like to see in the years ahead are more community cultural projects. I have an ideal location for an outdoor theater already in mind,” he says. There is even talk of a complete medical center.

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*“This could easily become another Palm Springs. We encourage people to come out and enjoy the facilities.”*

---

The Rio Bravo development is a massive project that has taken years to achieve, and has required hundreds of hours of George’s energy and time.

But life has not been all work for the energetic Nickel. When relaxing, he enjoys the company of his lovely wife Adele. Together they can be seen playing tennis, barbecuing, horseback riding, river rafting or simply enjoying the ranch’s natural environment.

“This could easily become another Palm Springs,” he says enthusiastically. “We encourage people to come out and enjoy the facilities. Many people are under the misconception that they cannot take advantage of the activities that we have to offer, such as the restaurant and lodge.” *(Both were awarded the coveted FOUR DIAMOND AWARD from the Triple “A” Club-Ed.)*

In addition to the recreational aspects of the Rio Bravo community, there are also agricultural ones. “We’re very proud of the amount of agriculture on the ranch,” George says. “We grow our own oranges, grapefruit, lemons, apricots, peaches, almonds and table grapes.”

It was the Ranch’s involvement with grapes that lead to the sale of some of their grapes to the M. Lamont wineries. There, the grapes are turned into some of the finest domestic wine available; bottled under the name: *Rio Bravo Wine Cellers*. “We’re very serious about our wine, and I think we’ll continue to pursue it,” he says smiling.

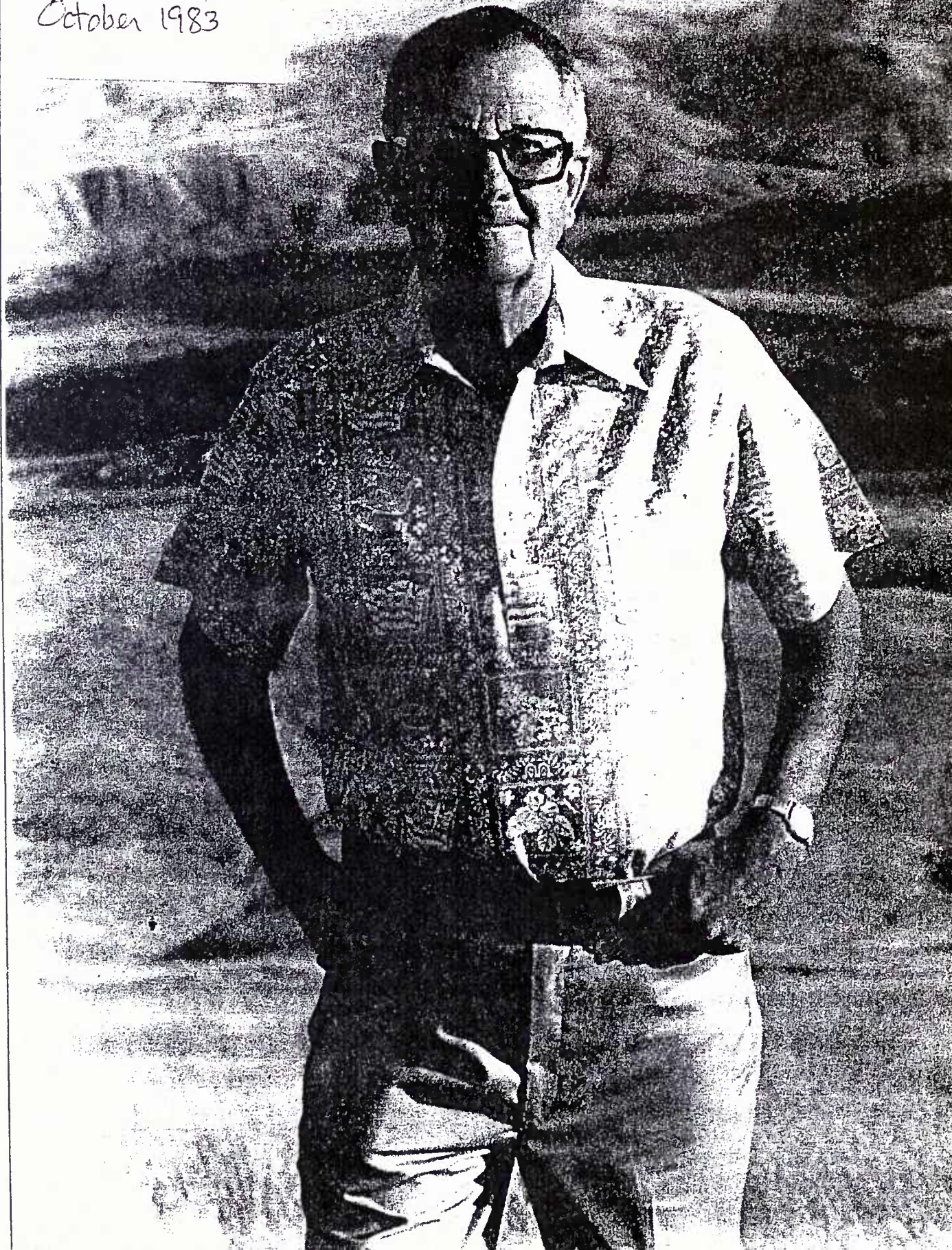
“Something else that I’d like to pursue is to bottle some of our Kern River water. Believe it or not, it’s one of the purest water supplies in the United States.”

His mind starts turning ... another dream begins.

They say that the true picture of a man’s soul is mirrored by his achievements and creations. If that is true, then it is easy to see why the Rio Bravo Ranch will forever stand as a living portrait of one man’s soul.

A man who spent his early years “... doing a little cowboying.” **B**







# GEOORGE NICKEL

George W. Nickel Jr. watches the sun rise over the Sierra Nevada Mountains east of Bakersfield every morning from his massive desk strewn with documents, reports and papers waiting to be signed.

An early riser, Nickel is hard at work in his office in the Nickel Enterprises administration building, pouring over those papers at 5 a.m. every working day. He habitually works 14-hour days.

"It is a long working day," the 66-year-old Nickel says with a half smile. "But on Sundays I take it a little easier."

To say that Nickel's hard work has paid off would be an understatement.

Millionaire Nickel is one of the most prominent and, at times, controversial men in Bakersfield.

He is a one-man agribusiness with farms in Merced, Fresno and Kern counties. With about 27,000 acres in his name, Nickel is highly ranked among California's largest farm operators.

In Kern County, Nickel perhaps is

best known for his 10,000-acre Rio Bravo Ranch which hugs the Kern River in the hills northeast of Bakersfield.

On his ranch, Nickel has created exclusive housing subdivisions and the Rio Bravo Tennis and Golf Resort which has been highly rated by several magazines and the American Automobile Association. County assessor records put Rio Bravo's value at \$23 million, according to newspaper reports.

Nickel has been a controversial man in Bakersfield because of the thin line he walks while trying to juggle public access to the Kern River, which runs through Rio Bravo, and the private property rights of homeowners in his subdivisions. It's an unresolved issue, Nickel says, that has been debated in Bakersfield City Council chambers and in Kern County's Superior Court. Yet it's an issue which keeps Nickel in the limelight.

Still, Nickel is an unpretentious, slow-talking man who seems uncomfortable being in the limelight.

He is a casual man who goes to work wearing canvas shoes, plain slacks with a huge, square-shaped "Rio Bravo" belt buckle and a short sleeve shirt unbuttoned at the collar. And he is a competitive sportsman who loves a good, friendly game of tennis and who once set an unofficial record in the breaststroke and was on the rowing team when he studied at the University of California at Berkeley in the late 1930s.

Resting his elbows on the documents, reports and papers piled on his desk, Nickel smiled and talked fondly of his college days and retold the familiar story of his heritage.

Nickel's great-grandfather, Henry Miller, was a German immigrant who started out as a butcher and ended up as one of California's largest landowners in the 19th century.

One interesting fact that is rarely brought up, Nickel says, is that Miller is not the true name of his great-grandfather. His real name was Henry Krieser.

## The Man Behind Rio Bravo

By Christi Kennedy

Nickel says that his great-grandfather was living on the East Coast when California's Gold Rush enticed him. A friend, whose name was Miller, had purchased a ticket on a ship bound for California, but the man decided not to go. So Krieser bought his friend's ticket. He apparently was worried that the different name on the ticket would be

To pay off the enormous debt caused by a bad bond investment, the company started selling huge chunks of land, Nickel explains. The land sales continued for years, and the Miller empire slowly crumbled.

Nickel, meanwhile, was growing up in the Palo Alto area. He became involved in the family business early.

control of the company. After a long, bitter fight, Nickel's generation won control. The properties were divided among the great-grandchildren to develop as individual enterprises.

Nickel concentrated on the farming and ranching business. He lived in Merced County and managed land in Merced, Fresno and Kern counties. Nickel learned to fly in 1950 in order to get around to all of his ranches rapidly. Over

**“It took my grandfather 10 years to put the company in debt to the tune of \$28 million.”**

the years, Nickel has logged more than 12,000 hours in the cockpit of his single-engine airplane.

In addition to ranching, Nickel also became involved in water issues and policy. From 1958 to 1966, Nickel served on the state Water Reclamation Board, a post he was appointed to by Gov. Pat Brown.

Before long, farmer Nickel began branching out in the uses he found for land. Nickel first got his hands wet in land developing in the Los Banos area.

Gregory Iger



*An 18-hole championship golf course now sits on what used to be ranch land.*

There he build a 40-home subdivision. That was just the beginning.

In 1965, Nickel moved to Kern County and bought the 16,000-acre Okese Ranch near the Kern River Canyon. He renamed it Rio Bravo Ranch and later sold 6,000 acres of the grazing land, leaving the final 10,000 acres in the ranch.

The year after he bought the ranch, Nickel tried to donate a 320-acre site overlooking the river for what would become Cal State Bakersfield. This would have brought land improvements

*(Continued on page 31)*



*In his office at Rio Bravo, George Nickel is hard at work at 5 a.m. each day.*

questioned, so he assumed the name of Miller and never bothered to change it, Nickel says.

Miller worked as a butcher in San Francisco rather than going to the gold mines. In 1858, Miller formed a partnership with another butcher, Charles Lux. Under the name of Miller & Lux, the two men bought cattle and land.

In the late 1800s, Miller & Lux owned more than 1 million acres in California, Nevada and Oregon. Most of the land was in the San Joaquin Valley.

Lux died in 1887 and left his shares in the partnership to various family members. However, Miller slowly bought back Lux's shares. By 1905, he was the sole owner of the operation.

When Miller died in 1916, one year before Nickel was born, he left a prosperous business to his heirs. Unfortunately, says Nickel, it didn't stay prosperous long in the hands of Miller's son-in-law, James Leroy Nickel.

“It took my grandfather 10 years to put the company in dept to the tune of \$28 million,” Nickel says.

Beginning at the age of 14, Nickel worked summers as a cowboy and as a survey team member on the ranches in Merced County.

He later studied history at the University of California at Berkeley and engaged in competitive swimming and rowing. He graduated in 1939 with a degree in Letters, Arts and Sciences.

After his graduation, Nickel moved to the Los Banos area and formally joined the company. He managed family ranches and was on the company's board of directors. At that time, the company still was selling land.

Nickel says he was able to slow down the land sales and the decades-old debt finally was paid off in 1941. Yet, the land sales continued. By 1954, the company's holdings were down to 45,000 acres.

As Nickel got more involved in the business, he found what he called mismanagement and “a lot of corruption.”

In 1954, Nickel and the six other Miller great-grandchildren sued to get



(depreciate) of \$9,500 of the original asset value, rather than the original cost of \$10,000.

A taxpayer can elect to avoid making a basis adjustment and instead make a 2 percentage point reduction in the investment credit. This would mean taking an 8 percent investment credit in place of the normal 10 percent credit for most qualifying property (five-year and up); and a 4 percent credit in place of the 6 percent equivalent credit provided for three-year recovery property.

#### Illustration 5:

Given the same circumstances as those in Illustration 4, the taxpayer elects to reduce the investment credit by 2 percent. The resultant computation of investment tax credit and basis for ACRS deductions is as follows:

Cost:	\$10,000
8 percent investment tax credit (elected to reduce regular investment tax credit of 10 percent)	\$800
Basis for ACRS deductions (depreciation)	
Original Cost:	\$10,000

The option to take a reduced investment tax credit is intended to deal with situations in which a taxpayer would not be entitled to claim all of its regular investment tax credit because of the limitation as to how much credit may offset tax liability. If the credit reduction election were not available, the taxpayer would have to reduce the basis of an asset despite the fact that it might not receive any current year tax benefit from the unused credit.

#### Offsetting Income Tax Liability with Investment Tax Credit

For tax years beginning after 1982, the amount of the investment credit earned by a taxpayer which may be used to offset regular tax liability cannot exceed \$25,000 of the regular tax liability plus 85 percent of the liability above \$25,000.

The tax liability against which the investment tax credit is applied is generally considered to be "regular" income tax. (This means tax computed under all the applicable income tax provisions of the code.)

Investment tax credit does not reduce any of the following taxes:

- 1) Minimum tax for tax preferences
- 2) Special (10-year averaging) tax on lump sum distributions from qualified plans
- 3) Tax on premature distributions from an IRA account and qualified self-employment plans
- 4) Increase in tax due to recapture of prior investment credits on premature dispositions

As one can see, the application of the "10 percent" investment credit involves various guidelines and ramifications. The intent of this article is to aid the reader in understanding the investment credit and to serve as a guideline in applying it. Please note, however, that the complexity of the investment tax credit may make a given situation the exception, rather than the norm. □

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Nickel—from page 6

and higher property values to Nickel. But Nickel lost that bid to the southwest Bakersfield company, Kern County Land Company, which later became Tenneco.

Nickel today says that he still thinks the Rio Bravo area would have been an attractive site for a campus, but he doesn't appear to be too worried about that past setback.

Instead, after that disappointment Nickel soon launched into plans to build a resort.

In 1975, Nickel opened the plush Rio Bravo Resort. The facilities overlooking the Kern River and the man-made Lake Ming included a luxury lodge and dining room, swimming pool and 19 championship tennis courts. Nickel has been adding to the resort ever since.

Now the resort offers whitewater rafting, an airport where Nickel bases his two airplanes, an equestrian center, condominiums and luxury homes priced conservatively at \$300,000.

The latest additions to the resort are the 18-hole championship golf course, which was completed last year, and an impressive, Spanish-style clubhouse.

Nickel is optimistic about his plans for Rio Bravo and bounces easily over disappointments like losing the bid of the college campus and narrowly missing a chance to host a whitewater event in the 1984 Summer Olympics based in Los Angeles. Nickel explains that the Kern River, the site of the U.S. National Whitewater Championships, was approved by the officials, but the event was dropped from the 1984 Olympics.

Placing a lot of his hopes on the land's potential, Nickel talks broadly of plans to build a health spa and perhaps an office complex at Rio Bravo. "This Rio Bravo country, I think it can be good for everyone—for us here and for the whole community."

Nickel looks out the huge windows of his office at the impressive panorama of Rio Bravo and the golden hills above Lake Ming. Dangling in one of the windows is an oval stained glass hanging which depicts the Kern River flowing through the canyon, the design chosen to represent Rio Bravo Resort. The hanging was a gift from Nickel's eight children. It's the only thing adorning the windows; Nickel shuns any notion of putting up curtains blocking his view of the land he has worked so hard to develop.

"I won't let them put anything else on the windows," Nickel says, smiling as he looks out at his prized view of Rio Bravo. □

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## SUNDAY PROFILE

Bakersfield Californian, April 19, 1998

# A wild ride

Like the river he loves so much, George W. Nickel has seen the extremes: from overflowing wealth to an evaporating empire, with plenty of swirling eddies along the way. But life is better than ever, he says. "I feel so positive!"

By STEVEN MAYER

Californian staff writer

e-mail: smayer@bakersfield.com

**RIO BRAVO** — As a modern-day prophet of venture capitalism, George W. Nickel Jr. has a particular talent: He can see deep into the raw potential of his surroundings and transform its promise into concrete reality.

Witness his emerald-green orchards and lush vineyards where summer-dry grasses once held sway. Nickel's knowledge of complex water laws and his recognition that water fuels the growth of agricultural crops, and bank accounts, has allowed the tall, lanky farmer to turn gold into green on the arid fields of his Rio Bravo Ranch.

And the community of Rio Bravo itself — developed as it was around the twin golf and tennis facilities that Nickel built and then subsequently lost — was his brainchild long before a blueprint was ever committed to paper.

"George was always the idea man," recalled Kern County Water Agency Director and former Nickel employee Tom Clark. "He's a visionary."

As a longtime Kern County farmer, developer and self-styled water baron, Nickel has been portrayed at various times during his 80 years as both a hero and a villain. He's been praised for the part he played in the formulation of local water policy and he's been sharply criticized for his unpopular stand on public river access and other issues.

Nickel's use of \$14.7 million in low-interest disaster loans he received from the federal Farmers Home Administration came under scrutiny during a 1979 "60 Minutes" TV segment called "The Grapes of Wealth." Those TV images that showed the farmer-turned-developer playing tennis at his private club clashed mightily with the popular public image of the American farmer, dressed in well-worn jeans and work shirt, struggling against the elements and the odds.

The show prompted criticism of the federal loan program for its generosity to large growers. And to make matters worse, the Nickel organization didn't or couldn't pay back the loan on a timely

**"George was always the idea man. He's a visionary."**

— Tom Clark

Kern County Water Agency director and former Nickel employee.



ANGELA MACCHIA / THE CALIFORNIAN  
Bakersfield farmer and developer George W. Nickel Jr. sits in his back yard on the bank of the Kern River.

basis, eventually accumulating more than \$7 million in back interest.

But the truth of George Nickel is complex and elusive, and crowning him with a black or white hat like the good or bad guy in a Hollywood western cannot capture the essence of this man who presided over the rise and fall (and the rise again) of a genuine real estate and agricultural empire in Kern County.

His recent gift of a parcel of land to accommodate Cesar Chavez School is just one example of the public-minded George Nickel that many are not well acquainted with.

And even in the 1980s, Nickel denied those who would box him into a single category — and angered a lot of traditionalists in the process — when he sponsored the first woman to be admitted to a

**Please turn to NICKEL / A3**



George W. Nickel Jr. and his mother, Ernestine, pose at his graduation from UC Berkeley in 1939.



An avid pilot, Nickel used his private plane for business transportation for many years.



## NICKEL: Developer's initial water recovery efforts marked beginning of city's 2,800-acre water bank

### Continued from A1

local Rotary Club. Looking back now, he's proud to point out that women have become an integral part of every Rotary chapter in Bakersfield.

During a recent interview at his home several miles northeast of Bakersfield, Nickel talked about his life, his love of the land and his affection for his adopted home. By his actions, he has certainly altered the face of Kern County. And he hopes that some of his accomplishments will be remembered as positive contributions to the local community.

"I initiated the recovery of water on the Kern River and its movement to underground storage," he said. "That was the beginning of the city's 2,800-acre water bank.

"Water has been my blood," he added, his eyes resting for a moment on the river that flows past his home. "And I've had a lifelong fascination with it."

Nickel's early push for storing excess water in wet years for later use in dry years proved to many that he was ahead of his time in the area of water policy. Though the local effort toward storing water in the underground aquifer was slow in getting started, today, about 30,000 acres on the Kern River fan are dedicated to recharging water for underground storage, according to Clark.

"Underground storage capabilities are now the centerpiece of water operations in Kern County," Clark added. "That is due in large part to the efforts of George Nickel."

Heart surgery in 1994 and arthritis triggered by a back injury have changed the day-to-day life of George Nickel. No more will he be seen wearing his tennis whites and swinging his roundhouse forehand on the courts at Rio Bravo. Walking has become a chore, and the proud businessman must use a cane to get around.

But despite his physical disability, an unyielding optimism colors his comments, and wry smiles occasionally break through his otherwise impenetrable expression. The family business is back on firm ground, he said, and it feels good.

"It makes you feel great when you take a temporary licking and still come back strong," Nickel said, alluding to the financial roller coaster he's been riding for several years.

At one point in the mid-1980s, his combined debt to banks, private creditors and the federal government reportedly approached \$60 million. But the sale of thousands of acres of farmland and valuable commercial assets have put his financial house back in order, Nickel said.

"I feel so positive!" he added. "I'm just ready to charge ahead."

Many would say that Nickel has charged ahead for most of his business life. He's never been one to be timid in his business endeavors.

In many ways, Nickel's path ran parallel to the path blazed by his legendary great-grandfather, Henry Miller 100 years before.

It's a family connection that Nickel's friends and loved ones recognize as well.

"To really understand George Nickel, you have to understand Henry Miller," Clark said. "His identification with Henry Miller is undeniable."

Miller, a German-born immigrant who came to California in 1850 with \$6 in his pocket, amassed more than a million acres before his death in 1916. The Miller & Lux cattle empire he created covered vast areas in California, Oregon and Nevada, making Miller the largest private landowner in the United States at that time.

But more importantly, Miller gained control of much of California's water, the one ingredient that can make the Central Valley bloom.

One story associated with Miller — and there are many — involved one of his employees who was reportedly asked by an acquaintance to describe the kind of man Miller really was.

The employee pointed into the near distance and asked his friend, "Do you see that tree?"

"Of course," the curious friend answered.

And can you see the second tree further on?"

"Yes," his friend answered again.

"And what about the third tree beyond the first two?"

"No, I can't see it," the man answered, squinting into the distance.

"Well, Henry Miller can see three trees beyond that one," the employee said proudly. "That's the kind of man he is."

Most observers agree that's the kind of man Nickel is as well.

Before his death, Miller created a

trust that would go to his great-grandchildren, but a series of disastrous investments and the financial collapse of the Great Depression left the Miller estate nearly decimated. By 1954, the million-acre empire had shrunk to 45,000 acres.

That year, Nickel and the other Miller great-grandchildren sued the estate's trustees for fraud. They won, and soon afterward, Nickel took over the management of the family's Kern County holdings.

In the early 1960s, as plans for a state college in Bakersfield began to take shape, Nickel pitched the idea of building Cal State Bakersfield on his land northeast of town. He tried to convince CSU regents that the area's picturesque foothills and panoramic vistas were best suited for Bakersfield's first four-year college.

But some preferred southwest Bakersfield, with its flat land and unlimited room for expansion. The regents deadlocked on the decision, and it was California's lieutenant governor who cast the deciding vote for the southwest.

To this day, Nickel believes the regents made the wrong decision.

"This would have been a sensational place for the university," he said. "And it would have saved a lot of good farmland in the southwest from development."

In 1965, Nickel added to his family's holdings by purchasing the historic 16,000-acre Olcese Ranch at the mouth of the Kern River Canyon. There he would grow citrus, almonds, grapes and peaches.

"We've been very successful in farming," Nickel said. "We also have farming operations in Merced and Fresno counties where we produce cotton, alfalfa and potatoes."

Soon after the Olcese purchase, Nickel's search for water led him to buy Hacienda Ranch, a property on the southern edge of Tulare Lake Basin in Kings County. Hacienda had extensive Kern River water rights, while Rio Bravo Ranch did not.

Nickel sold Hacienda Ranch, but retained its water rights and transferred those claims to Rio Bravo. By storing the water in wet years, Nickel could sell it to other users during drier periods when the price goes up.

"Our water rights are valuable only in wet years, when the river flow

exceeds 125 percent of normal," said Nickel's son Jim Nickel, now the president of Nickel Enterprises. "In those years, we can store it, trade it or sell it."

In the mid-1970s, the elder Nickel annexed much of Rio Bravo Ranch to the city of Bakersfield and began to develop the Rio Bravo Tennis Resort, the centerpiece of a planned community that would later sprout condominiums, single-family homes, offices, schools, churches and retail outlets.

Eventually an 18-hole golf course would be added, and the dream of creating a community above the fog and noise of metropolitan Bakersfield had become a reality.

"George has always seen the world as his oyster," recalled Adele "Dodo" Nickel, George Nickel's wife of more than 40 years. "He wanted to reshape the world to fit his vision."

But sometimes his vision ran afoul of those around him.

In the early 1980s, Nickel became concerned that river rafters and other users were hurting riverfront property and endangering themselves. He once erected a barbed wire fence along his river frontage to keep people out, and his security guards policed that fence line.

Soon, the fight over shoreline rights and public access became a full-blown controversy, and many saw the dispute as a public relations black eye for the Nickel organization.

Torn Fallgatter, a Bakersfield attorney and local river activist, soon waded into the fight, and helped to form the Kern River Public Access Committee, a group that would carry the controversy into the courts.

"We had a very heated dispute about public access to the river," Fallgatter recalled. "To the point that we sued him a couple of times."

Nickel tried to end the controversy in 1983 by offering the city limited public access to the river at one point on his property. But a Kern County Superior Court judge vetoed the argument, ruling that state law guaranteed wider access.

In the end, a state appeals court upheld the Kern County ruling that said Nickel must grant a public easement along the bank of the river. Today, the Kern River Parkway is an outgrowth of that ruling.

"George is a very bright, very capa-

ble man, and his development of Rio Bravo was beautifully conceived and I think beautifully executed," Fallgatter continued. "But he didn't see the river as a common asset for the community. It was his."

Despite their differences, Fallgatter complimented the Rio Bravo developer for always being a straight-shooter, even if he disagreed with Nickel's viewpoint. "George was always open and honest about his position," he added. "You always knew where he stood."

Meanwhile, the Rio Bravo Ranch plan continued to unfold with the construction of the golf and country club. But, visionaries are, after all, only human, and their predictions sometimes take unexpected turns.

The 1980s had ushered in a downturn in the farm economy, and housing in Rio Bravo was not selling as briskly as expected. Cash was short.

"We were undercapitalized," Jim Nickel explained. "Sometimes the dream gets in the way of reality."

By early 1985, the banks and the creditors were pounding on the door, demanding payment. In February of that year, Carmel Ranch Partners, a 5,000-acre farming operation near Buttonwillow was sold to the bank to help pay off debts.

On July 2, 1985, Nickel filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy to give his companies time to reorganize their finances. Before it was all over, both the tennis ranch and the golf club would be liquidated.

"It was a real heartbreaker," the elder Nickel said as he recalled those darker days. "We were at the lowest possible point."

But that low point also marked the beginning of the company's recovery, Nickel said. The farming operations are leaner now, with 8,000 acres under production.

The hydroelectric plant Nickel built on the river near his home is producing close to 10 million kilowatts per month during the peak water season.

And a planned 73-home subdivision near Chavez School has sold six houses so far and another half-dozen or more are under construction.

All of this is good news for George Nickel. For like his great-grandfather before him, he is intent on leaving a working, profitable legacy to his 17 grandchildren and three great-grand-



**George Nickel**

**Background:** Born Nov. 18, 1917, in San Francisco. Spent most of his childhood in Los Altos; graduated in 1934 from Palo Alto High School. Later, studied engineering and history at UC Berkeley, graduating in 1937.

**Family:** Married Charlotte Davidson in 1940; they reared five children: Sally, Susan, Jim, Nancy and Miller. After Charlotte was killed in a plane crash in 1954, George was remarried, to Adele "Dodo" Selfridge, a widow with three children: Kinzie, Cynthia and Jock. The couple now have 17 grandchildren and three great-grandchildren.

**Honors and**

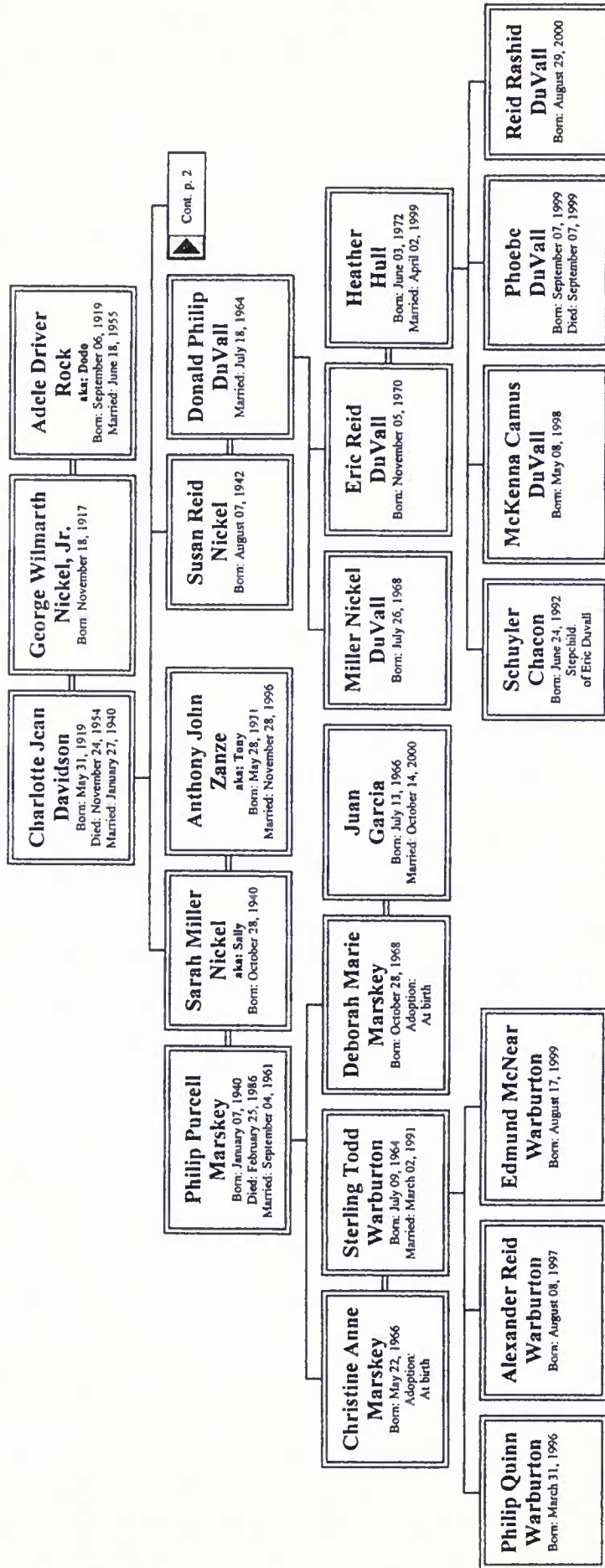
**accomplishments:** Nickel has remained active in Rotary since moving to Bakersfield in 1964. Named Person of the Year by Bakersfield Lifestyle Magazine in 1983, and has been honored for his efforts in developing the Kern County Soccer Park. Also a longtime supporter of the California Living Museum and has been a board director on at least three area water storage districts.

children. Who knows? One of them might decide to follow the path originally set by Henry Miller 150 years ago.

Through it all, the river that George Nickel has so long been a part of moves white and fast and dangerous as it tumbles and swirls out of the Sierra Nevadas.

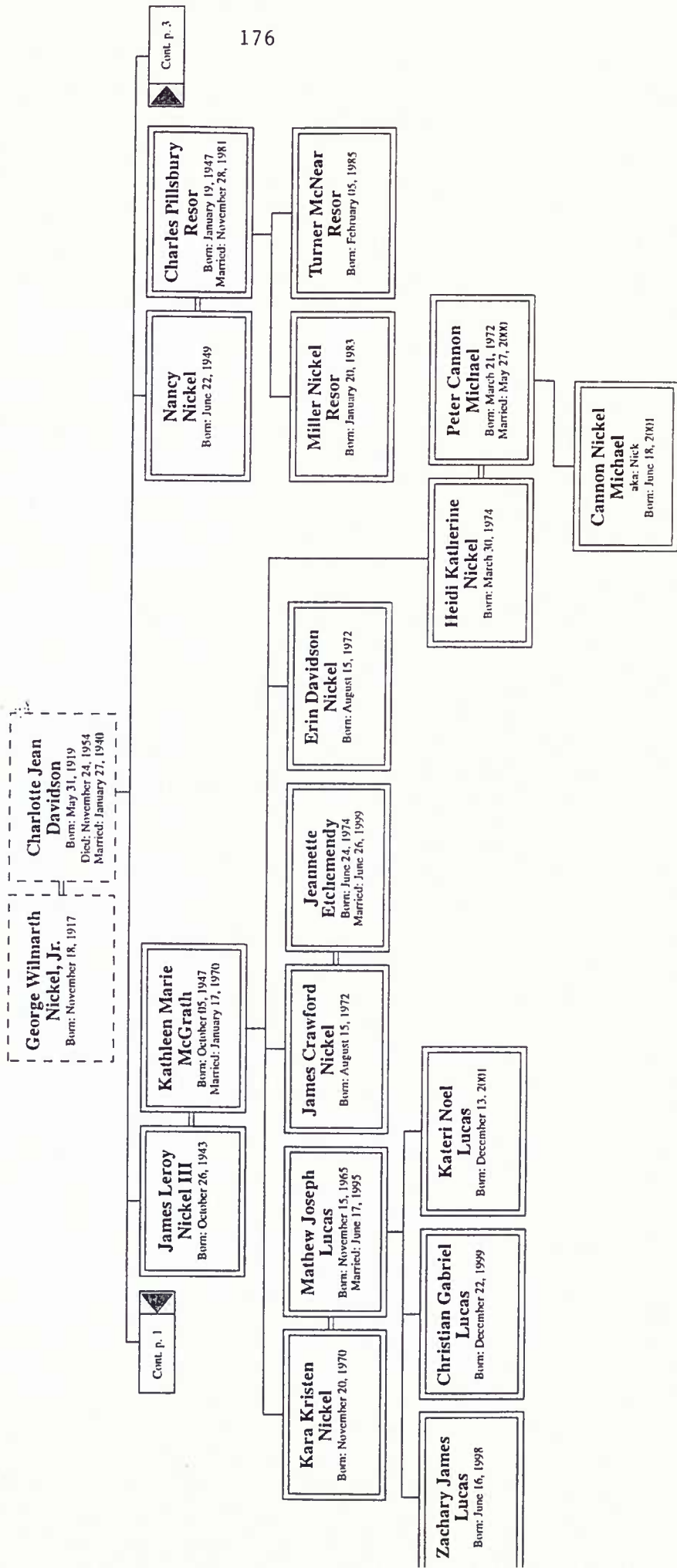
But further downstream, it slows to a calmer pace, its surface cool and serene and inscrutable like the eternal passage of time.

*Family of George Wilmarth Nickel, Jr. (1 of 4)*



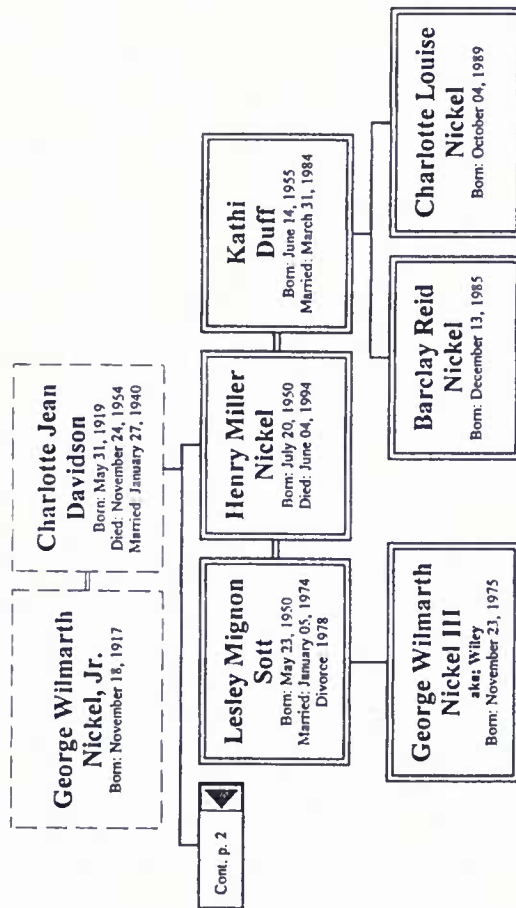


# Family of George Wilmarth Nickel, Jr. (2 of 4)

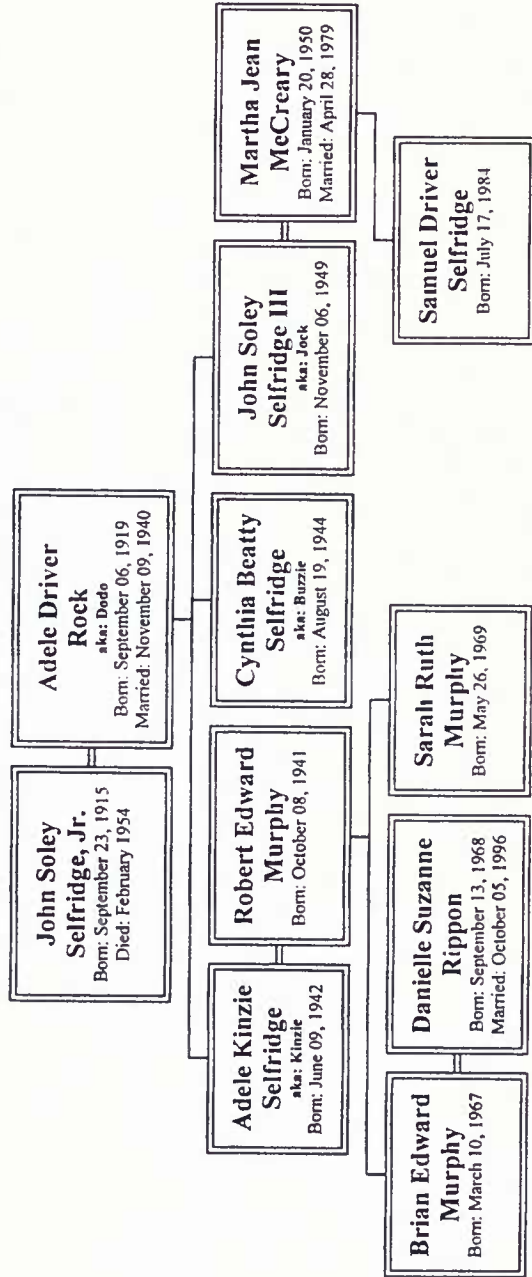




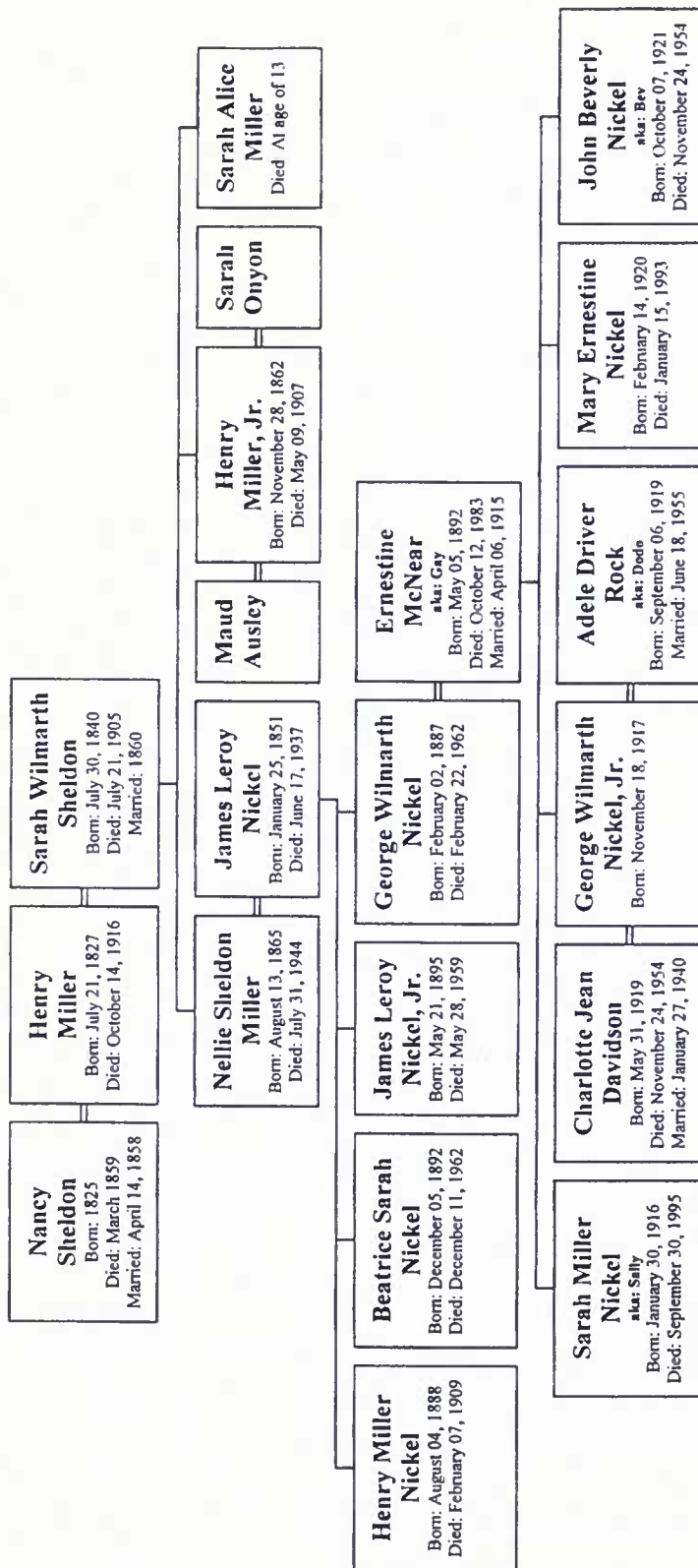
*Family of George Wilmarth Nickel, Jr. (3 of 4)*



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## JAMY O'BANION FAULHABER

Born in Dos Palos in the Central Valley of California, Ms. Faulhaber attended Dos Palos High School, graduating in 1964; she received a Bachelor of Arts in Spanish and Political Science from the University of Colorado in 1968, and a masters degree in Spanish Language and Literature at the University of California, Berkeley, in 1971.

From 1973 to 1984 Ms. Faulhaber worked for IBM in sales and marketing, rising to the position of regional sales director for New York and New Jersey in IBM's National Marketing Division. From 1984-1986 she was President of Lecht Sciences, Inc., a software design company in New York City. After returning to California in 1986 she formed a business partnership with a Mexican friend, María Luisa de Mateo, to import handpainted tiles and ceramics from Mexico.

Most recently she has been active helping her husband, Charles, director of The Bancroft Library, with development activities in support of Bancroft. She also served for many years on the Board of Directors of the International House at Berkeley and continues to help promote its goals and objectives.

This project to tell the life story of her father's good friend, George W. Nickel, Jr., is Jamy Faulhaber's maiden effort as an oral historian.







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