Regional Oral History Office
The Bancroft Library

University of California
Berkeley, California

California Horticulture Oral History Series

Gerda Isenberg

CALIFORNIA NATIVE PLANTS NURSERYWOMAN, CIVIL RIGHTS ACTIVIST, AND HUMANITARIAN

With An Introduction by
Bart O'Brien

Interviews Conducted by
Suzanne B. Riess
in 1990, 1991

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Gerda Isenberg
1991

Photograph by Suzanne Riess

Cataloging Information

ISENBERG, Gerda (b. 1901) Nurserywoman

California Native Plants Nurserywoman, Civil Rights Activist, and Humanitarian, 1991, xii, 148 pp.

German family background and garden school education; marriage, and farming and ranching in California; 1931 European Book Shop, San Francisco; assisting German and Austrian refugees, pre-WWII; Japanese-American relocation; work with Palo Alto Fair Play Council and American Friends Service Committee; Yerba Buena Nursery, Woodside CA: ferns, native plants, nursery management, intern program. Appended writings for The Friend; articles about Palo Alto Fair Play Council and Isenberg; Yerba Buena Nursery cultivars; "Yerba Buena Nursery People."

Introduction by Bart O'Brien, Head, Horticulture Department, Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden.

Interviewed 1990, 1991 by Suzanne B. Riess for the California Horticulture Oral History Series. The Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

Donors to the Gerda Isenberg Oral History Project

The Bancroft Library, on behalf of future researchers, wishes to thank the following persons whose contributions made possible this oral history project.

Mrs. Ralph K. Davies

S.D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation

Ann Witter Gillette

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INTRODUCTION by Bart O'Brien

I first met Gerda Isenberg in 1983 at a Santa Clara Valley Chapter meeting of the California Native Plant Society (CNPS). Over subsequent years, I would increasingly see Gerda at meetings of CNPS, Western Horticultural Society, California Horticultural Society, and of course at Yerba Buena Nursery. In March of 1988, Gerda offered me the position of manager of Yerba Buena Nursery. It certainly didn't take long for me to accept her offer, as I knew that this was a wonderful opportunity that I would most certainly enjoy.

Gerda decided to grow native plants and start her nursery in 1955, even though her good friend Charles Burr had asked her, "Why would you want to grow those weeds?" and encouraged her to grow ferns. Through the first twenty years the nursery grew at a fairly slow and steady rate. One of the first native plants that Gerda grew, *Holodiscus discolor*, never sold, so they were planted all over the nursery. Several of these are still found on the slope in back of the quonset, and on the slope across from the office. These less than economically successful plants were soon followed by flowering specimens of *Mimulus (Diplacus) aurantiacus* that Gerda took from nursery to nursery along El Camino Real until she sold all thirty of them (no one ever called her to see if she had any more, she recounted later).

Fortunately, her native and exotic ferns have always been popular--enabling Gerda to also grow "those weeds". With the advent of the environmental movement, and especially the drought in the seventies, Gerda's native plants moved to the forefront where they remain to this day. It was during this time that the nursery experienced its first major influx of customers and personnel. Nursery facilities were also expanded, and the demonstration garden became a reality.

Yerba Buena Nursery has spread out in many directions from the initial shade structures in the lower nursery. The quonset soon became the potting area and later an office was constructed within it. The chicken house became a greenhouse for the fern stock plants and young ferns, and in 1987-1988 became the site of the new greenhouse. The current ginger house of shade-loving native plants (excluding ferns) and the stone wall behind the quonset were built by neighbor Jimmy Rapley and long-time friend and former employee Hildegard Jackson. The ginger house formerly contained

ferns. These have since been moved to the shadier lower nursery. Keith Armstrong designed and built the propagation house in the mid-seventies. The tree fern house was built in the late eighties, as was the new fern house near the new parking lot.

There are two shop areas within the nursery: one is the quonset shop and the other, Carl's shop, is in the middle of the nursery. Carl's shop is set up as a woodshop with all the saws, tables, and tools needed for any construction project at the nursery. The quonset shop houses Gerda's mail order packaging supplies, the herbarium drier, a refrigerator for seed stratification, the poison cabinet, and a wide variety of other tools. The old outhouse near the propagation house was replaced by the new bathroom next to the fern propagation house in 1988. The outhouse was removed when the nursery greatly expanded to the east in 1989. The latest structure, the large "hot house," was finished early in 1990. These structures joined the fern propagation house, the liner/shade house, the stock cage, and the three shade houses in the lower nursery to form the Yerba Buena Nursery of today.

Yerba Buena Nursery has long been an important source of native plants for the Bay Area, and an invaluable way station in many lives. Over sixty people have been enriched by their experience as employees, volunteers, or interns at Yerba Buena Nursery. A reward of equal or greater value than the horticultural knowledge and experience to be gained at the nursery is the opportunity of getting to know Gerda. Her wit, wisdom, and life history are rich sources of inspiration to everyone.

A typical day in the Nursery starts at 9:00, as "No one will get here earlier that that." Lunch is approximately at noon, depending on whether or not there are customers. Convivial meals are either in the lunch room in Gerda's house during cold or bad weather, on the terrace outside the dining room in good weather, or on the front porch in early spring or late fall. Nearly everyone prepares their lunch in Gerda's kitchen, and after lunch the dishes are washed and left to dry. We all eat together, some of us reading, others discussing various topics, and listening to Gerda's stories of her experiences and thoughts.

The nursery "officially" closes at 5:00, but frequently people are busy finishing a day's task, or helping a late-arriving customer. All nursery workers have a cardboard shoe box in the inner office with their name on it. Here messages are left (many people work part time and don't get to see fellow workers regularly), and gloves, clippers, letters, and an occasional pay check can be found.

In general, Yerba Buena Nursery's principle role has been educating employees and the public in the value of California native plants and servicing the landscape trade and the individual home owner. The nursery has supplied a number of plants to several important botanical gardens and arboreta on occasion, including: the East Bay Regional Parks Botanic Garden

in Tilden Regional Park; Strybing Arboretum in Golden Gate Park; University of California, Berkeley, Botanical Garden; and University of California, Santa Cruz, Arboretum. The nursery has always had a good working relationship with these gardens, particularly Tilden and UC Berkeley.

I cannot speak for the entire life of the nursery, but will focus on my perceptions of my time at the nursery working with Gerda, and the times immediately before and after. There are several features shared among all of the employees of Yerba Buena Nursery which in combination give this organization its unique character. These are (in no particular order):

1) The sense of place--everyone who has ever worked for and with Gerda either has or very quickly develops a deep appreciation of the nursery, Gerda's home, the dirt road, the entire setting. The "remoteness" of the nursery helps to focus everyone on the tasks at hand, each other, and introspection. The primary "distraction" is the landscape itself, and the components of the landscape--the plants--that are the purpose of our lives here.

2) The plants--a dedication to California native plants and learning about them is shared by everyone at the nursery, though this is often shown in different ways, including the use of these plants in landscaping, restoration, conservation of endangered species, or their intrinsic horticultural value.

3) Shared purpose--everyone is working towards the same goals: growing a wide array of California native plants, making the nursery a self-supporting enterprise, and most importantly, working towards the fulfillment of Gerda's dream of establishing an ongoing foundation.

4) The people--everyone at the nursery genuinely cares about each other, the nursery, and especially for Gerda. Aside from our shared interests in the plants, we are all quite different and have various interests and opinions which are readily shared and discussed. The "YBNers" are truely a remarkable group of special people.

5) Gerda--whether it is curiosity, awe, or intrigue, I think that everyone who has worked at the nursery would have to agree that there is something particularly special, perhaps even magical, about working with and for someone who, at ninety years of age, is still so focused and clear about what she has been doing for so long and who still feels she has more to accomplish and to give.

Gerda does not believe in advertising for workers. "Someone will come," she would say, and sure enough someone would wander in and ask if there were any jobs available. If there was an opening, Gerda would make up her mind very quickly. After asking the prospect a few questions she would say "Yes," there was an opening and you can start tomorrow, or "No," there isn't anything at this time. She has an unerring sense about people.

I have been told that there were only two times that Gerda actually asked people to work for her in the nursery; everyone else has asked her for a job. (The two exceptions were Marilyn Daggett and me.) I found Gerda very easy to work for and with.

Throughout the state, there are few exclusively native plant nurseries. Most native plant nurseries tend to be smaller--Shop in the Sierra in Midpines, Wapumne Native Plant Nursery in Lincoln, Bay View Gardens in Santa Cruz, Las Pilitas Nursery in Santa Margarita, Theodore Payne Foundation in Sun Valley, and Wildwood Nursery in LaVerne--and focus on a particular regional element of the California flora, a specific plant community's flora, or a particular plant group.

Several larger nurseries--Tree of Life Nursery in San Juan Capistrano, Mockingbird Nursery in Riverside, Native Sons Nursery in Arroyo Grande, Cornflower Farms Nursery in Elk Grove, Saratoga Horticultural Foundation in San Martin, Wintergreen Nursery in Watsonville, and Skylark Nursery in Santa Rosa--feature native plants as a significant portion of their stock, or as a side line. All of these nurseries are primarily wholesale or contract growing nurseries, though most are open to retail sales at least one day each week.

Yerba Buena Nursery is unique on several counts: it grows a wider range of California's plant life than any other nursery (primarily due to consumer demand and the local climate and growing conditions); it is almost exclusively a retail nursery; and up until early 1991, it also supplied plants by mail order.

In the recent past there were several other significant native plant nurseries, particularly Louis Edmund's Native Plant Nursery in Danville, Taylor Nursery in Aromas, and Beeline Nursery in San Dimas. These three nurseries, along with Yerba Buena Nursery and Wintergreen Nursery, are the primary private sources of the native plant species and cultivars we grow today. (Of course many of these nurseries tapped into the fine plant resources of our primary native plant botanic gardens: Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden in Claremont, Santa Barbara Botanic Garden in Santa Barbara, the University of California Berkeley Botanic Garden, and the East Bay Regional Parks Botanic Garden in Tilden Park.)

Yerba Buena Nursery has been the inspiration and role model for a number of other small nurseries and has provided a source of mother stock plants for a great many more nurseries around the state. Gerda has always been partial to wild plants as opposed to cultivars, though her tolerance for the latter has grown considerably over the recent years. The Nursery has introduced a small but noteworthy collection of cultivars including (in alphabetical order):

Calystegia purpurata 'Bolinas'--named by Bart O'Brien, cuttings of this plant were collected by Bart O'Brien, Lori Hubbart, and Judith Lowry while visiting Judith's home in the town of Bolinas.

Ceanothus thyrsiflorus 'Percy'--a selection from San Bruno Mountain given to the nursery by customers who had named it after their son. This selection no longer survives at the Nursery, but it is probably in several Bay Area gardens.

Ceanothus thyrsiflorus "YBN Blue"--a particularly good blue-flowered plant of unknown origin. The "original" plant is planted in the Yerba Buena Nursery Demonstration Garden. The name is given in double quotes as no one is 100 percent certain that it is not another named *Ceanothus* cultivar whose identity has been lost at the nursery.

Ceanothus X regius 'Gerda Isenberg'--a plant at the nursery that Dr. Roxanna Ferris suggested be named. Cathy Bordi named it after Gerda.

Chrysopsis villosus 'San Bruno Mountain'--named by Bart O'Brien after the mountain from whence it was originally collected by Ted Kipping. Ted had given the plant to the nursery as "*Chrysopsis villosus* from San Bruno Mountain".

Malacothamnus arcuatus 'Edgewood'--named by Bart O'Brien after Edgewood Park where the cuttings were originally collected by Eleanor Williams.

Mimulus (Diplacus) 'Eleanor'--named by Gerda after Eleanor Williams who had a nice specimen of it by her apartment door at the nursery.

Mimulus (Diplacus) 'Indian Summer'--named by Lori Hubbart and Brenda Butner.

Mimulus (Diplacus) 'YBN Maroon'--a chance seedling named by Gerda that came up in the *Ceanothus rigidus* var. *albus* 'Snowball' at the nursery entrance.

Mimulus flemingii 'Ted's Red' (*Diplacus parviflorus* 'Ted's Red')--named by Lori Hubbart after Ted Kipping, who had given the plant to the nursery.

Solanum umbelliferum 'Bayo Valley'--named by Fannie Arnold on whose ranch cuttings of this plant had originally been collected by Eleanor Williams.

and the following derivatives of Dr. David Verity's hybrid *Mimulus (Diplacus):* 'Brick Red' (named for its color), 'Buff Ruffles' (named by Lori Hubbart), 'Chili Red' (named by Bart O'Brien), 'Grape Jelly' (named for its color), 'It's A Girl!' (named by Annuschka Deb), 'Old Ivory' (named by Bart O'Brien), 'Solid Gold' (named by Lori Hubbart), 'Tangerine' (named for the color, this was a series of plants, which was eventually narrowed down to one plant in 1989), 'V-8' (named for its color), 'Valentine'(named by Marti Aiken), and 'Yellow Triumph' (named by a customer).

Among the ferns the most notable introduction has been Llavea cordifolia, an outstanding beauty with dimorphic fronds. This fern won a California Horticultural Society Certificate of Merit in 1977. Additional California Horticultural Society Certificate of Merit awards that have been won by Yerba Buena Nursery plants include Keckiella cordifolia in 1981, Mimulus (Diplacus) David Verity hybrids in 1982, and Solanum umbelliferum 'Bayo Valley' in 1990.

Gerda has earned quite a number of accolades during her life. Her horticultural achievements have led to several notable awards. She was named a Fellow of the California Native Plant Society in 1980. In 1981, Gerda received an award for her outstanding meritorious contribution to horticulture in California from the California Horticulture Society, and in 1983 she was presented with Western Horticulture Society's Service Award.

These days, Gerda and Yerba Buena Nursery are practically inseparable. The two are so closely intertwined that it is difficult to imagine either Gerda or the nursery anywhere else. For all of her sincere and long-term interest in plants and gardening, I do believe that it is the people with when she has shared herself and the nursery that are Gerda's favorite passion.

I wish Gerda full success in the establishment of the Yerba Buena Nursery Foundation (she does not want her name attached to the foundation as this would be "too much!") as she has envisioned it over the past fifteen years: in its current location, with its fully labeled demonstration garden, selling the most extensive collection of California native plants (and ferns!), staffed with that unique blend of employees and volunteers, and her house filled with interns from around the world learning from that most special ambiance found at her Yerba Buena Nursery.

Bart O'Brien, Head
Horticulture Department
Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden

September 1991
Mt. Baldy, California

Editor's Note: Bart O'Brien was born and raised in Hollister, California. He is a fifth generation Californian, interested in plants as far back as he can remember. He graduated with a B.S. in environmental planning and management from UC Davis in 1979, and graduated from Harvard University Graduate School of Design with a MLA (Master of Landscape Architecture) in 1981. When he came back to California in 1982, he became active in the Santa Clara Valley Chapter of the California Native Plant Society, and he served on the state board of directors for CNPS for six years. Bart O'Brien was manager of Yerba Buena Nursery from April 1988 to March 1990. Currently he is head of the Horticulture Department at Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden.

INTERVIEW HISTORY

Gerda Isenberg is the owner of Yerba Buena Nursery, a retail nursery specializing in trees, shrubs, ferns, perennials, and ground covers native to California--as the nursery's descriptive brochure puts it. But Yerba Buena Nursery is not a slick operation spread along a highway, with seductively bright petunias and marigolds at the entrance. Rather, the nursery is reached by a route that ascends west from Woodside, California through chapparal, south through redwoods and some miles of bay- and ocean-viewing Skyline Boulevard, then turns further west, past grassy hills, fences and vintage buildings, a quarry, around more bends, down through oaks and bay laurel, and into the ranch proper. The only colors that lure the customer, who has already driven through much of what is beautiful about "native" California, are the colors of the season.

What is now the nursery once was part of a 3,000-acre cattle ranch. The varied native plant communities on those acres provided the original concept, as well as the stock, for the enterprise. Back in the late 1950s, Gerda Isenberg decided to go into business; she loaded up the back of her station wagon with ferns she had propagated, sold them, and determined that she was a nurserywoman. Since then she has worked hard and constantly to make her nursery business thrive. Yerba Buena Ranch has become Yerba Buena Nursery, a good many of the original 3,000 acres have been sold, and the nursery's activities go on in ranch structures turned potting sheds, greenhouses and offices. In his introduction, former nursery manager Bart O'Brien describes the evolution of the site. Still evolving is the demonstration garden, maintained for customers wanting to see mature native plants in cultivation, and also, I think, for the sheer visual pleasure of following the muted natural palette as it crosses a meadow and rises up the hillside to a redwood grove.

Native plants, adapted to weather patterns and soil types peculiar to California, and with the ability to thrive on little summer water, were not sought after when the Yerba Buena enterprise began. But now, as Mrs. Isenberg enters her tenth decade, and looks back at over thirty years in the nursery business, there is the satisfaction of seeing that her plants are in great demand. A world of enthusiasm for the value of natives in the landscape vindicates and bemuses her, and the nursery works hard to meet the demand--although Yerba Buena did <u>not</u> bid on a recent very large job to supply the dread poison oak for a revegetation project!

Yerba Buena Nursery has an excellent reputation, recently glossed by a rush of newspaper and magazine publicity. Gerda Isenberg, very much in command of all aspects of the business, as well as up to her elbows daily in the fern shed, has been the subject of several journalistic interviews. The Regional Oral History Office, in the fall of 1990, invited her, as a woman in the nursery business, and an authority on native plants, to be an memoirist, in order to document her achievement, to investigate why and how she conceived of the nursery, and to tell the story of its success.

In our letter to Mrs. Isenberg we outlined a memoir that would include family history, early horticultural studies in Germany, coming to California, her work on humanitarian issues, and the story of Yerba Buena Nursery and what she was accomplishing there. That agenda turned out to be too modest. In one of the most recent articles about Gerda Isenberg the author [Diane Sussman, Palo Alto Weekly, April 4, 1900] pointed out that there is "more to Gerda Isenberg" than a nursery, noting that in the 1940s she was one of the first Palo Alto residents to open her home to Japanese-Americans returning from internment camps, that she was a founder of the Palo Alto Fair Play Council, and that she had provided sympathy, advice, and safe harbor for German, Austrian, and Jewish refugees during World War II. [See Appendices]

The many sides of this woman are chapters of an oral history that moves from Germany to Hawaii to California, from childhood to motherhood, and from local to national and international civil and human rights issues. Along the way Gerda Isenberg started, in 1931, the European Book Shop in San Francisco, and in 1950 she ran for state assembly. The Appendices to the oral history are a sampling of writings by and about the interviewee, and The Bancroft Library of the University of California, Berkeley houses other writings, photographs, and documentary material from the book shop, her correspondence on behalf of Japanese-Americans, and Fair Play Council material.

When Mrs. Isenberg accepted the invitation to be an interviewee I felt it was with the sense that the interviews and articles in the last decade had been too much of the marvelling variety and that she wanted to have a chance to tell her story from start to finish, straight. That was fine, and so the oral history developed chronologically. We sat at a round table in the living room. I asked questions. Mrs. Isenberg answered. Occasionally her hearing loss caused her to misunderstand my question and we were derailed, briefly. At several points she excused herself to search in her library for a reference, or to head upstairs to a trunk where letters and scrapbooks were kept. She wanted to be specific. Gerda Isenberg also wanted to be clear and complete, and when she received the transcript of her oral history from the Regional Oral History Office, with a list of queries, she rewrote several sections in the interest of clarity and accuracy.

To refer again to the article by Diane Sussman, its title is "Tending the World," a graceful reference to the nurturing that Gerda Isenberg practices all day long. To interview her was briefly to sample life in Yerba Buena's community of seven or more workers, interns, volunteers of all ages--"Yerba Buena Nursery People" [See Appendix O.]. Pedigreed by working and learning at the nursery, they have gone on to positions with other nurseries, gardens or horticultural organizations. In his introduction, Bart O'Brien also describes lunchtime at the nursery. When I was there, Gerda made the bread we ate. It was dense and delicious, certainly nurturing, and quite adaptable, announcing its readiness by a faint burning smell breaking in on the interview taking place several rooms away.

We had five oral history sessions of an hour and a half each, starting in late 1990 and ending in January 1991. We first interviewed in September, California's hottest and driest time. The fourth interview coincided with a sample of extraordinary weather, a December temperature drop that came in with freezing winds and snow. It seemed dangerously cold and desolate over the hill that day, but a giant Christmas tree, delivered by the staff and positioned at the end of the great living room, was visibly cheering. The tree was a reminder, too, that this is an extended family home, and that children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren, as well as friends and friends' friends, and refugees, and their children all are welcome.

The nursery's future is not clear. At my first meeting with Mrs. Isenberg she talked about establishing a foundation that would enable the educational program at Yerba Buena Nursery to continue, and that would protect the nursery's work collecting and propagating rare and endangered California native plant species. A week from my writing of this interview history, a 90th birthday for Gerda Isenberg will gather together hundreds of people who appreciate Gerda as herself quite rare, someone who sees and understands much about humanity and who has set into motion an unusual number of good things, nurturing people and plants, and as the interview shows, words. One can only hope that this will all be there in perpetuity.

This interview is fourth in the California Horticulture Oral History Series. The series has benefitted from creative and generous funding from a number of sources. Following the impetus of benefactors David and Evelyne Lennette, a variety of garden groups and individuals in the San Francisco Bay Area and beyond have made possible interviews with Owen Pearce, emeritus editor of Pacific Horticulture; Adele and Lewis Lawyer, plant pathologists and iris breeders; and botanical garden director Wayne Roderick. The Gerda Isenberg oral history was made possible by Mrs. Ralph K. Davies, and by the S. D. Bechtel, Jr. Foundation and Ann Witter Gillette.

The Regional Oral History Office was established to tape record autobiographical interviews with persons who have contributed significantly to recent California history. The office is headed by Willa K. Baum and is under the administrative supervision of the director of The Bancroft Library.

Suzanne B. Riess
Senior Editor

Regional Oral History Office
Berkeley, California
June 6, 1991

Regional Oral History Office Interviews on
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Lester Rowntree, California Native Plant Woman, 1979.

BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

(Please write clearly. Use black ink.)

Your full name Gerda Dorothea Isenberg

Date of birth June 8th 1901 Birthplace Travemort, Germany

Father's full name Carl Johannes Isenberg

Occupation Farmer Birthplace Kauai, Hawaii

Mother's full name Martha Barckhausen

Occupation housewife Birthplace Germany

Your spouse divorced

Your children Dorothea Shick, Gerda Hyde
Anne Marie Ibqua

Where did you grow up? in Germany

Present community Woodside, California

Education Highschool, Garden School for Women.

Occupation(s) Plant Nursery

Areas of expertise California Native Ferns and
Exotic Ferns.

Other interests or activities Social Work

Organizations in which you are active The California Native Plant
Society. The Western Horticultural Society

I FAMILY AND BACKGROUND IN GERMANY

[Interview 1: September 21, 1990]

Isenberg Family, in Germany

Riess: Let's begin at the beginning. Tell me about your mother and father.

Isenberg: My father [Johannes Carl Isenberg, b. 1870] was born on the island of Kauai. My grandfather [Paul Isenberg] emigrated from Germany to Hawaii in the 1850s. There he married into one of the missionary families and had two children, a son and a daughter. But his wife [Maria Rice Isenberg, 1842-1867] died of tuberculosis. So his mother-in-law [Mary Sophia Hyde Rice] said, "You better go back to Germany and find yourself a wife and mother for these children." Which he did. They went around Cape Horn, grandmother too, to Germany.

These missionaries were puritanic people. When they visited my grandfather's parents and my great-grandfather [Daniel Isenberg], who was a Lutheran minister, served wine at dinnertime, old Mrs. Rice was quite surprised, if not shocked.

On that trip my grandfather met a young woman who was staying in the house of a Mr. Hackfeld. (You might put down that name because it plays quite a role in my family.)

Riess: The Rice family, where were they from?

Isenberg: Where did they come from? Massachusetts, I believe. I have a book on that whole family. I can easily look it up. [Koamalu, by Ethel M. Damon, two volumes, privately printed, Hawaii, 1931.]

My grandfather worked in the Lihue sugar mill. He became interested in the agriculture of sugar. He joined a very small

company by the name of Hackfeld. (It wasn't the same Hackfeld he later visited in Bremen, though I'm not quite sure about that.) Anyway, the old [Heinrich] Hackfeld was a sea captain on a merchant boat. He would sell all kinds of goods that they needed on the plantations in Hawaii. He had a store in Honolulu. With the help of my grandfather, who was the biggest shareholder there, it became Hackfeld & Company, which is today American Factors.

The island of Lanai, my Uncle Alexander could have bought it--the whole island, mind you. And he said, "What am I going to do with it? There's no water." He was just thinking of growing sugar cane. Well, then Dole pineapple came and planted pineapple.

My grandfather didn't live very long [1837-1903]. But, when my father was--I'm a little bit ahead of the story--when my father was eight years old, my grandfather took all the children, including the children from his first wife, back to Germany because they were supposed to be educated in Germany.

Riess: The second wife, did he find her in Germany?

Isenberg: Yes, in the city of Bremen, in Mr. Hackfeld's house. She [Beta] was there as a house guest. That's where he met her. She had, all together, six children. My father was the oldest son. There were three sons and three daughters.

After bringing his family to Germany, my grandfather bought a house in Bremen, where I later also lived when I went to school for a while in Bremen. But he died of a broken appendix, if you please.

In the meantime, his family had grown up in Germany. Most of them, I think, were married. He had accumulated an enormous fortune, so every child got an estate, one more beautiful than the other. My father got [in 1885] the estate [Travenort] where I think my grandfather wanted to retire. That is still in our family.

Riess: Your grandfather had come back to Germany and was buying land with his fortunes from Hawaii?

Isenberg: Yes, but he still had his business.

Goodness, the first trips back to Germany he made were across the Isthmus of Panama and then finally by railroad. But when he took the children back they had to go around the Horn.

[laughing] I don't know how he went back and forth to Hawaii, having the family in Germany.

Riess: Is Bremen near Hamburg?

Isenberg: Yes, not too far. But he came from another town--I can't think of it right now--where his father was a minister. It was in the province of Hanover [Dransfeld]. But when he took the family back to Germany they lived in Bremen.

After my grandfather's death came the question, "Who's going to go out to Hawaii and take the grandfather's place?" Well, my father was already settled pretty well in this farm we have. It's called Travenort. (And if you're wondering why I'm called Isenberg, I never changed my last name because I married a cousin.)

Riess: Travenort, does that mean anything?

Isenberg: Yes, the Trave is a very small river where it flows through our park, and Ort means place. At Lübeck the Trave is large enough to carry boats into the Baltic Sea. It you've read anything by Thomas Mann, that's where Thomas Mann came from.

Riess: Trying to picture your life, I thought about Buddenbrooks. I wondered if it would have been like a description of your upbringing, the Buddenbrooks family.

Isenberg: Of course, I read Buddenbrooks a long time ago. First of all, I never lived in a town. The Buddenbrooks were--. You know, there is a Buddenbrooks bookshop in Lübeck. I believe it is in the old Mann house.

Isenberg Family, in Hawaii

Isenberg: Not everybody had gotten their own farm. The three sisters did, and two sons. But there was Alexander Isenberg, who was persuaded to go back to Kauai and learn something about the business, which he did, but he died of pneumonia when he was in his early thirties.

There were a group of Germans there in Hawaii, and as strange as it may seem, the hatred of the Germans then [World War I] was much more obvious than with the Second World War. In fact, I had one of the professors' wives from Stanford come to me and say, "I have to talk to you about something. You know,

my husband and I, we fell for a lot of lies during World War I. I mean, that the Germans were cutting off the hands of Belgium children--" It went a little bit overboard. And she said, "We don't want to make the same mistake again." Because the stories were coming out about the Jewish persecution. I said, "Mrs. Webster, I'm afraid this time you have to believe it."

In the First World War there was the competition in Honolulu. They went to Washington and said, "What are you going to do?"--when the United States went into the war, they weren't in at the beginning--"what are you going to do about an all-German firm in Honolulu?" And so they confiscated it. The money was put in the Alien [Property] Custodian. After the war the money was paid back, but the business was gone.

The two children from my grandfather's first marriage stayed in Hawaii. I think they got some schooling in Germany, but they went back. Especially my aunt played quite a role, Aunt Dora Rice Isenberg. She did an awful lot on the island of Kauai. The first war must have been very, very difficult for her.

Riess: Because of this anti-German feeling?

Isenberg: Yes. She, after all, was Paul Isenberg's daughter. She weathered that. And then there was the widow of Alexander, the son who was supposed to take the place of my grandfather. His wife [Virginia Duisenberg Isenberg] stayed in Hawaii, at least whenever she wasn't traveling around the world, or something like that, but after World War I she came with her oldest son [Ruolf Isenberg] to visit her German relatives. (She came from a San Francisco family, also German.)

They invited me to spend a summer on the island of Kauai. Now I don't know why my parents didn't give me at least some of the background and story of the Isenbergs on Kauai. I'm not so sure that I even knew that my father was born there, in Lihue. When I got there, and everybody was "Auntie This" and "Uncle That," I said, "My God, who are all these people?" [laughing] Well, anyway, I had quite a time.

Riess: How did you get there? What was the route for you?

Isenberg: We came by boat to New York, where I had another aunt with whom I stayed for a short time. Coming from an impoverished Germany, New York was quite overwhelming. The New York aunt took me to Altman's for the proper dresses, especially an evening wrap for going to the opera. The final touch was the beauty shop at one of the big hotels. I wore my hair straight back, but I came out

of the beauty shop with curls all over my head. I could hardly recognize myself, and I suggested to my cousin to send me back home. This was not accepted!

Then we traveled across the continent by train. I've been across this continent by train I don't know how many times. Then, from San Francisco they had these two boats from the Matson Line, the Maui and the Matsonia. They went like ferry boats. They always met in the middle of the voyage. And they were such fun. You know, you get places sooner now, but these boats, that was really something. We had games on deck, costume parties, and above all, watching the ocean with the flying fish and dolphins.

Then from Honolulu you got into an overnight boat to the island of Kauai. That always seems to be rough and hot and sticky. There was no pier. The boat anchored out in the harbor and then they brought a rowboat. You had to jump into the rowboat and go ashore.

There was my aunt. She was just wonderful. You see, I had been to a garden school for women, and I'm sure I thought I knew it all. I got there and I didn't know one single plant that I looked at. My aunt was a big help. She had a very wonderful garden with all of the tropical plants. We went fishing on a sailboat.

Riess: How long did you visit?

Isenberg: I stayed there three months.

Riess: And this cousin, who you married?

Isenberg: He was there.

Riess: Was this always the plan, do you think? To have the two of you meet and possibly marry?

Isenberg: Was it a plan? No, not really.

My parents actually--at first they wouldn't let me go because my aunt was a very eccentric woman--.

When Alexander died, he left a big fortune. When my husband became of age, she had already gone through her whole inheritance. She had a big, big house in Honolulu. One of her brothers, who was a stockbroker, said to her, "You're never here. Why don't we make a nice family hotel out of it?" She agreed to that. But on one trip on the boat I met a woman who

said, "You know, I was a guest in that hotel when a telegram came from Mrs. Isenberg that everybody had to leave. She was going to want the house back." That's the way she was, and my mother knew how she was.

But yes, it is possible, now that you ask me the question, that my father liked the idea of someone in his family living on Kauai again. This was still close to the First World War, and the money from the Alien Custodian hadn't been paid out, and we really couldn't travel anywhere. Germany was just down, down, down. When that invitation came I said to my mother, "This is my chance to see something of the world. You just have to let me go."

Riess: What year was that?

Isenberg: That was 1922 and I was twenty-one.

Travenort, Parents

Riess: Let's back up a little bit. Tell me about your mother.

Isenberg: My mother [Martha Barckhausen Isenberg] was also brought up on a farm, and my father was there as an apprentice. If you want to go into farming you don't only get some education from a university, but you have to go and get your practical experience, possibly on a farm that has the reputation that they can teach people. A well-run farm. Well, that's what my father did, and there was my mother. She played the piano and he played the violin. So they played together. And they married.

She comes from a old, long name. (I always have to spell it if I want to do something at the bank. "What's your mother's maiden name." I say, "Well, I'm afraid I have to spell it to you. It's Barckhausen.") That family did farming in the province of Hanover. Actually, they were what they called domain farmers, but I don't know if that is of any interest. That was an old arrangement. I think it probably started with Charlemagne. The government owns the farm, with the idea that there should be farms that are examples of efficiency. They called them domain, and they still have that. And these Barckhausens did that.

Riess: This is a different notion of farming, that a young man who wants to farm does an apprenticeship.

Isenberg: It doesn't make any difference how much money you have, or family, or anything, that's what you do. At Travenort we always had--we called them eleven. Apprentices.

Riess: Your family didn't want to leave the land. They didn't want to become lawyers and bankers? They wanted to stay with their land?

Isenberg: No, I don't think that we have a lawyer in the family or a banker. Of course, my great-grandfather on the Isenberg side, he was a Lutheran minister. There are several ministers in the family.

Riess: Farming was a successful, predictable business in Germany. I wonder why it was so successful there and so unpredictable here?

Isenberg: I don't believe that farming is ever predictable. The farmer is dependant on the weather. Nothing proves this more than the present drought and freeze in California. Also, the farmer is no longer self-sufficient. In Germany farming is not what it was at the beginning of the 1900s when we produced practically all the food we needed.

We had, of course, diversified farming. We didn't only have cows, we had pigs, we had grain, we had beets, we had pasture and, of course, when I was a child, everything was done with horses. There was a whole barn full of horses and a hundred milk cows. The system at that time was to provide for all the people on the farm. Well, that doesn't work any more.

The Common Market suggested giving up the dairy business. They were talking about the surplus of butter, hundreds and hundreds of pounds of butter. So we did, on our place, and most of the farmers did that. Then, of course, we got tractors and out went the horses, except for riding horses and so forth. So the picture is very much changed. I mean, my father had between twenty and thirty families living on the place.

Riess: And what was your mother's role?

Isenberg: My mother was quite the organizer. She had a lot of servants. I've never seen my mother cook anything or do any housework, but she was a very good organizer. She gave wonderful dinner parties. They had quite a social life with the rest of the neighborhood, and also in Hamburg. (Talking about Lübeck, that's only about a half of an hour by car, and Hamburg is an hour or a little more. We are not too far from the Baltic.)

Riess: What was your parent's attitudes towards their servants? Were you taught a noblesse oblige? Were you instructed to be kindly to your servants?

Isenberg: I don't think that needed any instruction. My mother certainly cared for all who worked on the place. She always visited the sick people, the newly-born children, and provided extra food in these cases. Often I was sent to deliver extra clothing or food.

The whole outfit was sort of patriarchal. My parents were not unkind to the servants, but certainly there was an accepted stratum. I don't look at television, but the children told me about this program, "Upstairs, Downstairs." I said, "Look, I don't have to see that. I know all about it." My parents were addressed in the third person, for instance. "Has the gracious lady [Die Gnädige Frau] called me?" "Does the captain [Herr Rittmeister] wish something?"

Riess: Were you aware of modern literature and psychology? Thomas Mann, and Freud?

Isenberg: I did read the contemporary writers. I was very much interested in literature. I remember when I went to the school in Bremen and they started on German classics. Well, I had already read them. I did a lot of reading myself.

As for Freud, I have not gotten into psychology at all. I know about it, and I am skeptical of psychiatrists. (Much later in life I took care of a very emotionally disturbed child who needed help from a psychologist, and that almost spoiled any faith I might have had in them before.)

Riess: And there was the music of Mahler and Strauss.

Isenberg: My parents almost every night played together. And finally--I think I was already gone--my father had professional musicians come to the place and play quartets with him.

Riess: Wonderful.

Isenberg: I was taken to the Bach festival, much too early.

Riess: You mean, it spoiled Bach for you?

Isenberg: No, I don't think it spoiled Bach. But I could not absorb that much. It was too much music at one time.

Also, my father was a collector of pictures. We were taken through museums at a very early age. There was plenty of exposure to so-called culture.

Gerda's Education, Garden School

Isenberg: So, the plan for me. First of all, there was a school on my father's place for the working people's children. Well, that wasn't good enough for us--I had two brothers--so they got a tutor or a governess. Later my brothers went to school in the city of Lübeck.

Riess: Were the tutors and governesses German?

Isenberg: They were German, yes. My mother, theoretically she had very good ideas, but it didn't all work out that way. The tutors and governesses were fired frequently, and I had to go to the village minister to get some instructions. I'll never forget, that man was so orthodox and he tried to influence me there.

Riess: To get religious instruction?

Isenberg: Yes, well, I think I've always been religious, but I didn't really believe some of these stories he told me then.

Anyway, my parents finally decided it probably would be good for me if I could go to school with other children. I was farmed out to my grandmother in Bremen. I was taken to Bremen and I had a ball being with the children. My grandmother thought I was a nice little girl, no problem at all. But pretty soon she would get a notice from the school that I wasn't really doing very much. I had too good a time. That only lasted--I can't really remember--maybe three months. It was, really, according to my parents idea, not that I learn something, but that it was enough to have the experience. I made friends.

Riess: You were socialized.

Isenberg: Yes. I mean, I wasn't always sitting there alone. So back I went to Travenort.

I tell the people who work for me in the nursery, who all have gone to college and so forth, "I have never in my life passed an examination." Because if there were such things to go from one class to the next, if there had been an examination, I probably never was there at that time. I never finished the

last class because my parents thought, "This is enough, now, of school," and I went back to private lessons of French, history of art, and piano.

If the economic conditions had not been so bad in Germany I would have been sent to Switzerland, French-speaking Switzerland, because one of the ideas people had, of my parents generation, was a young lady has to speak French. And she has to speak English, and maybe play the piano. I had piano lessons, too. There was absolutely no idea of, "What is she going to do if she ever has to make money? If she ever has to make a living?"

Then I heard about the garden school for women outside of Hamburg [Gross Hansdorf], where a girl went whose father and mother were friends of my parents. She told me about it, and I said, "That is where I want to go." It was a private school on a sort of a country place for a Hamburg doctor where they went in the summertime. He died and she, the wife, turned it into a garden school. It was her idea. It was just a very small school.

My mother took me there for an interview. It was a very nice teacher. She thought I was too young.

Riess: This was during World War I?

Isenberg: Yes. I was sixteen.

Riess: She thought you were too young?

Isenberg: Yes. She would take me, but I would have to put up my hair. Can you imagine that? I had a braid, but it made me look too young. [laughing]

I have to explain that picture in the newspaper article showing me when I was plowing with a pair of cows.[1] See, this country place turned into a school, well, also the idea there was that you would learn to take care of domestic animals. So, they had a field. I don't know what we were going to use the field for, but it had to be plowed. They decided, "Why don't we do it with the cows?" and I asked to have a try at it.

I tell you, I was shocked when I saw that picture in the newspaper. Did you see this? [looking at picture] My daughter

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[1] Palo Alto Weekly, April 4, 1990.

just loves this picture and she gave it to the photographer. Carolyn Clebsch was her name.

Riess: It looks like your hair is wrapped up in a scarf.

Isenberg: Well, we usually wore bandannas and long aprons. Of course, there was no idea of pants.

Riess: Because this was after the war, and the country was still recovering, you perhaps would have actually had to learn some useful trade?

Isenberg: They just sent me there because that is what I wanted to do. What else could they do with me? I stayed home for a while, and I couldn't stand it. My mother, for instance, said, "You can take off the breakfast dishes." I started crying. I said, "I'm not going to take off the breakfast dishes while the butler stands in the pantry and waits for me." It was just making something to do.

I was very happy there [at Gross Hansdorf]. We just had a ball, with all the bad food we ate and, you know, I mean there was no coffee, no sugar. You just can't imagine what we had. We had a hot drink for breakfast that was made out of rutabagas. I can still meet people from that time and they will not touch a rutabaga. You know, it's a turnip.

Everybody had a loaf of bread and you carved your initials into it. I can still see myself sitting there with everybody looking at me. And after you used the bread, you threw it into a chest. That had to last at least a week. We made butter on Saturday, and on Saturday evening we got one butterball. It became a big problem: how are you going to use it, spread it on several pieces of bread or are you going to eat it all on one slice? On Sundays we had a piece of meat.

Riess: And why was this pleasurable?

Isenberg: We sang and we played the guitar. We were young. We went out on walks. We went to the pond to go swimming. No television or anything like that. We really had a good time.

Riess: And did it feel like it was purposeful?

Isenberg: Yes. We were addressed by "Sie." You know, in the German language you have the difference between Sie and Du. You call your relatives Du, and your best friends, up to a certain age. Well, we were addressed by our teacher by Sie. I felt, "You're

being treated as a grown-up." I felt I was getting a profession. That was rather important.

Another interesting thing, the teacher we had had been the head gardener of a big estate outside of Saint Petersburg in Russia. When the war came, she managed to get out, or they sent her out. And she spoke Russian. There was a lot of heavy work, and the poor woman, she had to work with these girls who didn't know anything, really. So we got one of the Russian prisoners of war there. He was the nicest real Russian peasant. (I still wonder if he ever found his way home.)

We couldn't really talk to him, but he'd picked up a few words. He would, if we left the tools lying around or something like that, he would say, "Madame, Fünf und Zwanzig." That means, twenty-five--.

Riess: Twenty-five lashes.

Isenberg: Lashes. [laughter] "Madame, Fünf und Zwanzig."

I made several friends at that school, and they're both dead now. The last one just died in Hamburg. Both of them have been here to visit me.

Riess: You learned basic gardening techniques at the gardening school?

Isenberg: We didn't have any hormones, we didn't have any artificial fertilizer. I mean, today you have to study biology or botany or chemistry to know all of these things. That didn't exist. We didn't have any hoses; there was no rubber in Germany. We had big watering cans. Of course, we didn't have to water as much as you have to in this climate. But we carried the water.

Riess: You had compost piles?

Isenberg: We had compost piles. We used the manure for hotbeds. We made our own hotbeds.

Really, we learned how to work. The teacher was forever after us. If, for instance, you went over there to get a watering can or a hoe or something, when you come back you say, "I should have taken something else." That was bad, that you wasted time. You know? That's a good thing to learn.

I still have to teach people what to do with a spade. Nobody knows. You see, now you use the rototiller.

Riess: What is a hotbed?

Isenberg: A hotbed is a wooden frame. You put in straw and manure and a layer of soil, and you cover it up with a glass frame. The straw and the manure create heat, and on top of that you have a layer of soil. It creates so much heat, it starts to germinate the seeds before you can sow them outside in the soil.

Riess: You do that in early spring to start the plants?

Isenberg: Yes, we did that during the very early spring. You get a start with your vegetables, for instance.

Riess: Did you do everything from seed?

Isenberg: Yes.

Riess: Did you learn to do rootings, cuttings, or propagation?

Isenberg: Not too much with cuttings because we didn't have any greenhouse.

Riess: The hotbed wouldn't work like a greenhouse?

Isenberg: Well, it could. I don't remember doing that at all. It was mostly for seeds. Anyway, I think the main thing I learned there was to use tools and to work.

Riess: Was the country beautiful around there. What is your memory of that?

Isenberg: Beautiful. The climate is, compared to what we have here, pretty bad. It can rain all summer. The winters are not just ice and snow, but kind of slushy. It snows, and then it melts again. Yes, the country is very beautiful, especially the woods of beech trees. In the spring the words are full of primroses and anemones.

Riess: When you said that your father was in the reserves in World War I, does that mean that he had to leave home?

Isenberg: Yes. He was an officer of the reserves in World War I. He was in Russia.

Riess: But did he actually see any action?

Isenberg: Yes. I think so, yes.

Riess: During that period, did your family struggle?

Isenberg: My mother had a manager, but most of the young workers were drafted into the army.

Riess: You didn't have to go without food at home?

Isenberg: No. Of course, we were rationed. We couldn't just indulge in sugar, meat or butter. It was all rationed. My mother, for instance, would send me a sausage, because she knew that the food at the garden school was very limited. We went into the woods, maybe two or three of us, and ate the sausage. I couldn't share it with everybody. There wasn't quite enough for that.

At the school, the vegetables we had--I don't know why that was--we always had dried vegetables. They were cooked. Every Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, every day was really the same. I remember that while we worked outside we'd ask somebody to go and take a look at the kitchen. It was always the same. One meal was sauerkraut and mashed potatoes. And if you didn't like sauerkraut, you wouldn't get any mashed potatoes either. In spite of that, we had a good time.

Riess: It was a real introduction to a very different life for you.

Isenberg: Yes. I remember the whole group was invited to my parents' place. When we came back they said, "How can you stand being here? Why don't you stay at home?"

When I came home from the garden school--I came home for a weekend or so--I asked myself, "What am I doing at this garden school? There is everything here." We had greenhouses, we had hotbeds. We had a special flower garden. The park was beautiful. My father was very interested in trees. He belonged to the dendrological society and all that. And I liked our head gardener.

I said to my parents, "I would like to work with the head gardener." I got permission to work half a day. (In the afternoon, I was supposed to be presentable in case somebody came for tea.) Of course, the gardener had never heard of such a thing. He thought I just had a notion, you know. Finally, he got used to me and if I didn't show up one morning, he was almost hurt. We had a very good relationship.

I learned a lot from him. I had asked him to tell me if I made a mistake. And he said, "Miss Gerda, I'll tell you right now, slow down. Don't run all the time." That was an acquired habit from the garden school, where the teacher always said, "Don't--." The German word is trödeln. It means to dillydally.

"Don't dillydally." But our gardener told me, "The first thing you do is you slow down."

Riess: Slow down and smell the flowers.

Isenberg: After working with the gardener in Travenort, I went to another garden school, in Plön, Holstein. It was more or less the same idea, but they had a few more facilities. They had a greenhouse.

Then after that, of course, I thought I knew it all. We had an aunt who also lived in the neighborhood of my parents, but she, because she married an American, lived most of the time in New York. (She is the aunt I stayed with en route to Kauai.) And the garden of her house was sort of going to pot. I applied for a job, and my aunt gave me and my friend the job, and we really got the place straightened out pretty well.

After the second garden school, and working for my aunt, then came the invitation to go to Kauai.

Riess: Did you learn anything in those gardening schools about plant families, botany?

Isenberg: In the first garden school, after lunch we usually had a lesson. But I must admit that I was too tired to pay much attention.

Sometimes people will tell me, "Oh, so-and-so learned so much at your nursery." I say, "I've given them the chance to make their own mistakes, to experiment."

Riess: Has there ever been a time in your life when you took the time to study something like Jepson's Manual, and started to memorize information?[2]

Isenberg: Oh, yes. I have lots of books. We have quite a nice little library. Oh yes, I try to read, until I come to the point that I have to read a novel for a change.

Talking about Jepson, I am on the committee to set up the new Manual. I was asked to comment on California native plants and their horticultural value, as far as I have experience with them.

Riess: Did you learn anything in school about agricultural economics?

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[2]Willis Linn Jepson, Manual of the Flowering Plants of California, University of California Press, 1951.

Isenberg: Well, I think I learned a lot from my environment in Travenort.

I became very interested here in California in farming with migrant labor. Of course, in California it is really industrial farming. It is not any more the farmer who gets his daily food from his own place. That's quite a difference.

Riess: Your family supported all those other families that worked on the farm?

Isenberg: Yes. They all had their own gardens. Quite a bit of grain and such things were part of the pay. It wasn't all just money.

Riess: Did you have wonderful potatoes? [laughing]

Isenberg: Yes. Everybody had a little plot out in the field for their potatoes. They all had goats, most of them. They all had their own pigs. Well, it has all changed now. Very different.

Looking Back at Home Life

Riess: I have a question I always like to ask in an interview, and that is, can you remember when, as a child or young person, you felt like you were truly a separate person?.

Isenberg: [pauses] Very early.

My mother, contrary to some members of our family who had English nurses for the children, the idea being so they would grow up bilingual--they were not nurses, they were governesses--my mother didn't want the governess, she wanted to be the one. So, she engaged a girl just out of school, which means the girl was fourteen years old. Elementary schools stopped right there.

This girl was already there when I was born. And she--it's hard to describe, she tyrannized me so. All through my childhood. I could not talk to my mother about it, because I was afraid she would not be fired, and the situation would get worse.

For instance, one incident, we had a big carriage, and we went out for drives, sometimes to the Baltic Sea. My parents were having some guests, and I was out with this "nurse," if you want to call her that, and my younger brother, four years younger. My mother said, "You can come along." I knew this

woman didn't want me to go, so I said, "No." I was dying to go, but I didn't dare to go.

This sort of thing went on for years. That's why going to grammar school in Bremen was such a relief. I was never homesick for a day.

Riess: You really had to calculate your responses.

Isenberg: I also remember, when the girl had her day off, my mother would put us to bed and spend some time with us. I can remember as if it were today. I said to myself, "Now I'm going to tell her." My mother said, "You look tired. Do you want to go to bed?" I didn't have the courage to speak after all.

I remember counting the years until I might be free. Twelve seemed an age when this could possibly be. Finally, that woman became our housekeeper, she was the head in the kitchen, and she tyranized the rest of the household help while I outgrew her influence.

I have a whole bunch of letters from my mother from after the last war, when I sent her everything I could possible send. My mother had over forty people in the house, refugees from the east, from when the Russian army came in. That isn't all, they were in the stables, they were in the barns. They were everywhere, these people. Again and again, my mother tells me she couldn't do it without Charlotte. My mother depended on her, and that woman was just like a slave to my mother.

So, the childhood was anything but easy, although I had everything. We had a pony carriage. And every time we went out in the pony carriage we went to this girl's [the helper's] house in the next little village, and she visited with her mother. Nothing for us to do.

Riess: Could you talk to your father, if you were bothered.

Isenberg: No, no, no, no.

Riess: No. Is that cultural, or particular to him?

Isenberg: I know they loved me and all of that. If you want to know if I felt like a separate human being, I can say that I lived in a world of my own that absolutely nobody else knew about. But certainly by the time I was in my teens I had a wonderful time. I went riding, and there was a large pond in the park where we swam.

Riess: Was the trip to Hawaii the first time that you had traveled? Did you travel in Europe at all?

Isenberg: Just in different parts of Germany, and I think Vienna once with my aunt. I went skiing in the Hartz Mountains. I had a great time in Munich, Bavaria. I visited relatives on farms in different parts of Germany. I went with my parents to Copenhagen, I remember, but I was pretty young then.

My parents were very nice people, but they just didn't know what was going on with their children. I have one brother who is still alive, the younger one. He lives in Hamburg.

Riess: What does he remember of that woman, Charlotte?

Isenberg: This particular person who gave me such a hard time just spoiled the heck out of him.

Riess: How about your older brother?

Isenberg: He was four years older, and I don't remember ever doing anything with him, very little. At that age that is quite a difference.

Riess: What did your brothers go on to do?

Isenberg: My older brother followed my father on the farm. His daughter is now the owner. She and her husband run the farm now. Now they're going to retire, and now comes number four, not counting my grandfather. Yes, this is the fourth, and my grandfather bought the place.

There are lots of grandchildren there. I could go back today and probably sleep in the same bed I was born in. But I'm not going back anymore. I've gone back so many times. Now it's enough. Things have changed a lot. Practically all of my friends are dead now. I'm too involved here now.

Riess: What did your younger brother do?

Isenberg: He used to be in the coffee business in Hamburg. He's retired. He lived here for a while; he came to California after the last war, but he went back. His son is in business in Hamburg. He has grandchildren there. He was in the army, but he was married to a part-Jewish woman. So he could never advance in the army. He could just be a clerk.

Riess: But he could protect her during the war?

Isenberg: Yes.

Riess: Goodness. There are so many stories.

Isenberg: [pauses] I don't know if my brother will ever read this history. He doesn't know about it?

Riess: Why does that concern you?

Isenberg: Well, because everybody believes that this woman was such a help to my mother. She was what you call a factotum. That's what we called it, you know. [laughs]

I remember my mother had a basket with all the keys in it. You know, the linen closet was closed, and many other doors were locked, and so a whole basket of keys. And she would put it somewhere and forget where she put it. It was always, "Charlotte, where is my basket?" And I suppose Charlotte knew, every time.

That house, to show you the difference, how it has changed, the kitchen was in the basement, a huge kitchen with a big wood stove. And in the kitchen the upstairs maids and the downstairs maids and the kitchen maids, they had a table there where they had their meals. There was a little storeroom that had all the sugar and the flour and all that, and it had a nice little table. That's where the cook ate. They also had apprentices there. The daughters from the small farmers would come and learn how to cook there. So the cook apprentices ate there with the nurse and the housekeeper.

Then, coming in before the kitchen, was a room with a fairly big table where the single men, like stable boys and the apprentices in the garden, if they didn't have a family or a house, where they ate. That's one, two, three. Three, right? The chauffeur and the butler had a little extra room. You can't believe it. Nobody questioned that, that it was kind of funny. But they were all separate. The chauffeur and the butler would not eat with these people who were stable boys and young workers.

Then there was a dumb waiter. The food was put in a dumb waiter and the butler was upstairs there and took it out. And then there was a pantry. Well, now the pantry is a modern kitchen, and the whole downstairs is just empty. That's the way it was. But talking about "upstairs and downstairs," everybody accepted that. It was not just the difference between the owners and the servants, but there was this strata, or whatever you call it, between them. That's the way the society was.

Riess: It was unthinkable for you to run around down in the kitchen?

Isenberg: No, I did. I had to go all the time, because if I didn't show up then this girl, this nurse, would be not talking to me or punish me some other way.

My parents, as I say, weren't unkind to their servants or anything. But I didn't like the system. We were allowed to play with the workman's children. They came into the park, and we had some kind of a baseball game going on, all kinds of games, and that was fun.

When I was in my teens there weren't really any girls, except one, and her father was leasing a farm. (There was also a social difference between the people who only lease and the people who own a farm.) They had three daughters, and they went to school in Lübeck and got a good education. One was my age, so I was allowed to play with her. She would be invited and spend the afternoon with me.

When my wedding came, we went over the list of the guests, and I said I wanted to invite this girl. My mother said, "Well, we can't do that." As friendly as they were with those parents of hers, there was no socializing. My parents didn't go there for dinner, and neither did they come to our house for dinner, maybe for afternoon coffee.

I said, "She's my friend and I want her to come." I think for her it was quite difficult. She was engaged at the time, and she came with her fiance. It was probably quite a strain. It was a strain on me, too, because I was afraid that she might not have a good time, but I felt I just couldn't let that go by. My mother gave in. She didn't make a fuss about it, but her first reaction was that there was such a social structure that you had a hard time to break through it.

The Visit to Hawaii

Riess: We started to talk about Hawaii. Was the lushness and the fragrance and the beauty of the plants exciting for you?

Isenberg: The whole environment, the people and everything, was so different from what I had seen before. No, it wasn't just the plants. The few Hawaiians or part-Hawaiians--of course there hardly are any pureblood Hawaiian, even then.

Riess: Did you meet any Hawaiians?

Isenberg: Oh, yes. We used to go out on Hana Hano's boat. He was quite a character.

Riess: Who was he?

Isenberg: I don't know if he was just a fisherman, or if he did any other kind of work. He had a boat. He took us on an excursion with the boat.

My husband said, "We are going to spend the night on a bird island." Well, the bird island was so full of birds and so full of guano, and smelled, that we couldn't possibly stay, so we landed on Niihau. We stayed below the water line, because we knew that the owners don't want anybody on Niihau. The Robinson family owns that. They are famous for keeping people out--although my husband knew the whole family. He said, "Nobody will notice us. We get up, we leave in the morning, and nobody will see us."

Well, at dawn here comes a boat, the Robinsons' supply boat. We were really in for it. Some other friends, when we got back said, "I'm so glad we didn't go with you because we couldn't <u>live</u> on Kauai having done that." Landing on Niihau!

Riess: Really?

Isenberg: Yes. Very peculiar.

Riess: Did you go out on an outrigger?

Isenberg: Yes, and I even went surfing. And I learned how to dance the hula. I took hula lessons. I did everything that you can do that was Hawaiian.

Riess: Your husband sounds like he was adventurous.

Isenberg: He was very interested in collecting these fabulous fish. We did a lot of that. These colored fish, you know. He had a big aquarium.

Riess: He collected them by swimming for them with a mask?

Isenberg: Yes, with a mask. And we went in a glass-bottomed boat. Have you ever done that?

Riess: Yes.

Isenberg: Isn't that something, it's a different world. I found it all very interesting, but I didn't particularly want to live in Hawaii. I mean, it seemed to me so isolated, especially Kauai.

At a later time, when I was in Kauai with the children, I hiked along the Napali Coast. Now, unless you want to do it in two days, you hike along the coast, and then you are picked up by the boat, or the boat takes you there and you walk back. Well, I did that one day, and towards evening when I went to the grocery store: "Did you have a nice hike?" I mean, everybody knew what everybody was doing.

My aunt had a beach house at Hanalei. She let us have that for a while on the trip with the children. We had a little sailboat. I was supposed to sail it, and I tipped the whole thing over on the way, so we had to swim the boat in. It wasn't dangerous. I said, "Now, don't let's tell Aunt Dora about this. She thinks we're just a nuisance around here." Well, before we knew it, all of Lihue knew that we had tipped over. [laughing] And I thought, "Oh no, I don't want this."

Riess: On your first trip did Aunt Dora act as a chaperone?

Isenberg: That didn't seem to be a problem. A sexual relationship then was out of the question for unmarried young people--as much as it is taken for granted today. And you see, I was actually with his mother. But then, she was in Honolulu and we went over to Aunt Dora.

Riess: What was his mother's name?

Isenberg: She was Virginia Duisenberg. Strange as it may seem, just like Isenberg except d-u. Let me just one minute look at this book [Koamalu]. She was married to [Heinrich] Alexander Isenberg, my father's younger brother.

Marriage, and Farming in Carmel, 1923

Riess: When did you and your husband decide to marry?

Isenberg: He wanted to marry while I was here [America]. I said, "I don't think so." I didn't want to really leave Germany. First, you

are loaded with such prejudices, or at least the things I had heard. "Americans don't have any culture. All they're interested in is money."

Riess: And besides which, you had just finished a war with America.

Isenberg: So many prejudices. I think there are about almost every country. "The Germans all drink beer and are obnoxious and are fat"--these kinds of stereotypes. Well, I pretty soon found out for myself what the people are.

Also this thing that I had worked with our gardener, and really worked, was very unusual. After the war was over there was sort of a revolution in Germany when they threw out the Kaiser. When I got married, and my father made the speech to his daughter, he said that he was grateful for my attitude at the time, and it was very helpful.

Riess: It had been instructive for your father.

Isenberg: It was good, my relationship to the working people there. I don't know exactly how he said it, but he mentioned it anyway.

Riess: Was your father a political person?

Isenberg: My parents were very conservative. What party did they belong to? They certainly didn't belong to the Social Democratic Party, or the Nazi Party. In one of the letters from my mother she said, "Your father said that Germany would pay for this, what they did to the Jews."

My father was so interested in music. I remember when they were visiting here, and we heard Yehudi Menuhin, when he was still a young boy.

Riess: What did you and--your husband's name was Ruolf?

Isenberg: It was really Rudolph, but he changed it. It was the German spelling. He finally called himself Ruolf.

Riess: He came from Hawaii to Germany to marry you?

Isenberg: When I was back there he came. He stayed with an uncle, and he stayed there until I said I would go home with him.

Then my parents stepped in. They said, "It's very fine that he has money, but you can not marry him"--and this was another one of their beliefs--"you can not marry a man who doesn't have a job, who doesn't do something." And he was more

or less playing around. In many ways they were right. So he was sent back.

He went all over California and bought himself a place in the Carmel Valley, a little farm--before the Carmel Valley had any residences. After we moved there my parents made the mistake of coming to visit us there; they came to see us, and then they went to Hawaii. The place in Carmel was almost as badlooking as this place [Woodside] was when we bought it. [laughs] My cousins in Germany said, "Your mother wouldn't talk about where you live. She was so upset." Well, I didn't mind it. I found it very interesting.

Riess: Where was that land in Carmel?

Isenberg: It was about eight miles into the valley, just out of the fog. It had been bought by the La Playa Hotel, with the idea of having a place in the valley for their guests go to amuse themselves out of the fog. They had this little farmhouse and they built a big platform with a roof over it for dancing. These plans didn't work out very well, so they sold it to my husband. He enclosed the dance hall. That's where we first got this idea of having a big living room.

Riess: That became your house?

Isenberg: That became our house.

Riess: You were in Carmel in 1923?

Isenberg: In 1923 I came to live in this country. We were married in 1923.

Then he started farming, with the help of the Japanese. They knew exactly what to do about growing strawberries. And he sold them to the Del Monte Hotel.

Riess: Had he been working with Japanese in Hawaii?

Isenberg: Yes. He was very familiar with them. I think he had Japanese servants all along.

Riess: There were already a number of Japanese in the Carmel Valley in the 1920s?

Isenberg: No. We had one farm on one side, an Italian family. On the other side was a Portuguese family.

Riess: And so were the Japanese day-laborers? Or did they live with you?

Isenberg: They stayed there. They didn't come in. We had enough room because the La Playa Hotel--. The farmhouse was on a fairly steep hillside, and they used the hillside and built a lot of little small rooms.

Riess: Did those Japanese come from Hawaii to be with you?

Isenberg: No.

Riess: Where did they come from?

Isenberg: Where did they come from? Monterey maybe?

Riess: But they were first generation?

Isenberg: They were first generation Japanese, definitely. They must have come from Monterey.

Riess: Did you, when you first met the Japanese, did you find a way of communicating and being involved in their lives?

Isenberg: Well, my Aunt Dora on Kauai had nothing but Japanese. My mother-in-law had a Japanese maid; she appeared in Germany with this Japanese maid in a kimono. Imagine the sensation in Travenort! In a separate building we had a laundry where women did all their washing by hand. The gardener said to me, "I looked through the window, and she can wash!" He saw that Japanese girl wash.

My husband was very much used to them, liked them. And later on we went to Hawaii for a summer with the children, not the youngest, but the three oldest children. When we were there Aunt Dora got me one of the young Japanese girls to help me with the children. That one came here, and then her sister came.

That's one thing that got me involved so much with the evacuation, because we didn't want those girls to go to a camp. And, of course, we didn't know from one day to another, until finally they gave them about three days to evacuate. I got them out; before that evacuation day, you could leave here, so we put them on a train. [See p. 57]

Riess: Did your husband know anything about growing strawberries?

Isenberg: No, no. But he also had a couple of cows and vegetables. He loved to grow vegetables.

Unfortunately, he was a man who could not stay with anything. So by 1928 we had already gone from there to Los Altos. I mean, my idea that I was brought up with was that you start something and you stick to it and stay there and your children stay. This business of moving all the time seemed wrong to me.

With my first child, I was not very well. I had to go to the hospital. While I was there, he sold the Carmel Valley place. It was sold to a Mrs. Lowell from Lowell Observatory, that family. That woman looked like some poor creature. If she had asked me for a sandwich, I wouldn't have thought that out of place. But she was crazy to buy land. My husband gave her a price and she paid him right there.

Riess: Wonderful land, I'm sure.

Isenberg: Yes, now it is. There is a big cliff when you drive into the valley on the other side of the river and right below that cliff we had seventy-five acres. That's a small farm. Beautiful.

Riess: Did you get involved in the farming?

Isenberg: Yes. What did I do? Grow the vegetables and helped generally.

Riess: Did you learn anything from watching the Japanese?

Isenberg: Oh, yes.

Riess: Did they have a very different approach to gardening?

Isenberg: Actually, I had never worked in a dry climate like this. I come from a very wet climate. We had strawberries in Germany, but the Japanese grew all the strawberries in raised beds and irrigated. It didn't rain on their berries. They just let the water run down. They did a beautiful job.

Riess: **Your** husband, when he bought that land in Carmel, how did he choose that spot of all places? Do you know why he landed there?

Isenberg: I think he went practically all over California. That's what I was told. Well, the Carmel Valley is very beautiful. Also, he was in a big hurry to get this job he was supposed to have [in order to marry]. And we both shared the interest in country life.

His mother had dragged him all over the world. She just took the boys out of school and traveled around with a tutor. He did not like this always going, always living somewhere else. She had a house in Munich. She had a house in San Francisco. She had a house in Honolulu. The boys were sent east. Many of the families in Hawaii sent their children to the eastern prep schools or colleges.

Also, he went to school in California for a while in the Ojai Valley, the Thacher School. He was pretty sick and tired of moving around all the time. That seemed to be a good spot and he was able to buy it.

Riess: Carmel is such an interesting place. Did you become part of the Carmel community?

Isenberg: We knew quite a few people. I took piano lessons in Carmel from Mr. Alberto. We even got involved in that little theater. What do they call it now? I know I was in one of the plays. I forget the name of the play. We had friends. We didn't get involved particularly with Pebble Beach. I think we knew somebody there, but not people who would come out and visit.

Riess: So even though your husband liked the idea of settling, he didn't settle down for long?

Isenberg: Yes, he settled down there, but it didn't last very long.

Riess: Did you have a child in Carmel?

Isenberg: Not until we got to Los Altos.

Los Altos, 1928, and the European Bookshop in San Francisco

Riess: You moved to Los Altos in 1928? What was Los Altos like then? Was there a population in Los Altos, or was it just a farming community?

Isenberg: There was still a lot of fruit, orchards.

Riess: You were there through the Depression?

Isenberg: I know. There was the Depression, but I don't think it affected my husband very much with his income from Hawaii.

He had an airplane, and that was his main interest. (He had a landing field that now is a little park for Los Altos.) I mean, you don't have to do too much with an apricot orchard. You can also have people come and pick them. He did plant a lot of trees there. We were the only ones in quite an area, but it is now all full of houses.

When we were there I was always trying to do something positive, to create something to work at, a project. I remember we joined the Los Altos Country Club. I tried to play golf, and I couldn't get very interested in that. So this is the reason why I became interested in having a German bookshop.

There was a German woman who said to me one day, "You know, it's too bad we don't have a decent German bookshop here in San Francisco. I wish I could do that." At that time my father had set up a trust for me, so I had a little extra money of my own. I said to the woman, "I'll do it with you." So I went back to Germany, and I went to Leipzig where there is the largest wholesale book business in Germany. And I picked out all the books for the bookstore.

In the meantime, my friend rented a shop in the Western Woman's Club on Sutter Street [609 Sutter Street] in the arcades there, which was somewhat of a mistake because you should have a show window on the street. I mean, who goes into the Western Woman's Club? That was before the war that we had the bookshop. We gave it up on account of this Hitler business. You know, half the German books were forbidden.

Well, we found out that our location wasn't good, and the rent was too high. So we moved into a Frenchman's bookshop. His store was sort of a long hall, and he didn't use the end of it, so we moved in, and he let us have one of his show windows facing the street. That was also on Sutter Street, near Mason, not very far, just a couple of blocks. The location was good. I don't know if he is still there.

Riess: Did it draw the German population? Did it become a kind of center?

Isenberg: Yes, we had a reading and tearoom on the mezzanine floor, which was very popular.

Actually I didn't make too many mistakes in what I bought in Leipzig, except that I got some art books that had all black and white illustrations. I still have them! It was just the beginning of very good colored reproductions, and that's what people liked and bought.

I remember we had two customers, musicians from the San Francisco Symphony, nice guys. I don't know how much room they had at home, but when they didn't have any more room on their shelves they sold some books, and then they bought some new ones. They were always buying books.

When my parents came for a visit, my father thought the bookshop was wonderful, but, "What this shop needs is paintings." He went back to Hamburg and one of these art dealers said, "Mr. Isenberg, these are the paintings that the Americans like. They're just right for America." So my father was talked into buying them.

Here these huge boxes arrived. We started unpacking them. There was a big portrait of a Bavarian peasant with a long pipe in his mouth and a beard. Then one was of kittens playing with a ball of knitting yarn. I mean, they were all so 1900, and our furniture and stuff was very modern.

I said to my friend, "Listen, we can't display these things." So I gave the pictures to one of the big auction houses to try and sell them. When my father came next I said, "That's where they are. You go and see if they sold any." Well, the people had moved to Los Angeles. We never saw them again. [laughs]

Riess: I had no idea that this business was part of your life story. You were a businesswoman.

Isenberg: Of course, the children were small and I couldn't move to San Francisco exactly. So I went there once or twice a week. Otherwise, my partner, Gertrud Zenzes, took care of the bookshop. Gertrud and her husband had left Germany just before Hitler came to power.

Riess: That was a terrific commute for you from Los Altos. Did you drive up or take the train?

Isenberg: I drove up. It wasn't bad at all, and the traffic in the city was not what it is today.

The bookshop was interesting. We also had some lectures.[3] I remember especially an evening when we had a gathering in memory of the 100th anniversary of Goethe's death. We also had

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[3]Lecture on "The Modern Trend in European Literature" by Gerda Isenberg, March 5, 1932, in The Bancroft Library, Isenberg papers.

Foreign Books

The opening of the European Bookshop in the Arcade of the Western Women's Club was an event of social importance in November.

Under the direction of Dr. Gertrude Zenzes and Mrs. Gerda Isenberg this delightful spot is sure to become the favorite rendezvous of San Franciscans who are interested in foreign-language books and periodicals.

Visitors who have been privileged to inspect the shop in the short time it has been open are charmed with the lovely appointments—tables and book-shelves of soft gray wood with chromium insets, gold-gauze curtains and luxurious chairs—and with the excellent collection of books and periodicals in foreign languages.

For children there are enchanting carved wooden toys from Germany. And a collection of illustrated children's books that adults will admire for the fine drawings done by leading European artists.

Prospective customers will be glad to know that prices in the shop are surprisingly low considering the individuallity and artistry of the things displayed.

The shop is prepared to fill orders for any books written in German, French, Italian, Spanish or the Scandinavian languages. Within a short time a lending library will be in operation.

Tea is served every afternoon at 5 o'clock with the daintiest of menus.

Dr. Zenzes aud Mrs. Isenberg extend a cordial invitation to interested Club members to visit the shop and we can assure those who accept that they will thoroughly enjoy this new feature of the Club building.

some little German figures for Christmas. I have an album, with pictures. I'll get it. [interruption]

Riess: [looking at album] It's a very modern-looking store.

Isenberg: It was modern. And you can still see part of the furniture from the store in my nursery office.

Riess: You also had German magazines, it looks like.

Isenberg: Yes, I guess so.

Riess: Was the Goethe Center also in San Francisco at that time?

Isenberg: Goethe Center. I know there is one. I don't remember that it was there then.

Riess: You sold bowls and ceramic pieces.

Isenberg: Yes, we did. I don't know who did those.

[looking at album] This is no good any more.

Riess: The pictures have curled up.[4]

Langley Hill

Riess: When you got married, did you and your husband talk about what your life plan was?

Isenberg: No. He said he wanted to go into farming. That was fine with me.

The way he heard about this place was, he used to go to a feed store--they also sold fruit, boxes of apples, oranges--and there was always a man sitting there doing nothing. They told my husband that he owned this property. Langley, Bill Langley. His father had homesteaded this place; he owned neighboring ranches, quite a bit of land. He divided it between the sons, and Bill Langley got this. The father started a cattle business and he picked out the place for a house.

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[4]Further information on the European Bookstore, including photographs, programs, and texts of lectures, in The Bancroft Library, Isenberg papers.

I think he had very good ideas, this man. But the son let the whole thing go to pot, and his wife left him, and finally he had to sell.

The people who leased the land were dairy farmers from the valley who brought up their dry cows here. They used the pasture, but let everything else go to pieces, house, barns, garden, fences. The house was full of bats and mice and rats when we took over. [Further discussion in Chapter III]

The road that comes in here to the ranch from Skyline, my husband built. He built roads all over the ranch, and three ponds. It's really a little lake that my children have now, my youngest daughter. Then he lost interest.

Riess: It held his interest longer than the other places, because there was more to do.

Isenberg: Yes.

Riess: How was he able to finance this?

Isenberg: He had quite an income from Hawaii. While the German people's money was confiscated, he was an American. Aunt Dora was an American, his brother was, his mother was. They kept their interest in American Factors. So he had an income. But he just didn't know how to handle his money. Finally he left. He got married again. We divided the place and he took his share and sold it and I stayed here.

I'd like you to meet my youngest daughter, Anne Marie, called Ami [Jaqua]. The oldest one, Dorothea [Martha] Shick, was just here. Then, I have one in Oregon, Gerda Hyde. She is running a cattle ranch.

Riess: Continuing the farming tradition.

Isenberg: Yes, except she has married another one of these adventurous persons [Dayton "Hawk" Hyde]. You know about the wild horses that are in this country mostly on government lands? The government has been accused of not treating these horses properly. There's not enough feed, and too much dying and interbreeding.

My son-in-law got the idea of having something like a national park for these horses, only not national, more like a

preserve. He got the thing going, and that is where he lives most of the time. He is the director of it, the Institute of Range and American Mustang, a new foundation. It's in South Dakota and Wyoming. I have a pamphlet of it. He is also the author of several books, mainly on birds and animals. That's what he is working at, while she's working with one son--she has three sons--on the ranch.

The cattle business hasn't been very profitable, so she takes in fishing people. There is fabulous fishing on their ranch, on the Williamson River. Right now, she's booked up. She feeds those people, she houses them and then they fish.

The other daughter, Dorothea Shick, her husband is retired and they are about to move to New Hampshire from Connecticut.

Riess: What did they do in Connecticut?

Isenberg: Victor [Vladimir] Shick was in business in New York City. He was born in Harbin, of Russian refugees, and educated in Shanghai. He came to California as a student and graduated from the University of California, where my daughter met him. When the communists took over in China, he could not return. Instead his family came to the United States. The Shicks have three sons, all living on the East Coast. Once a year, usually at Thanksgiving, I visit them.

Riess: And you have a son, too?

Isenberg: My son, Carl [Alexander Isenberg], passed away in 1988. He was a teacher, a biologist. He had a hard life; he had diabetes, and he never married. He died of a heart attack.

Travenort, and Prewar Attitudes about Education, Class

[Interview 2: September 25, 1990]

Isenberg: You know, sometimes you wonder how good it is to set up your children so they don't really have to do anything except spend money. My father, for instance, was given that farm. And I don't know how much income he had, but that income came from Hawaii. They lived, probably, much too high. I mean, the way they lived, that couldn't come out of this farm.

It was not a case of senseless spending. Both my parents made many improvements, also for the living conditions of the

working people, modernization of the main house, and no end of beautiful landscaping around it. But finally my oldest brother, who followed my father, told my mother, "If you keep this up you will lose the place." She was shocked.

Riess: What finally forced them to change their life?

Isenberg: Actually, the war, the two wars. Well, after the first war they managed alright on that farm, but the Alien Custodian paid what they owed them.

Riess: Last week you showed me an album with beautiful pictures of Travenort, the buildings and the park and the horses. What part of that was business? Did your father sell the horses?

Isenberg: There wasn't much business with horses.

Riess: And the cattle?

Isenberg: Well, it wasn't cattle, it was a dairy. Yes, you could live off that, but not in that style.

Riess: You explained to me your education was mostly at home with tutors, and you are obviously well educated. How many languages do you speak?

Isenberg: I speak French, not very well. Just yesterday I got a Mexican house cleaner. Before my youngest daughter was born--that's over fifty years ago--I took some Spanish lessons, just for the fun of it, from a Stanford student, a Portuguese boy. We finally got so we played bridge in Spanish, but I didn't keep it up.

Before this man came I thought, "What am I going to do?" But it turned out that his English was better than my Spanish.

Riess: When did you learn English?

Isenberg: You have that in the school for four years, a lot of grammar, reading, and spelling. But you don't learn how to speak a language until you really have to. I spoke enough to communicate somewhat when I first came to Hawaii on a visit.

Riess: But you were not in the schools, you said.

Isenberg: That's right. I had private lessons after they took me out of school. I told you, they thought this was enough now. [laughter] But I did have lessons from a very nice woman in our county town. She gave piano lessons, and I know I had French

from her. I don't know if I had English from her, but I had enough English while I was a visitor at the girls' school in Bremen to give me a good start.

And I had history of art. My father was very interested in art, mainly paintings.

Riess: At dinner in the evening would you be expected to contribute to the conversation? Did your parents include you?

Isenberg: Yes, after a certain age. I can't really remember when we were eating with the parents. We ate upstairs in the children's room. The main meal, at that time, was always at noon, and then they had a cold buffet for supper. I do not remember the exact age when we were allowed to have the evening meal with the parents.

When I go over to my daughter's [Ami Jaqua], the children come, and the grandchildren, no matter how small they are, they all take part in the conversation. The way I remember, it was "children should be seen but not heard." Nobody ever said to me, "What do you think about that?"

When I started beginning to read, and I had some of my own ideas, I thought whatever my father said was just impossible. When you are sixteen years or seventeen years old, how can anybody not agree with you? I remember I was reading--you probably never heard of it--[Oswald] Spengler's The Decline of the West. I was so impressed by that book then. My father wouldn't hear of it! If I would read the same book today I might see my father's point of view. [laughter]

Riess: Is that because he wouldn't hear of Spengler's ideas, or he wouldn't hear of a daughter having anything to say about them?

Isenberg: Well, I can't say that he didn't want me to have any ideas. It was sort of, "You're too young to understand that kind of thing." These people here, my children, they listen to somebody four years old! It's amazing what these kids come up with, these very small children.

Riess: Did you get mathematics and science and philosophy from tutors?

Isenberg: Nothing in science. I remember we had some physics in that school where I went, but I didn't learn anything there.

I might be educated as far as literature is concerned, art, that kind of thing. As far as languages are concerned, I missed being sent to other countries, which would have happened if

economic conditions in Germany had been normal. If, after World War I, Germany wasn't so impoverished, and the money wasn't worth anything so we couldn't really go to any other country, I would have been sent to French Switzerland to learn French.

As I told you, this is the main education for a young lady, to learn French and then go to England and learn English, and then play the piano. But that didn't materialize, they couldn't do it. So I decided to go to that garden school instead, and I do believe it was an improvement over the so-called "finishing school."

Riess: About that garden school, were you equipped to actually run a nursery? Did you know enough at that time?

Isenberg: No. Maybe I'm still not. [laughter] People ask me about my background. First of all, we learned how to work. But I did not learn anything about California native plants or ferns. I have to tell people I learned by my own mistakes, and with help from many horticulturists, not to speak of from many good books on the subject

Riess: The reason I asked was because I read an interview done by Sunset Magazine with Elsa Knoll. She said, talking about the garden school that she ran, she said one of her faculty members was a Viennese horticulturist who came to the United States early during the Second World War. She was a graduate of an Austrian horticultural school and had established a thriving nursery which she had to give up when Hitler invaded Austria. I thought maybe you might have learned enough to be like this Austrian woman, someone who could have started a nursery.

Isenberg: How did Elsa get into this? I know her.

Riess: Well, Elsa Knoll ran the California School of Gardening on the Stanford University campus. She took it over in 1936 from two English women. She was talking about the people she had as her faculty, and one was the woman from Vienna.

Isenberg: That was about when?

Riess: In 1936 or so.

Another question, following up on the last time we talked, I wondered who were the writers you most admired early in your life before you went to Hawaii.

Isenberg: I did read a lot of the German classics, like Schiller and Goethe. I loved the poems of Moricke. I read many of the

contemporary authors, like Thomas Mann, Knut Hamsun, Sigrid Undset, Stefan Zweig, Ibsen. But the Russian authors seemed to be the greatest experience at the time. I read many translations from Russian authors, mainly Tolstoy and Dostoevski, and also Turgenev. Tolstoy was my favorite. I read Anna Karenina in German, French, and English.

Riess: Did you go to theater with your family?

Isenberg: Yes, yes. Hamburg has a very good theater. But then, so much of my teenage was after war, during war and after war.

Riess: And what people did you admire most? What people in your family, or perhaps among teachers, or someone on whom you could fix your star?

Isenberg: I wish I could answer that, but it seems I did not have that "star" at the time.

I told you about this girl who wasn't supposed to be invited to my wedding. When she was in her teens she joined the so-called Wandervogel, meaning "migrating birds." I would have loved to become a "Wandervogel" at that time.

I got a little bit of that from the garden school. When we had free time we would get on a bicycle and go somewhere and play the guitar and sing. It was above all a trend to go back to nature, something like the hippie movement in this country, but not quite that extreme. They wore dirndl dresses, that kind of stuff. I liked that at that time, but it wasn't in the cards, I guess.

Riess: How was that sort of life viewed in Germany? Were they alienated from the culture, the Wandervogel?

Isenberg: I cannot say they were. Maybe by some of the people.

Riess: Did that movement survive the '30s?

Isenberg: It did not. The so-called Hitler Youth was compulsory, first of all. You were under suspicion if you did not send your children to their meetings and exercises. Also, they used them for indoctrination.

My father told me about a man in Hamburg who was arrested by the police and was supposed to have said something against the government. He said, "Yes, I said that, but how do you know?" And the police said, "You must remember your son is in the Hitler Youth." I mean, these kids were inspired by the idea

of everything for the Fatherland. And no sacrifice is too hard, or may be wrong.

Finally, when some of those kids were in their teens they were already trained with weapons, and when the war was going against Germany, I mean Germany was losing, they sent these kids out to the front. I had a nephew--I don't know if you want to hear all his story, but because he lived in such a remote place he missed out on the Hitler Youth movement, and was not indoctrinated.

When he came to this country after the war--and he chose to stay here, on a student visa, and he went to Cal Poly--he had experiences with other students, refugees. One was a Jewish student, and my nephew had no idea or question why the young man was living in the United States.

I mean everyone in America knew more about what was going on in Germany than the German people themselves. My nephew asked this student, who had become his friend, and he said yes, he managed to get out to England and eventually he went to Israel. His mother and his grandmother hid in a cave in Holland during the war, during the occupation. Now, here was the Jewish refugee helping my nephew to make up his schedule for his classes. And that wasn't the only story. It was really quite an experience for this boy.

Return to Travenort, Postwar Germany

Riess: One of the pictures you showed me last time was taken when you went home to Travenort with your first daughter. You managed to go back on a regular basis to visit in Germany?

Isenberg: I had gone about every two years before the war. After the war--. When was the armistice? The United States government gave special passes to American citizens who had parents over seventy years old. My husband was good enough to say, "You better go"--although I think it was November, a terrible time to travel.

I had seen a movie of some of the German cities and I was prepared, you know, but still you can't imagine what it is if a country, the whole economy, is broken down. You couldn't buy a straight pin in that country.

I arrived in Hamburg by airplane. My brother met me. I had already known what everybody wanted. Money didn't do them any good, you couldn't buy anything. So I had some cigarettes on me, and the porter who took the suitcase, I handed him a pack of cigarettes. My brother said, "Are you crazy?" I said, "Why?" "You know, that is worth a hundred pounds of potatoes, one sack of potatoes."

I also travelled to Frankfurt, and I visited with the American Quakers that were there. Except that the American Quakers were all at a conference, and there were a couple of women German Quakers, and were they ever glad to see me! I could speak their language. They said, "You know, those American Quakers they just don't know what is going on. They don't lock things up. Everything is getting stolen. They refuse to operate on the black market."

They said, "We need a carpenter here. And he will work for anything, chocolate, cigarettes, coffee, and the Quakers won't do that because it is playing on the black market." I said, "They will probably learn."

While there, I also wanted to see a relative of mine who had been here during the war. That was in Wiesbaden, and I asked him, "Where can I stay?" He said, "Try the American Officer's Club." (All hotels were occupied by the U.S. Army.) I had this special passport, and in the back it said I was not eligible to get anything in a PX store, or any accommodations, unless I worked for the army.

There was a German at the desk. He didn't ask me any questions, so I got a room, but he could have easily turned me away if he had really looked at my passport. There were, of course, women, secretaries and such--he probably thought I came under that category.

In the morning I went to the restaurant in the hotel. I noticed that people tipped the waitress with one cigarette. So I tipped the waitress with one cigarette, too.

It was incredible. Nothing worked, really. If you wanted to go somewhere you had to sort of organize it. I had a friend in Lübeck who I knew was in social work for the Lutheran church. I wanted to see her. I had written her a postcard--it arrived after I did.

I said to my brother, "How do I get to Lübeck?" (This is a half hour with a car.) "Well", he said, "you take the horse carriage and go to Segeberg. Then you take the train and you

have to change trains in Oldesloe." I said, "I can't do that. My mother doesn't want me to go away for too many days. It will take me days to get there and days to come back."

Then my brother found out about a bus that had to go to Lübeck to be repaired at some ungodly hour of the morning, and I went in that bus.

When we got there I said to the driver, "When are you going back?" "Well, at such and such a time." I said, "I will be here at the garage." When I got there, he had left. I mean, nobody even tried to do something. Oh, I could talk hours about that visit to Germany!

When I found my friend in Lübeck, she was at the train station in a little booth giving advice to hundreds of people, and soup which came from the American Mennonites. The station was literally full of people, sitting all over the floor and waiting to find a roof over their head somewhere. My friend was bending over her desk, and she looked up at me. She said my name and kept on writing. I don't think she thought that I was really there.

Riess: You went without your children on that visit?

Isenberg: Oh, yes. I went by myself. I could not have gotten permission to take anybody else, especially not children.

Riess: Was it a difficult reunion with your parents?

Isenberg: My father died during the war, and I hadn't seen my mother for ten years. No, that wasn't difficult. What was difficult for her was there were over forty people in our house, all refugees from East Germany. See, the Russian army stopped just before Lübeck. They didn't quite come as far as Travenort, but the refugees certainly came. In fact my friend in Lübeck showed me on my visit to her the barracks where the refugees were.

Riess: What about the Jewish population? Did your family have Jewish friends, and had they helped them before the war?

Isenberg: I do not remember that there was any discussion about a Jewish problem. I actually found out after World War II that some of my closest friends were Jewish. During the several times I attended a school in the city of Bremen I stayed at the time not with my grandmother, but with a Mrs. Henoch.

Mrs. Henoch was the widow of a man who was my grandfather's bookkeeper. The Henochs had four daughters and two sons, and

they were Jewish. One son lived in California, and it was his wife who told me that they were Jewish. And that was many years after I lived in the Henoch's house--and spent the happiest time of my childhood. Two of the daughters became my closest friends as long as they were alive.

My youngest brother married a girl whose father was Jewish. Again, this was not talked about until Hilter came.

You asked if my parents helped their Jewish friends. It is one thing to help Jewish refugees in the United States, and another to have helped them in Germany at that time, unless you wanted to be a martyr. I know my mother had a Jewish dressmaker in Kiel and I remember that she was worried about her, but could not reach her. Hopefully, she left the country.

The last time I visited my family I heard about police arrests, but nothing of concentration camps. That time when I came back from Germany everybody asked me what was happening there. I told them the worst thing I could see was that nobody could trust anybody else.

Riess: Did you ever have a chance to discuss what was happening in Germany with your father?'

Isenberg: When I went back my father was gone, he died of cancer. But in one of my mother's letters she writes that my father said, "Germany will have to pay dearly for this."

Riess: Did you try to get your mother to leave Germany?

Isenberg: No. I don't think she would have. She wouldn't leave that place, no, no. They wouldn't. They were so attached to that place where they lived.

Can you imagine having something like forty-five people in your house? You see, first these refugees came because they had some connection, somebody we knew. But it got so much that finally the occupation authorities arranged how many people you had to take. It was so many square foot per person.

There was quite a large dining room there. I told you this before, didn't I?

Riess: You didn't describe it.

Isenberg: When I came back first my mother said, "Our manager has been asked to be the supervisor of all these--." The people weren't only in the house; they were in the barns, and wherever there was a roof. So the first day I was there that manager--my mother introduced me to him--he said, "Would you be interested

to go make the rounds with me?" I said, "Yes. I would like to go see what goes on."

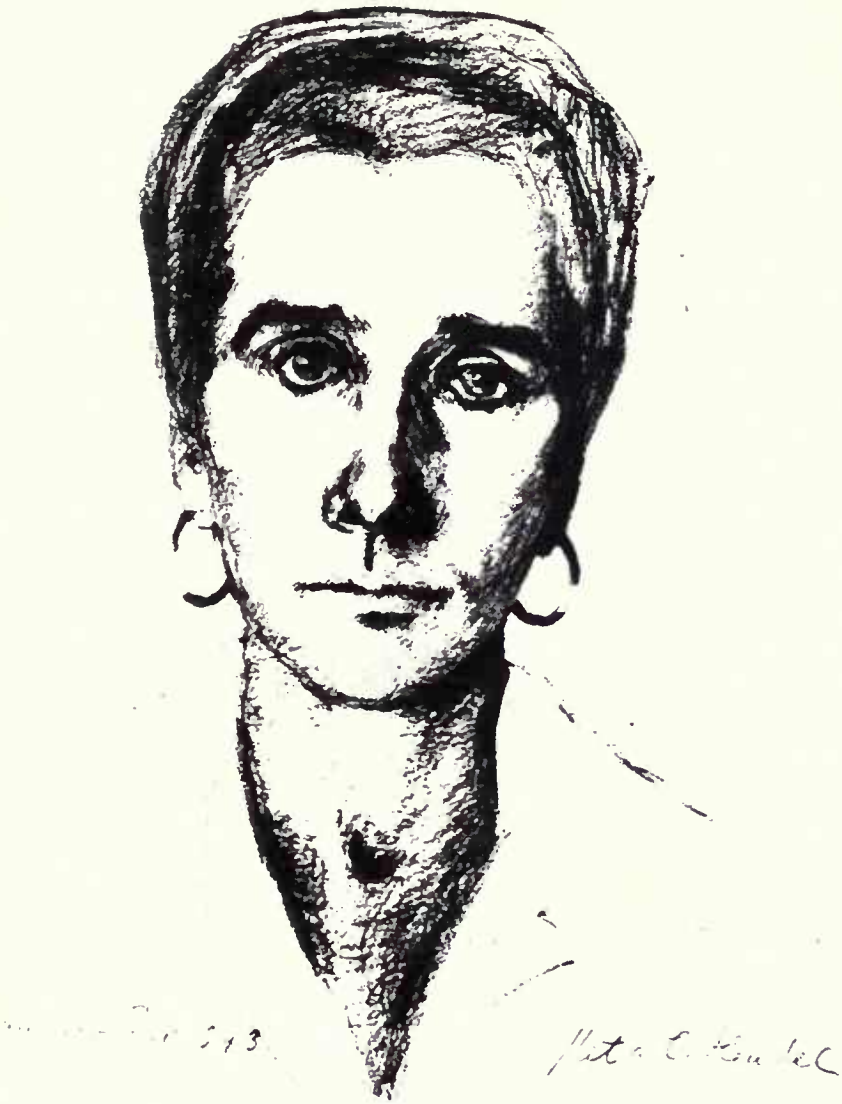
First thing, we went into this dining room. It had a big porch towards the garden. Well, there was only one couple to talk to, everybody was out. These were middle-aged people from East Prussia. They said, "We have been in this room two years now"--I must have been there two years after the armistice--"but we don't talk to the other people." The other people were a young couple with a child. And a woman with a brother who was an epileptic. They were all in that room. My mother, they left her a living room and a bedroom.

When my mother wrote to me about this first she said, "We can't employ all these people. Besides some of them were big land owners. They wouldn't know how to work anyway." I wrote back and I said, "Well, how about making sort of a sewing bee with the women?" She said, "Yes, that's a fine idea, but what are we going to sew with?" She gave away their last piece of cloth. Children came without shoes. It was just a mess. I began to send things. I sent cloth and I sent sewing needles. When I got there, they did have this group.

I brought coffee--they hadn't had any coffee or tea. They must have all had a sleepless night because they had so much coffee. [laughter] Then I said, "This big kitchen in the basement"--I described it to you I think last time--"why don't you have one person cook something for the whole bunch?"

Impossible! The baron from East Prussia couldn't possibly eat under those circumstances. They couldn't eat together. Everybody had to have some little corner where they did their cooking. And, of course, there wasn't any soap. Well, it was incredible. Now Germany lends money and support all over the world.

Gerda Isenberg with her family, circa 1936. Clockwise from top: Gerda, Dorothea Martha, Gerda, Carl Alexander, and Anne Marie.



Gerda Isenberg, San Francisco, December 1943.

Drawing by Meta C. Hendel

II SOCIAL CONCERNS, GERMAN REFUGEES AND JAPANESE RELOCATION

Persecution of the Jews in Germany, Helping Refugees in San Francisco

Isenberg: One more thing I was going to say. When I came back after my first visit to Germany, people here asked me, "Well, how is it?" At that time I didn't know, and I don't know who knew, what was going to happen with these concentration camps. I guess maybe Hitler himself didn't know. Anyway, I said, "The sad part, the saddest to me, is nobody trusts anybody."

I was visiting my friends in Bremen in the afternoon. The family was sitting around, and my friend's father was reading the newspaper and made a remark about Goering saying that weapons are more important than butter. My friend said something sarcastic, and everybody laughed. When the door opened, and in came the maid with the tea tray, everybody shut up. They didn't trust the maid.

Riess: This is what year?

Isenberg: Must have been '33 or '34.

Then I came back on a North German Lloyd steamer, and for some reason I was sitting at the captain's table and people were telling jokes about Hitler. You know, that was one thing, if you don't have any other outlet, you make a joke of it. No? I could see the captain was getting so nervous every time the steward came he said, "Oh, please," to hush us up.

I asked my friends in Bremen--I hadn't seen them for so long--"Are you very social? What kind of a life are you leading here?"

"Oh, no. We don't want to go out. You see, there was a man arrested after a dinner party." Mind you, you go to a dinner party and people report you to the police because you are

heard to say you think that George Bush is an idiot. You can do that in this country.

Riess: And yet in those conversations you didn't get any inkling of what was happening to the Jews.

Isenberg: We knew that they were emigrating. But no, I really didn't know what was happening until--we were still living in Los Altos--my neighbor, Dr. [Esther] Clark, called me one day and she said, "There is a German doctor here. Maybe you'd like to talk to him." I went over, and here was Dr. [Arthur] Haim from Hamburg, who was about to become a professor at the Hamburg University. He'd gotten out of Germany and finally got to San Francisco. Of course, he was Jewish.

We had recently been at a dinner party, my husband and I, and our host was telling all these stories about Jews being taken out of their homes. On the way home I had said, "Well, where does he get these stories? I can't believe it." But after I spent quite a bit of time with this Dr. Heim, I had to believe it. At that time, of course we didn't know that they were going to burn the people or--. Horrible.

Dr. Haim got his wallet out and showed us a little picture of a very blonde and very German-looking girl. He said, "This is my bride, and she is coming over to marry me." Then I said, "Well, why don't you bring her. I'd like to meet her." But that was really my first--you know. Then I got involved with the Jewish refugees.

It was Josephine Duveneck who said, "We need a center in San Francisco where these people can come, where we can take care of them. You see, the war had already started in Europe, and refugees could get out of Germany and Austria through Russia, via Japan. Instead of landing in New York they landed in San Francisco.

Where I could help was mainly because I could speak their language, and also I had a good idea where in Germany they came from. So every Wednesday I went to the American Friends Service Committee in San Francisco, and then I was sent out to visit different people who had recently arrived and needed advice or simply a welcome.

I really knew San Francisco quite well at that time. Now I think I'd get lost.

Riess: Where was the center, or the office?

Isenberg: It was on Sutter Street in the city. We rented the Japanese American Y.W.C.A. while they were evacuated.

Riess: This was all part of a larger organization that was helping refugees?

Isenberg: Yes, the American Friends Service Committee, which has their main office in Philadelphia.

Riess: There were some specifically Jewish groups in San Francisco to aid immigrants. Were the refugee groups segregated, emigrating Jews and non-Jewish German refugees?

Isenberg: They were not segregated by institutions, but simply by their personal situation. Many of the refugees did not belong to the Jewish temple or practice their religion. They felt more at home with the Quakers, who asked no questions about their religion.

The non-Jews came of their own free will and did not have much difficulty finding positions. For instance, Karl Brandt who had worked for the Weimar Republic in Germany came to Stanford, and later to Washington D.C. during the Eisenhower Administration.

I might mention here that the Jewish scientists did not need the A.F.S.C. either. Professor Herman Frankel was asked by Stanford to come from Göttingen, one of the oldest universities in Germany. He was in the classics department at Stanford. He and his wife became very good friends of mine and I am still in contact with their children. This family had no need to go to the Eureka or the A.F.S.C.[1] They had been accepted with open arms at Stanford. But the refugees could not all be Einsteins.

According to Hitler, all you had to have is a Jewish grandmother. A lot of people did not even think they were Jewish. Every Wednesday night we had open house, a time for visiting or lectures, or sometimes music. And there we even had a Christmas party. So, you see, the people we attracted mostly were not Orthodox Jews.

Riess: They were people who didn't think of themselves as Jews when they were back in Germany?

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[1]Eureka Benevolent Society, organized by pioneer Jews in San Francisco, became a part of the Federation of Jewish Charities in 1910, but continued to serve the Jewish community as the Eureka.

Isenberg: Yes, and there were Jewish people who were even brought up in a Christian church. But if only one parent was of Jewish descent the whole family had to leave. I have a very dear friend who came to Berkeley with her mother and two little sons, leaving a non-Jewish husband in Germany who refused to emigrate.

Often people would bring personal problems to me when I visited them in their homes. If I suggested they go to the Eureka, that they might know more about the problem, I usually got a negative answer. Some of them felt that they were just another number there. This shows that they wanted personal contact and advice.

I spent many hours with Eugen Altmann, for instance. He no longer worked, but his wife did. He had been a grain merchant. He was a very wise old man and talked mostly about Germany. And many of these people came to visit us on the ranch.

Riess: Did you know Sanford Treguboff and Alfred Esberg and Paul Bissinger? Did you and Mrs. Duveneck work with their organizations?

Isenberg: I do not remember their names. I am sure Josephine Duveneck would remember them if she were still alive.

There was a Mrs. Sloss, I think. Mrs. Sloss was very helpful to us. There was a lot of communication between the organizations. People needed advice about everything, practically. "What can you do? What do you want to do?"

Riess: It was relocating people.

Isenberg: That's right. Relocate them, exactly. That's what it was. Like the woman who painted that picture there [on wall of Isenberg living room]. That was Meta Hendel.

The Service Committee got a message from New York about a Meta Hendel, and her old mother, who had come to San Francisco. Meta was quite an outstanding painter in Berlin. When the war came of course not many people bought paintings, so she worked in a furniture factory where they made unpainted furniture. She had to earn money for herself and her mother, and it took courage to take a job in a furniture factory.

I was the first one to talk to her here, because we got word from the organization in New York, they said, "There is a woman coming with her mother, and she needs to be visited." I

was sent there to see how they were getting along, and we became very good friends.

Riess: Were there other groups? There was a strong Jewish community, and there was the American Friend's Service Committee. Were there also Catholic and Protestant groups helping Jews?

Isenberg: Some of them must have done something, but I can't remember now.

Have I told you the story of when the director of the Booker T. Washington Center came to the Friends Service Committee?

Riess: You didn't tell it with the tape recorder on.

Isenberg: Oh, I see. Well, Mrs. Duveneck usually was responsible for some sort of a program for our open house which we held every Wednesday evening, and she always was anxious for these people to get to know San Francisco, what goes on in San Francisco, etc. Right around the corner on Bush Street was, and probably still is, the Booker T. Washington Center. Josephine Duveneck invited the director of that organization to tell our people about his organization, about the Booker T. Washington Center. So this man did, and everybody was interested, and that was it.

Pretty soon comes an invitation from the Booker T. Washington Center for our group, the refugee group, to come there and do folk dancing. [laughter] The day of the invitation I got a call from Josephine Duveneck. She said, "I cannot go tonight. Are you going? Are you sure you're going?" "Yes," I said, "I'll go."

So I went there and quite a few of these people came. But I must say ahead of time that I got a letter from an elderly couple saying, "We have gone down far enough without associating with black people." But the people who did come were full of good will. They knew what it was like to be discriminated against and they were willing to show how they felt.

There at the center was a black secretary, a nice young girl, and she lead us all down to the gymnasium where the folk dancing was supposed to go on. The director of the center was not present. The leader for the folk dancing was a Chinese man. [laughter]

Everybody was kind of standing around, of course, not knowing how to folk dance. Middle-class Germans don't folk dance. And everybody asked me, "Mrs. Isenberg, where are the

black people?" I said, "I don't know." Finally, I spotted a black man. So I introduced myself to a Mr. Williams.

I said, "Mr. Williams, where are the people who do the folk dancing here?" He said, "I don't know, I came from Chicago yesterday and I want to meet somebody." [laughter] So, all the good will of these Jewish people was showered on this one young man. Finally we danced the Viennese waltz, and that was the end of the evening.

An explanation for why there weren't any black people at all might be that at that time black people might have been reluctant to mix with such a strange people, strange to them. But I still don't have the answer why at least the director did not show up.

The next Wednesday a couple from Vienna who had been there that evening told me that they had invited Mr. Williams for supper. She said, "Do you know what Mr. Williams said to us? The reason the black people are discriminated against in the United States is all the fault of the Jews." I thought, "I give up on race relations."

Of course, the poor guy, he didn't know who these people were. I guess he found they came from somewhere else. I can very well see how it is. He came, most likely, from the slums of Chicago, and there are these awful housing conditions and maybe his building was owned by a Jew--so, "it's all the fault of the Jews."

Riess: Were there happy endings to the stories? Did people find their niche?

Isenberg: Yes, many happy endings. For instance, the story of a woman from Hamburg--. I knew the area where she had lived, the best houses, the most beautiful view, the best gardens. This Mrs. [Juanita Elena] Jaffe came from there. She had to earn some money here, and I was introduced to Mrs. Jaffe. When she realized she had to get out of Germany, she had all her furniture taken by a mover and brought over here. We stored quite a bit of it, and I sold some of it for her.

She said that when she realized she had to leave, she said, "Now what can I do when I get to America?" So she took a course in facial treatments. Well, I spent one whole day with her in San Francisco only to find out that if you want to do that professionally you have to know all about hair and manicure also, otherwise you can't get a license.

That is just part of it. She even brought a chair for the woman to sit in [for the treatment].

What do we do with Mrs. Jaffe, for heaven's sake! So I gave a tea and invited some of my friends. One of them was Dorothy Lee, the wife of Russell Lee who founded the Palo Alto Clinic. and she asked me, "Do you think that Mrs. Jaffe would help me out? My housekeeper is sick." Dorothy had five children at home and Dr. Lee coming in with a guest at all hours of the day or night.

I said, "Well, I'll ask her."

Mrs. Jaffe immediately took the job, which was so different from what she was used to. She had had a cook, a maid, and a chauffeur in Hamburg! One day after she had already started at the Lee's she said, "You know, I wonder what did I ever do in Hamburg? Usually I went to town and then did some shopping. Then I had lunch with somebody in the city. In the afternoon it was about time to get ready for dinner when my husband came home. That was about it."

Here, one of the first days Dorothy Lee tells her, "I have to go to town, get some lunch for the children." At twelve o'clock, here came all the Lee's children and their friends in wet bathing suits into the dining room. [laughter] And so it went on. Dinner, you never knew if the doctor would be there or whom he would bring for dinner. In Hamburg, if you have somebody for dinner, that's next week or two weeks ahead. You prepare all that.

Well, she stood the Lee household until it got physically too much for her and also the housekeeper recovered.

The Lees were very fond of her and they introduced her to a Dr. [Robert Eckles] Swain who was the head of the chemistry department. Dr. Swain's wife had lost her memory. He did not have the heart to put her in any kind of an institution. So he was looking for somebody to take care of his wife. Mrs. Jaffe took the responsibility, and it was not easy. Also, she did correspondence for Dr. Swain and made his airplane reservations and all that kind of thing.

When Mrs. Swain died Dr. Swain could no longer get along without Mrs. Jaffe, so he married her. Then she had a big house on the Stanford campus. Later on they bought themselves into the Channing House retirement home. There she finally died. But she was brave, and she wasn't complaining. I mean, she

didn't say, "Well, in Hamburg I had this and in Hamburg I had that."

I had a woman from Vienna to help me. Well, first of all, she couldn't wash dishes without gloves on. And whatever she saw--. I had a certain dress. "Oh, in Vienna I had a dress almost like that." [laughter] She had a chair that looked "just like that." It was, "In Vienna was everything." She had a hard time, of course. I sympathized with her, but what could I do?

Riess: Did the refugees stay together in cliques?

Isenberg: When I came first back from Germany after the war there was a whole clique from Kiel and Hamburg and from that whole area. They wanted to know exactly what I saw and what was going on. They had me for supper so I could tell them all about the unbelievable conditions in Germany, the thousands of refugees, the ruined cities, etc.

Then, the ridiculous thing was--. You see, they were all still German citizens, so they had a curfew when the war broke out. They had to be home by nine o'clock or something.

Riess: That was in San Francisco?

Isenberg: In San Francisco. But the Austrians didn't have a curfew and could stay longer at this Wednesday open house. It always was embarrassing to have the Germans leave and the Austrians stay.

But to answer your question about cliques, wherever there are people there will be cliques, even in a concentration camp.

Riess: Were there other restrictive rules for the Germans in California?

Isenberg: Yes, for instance an old friend of mine, a Jewish refugee, could not stay in her leased home in Carmel Highlands. In other words, German citizens could not live on the Coast.[2]

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[2]This is Julie Braun-Vogelstein, the second wife of Heinrich Braun, a minister in the Weimar Republic (whose first wife was author of A Diary of a Socialist). Julie Vogelstein was the daughter of a rabbi from Eastern Germany. After Braun's death she lived in Berlin. Later she emigrated to this country and lived in New York. She took a house in Carmel Highlands for the summer, and Isenberg was introduced to her when both women were attending the Carmel Bach Festival and they became friends. As essay on Julie Braun-Vogelstein is in The Bancroft Library, Isenberg papers.

Some Germans I think were interned. I remember the FBI coming and asking me about some Germans that I happened to know, and how dangerous they were.

Riess: When did you become a citizen?

Isenberg: In the '20s. If you marry an American you don't have to wait five years.

Riess: Because Ruolf was, Hawaii was--.

Isenberg: Well, he was born in San Francisco.

Riess: Oh, that's right.

Isenberg: They were all American citizens, his brother, his mother and he.

Riess: And your Germanness was never a problem for you?

Isenberg: No. It was for my Aunt Dora on Kauai. The First World War was much worse. I think people let out their hatred more on the Japanese this time [World War II], you know, after Pearl Harbor. I personally can't complain.

We had two Japanese girls from Kauai helping us in the house and with the children. I was up here on the ranch with one of them. We were really not moved in yet, but I was up here.

Anyway, when the news came of Pearl Harbor those girls were just in tears. The next day the news was they might be evacuated. I had a Service Committee meeting. I came home and I said to my husband, "Everybody is going to be evacuated, everybody who looks Japanese, citizens or no." He said, "You're crazy. They can't do that. It's against the law." Well, you can do a lot of things against the law if it's a war emergency.

Riess: Was your husband involved in the refugee work?

Isenberg: He supported me in that. It came pretty close to us because we had those girls.

Riess: I mean the German refugee situation.

Isenberg: Well, he was very good to them. I think he gave eight affidavits. You see, they couldn't just come in, they had to have an affidavit. When the war came it had to be two people

vouching for them. The affidavits mean the person you sponsor, if he or she stands out in the street and has nothing to eat, it's you who are responsible. They are not eligible for anything from the government.

Riess: Who made those arrangements on the German end?

Isenberg: They went to the American consulates in Europe for their passports to immigrate.

I'd say most of these people we never even met. And we have had no repercussions. Some people stayed on the East Coast. But these Altmanns--I mentioned them before--had a daughter in Israel. They wanted to get her over here. I know my husband gave that affidavit. There were several we knew, we had personal contact with.

Riess: Were you working with the Red Cross too?

Isenberg: No, we were just working as individual citizens. And you had to work with the government, of course, with the affidavits.

Joining the Religious Society of Friends[3]

Riess: You talked about Frankfurt Quakers, the German Friends, as a religious group when you were in Germany in the '30s.

Isenberg: Yes.

Riess: Had you known about them when you were young and in Germany?

Isenberg: I don't think it was very large, but there were groups, or "meetings."

Riess: But you hadn't known about them?

Isenberg: No. I came in contact here with the Quakers in California because I--. First of all, my children were christened in a Lutheran church. The youngest one was christened by a minister in Palo Alto who actually "drove out the devil" during the ceremony. He was very fundamental, like the Middle Ages. Here was this really beautiful baby. I asked myself, "How can I bring up children and make them go to that church?"

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[3]See "The Place of Women Among Friends" by Gerda Isenberg, The Bancroft Library, Isenberg papers.

Riess: It had a different tone than the Lutheran church in Germany?

Isenberg: At least different from the one I was confirmed in, a Lutheran church in Bremen. So I was, sort of, shopping around. I believed that I wanted my children at least to know what's in the New Testament, the Old Testament. Isn't it amazing how little some people in their teens know? Not even the difference between the Old and the New Testament.

Riess: How did you "shop around?"

Isenberg: One day I went to the Stanford Chapel, where Elton Trueblood was the chaplain. The way he spoke impressed me. He didn't pretend to know it all, and being a Quaker did not believe in dogmas.

I had a chance to meet him and his wife, Pauline. They told me they had a Quaker meeting for Stanford students, Quaker students or any student who wanted to come, at their house, and that I was welcome to come and see what it's like."

I did that for a while, and then I found out that there was a Quaker Meeting in Palo Alto, and I joined. I'm a member of the Palo Alto Friends Meeting.

Riess: How big a group was that?

Isenberg: It wasn't very big, but it's much bigger now. It began at a Stanford professor's house on the campus. His name was Murray.

Riess: Had it been founded very much before you joined it, had it been long-standing?

Isenberg: No. But while I was there they got their own house, and how that happened was when I worked for the [Palo Alto] Fair Play Council we made an attempt to have people of different races live in the same subdivision.

The Fair Play Council started this subdivision. We managed to get enough money to buy this piece of land. (It had been a dairy. It's all built up now.) Then one of the Quaker members gave two lots to the Friends Meeting and that's where they built their house. [See p. 70]

Riess: Was the congregation of the Friends racially mixed?

Isenberg: Not much. Not much.

The Friends Meeting for Worship really asked an awful lot of people. When they started in the sixteenth century--or was it the seventeenth century?--in England it was in opposition to the church and to the misuse of power and money and so forth. So they went to the other extreme and said, "We don't need stained glass windows. We don't need music. We don't need a preacher"--although they started by George Fox walking around the country preaching.

They finally said, "We should have a silent meeting and if you feel so inspired that you want to share your ideas with the other people, you can talk." Which is okay in many cases. But, for instance, in the Palo Alto meeting and for every meeting, I guess, people come up with social questions, social problems. Then the next person gives their ideas too. It's not supposed to be a discussion group. You see? And it's hard to--.

Riess: What is the nature of the kind of sharing that George Fox was thinking of?

Isenberg: There is that of God in every man. You're supposed to make your connection with God, whatever it is, yourself. You can, or you're supposed to, without any outside help. When the Quakers got into the Middle West some of the groups were so small that felt they needed a pastor. There's even a Quaker church in Berkeley, and they sing and do all that.

Riess: I've read that the tenets of the Quakers are peace, simplicity, and community. Would you say that your life, after you joined the Meeting, developed in these directions, or would you say that you were always this kind of a person? In other words, were you always a Friend in your relationship with people and with animals and with the world?

Isenberg: Yes, I think I was. I was always very conscious about putting people in different classes. I felt very uncomfortable about it. Like this one friend, this girl. I mean, I didn't have very many friends. She came from a family who were on a different social level. I didn't argue with anybody about it, but I never felt very comfortable about it.

Riess: Is there a mission to proselytize, for Quakers?

Isenberg: No, you're not supposed to. The question is very often, "What do you do in the silent meeting?" Well, I suppose you're not supposed to worry about the roast in the oven. [laughter] I suppose you should meditate. As I say, it's all up to you.

I think what really had an influence with me was the American Friends Service Committee. Up to World War I, the Quakers said it's up to you, and your responsibility, what you will do to help other people, or better conditions, or something like that. But then after World War I conditions were such in Europe that the [Religious Society of] Friends said, "This can't be done by individuals. This has to be organized." I think my main attraction to it was not only the religious part, but that they actually practiced what they preached.

I haven't been to a Friends Meeting for I don't know how long. I can't do it now. I can't drive, and it takes almost a whole day to go down there. I help--next Sunday we have what they call a Harvest Festival. It's at Hidden Villa. The money goes to the Friends Legislative Committee. The legislative committee is not tax exempt. They have an office in Sacramento and they have an office in Washington.

Riess: And the activities at Hidden Villa still continue?

Isenberg: Oh, yes. You know, I thought after Josephine went the whole thing would sort of fall flat on its face. But the Duveneck couple, Frank and Josephine, had it all figured out, what they wanted to do, and it's being done. It's a trust. And there are all kinds of things going on. I haven't been there in quite a while.

1950 Campaign for State Assembly

[Interview 3: October 1, 1990]

Isenberg: When I ran for the [California State] Assembly [1950] one of my pet things was the migrant workers. Although I was told by the Democratic Central Committee that that was kind of a hot potato, I better not mention it, I did anyway.

Riess: When you were in the Carmel Valley were you involved with the farm workers there?

Isenberg: No, no. I never personally was involved. I don't know how I really made this one of my main concerns during the campaign.

Riess: How did it happen that you ran for Assembly?

Isenberg: Well, I wasn't any more prepared for that than the man on the moon. How it happened, I was on the jury in San Jose. (We

still had a house in Santa Clara County.) And when you are on jury duty you have two hours [break at lunchtime] until you go back to the jury. What to do in two hours? A friend who was a lawyer, had his office there. I said, "Frank, why don't we have lunch together? I don't know what to do in San Jose for two hours." So we had lunch together.

At the next table there were all the men from the Democratic Central Committee. We got to talking to them. I said, "How are you coming with your candidates?"

They said, "Well, one just backed out."

Then my friend said, "Why don't you ask Mrs. Isenberg to run?"

I thought it was kind of funny, but he got very serious about it and the work I had done in the community. I don't know what he said. They were desperate to find somebody. So I went through that "experience," I can only say. I ran against [Robert] Kirkwood. He was the incumbent. I didn't have a chance. But it's quite an experience to go through.[4]

Riess: This was Frank Duveneck you were having lunch with?

Isenberg: No, it was Frank Barrett.

Riess: You said that one of the things that you were concerned about when you ran for office in 1950 was the farm workers, the Mexican workers.

Isenberg: Their living conditions.

When I got into that campaign, somebody asked, "Who is your campaign manager?" I said, "I don't think I need such a person." But there was a young man who was very interested in politics whom I had met before, several times. He offered to be my campaign manager, which was very noble of him, because he knew about these political campaigns, that I could not win.

Riess: What do you mean that you could not win?

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[4]Final Count: Kirkwood, 10,229 D, 16,283 R; Isenberg, 5,370 D., 1,747 R; Provenzano, 2,423 D. "This is the final count of my run for the California Assembly. Runner No. 3 was accepted (one supposes) because I might be too "liberal." But all he did was cut down the Democratic vote." [G. Isenberg]

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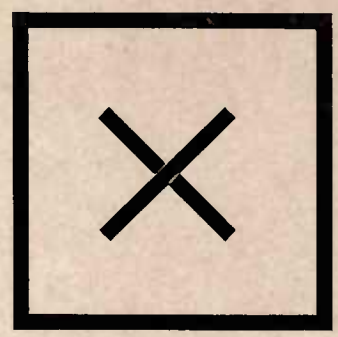

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Frank Duveneck and Gerda Isenberg at Gerda's 80th birthday party.
June 1981.

Isenberg: My opponent, first of all, was an incumbent. The incumbent always has a better chance. He was not an extreme rightist. He was very much liked by the school people, for instance. He became the controller, I think, Kirkwood.

The young man, he didn't say that to me, but I know afterwards--I think I talked to him, I mean--that he was willing to help me in spite of the fact that I was not apt to win.

Anyway, I told him what I needed some help with was I wanted to visit the camps where the migrant workers stayed. I was mainly concerned about the families. We went south all the way to--. Oh, my goodness, where was that? Well, anyway, the government used to have large camps. The federal government made an attempt to better their housing. When the war was over they offered the State of California the opportunity to buy these camps. The State of California refused to do that, and the camps went to the growers, and we visited those.

I think there weren't enough of them, because we visited places where they had just cabins, I don't know exactly how many cabins, but only one faucet for water. The sanitary conditions were impossible. [pauses] It is kind of hard for me to recall all that. I mean, at the time I was pretty well informed.[5]

Helping Evacuate Japanese Girls, A Visit from the FBI

Riess: Your campaign literature referred to your long experience working with people, and your humanitarian activities. You had become well known?

Isenberg: I suppose through the Fair Play Council and the relocation of Japanese.

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[5]See Isenberg's campaign speech, Appendices. Original in The Bancroft Library, Isenberg papers.

Riess: Had you made yourself the enemy of any particular group, the Associated Farmers, for instance?

Isenberg: I don't think they thought that I had that much importance, if they knew about me at all.

Of course, Pearl Harbor scared the life out of people. There was fear of Japan invading the West Coast. For instance, Frank Duveneck started a hostel at Hidden Villa. He called me one day and said he had some extra cots that he didn't need, and did I have any use for them, because I had expressed the plan or idea to have a hostel up in that house by the quarry. (That used to be mine. It was empty at the time and I thought maybe that would be a possible place for a hostel, and actually the hostel people were looking for something up here, though it never came through.)

Anyhow, Frank said, "Can you take care of those cots, in the meantime, until you really get going?" I said yes I could. Frank sent out a truck with these cots, and somebody reported to the FBI that Isenberg was going to build barracks to house the invading Japanese army. That was the hysteria at the time!

One day while we were not at the ranch the FBI came to investigate the whole house. (One could see where they had been.) They discovered a radio which could have been used for sending messages--if it had been prepared for that purpose--and they came back again later to check about the radio. My husband met them on the road.

Here comes this car with two men in it, and it was rainy and cold, and my husband said, "I'm on my way home. Make it short, whatever you want to say." He thought they were salesmen or something. They got out their badges, and that was the FBI, wanting to know about this radio.

Riess: I wonder if it was some actual activities that made you a target of this surveillance, or just your German name?

Isenberg: Later on, when they came up with the evacuation, we had these two Japanese girls. That was another thing: they had seen that we had Japanese in the house. As a matter of fact, I was up here with one of the girls when Pearl Harbor happened.

Those girls were shocked and sad, like everyone else, and immediately they asked, "What can we do about the war effort?" I asked them if they had anything in mind. One of them wanted to become a nurse's aide. The other one took a course in home nursing.

I took Katherine to the Palo Alto Hospital for her training to be a nurse's aid. One day one of the doctors I knew saw me sitting at the hospital and asked, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I'm waiting for my nurse's aide." He said, "Which one?" I said, "It's that Japanese girl." "Oh", he said, "She's the best one. She knows how to work."

Then Dorothy Lee, who was a good friend of mine, head of the nurse's aides, she called me and said, "I have to talk to you about Katherine. You better come and see me." (At that time you did not discuss these problems over the telephone.) When I got to her house she told me that the private patients in the hospital refused to be waited on by a Jap. Really.

Naturally I was upset, if not mad, and decided to talk to the manager of the hospital. Dorothy said, "No, you better stay away from there." She said, "I will try something else. There's a men's ward downstairs. We'll put Kathy in the men's ward." Well, that lasted a day or so, and the same thing happened. "They wouldn't be waited on by a Jap." So I had to tell the poor girl. I mean, she had her uniform, she had her white shoes and white stockings, and was the best one there, according to the doctor.

Riess: And the doctors were powerless to do anything about it.

Isenberg: The answer was, of course, "It's the war effort." Kathy was almost pale when I told her.

Finally came the date for the evacuation, and they gave these people less than a week. I was up here at the ranch with one of them when my husband called and said, "I've gotten tickets for you to go on the train to Denver with the girls." I said, "My lord. What are they going to do in Denver?" His idea was just to get them out, because we felt responsible for these girls, and their families were on the island of Kauai.

Riess: They had come over specifically to be with you.

Isenberg: Yes. We brought them over here. First one, and then the sister came. We couldn't see that these single girls should be living in one of the camps.

Pauline Trueblood, the wife of the chaplain at Stanford, was a friend of mine. I talked to Pauline about sending the girls to her sister in Philadelphia. Pauline was confident that her sister would receive them and find jobs for them.

The sister first responded with saying that she had never in her whole life talked to a Japanese. And Pauline said, "This time you will."

It worked fine. I visited them in Philadelphia after the war. In the meantime, Katherine had gotten married to an Italian. She is still there. Louise went back to Hawaii. I have seen her since, and she's been here. When I visited her in Hawaii, she and her husband treated me and my oldest daughter and her husband royally.

On that trip it was interesting for me to see that the Japanese in Hawaii did not give up all their customs. We still left our shoes outside, and they still ate on the floor, although they had a table for me.

But your question, "Did my activities make a difference?" [referring to FBI surveillance] First of all, when the one girl worked in the hospital, evidently the FBI was told that not only was I German but I also put a Japanese in the hospital. I don't know what she was supposed to do, spy there? [laughs] That sort of gossip and reporting happened. But from personal friends I had no unpleasantness.

Riess: I have seen a reference to the Associated Farmers and the American Legion putting pressure on the state to put the Japanese into the camps. You were a farmer also. Did you have any dealings with the organized farm groups in California?

Isenberg: Yes. I belong to the Farm Bureau, but I am not active, and I don't partake in their political activities. I have my Workmen's Compensation Insurance through the Farm Bureau.

Riess: Many Japanese were located in the Menlo Park area. What were the origins of that concentration?

Isenberg: They were almost exclusively farmers. For instance, they were where Moffett Field is now. (That was another thing. After Pearl Harbor all the Japanese farmers around Moffett Field were under suspicion. They had been there before Moffett Field was built!)

The whole of Santa Clara Valley was planted in fruit trees, vegetables and strawberries. It was the Japanese immigrants who did much of the farm labor which is being done by Mexicans today. The second and third generation Japanese no longer does this kind of work. Neither do you find them anymore in domestic work. They now are in all kinds of professions--doctors, lawyers, teachers. And as far as business is concerned, many

Japanese are very successful nurserymen. I meet them when I attend, sometimes, the monthly dinner of the Association of California Nurserymen.

As I say, all of a sudden these people were under suspicion. For instance, there was an old man who did the watering. He was half-blind, but he could do that. He was working for his son. Well, he was reported to be spying on Moffett Field. Before there was any evacuation at all they interned aliens who were under suspicion, Germans or Japanese or whatever. They had a hearing, and this old man was found innocent. And when he came home he was evacuated with all the rest of them! He came home just in time to be evacuated.

There were a lot of perfectly ridiculous things. As far as I know, amongst the Japanese-Americans there were no spies. The main spy for the Japanese was a navy officer who got a dishonorable discharge. I don't know his name, but that was all I was told at the time.

Riess: Did all of this come to your attention because of the American Friends Service Committee? Is that how the problems came to your attention?

Isenberg: Well, first of all it was right in my house, the fact that we felt responsible for the two Japanese-American girls working for us. This led, of course, to the general problem.

I also was quite conscious of any civil rights problems, especially after what happened in Germany. Having taken a position against the country of my birth during World War II, I was not going to let an action which was contrary to human rights by the government of my adopted country go by without at least giving some assistance to the people in question. My stand on the basis of human rights made me sensitive to anything that might be done in the way of disregarding human rights in the USA.

Of course, the American Friends Service Committee was a great help to me. We had meeting after meeting: What could one do? Should we encourage people to leave? Should they go to another state? The evacuation was planned only for California, Oregon and Washington. Japanese in Hawaii were <u>not</u> evacuated, by the way. I suppose it would have caused trouble in the economy of Hawaii.

Helping people to leave could really be done on a very personal basis. When some friends heard that we sent the two girls to Philadelphia they asked me if I could do the same for

their housekeeper and her little son. So I managed to get her on the train to Philadelphia.

Forty years later I had a phone call from a man who asked to see me, saying that he remembered me from the time of evacuation. When he came he told me that he and his mother were the ones I took to the train to Philadelphia. His mother had a good housekeeping job, and her son went to a Quaker school. He now is a professor of plant pathology. It was a great pleasure to have a visit from him and his wife.

So yes, you could get out, but you did have to have somebody to go to. We were told that people down in Los Angeles got into their cars and they started driving east. They got to the next county and they were met with people with guns in their hands. They said, "We don't want you here."

I know of other people who did it by themselves, very sophisticated businessmen who had connections in the Middle West. The rest of them went to the so-called Relocation Centers, really not knowing where they were going, what living conditions to expect.

Also, they did not know what to take, what they would need. I did a lot of shopping for them, especially when these people were temporarily housed in horse stalls on several race tracks. This was temporary because the relocation centers were being built. The race track closest to me was Tanforan. One could not visit there. Things had to be left at the office.

Riess: The Nakatas were a family you were close to?

Isenberg: Yes. When the Nakatas came back from relocation they lived in the house by the quarry for a while.

After the war, so many of them had no place to go to. That area in San Francisco where many of the Japanese lived had been taken over by black people from the South who came to work in the shipyards. So when the Japanese came back they really didn't have any place to go, except the people who owned their houses.

For instance, a Mr. Okado owned a laundry and a house. He did not panic, leased the laundry to a white man, and locked up his house. When he and his family came back all they had to do was unlock their front door. Subsequently Mr. Okado was a great help to me.

The evacuated people lost, of course, a lot of their businesses and earnings, but the government did not take their savings. They still had bank accounts. There were several Nakata families. Michiko and Arthur Nakata had a nursery in East Palo Alto. My husband leased their house to Caucasians and put the money in their account. So I know they had their savings, but their nursery went to weeds.

Gerda and Josephine Duveneck go to Tule Lake, 1944

Isenberg: Did I tell you about Josephine [Duveneck] and I going to one of these camps?[6] Two of the camps were in California. One was way up north by Tule Lake near the Oregon border, and one was Manzanar, in southern California. Have you seen that book, that little paperback, Farewell to Manzanar? That gives you a good idea about life in a relocation center.

Each branch of the American Friends Service Committee in different cities took on one of these camps for any kind of charity work. Tule Lake Relocation Center was connected to the San Francisco office of the Friends Service Committee.

Tule Lake camp was constructed on a dry lake bed. There was so much sand and wind--I came home with sand in my suitcase. But near there is the best farmland you can have, and so they had the evacuees growing vegetables on that land. They would drive the men out to work in the fields in open trucks. One day they had an accident. Some people were hurt and there seemed enough reason to strike. After that the camp was closed to all visitors, and the vegetables spoiled in the fields.

Naturally there was a great deal of tension between the evacuees themselves. The day the camp was open again Josephine Duveneck and I arrived. We were sent by the Service Committee to see if we could be of any help. We got there by train. I'll never forget it. The train was full of soldiers. Josephine had a place where you could lie down, and we took turns. It was during the night. I came back to relieve her and here was a young soldier sound asleep on her shoulder. [chuckles] Anyway, that's not important. We got there and we stayed with the school teachers.

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[6]See"Quiet Drama by the Golden Gate" and "I Visited Tule Lake," Appendices.

Riess: In the camp?

Isenberg: In the camp. They had high school and elementary school.

Riess: Japanese teachers or American?

Isenberg: American just like anywhere else. The ironic thing was that--.

I'm sorry, I give you so much I always have to go back. [interruption] A committee had been formed by just a few people. Josephine Duveneck was one of the members, Ray Lyman Wilbur, the president of Stanford was one. The president of UC, Robert Gordon Sproul, was another, and Galen [M.] Fisher. They called themselves the American Committee for Fair Play [Pacific Coast Committee on American Principles and Fair Play, formed August 1941], and they put some pressure on Washington.

In the meantime, the government had asked the young men in these camps to volunteer for the army. Not so long ago, a couple of years ago, I talked to a man who has a nursery in East Palo Alto, and he was the president of the Japanese-American Citizens League. I asked him, "What did you do when this request came?"

He said, "I told them I will be very happy to volunteer for the American army, but only under the condition that my parents will get out from behind barbed wire fences." That's what he said. But many others went. They didn't even mix them, they didn't dare to mix them with the white men. They had battalions, the 422nd [Combat Team and the 100th Battalion] were all [33,000] Japanese Americans. And, of course, they were not sent to Japan, they were sent to Italy.

Then the government said, under considerable pressure, "Let's separate the loyal ones from the disloyal ones." I mean, it was one of the stupidest ideas. Just as stupid as what they did in Germany of de-Nazifying people. In Germany, if you wanted to be a school teacher, and you didn't join the party, you lost your job. Many people did. Well anyway, you can de-louse somebody, but you can't change somebody's thinking.

The way the government went about it was, they asked the people, "Do you want to go to Japan after the war?" I got a letter from Michiko Nakata. She said it took her two weeks to write the letter, but she and Arthur, her husband, had decided to go to Japan after the war because they didn't feel they had any future in this country.

There was no question of loyalty or disloyalty. This very young couple had never been to Japan. But to the government's thinking, even wanting to go to Japan was an admission of disloyalty.

Riess: How did that effect the rest of their stay in the camp then?

Isenberg: They separated them. You wouldn't believe it. Everybody that was considered disloyal by the government stayed in Tule Lake, and the others were shipped to the other camps. Also disloyal people from other camps had to move to Tule Lake. It's really, really incredible how stupid it was.

The day that Josephine and I went to Tule Lake to visit was the day after they opened the gates again, after the strike. And when I got in the Nakatas said, "How did you get in here?" I said, "Well, you can be visited again."

Then I said, "Mr. Isenberg sends his regards and he would like to know if you would like to sell your place now that you want to go to Japan?" They were hemming and hawing around and I knew that they did not want to go to Japan.

Finally the government realized that this thing was done under duress, and they were given another chance. So they are here. One of them died just recently.

Riess: What did the Galen Fisher, Ray Lyman Wilbur committee actually do?

Isenberg: They just lobbied in Washington, and had pamphlets printed about the Japanese American soldiers. They told the government that there are certain actions that are against our constitution. Probably they were effective in getting the change of the plan of who is loyal and who is not.

Before the order for the evacuation came up, I went to Ray Lyman Wilbur. I don't know how I ever got there. Somebody must have said, "You should talk to him and ask him if we should send people out." I've forgotten if he did give me any advice. The main thing he said to me was, "I told them long ago about this problem with the Japanese and they should have prepared for that in some way."

And of course, it is a matter of fact that when the evacuation finally came the camps weren't ready. That's why they had to put the people in the horse stalls at the race track.

Riess: Ray Lyman Wilbur knew that this situation was going to arise?

Isenberg: Yes. But then afterwards I was told that if I had gotten people out before the evacuation and they turned out to be spies, then I would be responsible.

Anyway, we got to Tule Lake and we were housed with the teachers, and we said, "Where can we help you?" Every one of them said, "Please talk to our children. Whatever we teach, they come up, in the high school, with the question about going to Japan."

I said, "Two years ago I knew what was going on in the minds of these people, but I don't know what's going on here." It took a couple of days before one understood what was going on. We went to the high school, and I talked to a class there and put it on a pretty personal basis. I said, "I was born in Germany and here we are at war with Germany. I think I understand your situation." (You see, at that time I didn't know this was being reconsidered, this going to Japan.)

I said, "If you believe in certain things, then you can work for that in Japan just as well as you can in America." I said, "I know it isn't very easy. It isn't very easy for a German to believe Germany has to lose this war."

As far as I'm concerned, they could have put <u>me</u> in one of these camps if I had slant eyes or something because I had--. My youngest brother was in the war [on the other side]. I had several cousins who were killed in the war.

The teacher said, when I got through what I had to say, "Would you like to ask Mrs. Isenberg a question?" This young boy got up and he said, "How much right do I have to go against the wishes of my parents? They have signed me up to go to Japan, and I would like to join the United States Army." That was a hard one. That's what the situation was.

There was a lot of friction. Those kids wanted to do--they wanted to dance and play jazz. They were Americans, and the other people tried to interfere with that.

Also, there were eighty single men in the camp at Tule Lake, and they had nothing better to do then to found some sort of a political club. They were pro-Japanese. I did not know any of them, except my old gardener Shusho who worked for me in Los Altos, he was in that group. He could hardly speak English, and when it was all over I got a letter from a woman from Tule

Lake that asked would I like to take Shusho back. I said, "Yes, he can come back."

But no, he had gone too far with his political friends. So Shusho went to Japan, which was not very tragic.

Riess: But you say circumstances had driven them into this political corner.

Isenberg: Well, I think they had nothing else to do there. [laughing] I cannot picture Shusho as a spy, but neither can I picture him as a person defending democracy, if he ever knew anything about that.

Riess: You kept up that relationship with Tule Lake until the end of the war?

Isenberg: Yes.

Riess: Did you feel that you were effective with the children?

Isenberg: Well, maybe I was. I pointed out this conflict. You see, most of these kids were born in this country.

It was a little different in my case. I was twenty-one, twenty-two when I came to this country. I had my main education, childhood, in Germany. And what I was trying to tell them was that regardless of all these politics and wars we can have certain principles and we have to stick to them. They can do that. That's all I could say because I thought, at that time, they would have to go to Japan.

Fair Play Council: Jobs for Japanese

Riess: Is the Fair Play Council the same thing as the Committee for American Principles and Fair Play?

Isenberg: No. They did their job and they disbanded.

Riess: The Galen Fisher group disbanded?

Isenberg: Yes. One day I was on the Stanford Campus and I ran into Galen Fisher and he said, "Mrs. Isenberg, these people are coming back and the War Relocation Authority can't handle all these. We need to help. We have to have groups that are willing to help

these people resettle." That's how we got the Palo Alto Fair Play Council, and it was founded at my house, in 1945.

Riess: And you were the first chairperson?

Isenberg: I was the first chairperson and I was for many years. When I got a divorce and I had too much to do here at the ranch I gave it up for a while.

Riess: Until 1965 you were chairman.

Isenberg: Yes.

To come back to relocation, Mrs. Duveneck called me and said she had a letter from a young woman from a camp, a Japanese woman whose husband was a soldier in Italy. She was a piano teacher and she had a little girl. She was looking for a place where she could help with the household, and she was very anxious to get out of camp with her child. Josephine asked me if I would take her. So we took her into the house.

I still remember meeting the train, because we laughed about it afterwards. I took her hand, and she took her little girl's hand, and I started running to the car. Somebody had told me I could expect the press there because it had gotten into the paper that this was the first Japanese to return to Palo Alto. I was running away from the press which never came, fortunately.

A day or so after her arrival she said, "I would like to go shopping." I wasn't going to scare her. I said, "Well, sure." When she came home I said, "How was it?" "Oh, people kind of looked at me, but everybody was very nice."

Before she came this had gotten into the paper. I got a couple of telephone calls: "Mrs. Isenberg, if you hire a Japanese woman you are a Goddamn bastard." Then pretty soon the telephone rang again and that person said that my life was in danger. Another threat.

I thought, if this keeps up I'm going to have somebody else answer the telephone. But there were no more unpleasant telephone calls. To the contrary, I received some very nice letters from people who encouraged me. They were in favor of helping with the relocation.

Then came the telephone calls from people who had had no servants during the war. It was very hard to get servants, and many Japanese at that time were still gardeners, cooks and

housekeepers. The publicity in the newspaper encouraged people to call me.

I still remember the first call. "I hear you hired a Japanese maid. How did you get her?" I felt like saying that I did not "hire a maid," but at that moment the main problem was to get people settled, and not trying to preach. So I became the "Japanese Employment Agency"--I did not call myself that, but people did.

I still have a file of letters from that time.

Riess: That file of letters is in The Bancroft Library.[7]

Isenberg: People, especially the older people, were afraid to come back.

Riess: And so you would correspond with them in the camp and you would tell them that a job was open? It seemed, also, like the people in the camps were writing to you to initiate arrangements.

Isenberg: They would write. For instance, I remember there was a job open in Los Altos, and they wrote back and wanted to know where they were going to stay, where they were going to live. And how many other people were on the job.

Riess: Were other members of the Fair Play Council writing letters and making this kind of contact? It looks like it was just you.

Isenberg: There were others. There was a couple in Mountain View. And, of course, the Duvenecks helped a lot.

The last couple I placed, the man had a water plant nursery in San Francisco, and his wife had a barber shop. They were both in business, and they lost everything.

We must remember that the older Japanese, in other words the immigrants, could not own real estate in this country and had to leave rented or leased property. (Today they can buy the Rockefeller Center in New York City.) When that couple came back they asked for domestic work. I placed them with a family who lived near the Stanford campus, in a place which is now the center on top of the hill there, separate from the University.

Riess: The Center for Advanced Study in Behavioral Sciences?

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[7]Gerda Isenberg gave her file of 3x5 cards on the families she helped in 1945 to The Bancroft Library, in 1990. They join other Isenberg papers on Japanese-American relocation.

Isenberg: Yes, yes that's it. That used to be a private place. The people worked there. I finally lost track of them.

Anyway, the people, especially also the young people, were all getting into this kind of work, just to get started again. By now, everybody [in the Japanese community] has been to college and advanced into higher professions.

Riess: Are you saying that experience in camp was an incentive to move more quickly through society than would have happened ordinarily?

Isenberg: No, I think the Japanese with their centuries of culture behind them, and the remarkable discipline of these people would have made the same results without relocation. The parents would have sent their children to college under any condition.

The advantage they did get was that they had quite a strong lobby in Washington after the war. They got immigration. You know that the United States cut off all immigration in the 20's or 30's. I can't tell you exactly when that happened, but it was a slap in the face of Japan. No quota, nothing. They got that [after World War II]. They got citizenship for the immigrants. They did not have that before.

I was asked to come to a big meeting of the Japanese-American Citizens League only a very few years ago. They were going to honor me and Frank Duveneck and some of the other people who had helped during the relocation. (I had been honored before, when the whole thing was over. I went to one of the first dinners down here where they celebrated American citizenship. Part of the speeches were in Japanese. They had a nice dinner and they gave me a very beautiful vase. So I don't know why they did it again.)

But anyway, at this recent dinner they had two young lawyers speaking to us, one man and one woman. That second generation, the ones who were children in the camps, really never knew what was going on. (And I'm sure--and this reminds me also of Germany--that the parents never really talked about it.)

First of all, they talk about "concentration camps." I know all about the concentration camps, I've talked to people who have been in there. In this country they were relocation centers and they should not be called concentration camps. Maybe if the persecution of the Jews had not happened in Germany you could use that name.

Also, I told them, "Don't blame your parents. Your parents were remarkable. If they had started to demonstrate we couldn't have helped anybody." I mean, those are some of the most disciplined people, the old-time Japanese. The young people now think, "Why didn't they object to this?" How could they object?

Riess: At the time that you were working on these relocation and job efforts for the Japanese, was there any kind of money to help with that?

Isenberg: The kind of help I was able to give did not need any money. The government had an office in San Jose, the War Relocation Office. I was in constant contact with James Edmiston, the director of the office, who by the way wrote a book called Home Again. I don't remember how many other people worked in that office, probably just one secretary. Most of my contact was on the telephone or when Mr. Edmiston came in person.

At one point, the government had questionnaires about losses of property. I had one of the farmers sit down with me trying to figure out what he lost. For instance, "How many tractors did you have? What was your property worth?" It was just impossible.

Riess: Was this in order to get some compensation?

Isenberg: To get compensation.

Riess: I noticed that the [Religious Society of] Friends were given the responsibility to resettle students in universities. Japanese students who would have gone to the camps were given an opportunity to go out of California to universities in other states.

Isenberg: I don't think any specific Friends Meeting was given the responsibility, but I have no doubt that most of them tried to help with placing students in universities. But there was no time to do that before the evacuation, this was to be done once they got settled in the relocation centers. Quite a few must have gone to Chicago, because before the war Chicago hardly had any Japanese, but did have quite a colony of them after the war.

Riess: Why was this particular responsibility given to the Friends?

Isenberg: I think the Friends just took that responsibility. Up to the First World War the Quakers, or Friends, were left to their own conscience and capability to help people in need. But after the war the conditions of hunger and need for all kinds of daily

living were such that the Friends decided that this could no longer be taken care of by individual people, that a general relief operation had to be organized. So the American Friends Service Committee was founded and is still working all over the world.

One does not have to be a member of the Religious Society of Friends to either work for or donate to the charitable organization. A few years ago, in order to save the tax exemption, another committee was started, the Friends Committee on National Legislation. The Harvest Festival at Hidden Villa Ranch--I think I mentioned that we just had our twenty-fourth Harvest Festival--that's a fund-raising affair. I always have a table with plants for sale.

Riess: And that money goes to what?

Isenberg: The Friends Committee on Legislation. Remind me to show you. They are, for instance, very concerned about and do some lobbying about prison conditions, about the Indians, and, of course, peace.

Riess: The efforts that you were involved in were volunteer, but if you have offices and you have telephone expenses, ordinarily groups have to have some financing to do all of that.

Isenberg: The American Friends Service Committee for charitable purposes have offices in the same building in San Francisco as the Friends Committee on Legislation.

Fair Play Council: Housing, Discrimination, Lawrence Tract, Palo Alto, 1950

Riess: When you were writing letters on behalf of people, you did that as a volunteer?

Isenberg: Yes, that wasn't Friends Service Committee. That was here just local. I mean that was the Fair Play Council then.

The Fair Play Council was very concerned about the housing problem. The Japanese had trouble buying houses or lots, and so did other minority people, especially blacks. This gave us the idea to set up an interracial subdivision.

The first thing I had to do was to find a piece of land available for such a project. I got my information from a real

estate firm and found some acres at the outskirts of Palo Alto.

The financing of this property was done by all interested parties contributing to the down payment. Everybody's down payment entitled him or her to a lot in the subdivision. I still remember running around collecting checks the day I had to make the down payment. I speculated on the final payments and had no problem with that.

I've forgotten how many lots we had.

Riess: There were twenty-three houses.

Isenberg: Then there probably were twenty-five lots. There were two buyers who bought lots not because they intended to live there. One was Dorothy Murray, who was a member of the Palo Alto Friends Meeting, to which she donated two adjacent lots. The Meeting so far did not own any property and was now able to build their own meeting house. (Since then a "New Meeting House" has been built, as the "Old Meeting House" could no longer fulfill the demands.) The rest of the lots in the subdivision were built by their owners.

There was a black student at Stanford, Paul Lawrence, who was very helpful. He made contact with the City of Palo Alto planning commission regarding the subdivision, its location on a cul de sac off the main street, the name of the subdivision, etc. I was very grateful to Paul Lawrence, because I really had no experience at all in setting up a subdivision.

Riess: Who was the "we" who set it up? Who worked with you?

Isenberg: The board of the Fair Play Council.

We had an executive director. During the Jewish persecution in Germany I met a woman by the name of Elsa Alsberg. Elsa Alsberg was a retired social worker from Ellis **Island**. She had worked with the foreign born, and she had all **kinds** of experience. She came to Palo Alto after she retired, I **think** mainly because one of her brothers was on the Stanford **faculty**.

The way I met her was over a telephone conversation. She had a request from a Dr. Alsberg in Hamburg, Germany who wanted to immigrate to the United States and needed affidavits for himself, his wife, and two little sons. I was fortunate in finding him the necessary documents. (At that time Jewish people in Germany were desperately looking for relatives or even just people with the same names as theirs.)

I stayed in contact with Elsa Alsberg and it was just at that time that the Fair Play Council decided that we needed an office. So we leased an office at the corner of University Avenue and Emerson Street in Palo Alto, and I asked Elsa Alsberg to be the executive director.

I came regularly to the office to consult with her, and I had to admire her way of dealing with people. Elsa always found out if discrimination was the only problem or if there could be other reasons. Sometimes these "other reasons" were difficult to point out, but Elsa had the courage to do that and help at the same time. She was criticized by some of our younger members for being too condescending, but after she was gone one young black man said to me, "She was always like a mother to us."

There was one project that was really just her idea, and that was teaching the Spanish-speaking adults. She also worked on this idea of what we called the Lawrence Tract.

I had talked to a Mr. Nakamura, who was sort of the leading Japanese in Palo Alto. He had a cleaning establishment. I said, "Mr. Nakamura, we get all these complaints about not being able to buy in a white neighborhood. Do you know about people who might be interested?" "Oh, yes," he said, "I know at least ten people who are looking." So I told him what we had in mind, and that we could not set this up only for Japanese.

Outside of this piece of property we had located, there were already a couple of very poor-looking houses. Somebody I knew who went to look at the property talked to those people and they said, "That's going to be a nigger shack town." People got all excited about it. I said, "Let's wait until neighbors talk over their back fence to each other."

We had it pretty well evened out with blacks and Japanese and one Chinese family and some white people.

Riess: Did you interview the families before they bought?

Isenberg: The people who were interested came to our meetings, so I saw them there. There was no formal interview.

After talking to Mr. Nakamura about our project I had told him to have anybody interested come to our Fair Play Council board meeting, and nobody came. The Japanese did not show up. I went back to Mr. Nakamura and asked him what the problem was. He told me that there <u>was</u> a problem. His people--he was one of

the leading persons in his group--were influenced and warned not to live in a neighborhood with black people.

Anyhow, Mr. Nakamura bought two lots, one for a married daughter and one for himself. That broke the ice and a few other Japanese followed.

It was a long drawn-out affair. Frank Barrett, the lawyer, was ready to quit. A black couple who still lives in the Lawrence Tract today were discouraged, and the woman made the remark, "We are fast getting nowhere." (I still like to use that remark. [laughs])

Riess: Did you realize it was going to be that difficult with the Japanese and blacks?

Isenberg: I wasn't surprised. After most houses were built and people had moved in they formed a Lawrence Tract Association with the main idea to keep the interracial balance. One of the people who had moved in was Franklin Williams, at that time West Coast Director of the N.A.A.C.P. He told me about the association, and wondered what the N.A.A.C.P. would say if they heard that he was keeping blacks out of the Lawrence Tract!

Another incident comes to mind. I told you about the houses at the edge of the tract, and the remark about the shack town. One of those families bought a lot right in the middle of the Lawrence Tract--as a matter of fact, my lot.

Today the people in the Lawrence Tract are mostly Caucasians. There are many reasons, like the necessity for moving, needing a bigger house, and the value of the property. Above all, the fact that we now have laws against discrimination in housing. For instance, Franklin Williams got an ambassador's job later on. Also, he wanted a bigger place. So they moved to south Palo Alto.

Riess: Well, would you say that it was a successful experiment?

Isenberg: It was an experiment. I mean, we were not solving a very serious housing problem, but we definitely proved something.

Riess: And did it open up housing in Palo Alto?

Isenberg: Yes, it helped. It probably wasn't the only thing that opened up housing. When we folded up our work was taken over by the Mid-Peninsula Citizens for Fair Housing. We also left our documents with that organization. The board of the Fair Play Council decided that housing was still the main problem of

discrimination, and that our personal counselling was no longer needed. Also, people in East Palo Alto gave us to understand that they could and should take care of those problems themselves.

The Mid-Peninsula Fair Housing is a very active group. There are laws now. For instance, if there is an apartment to rent and a black person is told, "Oh, it's just been rented," or if it's the same case with buying a place, they send somebody there.

Riess: To test that case.

Isenberg: Yes. They are very active, and successful. On the whole, that situation has changed a lot.

I remember while Mrs. Alsberg was still working a black family with a couple of little children came to the office. They came from one of the southern states, and the man had a job in a laboratory at Stanford Hospital. They didn't want to move into East Palo Alto because it was more or less of a ghetto. When they finally found a house, and they made a down payment, the owners changed their minds.

I had this family up here in an apartment for a while. I told them to stay here until they really found the right place to live." And they did, finally. I still remember having supper in their house in south Palo Alto, a very pleasant experience.

Riess: Did you have any blacks or Asians or Hispanics on the Fair Play Council?

Isenberg: Mainly blacks and whites, never any Chinese and Japanese, only during relocation times.

Riess: Would they usually be from Stanford, or some place like that?

Isenberg: Paul Lawrence was at Stanford for his doctor's degree in education.

Another board member was Reo Miles, who was getting a law degree at Santa Clara University. His wife was the first black school teacher in Palo Alto. She had taught seven years in Chicago, specializing in handicapped children. After she got her California teaching credential I asked her if she needed any help finding a teaching job. She told me she would rather do that herself. The Palo Alto School Board informed her that Palo Alto was not ready for a black teacher. But she did get a

teaching position at the Children's Health Council at Stanford, which finally opened the gate to the public schools. I still hear from Reo, but his wife died.

Another person on the board was a dentist, LeRoy Lucas. The story of how LeRoy became a dentist and how he had the courage to open his own practice in Palo Alto could fill a book. Unfortunately he died of cancer in the midst of having a successful practice. He had been my and part of my family's dentist, and a good friend of many of us.

There always was one black woman on the board representing the black community, more or less, from Palo Alto. And that makes me think of another example of discrimination which I experienced. I had talked to a social worker in San Francisco who somehow had to deal with the influx of people from the south, mainly to work in the shipyards. She told me that she had asked a man from Alabama what he found different in California from his home state, and the answer was: "The greatest difference is that somebody here has called me Mister."

Being so impressed by this information, I was very careful about whom I called Mr. or Mrs. Reo Miles had said something of the same. He had gone to a bank to establish an account and was addressed by his first name, so he walked out. After all this, I called the black woman on our board Mrs. (I forgot her name) and everybody else by their first name! [laughter] It so happened that the other black people already had become friends and there no longer was a problem.

Today these different ways of discrimination don't bother me anymore. This also reminds me of an incident which happened to Josephine Duveneck. She had a conference with a black lawyer in San Francisco, and during their conversation Josephine made the remark, "There is a nigger in the woodpile." They both laughed.[8]

Helping Hispanics

Riess: Now, what about discrimination and Hispanics? How did they fit into the picture?

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[8]Newspaper reports on Lawrence Tract in The Bancroft Library, Isenberg papers. Also see, "The Meaning of Civic Unity" by Gerda Isenberg, Appendices.

Isenberg: Well, Mrs. Alsberg had an idea, and somehow or other I guess it worked out--.

You know, we are having schools in California now where there are more Spanish than English-speaking children? One of my granddaughters and her husband have two children who are both in school now. They live in the unincorporated area of Menlo Park, very close to the business district, where everything is Spanish. And Yvonne, my great-granddaughter, was almost the only child in her class who spoke English.

The trouble is that the children can't speak English at home. And Mrs, Alsberg said, "What we have to do is to get the parents to learn how to speak English." The question was, who is going to teach them? Mrs. Alsberg's answer was we have to find a person who knows Spanish to teach and make the contact with the people. The Fair Play Council was going to pay this person.

Well, the first person she asked gave up. She came to closed doors, and if people were home she had not the right approach. I thought, "That just fell flat on its face." But not Mrs. Alsberg. She found somebody else who was able to make contact with the people, and teach also.

The plan in the beginning was that the teacher should come to a house in the neighborhood and teach at least enough English for everyday communication. The fact is that these people don't go to adult education. To go to adult education you have to leave your home, you have to leave your family, you have to be dressed fairly well, and you have to get there. So that's out.

We started those classes in the homes in Mountain View where many Mexicans were living. Pretty soon some of the men joined. Then the adult education became interested and they took it over. The Fair Play Council had volunteers to drive them. The adult education had the project, of course, in the schools, not in people's homes. For the people who didn't have transportation, Elsa Alsberg drummed up some people to do the driving. If this is still going on, I don't know.[9]

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[9]Memorial to Elsa Alsberg by Anne Loftis, and articles on her work, in The Bancroft Library, Isenberg papers.

III YERBA BUENA NURSERY

[Interview 4: November 8, 1990]

Buying and Running the Ranch

Riess: We talked briefly about the ranch. Tell me more. You bought it in 1941?

Isenberg: Yes. The original owner homesteaded it, Mr. Langley. The hill here is called after his family Langley Hill. It's the highest peak around here. Langley had three sons. One of the sons, Bill Langley, lived in the house we are in now. When my husband heard about this place, Langley was living in a little cabin down in the redwoods. His wife and children had left him and moved to town. The place was leased to some dairy people from the valley.

My husband was told that Langley probably had to sell because the place was just going to wrack and ruin. And that's when my husband bought it. The house did not have any plumbing or electricity, nothing except one dripping faucet in the kitchen which came from the spring here.

Riess: I wondered what the water source was.

Isenberg: I still don't have any wells. I have all springs.

We were living in Los Altos. There we had nothing but an apricot orchard, and a landing field for my husband's airplane. We didn't sell that right away, we leased it, because when summer [1942] came we all moved up here. During the winter we did not move in here. We just came up on the weekends.

Riess: And you had a house in Palo Alto then?

Isenberg: Yes. Very temporary. Actually, that was on Cowper Street [2175 Cowper St., Palo Alto]. There was another house [on Webster Street] that belonged to a friend whom he [Ruolf Isenberg] married later on. We used it mainly as a residence for our

children to continue in the Palo Alto schools. The older ones were ready to drive themselves.

Riess: How old is the original house here?

Isenberg: The original house was built in 1905.

It was a nice little house with two big barns. One barn I had to take down. I didn't need it any more. It was going to pieces. My son-in-law used some of the wood. He made a beautiful front door with it.

The first job after we got this place was to clean the house of woodrats, mice, and bats. Then the plumbing had to be installed, so when we moved up here we did have a bathroom, and water in the kitchen. But we were still cooking at an open fire in front of the house, waiting for PG&E to come to install the power.

We were at that time five adults and six children, four of our own, a niece of my husband's, and a refugee boy from Germany, plus the music teacher, who later married my husband. It was kind of rough at the beginning. I wondered if this was really necessary. [laughing] But my husband was a person very hard to describe. He would just throw himself into something like that. Then when it was going, he had to move to something else.

We built the addition, we added the living room, and the work was done by my husband and one carpenter. The wood for the floor was taken from a barn we had in Los Altos, and later covered with hardwood.

Riess: It sounds like a happy thing when it started.

Isenberg: Yes, and it was nice for the children. They all had horses.

My husband introduced the Aberdeen Angus into this area. There are several neighbors who still have Aberdeen Angus. The next door ranch which was given to the Audubon Society--.

Riess: What was that family's name?

Isenberg: Williams. They were two unmarried women, the daughters of Dr. Williams, who actually was the original starter of the Palo Alto Clinic. Last year the second sister died. Anyway, they had Angus.

Riess: How many cattle did you have?

Isenberg: [thinking] Our pasture is very good here. We do get fog, even if it doesn't rain. Ten acres to a cow. So, it would be three hundred. We also had chickens, and the kids had all kinds of animals.

Riess: And what did you have for help?

Isenberg: Up to the evacuation I had the two Japanese girls from Kauai, two sisters. They helped. Before that I always had a Japanese cook. When we lived in Los Altos, we had a Japanese couple.

Riess: And how about ranch-hands?

Isenberg: My husband worked with our neighbor, James Rapley, a quite remarkable person. That family was one of the first to settle in this area. That house that you pass by the quarry, have you seen it? The white house? That used to stand on top where Skyline is now, where the old LaHonda Road comes up. Jimmy Rapley's grandparents lived there. During World War I, when they built the highway, Skyline Boulevard, that house had to be moved. There was a carpenter who took it all to pieces, one by one, and put it up here.

The entrance, when we bought the place, was through the canyon, through the Williams Ranch--coming through the canyon was the first time I saw the place. Of all the nuisances, they didn't have any cattle guards. They had so-called Portugee gates.

Riess: What kind of gates?

Isenberg: Portugee.

Riess: Portuguese or Portugee?

Isenberg: I have yet to find out if that really means Portuguese. When you talk to a cowboy, he says, "Portugee gate." It might have something to do with "to port," "to hold," or something. What that is is a string of barbed wire on fence posts. At one end is a wire hook that you put over a post, if you have the strength to do it, so it hangs there, you see. [ironically] It is very nice if you come home at night and you have to get it off the post.

After my husband left, I didn't have any money--. Once more my husband had come to the point of wanting to move, but this time he really had gone overboard with buying land. We had

already acquired another ranch, and acreage east of Skyline. My husband wanted to sell, but I objected to selling and decided to hold onto as much as I could, even though I really had no idea about the financial situation.

There had been a quarry before we bought the ranch from Langley, but it was not in operation at that time. Two brothers were operating it, but they couldn't make it go, because there wasn't any building going on here. It was just too far away. So they closed the quarry. The quarry land belonged to an uncle of Jimmy Rapley's from whom my husband bought twenty or so acres, mainly to get an entrance from Skyline Boulevard.

Talking to Jimmy about making some money, we had the idea of opening up the quarry again. I wrote to all the big street builders and contractors in the area, with no results or interest. The location of the quarry was still too far away from building new roads, parking lots, etc. Finally we found a man who was interested to take over the quarry on a lease basis.

I cannot say that money began rolling in immediately. It took several years for Bill Dempsey to have any income himself before he could pay me. But today the quarry is a profitable business run very efficiently by Dempsey's son Michael. It is no longer my property, but was sold after my husband and I divided our interests in the land. I still get the rock to keep up the road, and the topsoil for my nursery from the quarry.

The Dempseys, Mike and his family, live in the house that used to stand at the top of the old La Honda Road, that was moved to where it stands today.

Riess: Did you keep the cattle?

Isenberg: I kept the cattle for a few more years, and then I decided to sell them, and I leased the pasture to another cattle man. I leased it first to a Portuguese man from the coast. I don't know why he left. And then later on Peter Folger had his cattle here. After Peter Folger died, I leased it to this song writer, Neil Young. He writes popular songs. He has a big ranch near La Honda. I've never met him, I've just dealt with the foreman.

Also I sold four acres to Dr. Leslie Wright, and eighty acres to Peter Folger, including a redwood grove, and there was another sale, also part redwoods. These sales kept me going, and wiped out every bit of debt.

Over the years this land has become much too valuable to have cattle on it. The cattle business is poor anyway. I have one daughter in Oregon in the cattle business and she's holding on for dear life.

Riess: Are we talking about the middle 1950s?

Isenberg: Yes.

Riess: And you were up here all the time?

Isenberg: I was here all the time. I had the young man I mentioned taking care of the cattle. I did a lot of riding.

Riess: Riding?

Isenberg: Yes, you have to be on horseback to get around.

Riess: I didn't picture you doing that. You actually rode the fences?

Isenberg: Yes. Well, I didn't build fences, that's for sure. Not I. That's one of the main pieces of work that you do on a cattle ranch, you keep up the fences. Because you want to rotate the cattle. You want to put them from one pasture to the other. Sometimes they get out, and people call from La Honda and say, "Your cattle are coming in my garden." So you have to get down there.

Rediscovering Gardening, The Plants on the Ranch

Isenberg: One of your questions here [referring to letter from the interviewer] is, "When did I become aware of what grows around here?" The riding after the cattle took me all over the ranch, and I couldn't help but see what grows in this area.

But that wasn't the first interest I had in California plants. When my children were small we used to go up to Lake Tahoe in the summertime, for several years, and there I became

just fascinated with all those trees, all those conifers. I got some information on it.

I had a friend, Dr. Anna Barnett, who knew a lot about the vegetation in the Sierra, and the trees. Much of it was new to me. Whatever I learned in these garden schools was certainly not California natives.

I just went the other day to Tilden Park to the Brazilian Room. I was invited to a brunch for the 25th anniversary--I think I may have mentioned it--of the California Native Plant Society. It was just twenty-five years ago, I reminded them, that I started to collect native plants in my area, especially ferns. A friend of mine, Charlie Burr, who was a jobber, encouraged me to grow ferns--he said, "If you can grow ferns, ferns are very much in demand"--and he sold them for me all over the East Bay and Marin County and the Bay Area.

They used to call me "the fern lady." "The fern lady is here." I owned a station wagon and I would deliver. I remember the last bunch that he sold for me I got from somebody else because I was embarrassed to tell him that I didn't have enough.

Anyway, I did get fascinated by all this, what's growing here. The first thing that was kind of successful were the Diplacus, or Mimulus, with all its variations and cultivars. I had a bunch in full bloom, loaded my station wagon with them, and went up and down El Camino Real, stopping at all the nurseries on the way. I sold them all, but they never asked for any more. Nobody knew what that was. It wasn't on that market yet.

Riess: You had taken the plants from around here, the monkey flowers, and propagated them?

Isenberg: I also got some seeds from Saratoga Horticultural Foundation. Van Rensselaer was the director at that time and he encouraged me to grow these plants [Diplacus], saying if you can grow them we don't have to do it. (I think Van Rensselaer later on went to Santa Barbara Botanical Garden.) He encouraged me.

When I got into the native plants, Charlie Burr said, "What do you want to grow those weeds for?" Of course I didn't visualize anything like what I have now. I mean, we have contact with all the nurseries and the contractors. Even the landscape architects, finally they realize that they could use some of the California natives, that they have horticultural value.

Since then Charlie Burr for several years had a column in the San Jose Mercury, and he sent the garden editor, Joan Jackson, to visit Yerba Buena. They had quite an article about the nursery, pictures, too.[1] Now, this doesn't say that I had great visions that this would be very successful today. I did it just because I thought these plants had a horticultural value.

Suzanne, my parents never thought that maybe someday I would have to earn some money. Customers often ask me in the nursery, "What is your background?" I have to tell them that I have had some practical training in gardening, and otherwise I had to learn from my own mistakes.

I am not saying that people don't need the academic education, just because I did not have it. What I like to emphasize is that real, honest-to-goodness interest in plants is essential. The subject is so enormous, the more you learn, the more you realize that you can never know it all. We are not producing nails or safety pins. Every plant has its own requirements.

And now, of course, we are getting into revegetation.

Riess: And you hadn't foreseen all this?

Isenberg: I had not foreseen it. That reminds me, one of the Jewish refugees asked me, "When did you come to this country?" I said, "In 1923." "Oh, aren't you smart." [laughter] You know, just as if I had foreseen the whole Hitler era!

Horticultural Groups

Riess: You said that you started noticing the conifers at Tahoe and studying them. Did you join a garden club?

Isenberg: Yes, I belonged to Los Altos Garden Club for a while. Now I don't belong to any garden clubs because I'm in business. The garden clubs are private organizations. I belong to the California Native Plant Society, first of all, to the Santa Clara Chapter. And I'm a fellow of the state organization.

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[1]"Conservation's In; So are Gerda's Natives," Joan Jackson, San Jose Mercury News, Friday, May 23, 1980. This article, and others on Yerba Buena Nursery, are in The Bancroft Library, Isenberg papers.

Riess: When were you made a fellow?

Isenberg: Several years ago. [California Native Plant Society Fellow, 1980]. I think I have that little plaque. We can go down to the nursery and see some other things, too.

I am a member of the American Horticultural Society, of the California Horticultural Society, of the Los Angeles International Fern Society, and the Western Horticultural Society, which meets in Los Altos. So, all this literature comes. [laughs]

Now we have a new San Francisco Fern Society starting. I plan to join it. They are coming here to visit my nursery after the holidays [March 16, 1991].

Riess: What happens in something like the Fern Society?

Isenberg: All these horticultural societies have more or less the same programs: a speaker, a plant discussion--people bring their plants and talk about them, answer questions. They have plant sales or plant raffles. Plants are donated by nurseries and individuals.

Riess: Members of these societies, like the Fern Society, sometimes hybridize and do some of the real horticultural work?

Isenberg: Certainly. For instance, my neighbor Betsy Clebsch specializes in Salvias and has the largest collection of them. She exchanges plants and gives talks about them.

There is hardly a plant that doesn't have an organization. The Fuchsia Society, the Rose Society, Cactus Society.

Riess: I've often thought that it indicated competitiveness.

Isenberg: Oh, yes. If you only have one of something, you're pretty cagey about not giving that away, or letting somebody else have that, unless you had a chance to propagate the plant.

Riess: Was the Western Horticultural Society the first group where you were active?

Isenberg: Let me see, the Western Horticultural Society might be about thirty years, huh? I was president for a year, or two. We are active. I mean, unless I'm sick or something I wouldn't miss a meeting. We have a raffle table, and we always bring something for the raffle table. They come here for their picnic.

Riess: You must find yourself being asked to give talks to these groups all the time.

Isenberg: Yes. I don't feel like giving talks any more. Lori [Hubbart] goes now and talks to the different garden clubs. But for years I would give slide shows, fern talks. I have very nice slides of ferns.

Riess: Did you take them?

Isenberg: I don't photograph. But many people take pictures. Some of the workers take pictures--not that they are very expert.

My main fern slides were taken by a young Japanese-American whose parents are friends of mine. He brought his parents up here once, and then he asked, could he do a little photographing, the barn and so on. I said, "If you like to take pictures, would you take some pictures for me?" He took pictures of the prothallium and the transplanting of the prothallium and all that.

Riess: Did you know Victor Reiter, who was very involved with the California Horticultural Society?

Isenberg: Yes, Victor Reiter has been here several times, and I have been to his garden. He was, of course, tremendously knowledgeable. He brought me plants for my rock garden.

Riess: And Emily Brown?

Isenberg: She was very knowledgeable. She came to all the meetings.

Riess: Her book about perennials is very impressive.

Isenberg: Some people criticized the book, but I think it contributes a lot. I have it down in the nursery.

Riess: James Roof?

Isenberg: I didn't know him well personally. He was at Tilden. I think the first time I visited Tilden Park James Roof was there. And then, of course, there was Wayne Roderick, also at Tilden, and he has always been very good to me.

Offering the Nursery to the California Horticultural Society

Isenberg: Quite a few years ago I offered this place to the California Horticultural Society. Victor Reiter was quite interested, but they [Cal Hort] turned it down. I was at one of the board meetings where it was mentioned, and people didn't say very much. But I was told of another board meeting where one of them said, "Why do we have to have a nursery?"

I understand that. This is quite an operation now, and I don't blame them. They are perfectly satisfied: they have their meetings, they have their plant talks, they have their field trips. They don't want to be bothered with taking care of a nursery. They were here and looked.

How I got the idea, the California Horticultural Society had their fiftieth anniversary. We had a big dinner at the Olympic Club. I went there with Dick Dunmire and his wife. Dick spoke at the dinner. Deaf as I am, on the way home I had to say to Dick Dunmire, "What did you say? I didn't hear a thing."

He said, "Well, if you're really interested, I have my speech right here." I took the speech home, and among other things he said, "The American Horticultural Society, when they had their fiftieth anniversary, they got part of George Washington's estate in Virginia." (That, I think, was donated to them.) And Dick said, "It's time for us to have our own place."

When I went home I thought, wouldn't it be nice if they could take my place over. I told Dick about it and we had--I can't tell you how many meetings we had. But when it was all over I was kind of glad to go on by myself.

The Ferns

Riess: Let's talk about the beginnings of the nursery. You weren't entirely sure that it would be a success, but you started out with the Mimulas.

Isenberg: And the ferns.

If I had worried about "success" in anything I did in my life I probably would not have started anything. Yes, I had the idea of having a nursery, but I never gave a thought to how successful it might be.

Riess: Did you also find the ferns on the land here?

Isenberg: Yes. The original ferns I had I found.

Riess: How many varieties were here?

Isenberg: Oh, about five or six.

Riess: Were you propagating them from spores?

Isenberg: Yes, I grew some from spores, and others from divisions. I had the fern propagation in my basement for quite a few years. Now I have someone do it for me.

A couple of years ago a woman came who was studying at the University of California at Santa Cruz. Karen DeLapp. She needed a part time job during the summer. I engaged her, and she became very interested in ferns, but then she had to go back to school. The outcome was that she is doing the fern propagation [for the nursery] at her house now, because it is very time consuming, and I just couldn't keep up with it. She brings me the ferns when they are very small.

She and her husband are renting a house. She doesn't have a real greenhouse, but she manages to grow quite a few ferns in an enclosed back porch.[2]

I also get ferns from Hildegard and Bruce Jackson's nursery. They have a wholesale fern nursery called California Ferns. They built up their business in a few years, with five employees and a large clientele over the country.

Riess: What is the propagating process?

Isenberg: First of all you have to gather the spores. I put some out here--. You should just take a look.

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[2]See "Growing Ferns from Spores," by Karen De Lapp in Fine Gardening, September/October 1989, pp.45-49. "I learned how to propagate ferns from Gerda Isenberg, who has specialized in growing California native and exotic ferns for 35 years at Yerba Buena Nursery in Woodside, California..."

Riess: [after interruption to look at fern culture] What you showed me were sword ferns.

Isenberg: They grow all over here.

Riess: And is there just one time of year that you gather the spores?

Isenberg: Usually in the fall. The important thing is that you gather the spores at the right time: either they are not ripe yet, or they have already fallen out. What you see on the underside of the fronds is what they call indusium. They're little capsules that have spores in them and they are closed. When the spores get ripe, they burst open. They are as light as dust. Sometimes they can be carried for miles, if you have a strong wind.

Riess: But in nature they don't grow all over. In other words, you need certain conditions.

Isenberg: Yes, they need moisture to germinate. In the wilds only a very small percentage will germinate, unless there is water.

You gather the spores by cutting off the frond which shows the fruiting dots. You lay the frond on a piece of paper, cover the paper with another one, and weight it down so the frond will not be moved. After several hours, and this varies, the spores have fallen out and make a perfect imprint of the frond after you lift it off. Then you gather the spores by tapping the paper until you have a small accumulation of spores.

Next the spores are sprinkled on top of a clay pot--I used clay pots, other people might use plastic pots, there are many ways of doing this--and you cover the clay pot with some plastic wrap and close it with a rubber band and then set the pot in a saucer. You do the watering from below. You never open that until the whole pot gets green.

Then you take a pair of tweezers and transplant little pieces of that. Out of these little pieces which still spread comes the ferns. You can get about ten to twelve ferns out of one of these. The fertilization takes place in this green stuff that is prothallium.

Riess: You mean, it's self-fertilized?

Isenberg: Yes. It is not fertilized by the bees or the birds or human beings or whatever. But it needs water for that.

You know what horsetails are?

Riess: Yes.

Isenberg: Reeds. Those are all spore-bearers. Or mosses. After these kind of plants came the seed-bearing plants, millions of years ago, but there were the originals. How we know it is they are found in coal deposits, petrified.

Well, I don't think this explanation should be publicized. [laughter]

Riess: I just wanted to see why it was so complex that you would hand it over to someone else. Or not complex, but time-consuming.

Isenberg: Yes, to transplant is time-consuming. I still have to do a lot of transplanting after that. First it gets into a little pot, and then it gets in a larger container, and on and on.

From "Weeds" to Native Plants

Riess: You began the nursery in 1965, the same year that the California Native Plant Society was formed.

Isenberg: The nursery actually got going before then, in the late 1950s. But Charlie Burr's remark about growing weeds was not unreasonable at the time.

There was a big nursery in San Jose, Leonard Coates, that grew and had a list of a few native plants, but they could not sell them. There simply was no interest or knowledge of native plants in the general public. So Leonard Coates gave it up.

Riess: When you began, did you refer to this as a native plant nursery? Did you use the term "native plants?"

Isenberg: Yes. Have you seen our catalogue? We're working on a new catalogue. Every year there are new introductions.

When I look back, I could never have imagined that there would be so much demand for California native plants. Several periods of drought have contributed to the demand, and above all the awareness of conservation and ecology. It is not so long ago that many people did not know the meaning of the word ecology. Today anybody who can read knows what it means, and not only that, people feel they should do something about it right in their back yard.

I mean, you can't imagine, this Sunday from 9:00 to 5:00 we had people, people!. We could hardly keep up with it. The demand is there. Yerba Buena--to catch up to it we buy plants to be moved into larger containers from Saratoga Horticultural Foundation, Las Pilitas near San Luis Obispo, California Flora in Sonoma, and the Theodore Payne Foundation, near Los Angeles. Theodore Payne Foundation is the first all California native foundation and nursery.

Riess: The Saratoga Horticultural Foundation is a nursery?

Isenberg: They are a foundation, but they sell wholesale. The foundation was started by nurserymen who said that there should be a nursery that isn't continuously pressured to produce hundreds or thousand of geraniums or whatever. There should be one place where people can hybridize and have new introductions without being under pressure. It hasn't worked out quite that way. They're under pressure anyway. [laughs] It's hard to get enough money. They've had just too many different directors.

Women in the Plant and Native Plant Business

Isenberg: Barbara Coe, the woman who is now the manager of the Saratoga Horticultural Foundation nursery, started here. I think she started as a volunteer. She had the interest, all right. She has quite a job now. Everybody knows Barbara.

Another girl who came here as a volunteer, she was a graduate of Smith College in English. I've had more English graduates, because unless you want to teach, it's not so easy to find a job. Well, anyway, she was working in San Francisco for a landscape architecture firm, and that's where she got the bug. She is now the president of the California Native Plant Society, Suzanne Schettler. The other day she gave a little speech. She said that she started at Yerba Buena. That was very nice of her to mention it.

One of the first people at the nursery was a girl from Germany. At the request of relatives in Germany I sent some packages to a family who had lost everything, in the eastern part of Germany. They had four boys and a girl. And the first time I was over there after the war I visited these people. Actually, I surprised them because I couldn't find them in the telephone book.

While I was visiting with the parents their daughter came home from work in a nursery. Of course we chatted about plants, especially ferns. She told me she wanted to be a sculptress, but under the circumstances had to earn money and chose the nursery business.

Hildegard came to the nursery after she finished her training in Germany. She worked for four years for me [1966-1971], and then she was engaged to introduce ferns to a large wholesale nursery. Today she and her husband, Bruce Jackson, operate a wholesale fern nursery. I mentioned that I get ferns from California Ferns in East Palo Alto--that is their nursery.

The nursery was an ivy nursery, all these different fancy ivies, I don't know, a hundred different ivies. The owner leased the place from somebody who lived out of state, with the provision that he could buy after so many years. When the time came, he didn't have that kind of money, so he called Hildegard and asked if she maybe was interested to buy the place, because at that time they were leasing something on the coast. So she and her husband bought it.

Riess: But doesn't their kind of activity put you out of business?

Isenberg: No. I'm not in that kind of business. That is just wholesale. That goes to wholesale people, and the wholesale people put the ferns in pots and then they go to the retailer. I get a lot of ferns from them now. If they get too big they can't use them any more. She brought me a whole load of ferns the other day, and I can hardly manage to move them on. But she's another woman who got her start at Yerba Buena.

Riess: You have said that your teaching is partly by allowing your workers to experiment. It sounds like they end up doing research.

Isenberg: Well, we have quite a few books. We have quite a library that they use all the time.

Riess: You have talked about three women who got training at Yerba Buena. I'm interested in how much horticulture is a woman's profession. Do you have any thoughts about that?

Isenberg: So far men have been the owners of nurseries, and they have certainly been in the majority in the landscaping business. This might be changing, judging by the requests for internships and volunteers that I get.

Right now I have a young man as an intern, and I have had some before. But women are certainly into this. I don't know exactly the percentage. Besides the nursery business--. I went to a graduation in Oregon--one of my grandsons became a veterinarian--and more than half those that graduated as veterinarians were women.

I know that when I went to garden school for women in Germany, that was after World War I, and it seemed these garden schools were growing like mushrooms. There were state schools and there were private schools. I don't know if it was because so many men were killed or the general trend for women to get into professions.

Riess: Do you think that women are better at some of the tasks?

Isenberg: Not necessarily. No.

The young man I have as an intern now, he graduated from college in design. I guess he probably wasn't quite sure which way to go, plants or design, or both. And he is working hard at it. As I say, I have enough books that are used or consulted. And every time they want a particular reference book, I get it.

Riess: What's the distinction between employees, interns, and volunteers around here?

Isenberg: I have not been very successful with regular volunteer service. A few of them have actually worked themselves into a paying job. The volunteer is supposed to help mainly with maintenance, but most of them want to <u>learn</u> something, find out how to make cuttings, etc., and then, having acquired some techniques, they do not come back. Filoli has a very organized volunteer service, but also a more prestigious background for people to come to.

The intern definitely comes to get the practical experience to compensate his or her academic studies at a college or university. It is the responsibility of the Yerba Buena staff to see that this is carried out properly. The intern has to have a chance at propagation and maintenance, and dealing with customers. And they take field trips to botanic gardens--this especially for people who come from out of state.

We have had interns from Colorado, Iowa, Borneo, Holland, but course mostly from California. They stay for ten weeks and get $100 a week for five days work. Considering our location, I have to provide housing--no student can live down in the valley, with the ridiculous prices for any kind of a room you can rent, and the commuting--but they have to buy their own food. They have kitchen privileges.

Management, Bart O'Brien, Lori Hubbart

Isenberg: Two years ago I engaged Bart O'Brien to be the manager of the nursery. I had the idea of a foundation I was planning to set up, and I knew I had to have a manager. Bart has a degree in landscape architecture from Harvard. He got most of his experience in horticulture from UC Davis. He is by far the most knowledgeable person on plants that I have ever encountered.

During the two years he worked here he introduced innumerable new plants to the nursery, and made many new contacts with botanic gardens and nurseries. At the same time, actually working with plants gave Bart a chance to show what he could accomplish.

One day we had a visit from the curator of the Rancho Santa Ana Botanic Garden in Claremont, California. I asked Bart to show him around. After that he got an offer from Santa Ana, salary twice as much. I think if I had had the foundation at the time he wouldn't have left, because it was hard for him, he got very attached. But he could not possibly turn down the offer, and he is now in charge of an eighty-four acre area of native California plants.

My foundation for the Yerba Buena Nursery has taken much time to be accomplished and is still in the making. Bart's leaving was at first quite a shock, but as it turned out it was good for me to take responsibility once more. In the meantime, I have asked Tim Hyland to be the nursery manager, so that I do not have to be in the nursery all day long. He is quite capable of taking charge of the everyday operation, and is very cooperative to work with.

I think I said earlier that I am working on updating the Jepson Manual. We get a list of plants and then pick out the ones we have experience with. When they asked me to work on it I said I could not come to the meetings on account of my

hearing. Sitting around a large table with people talking, well, if I don't know what everybody says, I might just as well not be there.

I asked Warren Roberts, who is the head of the Arboretum at Davis--he's the one who got me to work on the Manual--I asked if another woman who was working here, Eleanor Williams, could represent me. I would do the work with her at home. So then, when Eleanor left and Bart was here, Bart went to the meetings. Now it is Lori Hubbart who goes to the meetings, and she and I go over the lists of plants we are able to comment on, that is their horticultural value. That is our job.

Critical Need for Training in Horticulture, the Intern Program

Riess: Do you try to keep one intern position filled, or two?

Isenberg: So far I have had just one at a time. The problem is housing. The plan is after I am gone to have an extended intern program, one of the main reasons for a foundation.

Riess: When did the intern program begin?

Isenberg: Quite a while ago. Most of them came from Cal Poly.

Riess: Do you have a particular person who is your contact there?

Isenberg: Woody Frey. He has sent me several interns. I think all of them have been very successful.

I had an intern from Borneo. She was sent to this country and she went to Foothill College. While she was there she came up here with a class to visit the nursery. She went on to study at Cal Poly. She saw in an office there an announcement for our internship. "Oh", she said, "I know that. I want to go there." She was very nice.

I must say, of all the interns I've had there was only who didn't really fit into this. She was forever bored. I offered her, I said, "What would you like to do? Would you like to make some cuttings?" "Oh, I've all ready made enough cuttings at Cal Poly!" [laughter]

Riess: What gave you that intern idea?

Isenberg: I feel the internship is very, very important. You see, the colleges and universities do not have the facilities to really get you to put your hands on the plants. I see it from the people who have been here. There are many people who agree with me that there is a real need for internships.

This is not only my idea. Filoli has a large internship program, and so have other foundations and trusts. The commercial nurseries cannot afford to have internships. Also, they do not want to bother teaching people for ten weeks and then have them leave. It takes time, and needs special handling.

There is a great need for this kind of teaching, especially for landscape architects. One time when the American Association for Botanic Gardens and Arboretae had their meeting at Davis, Warren Roberts asked me to give a talk on my demonstration garden for them. My talk came under the part of the meeting titled "innovative ideas." My idea was to have a demonstration garden for customers to see the plants they might want to grow in full growth. So I showed my slides.

Another speaker was the director of the Saratoga Horticultural Foundation, which is supposed to introduce new and rare plants into the trade. The problem is to convince the nursery business of the value these plants could have in regard to sales. The director's comment was, "The landscape architect knows seventeen plants, and out of them he uses eight in his design." Right or wrong, the man certainly brought up a problem, which is that of not enough practical experience for landscape architects.

Riess: Has the number of landscape architects who are planting natives because of their drought-resistant qualities increased? Do you know? Or do you not deal with the landscape architects?

Isenberg: We deal a great deal with the contractors. It's the contractor who has to put in the plants. All the landscape architect does is make his plan, and then turn the plan over to the contractor to find the plants. And we have some contractors that come again and again.

We have landscape architects come to visit, and I am sure their interest will increase as the demand of the general public for native plants increases.

Riess: Do classes from the junior colleges come up here often?

Isenberg: Yes, teachers from Foothill College bring their classes, and they show their students around. We have not much to do for them except let them look around. Recently we had a class from Cabrillo College. Also a botany class from Canada College.

Riess: What are they studying? Is it the demonstration garden? What interests them?

Isenberg: They come to study the California native plants in particular. The demonstration garden is of interest because it shows the plants in the ground.

They learn some of the propagation methods in the colleges. They all have made a cutting, or some of them have. But there seems to be not enough time to follow through on the whole development of a plant. After all, a university can't run a whole nursery for students.

Riess: Are you getting landscape architects as interns?

Isenberg: Not many, but I had a young woman who worked here while she took UC Extension courses. Ruth Guerney. She is now a landscape architect. I think she was wise to combine the practical experience with her academic training.

The student who came from Holland had been working at a botanic garden in Amsterdam. One of our local Native Plant Society members was traveling in Europe and visited this evidently beautiful botanic garden. She talked about the nursery with a young man there, and he said he would just love

to come to California sometime. There was some problem about his visa, because he wasn't a student, he had been working for two years. We worked that out. He was a good worker. He did a lot in the demonstration garden.

Riess: Do they take interns at Saratoga Horticultural Foundation?

Isenberg: I don't think so. Probably they can't afford it.

Persistence of Periwinkle, A Theory

Isenberg: I don't know if I gave you my interpretation of why it took so long for Californians to use some of the California native plants for horticultural reasons. You see, when I came here, and when I planted this little garden around my house, what did I plant? I planted English lilac, snowball, deutzia, hawthorne, because this is what I knew. This is what I had experience with. I grew up in a garden where these plants grew.

I am not the only emigrant in California who did the same, except that the early settlers seemed to have a passion for periwinkle, which is a weed in California. Wherever there is an old farmhouse or has been one, you find periwinkle. I have battled with it ever since I came here. I had one student all summer doing nothing but digging up the periwinkle around this house, eradicating it. He threw it across the road in back of the house, into the canyon. And now that is part of the nursery. [laughter] Terrible!

Even the old estates in California are much like their European counterparts. Like Filoli. Filoli is an exact duplicate of what Mr. Bourn who built the house and planned the garden had in Ireland. Friends of mine went on a garden tour in Ireland and they got to a place that looked exactly like Filoli, and it was the original model of it. Bourn didn't put in any native plants at Filoli. Now they are going to put a section in of some of the California native plants.

Riess: It was the early English travelers who first were interested in California natives.

Isenberg: Yes, the English and Scottish botanists. Douglas and all these names. And how they ever got the cuttings back!

Riess: Darwin, too.

Isenberg: It's amazing.

When I was at Kew Gardens there was a building, and in front of it some big urns. From a distance I could see they were planted with flowers. I went up to the urns, and what was it? It was the California sticky monkey flower in full bloom. They've hybridized many of our plants.

War, Peace, and Gardens

Riess: [Discussion of possibilities of a Persian Gulf war] What you are saying is that being in the nursery business doesn't take you out of the world.

Isenberg: No, it doesn't, even though I don't look at TV. I don't have TV. And that's just for a practical reason. I think there are many good things you could see on TV, but I can't do it during the day, there's no time during the day. If I start looking at TV in the evening, I will never read a book, and also I couldn't read my Christian Science Monitor and the many magazines I like to look at.

Riess: You've seen people come to the nursery and go away with such enthusiasm for what they've purchased. What do people get out of growing native plants? I'm almost talking about a religious thing.

Isenberg: That's a hard one to answer. Of course, there are the people who are completely involved, like Victor Reiter. That's their main interest in life. Then there are the people who think if they plant natives they don't have to do work any more. No watering, no nothing. [laughter] I mean, there are those kind of people. What was your question?

Riess: I guess I'm wondering why plants and gardens are so intensely important to people, and native plants in particular. Is it an escape from other concerns?

Isenberg: I don't really think it's an escape.

Sometimes I wonder that people don't talk more about this threat of war. These are all quite mature people who work for me, and usually I sit down at lunch time with them. Sometimes I wonder, "Don't they realize?" I think it is very difficult for young people to realize what this can mean. I've seen Germany after the war. It is incredible. And to think that it [war in

the Persian Gulf] is even going to be worse! But it is so far away, this Iraq, that they probably have to look on the map to see where this thing is.

To come back to your question, I think working with plants is healthy for body and soul.

Becoming Known, Publicity and Advertising

[Interview 5: December 19, 1990]

Riess: Has the newspaper publicity Yerba Buena has gotten been very important in bringing in customers?

Isenberg: Yes, the publicity we had in the Sacramento Bee and the San Jose Mercury, the Palo Alto Times, the San Mateo Times, the Oakland Tribune. And above all, an article about the nursery in Fine Gardening magazine, that brought us many customers, and hundreds of requests for our catalog. Besides that, there was a TV show including parts of Skyline Boulevard.

These articles are all free advertising, and I should not complain about some of the exaggerations, and details about my hair and what kind of boots I had on, and so on. Or about some misinterpretations which seem to be hard to avoid.

Riess: What paid advertising do you do?

Isenberg: We have an ad in Pacific Horticulture, and in Fremontia, and in the Yellow Pages of the telephone book. Also, our catalog is good advertising. We give them to customers in the nursery and we send them to people who have requested them. In 1990 we sent out 2,000 catalogs.

When I get requests for catalogues the people tell me where they heard about me. See here, for instance.

Riess: Oh. From Oregon, Willamette University. And they say they found you in Hortus.[3]

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[3]Hortus Third: A concise dictionary of plants cultivated in the United States and Canada. Initially compiled by Liberty Hyde Bailey. New York: Macmillan, 1976.

Isenberg: Hortus is like an encyclopedia. I don't think it has nurseries in it.

I should have kept all those things [publicity, etc.]. [looking through papers]. We are in many more places. I mean, the literature on horticulture is amazing. And there is one good book after another coming out.

Here is something from the early days of the nursery business. [Charles Burr, 2nd Time Around, 1950-1986, published by the Peninsula Chapter of the California Association of Nurserymen.]

Riess: And what is this 2nd Time Around?

Isenberg: It is a short history of the development of the nursery business in California.[4] I like my workers to see that, to get the idea that it isn't so long, for instance, that we have had pots at all. First we had clay pots. Then we had metal pots. And now we have plastic pots. But at first the whole nursery business was bare root; they were planted out and then dug up.

Riess: Is a lot of your business mail order?

Isenberg: No, very little. We are not really equipped for that. There are nurseries which do nothing but mail order, like the Rare Plant Nursery in Medford, Oregon. Mail order is a lot of bother. Still, I don't like to refuse people's requests, and I do send a limited number of plants.

I have even sent plants to France for a private botanic garden in Cherbourg. It was difficult to arrange, as France wasn't, at the time, letting out any money. So an arrangement was made through a person in New York to pay! And not knowing the name on the envelope, I nearly threw it away--it looked like one of the endless solicitation letters I receive.

Riess: Do you have orders from eastern United States?

Isenberg: Yes, from all over the states. But we don't advertise mail orders in our catalog.

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[4]In The Bancroft Library, Isenberg papers.

Being Businesslike, Finding Help

Riess: Last time we talked about your first forays into the nursery business, selling the ferns and the Mimulus.

Isenberg: I had some natives and I had what they call the sticky monkey flower in bloom in one gallon cans. I didn't know who to contact, so I loaded my station wagon and I went up El Camino and stopped at every nursery. [chuckles] One nursery was Coulter's Nursery, John Coulter, in Belmont, off El Camino.

I went in there and said I had something in the car I would like to show him. He didn't move--not interested. Well, John Coulter became one of my best nursery friends. He's now retired and lives in Oregon. They come to see me every so often.

In the beginning I felt very uneasy, because what experience did I have in the nursery business? But the plants looked very nice. If John Coulter had looked at them he probably would have bought them, but he didn't. Well, anywho--[laughter] I sold them all and nobody ever called me. It's very likely that I didn't even leave my telephone. I don't know. That was the beginning.

Riess: What was the next step to becoming more business-like?

Isenberg: It certainly went slowly. I changed the ranch chicken house into a fern house. Outside of it we built a little telephone booth where I also kept the money in a quart-sized jar.

Riess: Who was working with you in the very beginning?

Isenberg: At the very beginning, the first person I had was Gertrud Arnstein. Gertrud Arnstein had her training in Germany and was very knowledgeable. She helped, for instance, design the garden at the Allied Arts in Menlo Park. But the poor girl suffered from manic depressions. She had been in Agnews State Hospital, but she was out of Agnews. Another woman told me about her and she said, "Gertrud knows more than most of these nursery people around here." And that was really the truth.

Gertrud started to work with me on a part-time basis. When she worked here, she spent the night. Fortunately she did not give up her little house that she rented in Palo Alto. This went on--I think it was a couple of years. Her brother, who was a doctor, came once and he said to me, "This has been a very

good place for my sister to work, because she hasn't had one of her seizures for a long time."

But unfortunately I had to ask her to leave on account of her health. She also had arthritis. Her doctor had said she shouldn't lift anything. You can't do this nursery work without lifting anything. It's almost impossible.

Riess: How did you do this work? It is heavy work.

Isenberg: I could do the work for many years, but now I have to slow down. I really can't do things like push a cart full of one-gallon cans planted, unless it's downhill!

Riess: Who did you have after Gertrud?

Isenberg: [pause] Who came after Gertrud? I had a friend. He was one of the Jewish refugees. In Germany he was a math teacher, and he was quite a musician, he was a pianist. But when he came to this country he didn't feel he wanted to teach over here. So he went into gardening and he helped me out for a while, Helmut Schneider.

After that, I engaged a girl who was at Davis. During that time I was program chairman of Western Horticultural Society, and I had asked Ramon Gankin to speak to us about California oaks. He was then at UC Davis, involved in the marvelous oak collection they were planting. I told him I needed help for the nursery, and he suggested Judith Skinner, who was a student at Davis, and anxious to get into practical work.

Judith Skinner worked at Yerba Buena a couple of years, and then she decided to get back to a book she was writing. Then, the next one in line was Suzanne Schettler. I think I gave you her name before. Suzanne was working for a landscape architect's office, and I think that's where she got the bug. She came and she asked for volunteer work. And as you know, she is now president of the California Native Plant Society.

From there on, I never have had to ask anybody to work here. They all come here asking for a job, or the possibility to learn and do voluntary work.

Riess: Do you keep your connections with them?

Isenberg: We had a reunion five years ago or so of everybody who worked here.

Riess: In the California Nurserymen's Association have you been the only person interested in native plants, or are there others?

Isenberg: I don't remember that there were others. There might be now. I don't go to all of their monthly dinners now, for the simple reason that I don't drive anymore and I can't always get someone to go with. All my workers are involved with the California Native Plant Society and with Western Horticulture. Some of them are on the respective boards.

Riess: In the beginning, when you were a member of the California Nurseryman's Association, were you a rare bird because you were female?

Isenberg: Well, first of all, for these dinners they would all bring their wives. And also, there was another woman who owns the Burlingame Garden Center, a very fine nursery. She ran it with her son and is retired now.

Riess: Was there cooperation with you?

Isenberg: Yes.

Riess: Or did you feel discriminated against?

Isenberg: No, no. I can not say that.

Riess: I smell something good.

Isenberg: Oh, my God! [interviewer and interviewee rush off to save some baking bread]

Riess: Now, how did you set your prices in the beginning? How did you determine that?

Isenberg: Oh, I went on what other nurseries charged.

Riess: In the beginning there probably were no other nurseries selling native plants.

Isenberg: I took the advice of people like Bill Schmidt and Charles Burr. Schmidt's Nursery was probably the best nursery in this area, at that time.

Do you know that today we sell a fern in a one-gallon can for six dollars, and when I started it was seventy-five cents? Can that be?

Riess: Has it always been a profitable enterprise?

Isenberg: No. But this past year has been very good. I'm beginning now to take care of all--. I have six employees, three full-time people and three part-time. They get anything from six to eight dollars. The full-time people get eight dollars. Then you have to pay sales tax, you have to pay social security, you have to pay workman's compensation, and you have to buy the materials, pots, fertilizers, etc., etc.

Riess: Are you saying that until now you've done this at a loss, for the love of it?

Isenberg: Yes. I've put a lot of money into it, so far. But it's getting better.

This is, of course, what my family is worried about. They say I don't have enough money to support a foundation and I'm too old for it, and what not. That the place won't be kept up after I am gone.

These young people who come and ask me, "What do you do to start a nursery?" I have to tell them, "You better not ask me. I had the land, I had some buildings, and I live here anyway." That's a big difference. I had that. I had the quonset hut that used to be for the ranch equipment.

Riess: And also you had something that was completely new to offer. You weren't propagating pansies, you were doing something new and different.

Isenberg: The last place I was written up, the San Mateo Times, says just that. There was a young man who came up, and I tried to emphasize that I would like the nursery to be written up, and let the people know what we are doing, instead of what kind of boots I wear. [laughter] The San Mateo Times, you should get that article.[5] He starts out with, "[The nursery] doesn't sell pansies and primroses."

Botanic Garden Connections, and Endangered Plant Species

Riess: What kind of connections do you maintain with places like Santa Barbara Botanical Garden, or Rancho Santa Ana? Do they order plant material from you?

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[5]"Plant Talk" by Don Burns, San Mateo Times, Nov. 2, 1990.

Isenberg: Now that Bart O'Brien is at Santa Ana we have sold way over a thousand dollars to Santa Ana. You see, that garden also is all California natives. We do have contact with Santa Barbara, too. And all of those gardens have bought plants from us.

Our main contact is with the UC Botanical Garden, and the Botanic Garden in Tilden Park. We get permission to take cuttings from both of them, and make appointments to do so regularly during the year.

The main change, the interest or lack of interest in California natives, is through these drought periods we have. And, of course, there are other plants that are drought-resistant which are being introduced now from South Africa, Australia, mainly. Lots of these plants that you see along highways, these succulents and stuff, that's all South African.

Riess: Do you think there is a danger that if those foreign plants thrive that they will force out native plants?

Isenberg: No, not really.

What's coming now, and it is already growing, is revegetation.

Riess: What does that mean?

Isenberg: Where plants have been destroyed by fire or bulldozer, that people find out or know what the plants are that were destroyed, and they want to replace them. That's revegetation.

There's a nursery near San Luis Obispo, Las Pilitas, they do contract growing. They have quite a large order, I've forgotten now exactly how many, and do you know what the plant is?

Riess: What?

Isenberg: Poison oak! For revegetation. I said to Lori, who is one of my main propagators, I said, "Lori, you're in for it." And she said, "No, I'm not going to propagate poison oak."

We have very recently sold quite a few plants to the State of California. The Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District has bought plants from us. And the East Bay Regional Parks.

Riess: And are any of these endangered plants?

Isenberg: We have quite a few plants in the nursery that are endangered.

Riess: How do you treat them differently?

Isenberg: We have quite a few planted out in the demonstration garden. The state has put out a list of the endangered plants, and some of them are extinct. There's a Manzanita, for instance, Arctostaphylos franciscana [Laurel Hill Manzanita], that used to grow around San Francisco. Well, it got lost in the building of houses.

We have for years gone to Tilden Park and gotten permission to make cuttings, and that's where we got the franciscana. We've gotten a lot of seeds from them, too. They've been very nice.

Riess: And when you propagate the endangered plants here, do you sell everything, or do you hold back? And how much do you hold back?

Isenberg: Well, that's a very good question. Sometimes we run out of something. That's bad, especially with the ferns. There are several ferns that I just have to get the spores somewhere. But I belong to the Los Angeles International Fern Society and they have a spore bank. I have to watch that. I can get spores from them, and also I send them spores if I have enough of something or too much.

Riess: That can all be done by mail?

Isenberg: Yes.

Riess: Do you think that Fine Gardening is an important addition to the gardening magazines?

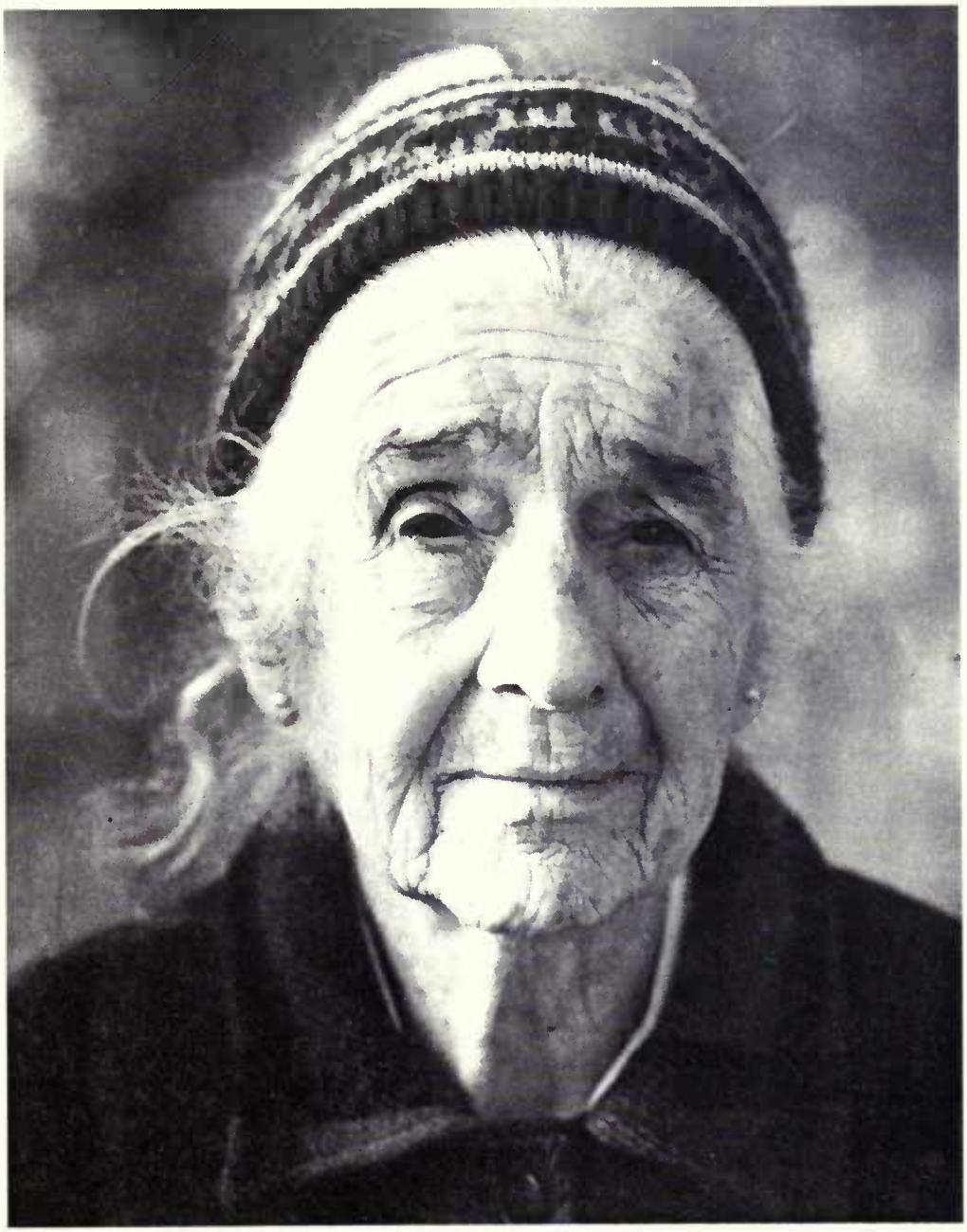
Isenberg: Yes, I think so, I do. I think they do a very nice job.

Riess: There are so many gardening magazines.

Isenberg: The last Pacific Horticulture, you know that Englishman who is the editor?

Riess: George Waters.

Isenberg: George. George always has his introductory remarks, and he wrote recently about the many local books that have come out. We just ordered a whole batch of them. Sometimes when we think that a book will be interesting to our customers we sell it. And the one we ordered is Perennials for the California Garden. It's excellent.



Gerda Isenberg in her eighties

Riess: I wondered what Fine Gardening adds to the mix.

Isenberg: I might be especially in favor of Fine Gardening because they wrote about my nursery, and they published Judith Lowry's article on her seed collecting and mail order business. Judith also started at Yerba Buena. Another article they published was on fern propagation--I mentioned that--written by Karen DeLapp, who is doing some of my work now. One of the main improvements in Fine Gardening is the number of articles on how to do it, like pruning, propagation.

Making the Soil Mixture

Riess: Students visiting your nursery, are there techniques that you have developed that are important to show them?

Isenberg: Yes, they ask questions about individual plants, their drought resistance, soil conditions, climatic conditions, rate of growth, and many more.

One main interest might be our soil mixture, as we are able to still use topsoil. For most nurseries, topsoil is too expensive, or not available at all.

Riess: You can go onto the quarry land and there is topsoil there?

Isenberg: Since I no longer own the quarry land I buy the topsoil from them and they deliver it to the nursery, and then we mix it with redwood sawdust, and with volcanic, red rock. What else? When Bart was here he introduced some other kind of sand that we use, too. And for certain plants you use a lot of perlite.

Riess: When you sell the plant do you have printed information on cultural conditions?

Isenberg: We try to have a short description on every group of plants for the customer to read. This saves some time for the salesperson.

Riess: You showed me how you put all your cans out on the polyethylene.

Isenberg: Yes. The plants stay cleaner and also it keeps the weeds down.

Riess: What I was wondering was whether you have invented some techniques here.

Isenberg: Not really. As I say, we're fortunate to have topsoil. I'm still old-fashioned enough to think that the plant needs some soil. [laughter]

A Typical Day for Gerda Isenberg, Prop.

Riess: What is a typical day for you? When do you get up?

Isenberg: At seven, at the latest. And if I really am pressed for work I get up a little earlier. Also, if it isn't too cold!

Then I usually look through my mail. My grandson, who lives here, picks up my mail. Going through the mail sometimes takes an hour. Then I like to be down at the nursery by nine o'clock if I can, if there isn't too much going on, telephoning or whatever. Well, right now is holidays, and everything is different--.

Riess: Are there questions for you to answer, or decisions to make, every morning at the nursery?

Isenberg: With the help I have I don't have to say every day, "Do this or that today." I just check what everybody is doing, and usually I have a project of my own, working with the ferns.

I have been told that I did so much for the young people, to get this experience. Well, I'm not really teaching, because this kind of work you learn by your own mistakes, the way I learned it. And you have to have a chance. For instance, if you make a cutting or save some seed and none of it roots or germinates you have to try again and find out why they did not produce--this is the way you learn.

And this is also where your academic instruction can be very helpful. I by no means want to say that we don't need to take botany, chemistry, and biology, just because I did not have it. Also we [Yerba Buena Nursery] have a good collection of reference books which are being used all the time.

Riess: When you are in the nursery what do you do?

Isenberg: I do potting. I usually take care of the ferns.

One of my main accomplishments is cleaning up the different houses, and then I pick one of my workers to help me push the wheelbarrow. Since the big freeze [added in editing, after the December 1991 freeze] we have spent many hours of cleaning up.

Maintenance is very important for the appearance of the whole nursery.

Riess: Everybody works on maintenance.

Isenberg: Yes, I arranged it so that everybody has a part of the nursery for maintenance. So nobody can blame anybody else.

Riess: The staff all work well together?

Isenberg: Fortunately. It has not always been this way. There is no friction, there is no jealousy, no saying, "This is mine." Everybody down there is trying to grow something.

Riess: And who does the bookkeeping?

Isenberg: Since I arranged a board of directors for the foundation I have had help from Bob Young whom I asked to be the treasurer. Although the foundation is not functioning as yet, Bob has checked on my bookkeeping. He has been a great help to me, and I shall be forever grateful for his help and patience.

Riess: What does Brenda do?

Isenberg: Brenda is very helpful to me with business, answering letters or ordering labels, and so on. Correspondence. She does potting, too. And I have a part-time woman now who does nothing but watering. But I told her if it starts raining we will give her some other work to do. Everybody will do everything if it's necessary, but it's pretty well arranged now.

Riess: When the intern arrives from Iowa, what will she do?

Isenberg: We discussed that. Last Wednesday we had our meeting--we meet in here usually at eleven o'clock--and somebody mentioned the intern who was coming. I said, "The intern has to have a chance at everything, maintenance, propagation, everything." Also my workers were all concerned about her. "She comes from Iowa, oh, the places we have to take her." Fortunately she's going to drive out, and she'll have a car. That was a bit of a problem with the fellow who came from Holland: he didn't have a car. They want her to see Tilden Park and UC Berkeley and UC Santa Cruz, all the botanic gardens. And somebody said, "How about Los Angeles?" I said, "Now listen, she doesn't have to go to Los Angeles. Disneyland is not included in our program!" [laughter]

Riess: Part of the day is lunch? You give everyone lunch?

Isenberg: No, I give coffee if they want coffee. They bring their lunch, but they sit together.

Today two of them are exploring with another nursery the possibility of a computer. I understand that a computer is very helpful, but I said, "I don't want to have anything to do with it. Just make it cheap." I don't know what they are going to learn from this other man, but two of them are doing that. And two of them went for the Christmas tree, and one of them is down there by herself.

Riess: And in the afternoon?

Isenberg: I sleep for an hour. And then at about two, unless I have too much to do at my desk, I go out again and work until five. Sometimes I only work two hours in the afternoon.

Riess: And do you go to meetings?

Isenberg: Not as regularly as I used to. I belong to the California Horticultural Society, the Western Horticultural Society, the California Native Plant Society, and recently the San Francisco Fern Society, a newly-formed group. These societies have meetings in San Francisco, Los Altos, and Saratoga. I don't drive any more, but I always have a chance to go with someone else. My workers also attend these meetings.

For instance, Cal Hort doesn't stop meeting, even in the summertime! [laughing] They only stop in December. I have a neighbor here, Betsy Clebsch, who is quite the horticulturist, and very often I go to Cal Hort with Betsy. And Western Hort just had a Christmas party and I made little arrangements for ten tables. I made them in a form like a spray, different greens. Betsy took me to that.

What I don't do any more is go and give talks. I used to give a lot of fern talks to garden clubs. Also in the spring we have a lot of garden clubs that come here to visit the nursery. They bring their lunch and they get a tour of the nursery. I always think that there couldn't be another garden club, but there always is. [laughs]

Most of these functions I have to pass on to the younger generation, mainly on account of bad hearing. It is a pleasure for me to see the young people take over and do a better job than you did yourself.

Riess: Gerda, you work hard.

Isenberg: I do. But it is all right if I get my rest. I don't have the [nursery] telephone up here anymore, I have my own telephone now. I always used to have to listen in to see if a call was a personal call, you know. So that makes it much easier.

Riess: And today you had many telephone calls. Well, it is time for me to leave, and for you to have lunch. So let's stop. Thank you.

Transcriber: Sandra Tantalo
Final Typist: Merrilee Proffitt

APPENDICES

Quiet Drama by the Golden Gate

By Gerda Isenberg

(The following is based upon the author's experience in the evacuation of Japanese citizens and non-citizens from the city of San Francisco. Since the events of our day, such as those described below, will long be subject to debate and speculation, it is important now to encourage and keep such eye-witness accounts. Gerda Isenberg is a member of the Palo Alto Meeting—Eds.)

All people with a very few exceptions must have personal experience and contact with human events in order to have interest and understanding. Often similar experiences will help people to imagine other circumstances and situations, but the great majority of people will not understand an earthquake unless it shakes their own house. I have no hope to reach this kind of isolationists with the following attempt to create better understanding and deeper concern, and out of this concern the will to act. But to people who approach human suffering and problems as Christians, with open minds and hearts, I should like to present a picture of the evacuation and concentration of all people of Japanese ancestry in California. This event is apt to be forgotten and overshadowed by more tragic and more dramatic events of the war, but it presents all the political, economic and racial problems, which, in a different measure and form, are the chief cause of this war. Friends want to work for peace, for better postwar conditions, for better understanding of races and nations; very well—here is our chance. Friends in California have had many a day when they felt nothing more could be done, when every plan and idea to help was rejected, and they were hopelessly in a minority. But we have no right to give up; where there is a will there is a way.

I am beginning to understand what stands behind the evacuation and internment of thousands of families of Japanese ancestry, about seventy thousand of whom are American citizens. Originally these plans did not come from Washington and neither did they come from the Fourth Army. It seems the power behind the throne is the business interest of vegetable and fruit growers, who resent the strong competition of the Japanese farmers. The same people who succeeded in 1924, with the Oriental Exclusion Act, have been at work again. In short, business interests and race prejudice have succeeded in putting thousands of women and children, old and feeble people, and capable, skilled men, who should be producing food and material, behind barbed wire fences.

The fact that their American citizenship is not taken into consideration is probably the greatest hardship involved. But only a few individuals have had the courage to speak up for their rights. The Japanese American Citizens League, in their desire to show their good spirit and cooperation, has put up no fight at all. Another cause of resentment is the fact that they will be a burden to the government. I have heard this expressed many times. The Japanese people themselves have worked out impressive plans for cooperative farming, and I have been told again and again: "We want to produce, we want to show the government that we are willing to help." I do not know if any of these plans will be considered and worked out in other states: I certainly hope so for both human and economic reasons.

Friends all over California have helped with the evacuation and we have seen these people leave their homes, their jobs, their business and their farms with no certainty of when and if they will return. Fathers of large families look with apprehension and worry to postwar times. After weeks and months of vain hopes and waiting the days of evacuation have finally come. We have helped with our cars to transport families with all their baggage and bundles to the places where the army takes over. At one day I saw between six and seven hundred people assemble, two hundred at a time, in a large hall, where they waited for the buses to take them to camp. Except for an occasional question from a child, there was no sign of impatience, no outward manifestation of resentment, only an effort to cooperate and to be of as little trouble as possible. Friends, with the help of people from various churches, served tea, sandwiches and appies. Little troubles were taken care of, like the forgotten teeth of an old man, the forgotten brief case of a Japanese minister, a lost key, etc. Various people have stored furniture, cars, plants and taken the responsibility for property.

I saw Japanese people say goodby to their colored neighbors and their Caucasian landladies; I saw the American soldiers and government officials treat them with great kindness and consideration; and once more I wondered why *this* kind of public opinion has had no voice at all. The small Japanese children have been told that they are going on a picnic or vacation. This is done in most families in order not to let the children know the real meaning. Even if the parents wanted to explain I doubt if they could; they are overwhelmed, worried, numbed. Many of them have said to me: "I don't understand this. Aren't we living in a democracy?" An old man expressed himself in his broken English: "Japanese treated just the same thiefman." Some of the young people look forward to the camp with the anticipation of a new experience. But they are only the ones who do not have to fear that their education will be interrupted and who are too young and carefree to fear the consequences of internment.

On the whole the Japanese young and old have

been badly in need of moral support and Friends have been doing their best to give it. I am sure all of us feel it is precious little we can give and the small friendly neighborly deeds we are doing at this time remind us painfully of all the work that should have been done years ago. Who actually worked for better understanding of Orientals in California? Who fought the Exclusion Act? Do we not all share the responsibility for the injustice which we are bewailing today? Outside of public schools no effort has been made to include Orientals in our cultural and social activities. I resent all sugarcoating of these events. *C'est la guerre* is an insufficient, cheap excuse. Neither do I like to be reassured that *we* are treating people well in concentration camps. Are we stooping to compare ours with Nazi methods? This Pharisaic attitude is not worthy of a nation which is looked upon by all oppressed and suffering people in the world as the citadel of human freedom. It is self-understood that we are not beating and mistreating people, and we do not have to pat ourselves on the back on that account. *Qui s'excuse s'accuse.*

What is left for us to do? The organization and establishment of the camps is in the hands of the army and the WRA. Unfortunately the latter office is anything but ready for the job which the army has turned over to them. People arrive in reception camps and are apt to find no beds or cots. The food has been insufficient: only children up to five years have received milk. For the first ten days in one reception camp, only one doctor and one graduate nurse were in charge of medical care for three thousand people. This seems not only unnecessary but quite dangerous. Mental cases, developed in some instances on account of the evacuation, have not been taken care of separately. I could report innumerable facts of mismanagement and hardship which are the result of a lack of previous plans and organization. I believe, however, that as time goes on, these mistakes will be rectified. They are mainly due to a lack of imagination and understanding of human needs. It is impossible for Friends in California even to begin to supply the camps with the recreational, medical, and culinary supplies which are lacking at the present time. We have collected toys, games, books, and musical instruments, also a minimum of medical supplies. But all these things are merely a drop in the bucket.

It is important to keep on presenting unfavorable conditions to the officials who are apt to bog down in red tape and bureaucracy. It would be a good plan to have regular visits of Friends to the camps in order to have interested and understanding people as go-betweens from the internees to the men behind office desks. Friends have been given the responsibility by the government to resettle Japanese students in Universities outside of California. This job will involve a great deal of work in social relations besides all the technical procedures. It is very doubtful whether we shall be allowed to work on resettlement of other individuals and families. What seems more important than anything else is to pave the way back for these people after the war. There are interests at work seeking to take away the citizenship from people of Japanese ancestry and to eliminate all Japanese commercial and farming competition in California. Let us try, no matter how much we are in the minority, to prevent this injustice. We should not be content just to clean up the mess other people have made. During the last twenty-five years the Service Committee has been a sort of glorified garbage man. I am certainly not trying to belittle the remarkable work that has been done all over the world; I am making an appeal for higher ambition.

I Visited Tule Lake

By GERDA ISENBERG

(*Few members of the Society of Friends are as conversant with the spiritual and economic problems of Japanese-Americans as is Gerda Isenberg. We are fortunate in having the following account of her visit to the most difficult of American camps.—Eds.*)

Two years ago I saw the trains with hundreds of Japanese-Americans leave the California towns and at the end of last month, I found some of these people again at the Tule Lake segregation camp, where I went as a member of the A.F.S.C

Tule Lake is considered by the general public as the place where all "the bad ones" are. There has been very little publicity about this camp since the riot in November. Only recently *Life* magazine, in its issue of March 20th, has produced pictures and a short article, which touches upon the many problems of the internees. During my four-day visit in the camp, I had a good opportunity to learn about these problems. It is, of course, unreasonable to believe all of the twenty thousand internees to be of one mind and consequently brush all interest and responsibility aside with the simple explanation that they are "bad," i.e., disloyal. A relatively small Fascist group does exist; this group was well organized and tried to terrorize the whole camp. They did this with some success and finally staged the riot in November, 1943. These "gangsters" as they are called by some of the Japanese-Americans are now safely locked up behind the stockade. Never-theless the wish was expressed that the stockade and its inmates would be removed from the camp and possibly another segregation undertaken, so that the internees could be assured of law and order. This Fascist group advocated no attendance at American schools, no visiting with Caucasians and that the vegetables from the Tule Lake farm should not be sent to other relocation centers. Naturally I did not talk to or see any of this group, but staff members and internees were still anxious to tell about the riot, which caused everybody no end of trouble and deprivation.

I visited two families, whom I had known before evacuation. These families both have one member who is not a U. S. citizen and does not speak English. This factor contributes greatly to the reasons why they are afraid to relocate in any other state. They have very little hope of being able to return to their old homes on the West Coast and we have to take into consideration the fear complex these people have developed during two years of internment. When segregation came along, it seemed to them that the only way out was to go to Tule Lake, although they really and truly do not want to go to Japan. One couple does not read and write Japanese properly. They are also afraid of the different customs and ways of life, for example, the position of the Japanese woman in contrast to the American woman. In short, Japan is a strange country to them. Thus when asked if they wanted to sell their property in California, they said they would like to keep it a while longer, which shows that there is still a ray of hope that they may be able to return to their own homes and land. Fortunately, the W.R.A. understands the various reasons why people have gone to this segregation center and the internees are being given another chance to relocate.

Above all, we have to be concerned about the people of the ages between sixteen and twenty. Theirs are the most complicated and most serious problems of all the internees. I was asked by some of the Caucasian teachers to talk to their high school classes and also to a group of young Christians on Sunday evening. I used a very personal approach in telling them that I was a German born, naturalized American citizen, and that I had close family relations in Germany. After Pearl Harbor all these people became from one day to another the official enemies of the country to which I am bound by my responsibility and loyalty as a citizen and by my belief in the democratic form of government. Things which we have been taking for granted became a severe test, especially to Americans of foreign parentage. For the young Christians, I could use a quotation from the New Testament: "If a man come to me and leave not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple."

In the high school where the majority are Buddhist, I concentrated on the subject of democracy and human rights. Although the evacuation seems to them a proof that democracy does not work, I tried to make them see that we have no right to lose faith in it. Like all other human institutions, democracy cannot be perfect and there is no justification for expecting it to be so. But there is all reason to study and work for a greater fulfillment of democracy. I told them that it probably seems quite logical to them to compare their situation to that of European concentration camps, especially to the treatment of Jews in Europe, but I gave them some contrasts. For example, the problems of the internees in Tule Lake are: *Can we get a good education? Can we have decent recreation and enough work to keep us busy?* The problem of the people in a German concentration camp is: *Will I be alive tomorrow or the next day?* Another problem at Tule Lake is: Will we eat turkey or beans for Christmas? In an European concentration camp the question is: Will I get enough to eat to stay alive? Furthermore, in spite of the fact that the people in Tule Lake camp are behind wire fences, they are still members of human society and under human law. The people in European concentration camps are outside of human society and human law:

they are completely at the mercy of unscrupulous and lawless gangsters.

The point I was trying to make is that it is very easy and very dangerous to become cynical about democracy and lose all measure of differentiation. I then talked to them about race prejudice and minority problems and reminded them of the fact that also the minorities amongst themselves lack tolerance and understanding. It is important for these young people to be aware of the fact that they are not the only minority group which has to suffer.

Finally I made one more effort to give them something to look forward to and work for. Instead of getting completely lost in camp life and their own personal problems, they should ask themselves what kind of a world they would like to live in, and then study and prepare themselves for this kind of a life, this kind of a world, regardless of where they will find themselves after the war. I realize that this is a big order for the average girl or boy, but I see no other possibility of helping them. It seems to be the only way out of the problem which consists of strong family authority and ties and the loyalty and tie to the country of their birth, on the other hand.

We should seriously think of the several thousand young people who will live in camp for a number of years with this feeling of not being wanted, of not really belonging anywhere, of having lost faith in democracy and of having no experience whatsoever in taking responsibility for earning a living. This is the reason why it is of the greatest importance to make these young people work for their future.

Serious economic problems will face every country after this war. Problems of minorities and race will grow with greater communication and greater liberation of people. Let them study about these problems and let us teach them about democracy and Christianity, not as perfectionists, but as people who do not expect the impossible and who are willing to work for their ideals in spite of all human imperfections. The young Japanese-Americans need *positive* encouragement more than they need sympathy for their cynicism and criticism of our government and of the war. If we fail to give them encouragement, the influence which comes from behind the stockade will be stronger than ours and we shall have failed in our responsibility towards these young fellow citizens. Teachers and visiting Friends can be of invaluable help, in direct cooperation with the program of the W.R.A., which has, in the words of Secretary of the Interior, Harold L. Ickes, "in general been handled with discretion, humanity and wisdom."

1950

State Assembly Campaign Speech

On March 23rd [1950] I was asked by the Democratic Central Committee of Santa Clara County to enter the race for the 28th district seat in the State Assembly.

This proposition was quite a shock and a surprise to me, but with encouragement from my family and from my friends I have considered this very serious step and I have accepted.

If there are enough voters who believe that my past experiences in working with people and the standing I have in my community justify a candidacy for political office, then I shall welcome the opportunity and the responsibility to serve and represent the people of this district in the State Assembly.

I have already been warned that I would be disillusioned, that I must not have my feelings hurt and that I am probably not tough enough. I would like to answer these warnings or doubts right here, because they are important.

First of all, I have no illusions about the workings of political parties because I have dealt long enough with people to know human nature. Man is capable of the lowest baseness and of the highest integrity. We have to contend with the one and depend on the other. If being disillusioned could stop my concern and my interest in human affairs, I can assure you that I would have stayed home long ago and attended to my knitting.

I can truthfully say that my feelings are not very easily hurt. I have been called names which I do not like to repeat in public, and there have been people who wanted to tar and feather me. Such things are caused by misunderstandings and fears, and instead of having one's feelings hurt, one should go to the roots of these misunderstandings and fears and try to overcome them.

In regard to being tough, I would like to say that I have no intention to be tough. In order to be an effective public servant one should be very sensitive, sensitive to the needs and problems of all kinds of people. The word politics has changed its meaning and has become identified with something hard, relentless, and possibly corrupt, and if one is not hard and relentless, one should stay out of politics. I refuse to take such a defeatist attitude, and I know that one can take a firm stand for the things one believes in without being a politician in the modern sense of the word.

I am not dogmatic in my political thinking, and I have tried for a long time to keep my mind open for the real human and economic problems without trying to fit them into a political or economic blueprint. I firmly believe that there can not be any blueprints for human life, may they be socialism or capitalism, the so-called welfare state or free enterprise. To me those are just so many words, and most of the people who use them are quite confused about the meaning of all these slogans.

Our greatest task today is to prove to the world that democracy works, that we practice what we preach, and that we are united instead of being disrupted and divided into capital and labor, into rich and poor, into Jews and Christians, into Negroes and whites, into majority and minority. People everywhere, and especially people in politics, should make it their primary concern to overcome all friction amongst the American people.

The eyes of the world are upon us with fear and hope. Let us eliminate this fear and justify this hope. I am convinced that out best safeguard against any totalitarian system is full employment, security for all people and a careful, very careful preservation of our civil liberties. In the face of the atom bomb and the dangerous tension between East and West, we can not afford to be divided and disunited.

I believe that I have said enough about my general approach to politics and human problems and that it is time to come to specific issues. What are the problems confronting us in the Santa Clara Valley? What are the problems confronting the State of California? What can and what should the California Legislature do about them?

Today we have 500,000 unemployed people in the state. Is it not possible to put these people to work on projects which are not artificial, but necessary? Of course it is. We need more highways, more [section missing from handwritten text].

The necessity to increase industry in California brings us right to the problem of water. Please don't expect me to have a ready solution for California's water problem. What I know is this: we must get the water from somewhere. The job to do now is to study the best possible plan, to find out if the Reber plan is feasible, or if there is enough water in the Central Valley Project to fill the needs in Santa Clara County, or if water could be brought down from the Klamath and Columbia rivers or from the American River.

The question of who should do the job, private industry or the Federal Bureau of Reclamation, depends entirely on who can do it best and how much the final cost will be to the people. My decision or vote on this would be determined exactly by these practical factors, not by any theories about government control and free enterprise.

One problem that has been on my mind for a long time are the seasonal farm workers. This situation is a disgrace to our state, people living in shanty towns which are worse than living conditions in bombed-out cities of Europe after the war. No sewers, no plumbing, no electricity. Children out of such unsanitary environments carry their diseases to our public schools. The worst of all is that these approximately 200,000 people in the San Joaquin Valley can not get unemployment compensation, they don't come under the minimum wage and hour law. They don't get social security benefits, and unless they have lived three years in the state and one year in the county they can't even get relief.

Collier's Magazine of April 1st has an article about these farm workers called "The Americans Nobody Wants." The title is a little misleading because these people are certainly wanted when the time of harvesting the crops comes, but the lack of responsibility on the part of the employers and the county administration are unbelievable.

Another problem which we are facing in our state and in particular in Santa Clara Valley is the problem of low rent housing. The California Federation for Civic Unity and the Palo Alto Fair Play Committee have done a great deal of thought and research on this problem, and we have come to the conclusion that the only way we can get low rent housing is to avail ourselves of the money appropriated by the federal government. If the need, and I am sure that everyone knows about this need, could be filled by private enterprise, I would be very much in favor of it, but the fact remains that this can not be done. The decisions about the kind of houses, who is going to build the houses and where, rest entirely with each individual community or town or city. Again, I would like to say that I do not consider such a project government interference or control.

Our modern economy has become highly complicated, and we can not govern this country the way a few agricultural states were governed before the industrial era. We have to move along with a changing world. We are facing problems today that people a hundred or less years ago could not possibly have known about, not in their wildest dreams. But this does not mean that we have to change the American ideals. Indeed not, we still have to go a long long way before we realize these very unique ideas, that all men are created equal and that every man has the right to the pursuit of happiness. This pursuit of happiness is not a free for all and the devil take the hindmost, and the equality of all men is not economic and physical, but to be understood in regard to divine order.

If I should be elected to serve and represent the people of the 28th Assembly District, my decisions and votes will not be influenced by any slogans and isms, but by these very fundamental ideas of the United States of America.

THE MEANING OF CIVIC UNITY

what are the forces in California sparking the move toward better intergroup relations?

By GERDA ISENBERG

SINCE the end of the war, a new development in community organization has taken place in California. At the present time, there are 53 organizations all over the state concerned with the improvement of intergroup relations and with the improvement of minority groups in regard to employment, housing and civil rights. The names of those organizations vary; most of them are known as "Council for Civic Unity," others as "Fair Play Committee," "Improvement Club," and "Inter-racial Committee." But not only the names vary; the reasons and incentives which start these organizations are different in different localities. In some cases the committee or council began with the work for relocation of Japanese-Americans after the war; others began through an incident of violence which aroused the citizens to their responsibility; somewhere else the incentive was a housing problem or a school problem.

These community organizations are co-ordinated into the California Federation for Civic Unity, which acts in an advisory capacity and maintains an exchange of information between member organizations. A great deal of time and interest is spent on the various practical problems and the various technics for solving them.

It is not the purpose of this article to discuss the different committees or the different technics for better race relations, but to touch upon a problem which would be very difficult to be discussed in committee meetings and workshops, and that is the question: What stands behind civic unity? What are the ideas, what is the faith which make us do what we are trying to do? Does it matter what our motives are, and will the ultimate results be the same just as long as we *do* work for better race relations? There are probably as many answers to this question as there are people engaged in this kind of work; but it seems of the utmost importance to find out if by any chance there could be a definite answer, if there could be a basis in which our work should be rooted and on which we can depend when all the selfish reasons we might have fail.

The success of civic unity depends not on action alone, but to a large extent on how this action is carried out; and the ways and means are, in turn, dependent on our motives. This problem presents itself repeatedly in all phases of social and political work, and the committees for civic unity are not an exception. Everywhere and with all kinds of people—Caucasian, Negroes, Orientals, Jews or Christians, majority or minority—selfish reasons play a predominant role. The desire for self-assertion, especially in frustrated people, is often the reason to engage vigorously in a good cause. The political zealot always uses race relations as a political weapon. People belonging to minority groups are sometimes only interested to an extent where the problem concerns themselves. These are all very human traits and weaknesses, but who is so utterly free of them that he could pronounce judgment?

How Can Prejudice Be Fought?

The question we have to ask ourselves is: Can we get our bearings from somewhere else than these very human and limited motives, which will of necessity only produce very limited results? From where, for instance, can come our courage to counteract prejudice and hatred in trying to break down discrimination in housing, employment, and accommodations in public places? Where shall the person find inner strength who is always aware of the fact that by anyone, anywhere, he might be rejected on account of the color of his skin, the shape of his eyes, or his religion—the inner strength which can help to refrain from aggressiveness and violence? Is it enough to say that we believe in democracy and that should be sufficient? Is not democracy also a very disputable conception; do all people mean the same when they talk about it? Let us go a little deeper into American ideals, and we find above all the words in our Declaration

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Gerda Isenberg, chairman of the Palo Alto Fair Play Committee and actively interested in many other civic affairs, is well qualified to write about minority group problems.

of Independence: "All men are created equal." This phrase is used frequently in connection with inter-racial work, although its real meaning seems to be lost. The most common interpretation today is that all men should have equal opportunity. Is this what Thomas Jefferson meant to say? Is this what Abraham Lincoln had in mind when he repeated these words. Would all men be created equal if all men had equal opportunities? Obviously not.

Let us suppose that we could eliminate all drastic differences in our physical environment, that it would no longer be possible for one child to be born in a tenement house and another in beautiful, comfortable surroundings, or that human society could arrange its economic life in such a way that there would be equal opportunity for all in work and financial gain; it still would not mean that all men are created equal. Possibilities and opportunities lie as much, if not more, inside a person as outside, and in that respect every human being differs. The outstanding creative individual in music, literature and science certainly has from the very beginning different qualities to form his life than the average human being. But also, the so-called average human beings will never be able to make the same of an equal opportunity. No matter how equal and just our human institutions might become, creation knows no equality; there are not two leaves alike on a tree, much less are there two human beings alike, and obviously our Creator did not mean us to be equal or alike.

"The Inequalities of Creation"

Why, then, have we repeated the words, "All men are created equal" for almost 200 years, and how are we to understand them? The signers of the Declaration of Independence knew very well the inequalities of creation, the inequalities of human and social life, but they also understood the real existence of one equality, namely: all men are created equal *before God*, which means that the worth of the individual does not rest with his bank account and pocketbook, nor with his natural gifts, may they be physical or mental, nor with the color of his skin or the shape of his eyes, but with the purity of his heart. The most humble, uneducated man or woman can have a good character, can be decent, honest, fair and courageous, and the most intelligent, gifted person can be mean, selfish and full of hatred. All people have the forces of good and evil in them, and it is left to everyone alone to fight a continuous battle between these forces—to decide which one shall get the upper hand, good or evil. *This* is the basis on which all men are created equal, rich or poor, black or white, Jew or Christian, majority or minority: all are sinners before the Lord, and by their fruits they shall be known.

American ideals have been converted into political slogans and shallow sentimentalities, and they will lose their meaning and message in the world unless we return them to the place where they were conceived, namely, in subordination to a divine order. It might very well appear today as if a divine order does not exist; this is so because people are blind to it, they do not want to see it and, consequently, they act without taking a divine order into consideration, with the result of chaos and fear. What, in the midst of all this chaos and fear, can be the relationship to our fellow-men? Can it be based on slogans we do not believe, or equalities we know do not exist, or sentimentalities which make us feel virtuous and charitable? *Real* equality and brotherhood can only exist where man realizes and respects his fellow-man as an individual, with freedom of conscience, with freedom of choice between good and evil—in short, as God's creature. Only then do the differences of color and class lose their significance and we also realize that humanity is not divided into good and bad people—the presumably good ones in agreement with us and the bad ones in opposition. With the understanding of the real nature of man we shall also understand the American ideal and it will be possible for people to carry this ideal into their communities and have lasting results. It is time to stop talking in words and phrases which have lost their real meaning and it is time to bring our ideals back into direct contact with a divine order, lest the Civic Unity Movement will go down with the chaos of our time as a forgotten gesture. We shall never overcome prejudice, fear and hatred in others and we shall never overcome prejudice, fear and hatred in ourselves towards the people who do not agree with us unless we fully understand, without any materialistic and physical qualifications, that we are all created equal before God.

Reprinted from the February, 1951, issue of Frontier, the Voice of the New West

E. 123

Sakura Gardens

2116 N. EL CAMINO REAL • YORKSHIRE 8-1694 MOUNTAIN VIEW, CALIF. 94040

September 19, 1965

Mrs. Gerda Isenberg
Palo Alto Fair Play Council
180 University Ave.,
Palo Alto, Calif.

Dear Mrs. Isenberg:

My wife, Florence, and I, wish to congratulate you and honor you for your devoted contribution for the past twenty years towards your work with the Palo Alto Fair Play Council and for which it stands.

Certainly, no one can know and understand what a courageous person you have been during the early part of the return of the Japanese to California more than I as I have been a recipient of your devoted work on our behalf. The Nisei's safe and smooth return back to our homes in California was a direct result of your very great work.

Since then all peoples of all races have been helped in the same manner. My only regret is that I would have liked to have had some hand in helping others also, but the expediency of making a living and saying that I did not have the time is really no excuse when compared to your devotion to a cause.

Even though I am unable to contribute the time, my feelings were always with the under dog. I have always admired you, and it is with great pride that I say that it was great to have known you. Please continue your work for many more years to come.

Very sincerely yours,

George K. Tsukagawa

THE PALO ALTO FAIR PLAY COUNCIL IN BRIEF

As a committee it was formed in 1945 to assist with housing and jobs for the returning interned Japanese-Americans (World War II)

In 1948 its members developed the nationally famous Lawrence Tract, the first planned successful demonstration in intergroup living in this area.

In 1952 it was the first group to announce that it would accept housing listings available without racial discrimination.

In 1952 it initiated the first Brotherhood Week event in this area.

In 1956 thousands of stickers, "I like to patronize businesses that employ all races in all capacities" were distributed and used on bills and checks throughout California. Reprints are still available

In 1957 We were the first voluntary group to advertise in the local newspaper directly on behalf of specific prospective home buyers.

In 1958 the first practical proposal to counteract drop-out of high school students was presented and accepted by the Superintendent of Sequoia Union High School District

In 1959 placed an ad in the local paper in the personals column--"TO MEN OF GOODWILL. When offering or listing your home for sale or rent BE SURE that you or your Real Estate Broker include and extend an equal opportunity to persons of every race. Palo Alto Fair Play Council".

In 1960 it initiated the activity that resulted in Stanford University's decision to list only nondiscriminatory off-campus housing.

Some 3500 copies of the pamphlet "Prejudice Won't Hide" have been ordered by churches, business corporations, State Departments, Federal Military establishments and individuals coast to coast.

Until her recent resignation as our housing chairman, Mrs. Louis Mazer was also a member of the Palo Alto Mayor's Advisory Committee on Human Relations and the City Conciliation Council under the California Fair Employment Practices Commission.

In 1965 tiny stickers were printed to be attached to checks in payment of rent and mortgages that read "I like to have neighbors of all races and religions". Still available.

In January 1967 the Council initiated a socio-educational pioneering activity that for the first time is reaching the isolated Mexican-American mothers in adjacent Mountain View, to bring them a better knowledge of English and basic subjects. This promising project has the active cooperation of the Mountain View-Los Altos Dept. of Adult Education. The children who come to the classes with their mothers are being offered nursery school advantages by highly qualified volunteer assistants.

The Council, with the cooperation of concerned real estate brokers is developing a new housing technique to motivate minority families to seek housing of their choice in accordance with their incomes. Aliens also are served when citizenship is a job requirement or there is a language barrier.
The Council offers a wide variety of advisory services to individuals with problems of discrimination. It is also a center of information and resource material from throughout the United States for students, researchers and intergroup relation organizations.

March 1968

Lawrence Tract: A bold experiment in integrated living

Peninsula Times-Tribune, March 31, 1980

A lot has happened in 30 years

By Loretta Green

PALO ALTO — Ethel and Aurelious (Reo) Miles were the first to move in on Lawrence Lane. They occupied No. 988. Elizabeth and Dan Dana made plans to move into No. 962. Melba and Leroy "Jack" Gee later moved into No. 979 on Lawrence Lane.

The Mileses are black, the Gees are Chinese and the Danas are white.

Big deal. So, what else is new.

In 1948, when it was planned, and in June 1950, when it began to happen, it was very new and a very big deal.

It was, as Elizabeth Duveneck Dana said recently, "a very far out idea."

The place was the Lawrence Tract, the first Peninsula subdivision designed specifically as an experiment in interracial living. It consisted of approximately 23 new homes on Lawrence Lane, Colorado Avenue and Greer Road in the South end of Palo Alto.

The idea was born at a gathering of Palo Alto Fair Play Council members. The council, organized in 1945 by Gerda Isenberg of Woodside, assisted Japanese-Americans with housing and employment after their return from World War II internment and then turned to helping other minority groups as well.

As moving day approached, it appeared seven homes would be occupied by Caucasians, nine by blacks, six by Japanese and one by Chinese.

A 1950 Palo Alto Times editorial came out strongly in favor of the project. Editor Elinor V. Cogswell wrote in rhetoric appropriate to the day:

"I've just been visiting two of Palo Alto's newest homes, attractive redwood 3-bedroom houses that cost somewhere around $9,000...First to move in were Mr. and Mrs. Reo Miles. Reo is a graduate student in law at the University of Santa Clara and his wife has just received her teaching credentials at San Jose State College. They are well-bred and intelligent people who just happen to have been born with skins we call 'colored.'"

Miss Cogswell's column urged white neighbors to be cooperative.

Another black couple moving into the tract in 1950 was Ernest (Pat) and Lula Belle Jones, who built a home on Greer Road.

"There was a Piera Dairy farm across the street so the only thing we could see was cows," said Mrs. Jones as she pulled out some old black and white photos. Much of Colorado Avenue was a weed-filled field.

Mrs. Jones, manager of the designer department at Joseph Magnin, Stanford Shopping Center, said the Lawrence Tract purchase ended their long search for a home in Palo Alto. "We just wanted to buy a house. Palo Alto Gardens just wouldn't let you (blacks) in there — no way. That was about 1948."

Not only blacks were grateful for the Lawrence Tract. In the '50s, Jack and Melba Gee were being turned down by builders because they were Chinese.

"A builder in Los Altos said, 'No, we just can't have you,'" recalled Jack Gee.

The Gees never regretted their move to the Lawrence Tract, although Gee admits they moved in primarily because it was one of the few areas available to them.

"But kids grew up under the objective for which the tract was founded in an interracial neighborhood. They grew up in the environment we wanted for them," said Gee whose only child, a son, is now an adult.

Another Asian-American couple still living in the Lawrence Tract are Chizuye and Buichi Nakata, who had the memory of three years in the Topaz internment camp fresh in their minds when they came to Palo Alto looking for housing. Gerda Isenberg helped them find housing in the Lawrence Tract.

Japanese-Americans Eunice and Tom Yanari, who own Emerson Cleaners in Palo Alto, built on Colorado in 1953 although Mrs. Yanari says they had not experienced prior housing difficulties.

"We were very happy," said Mrs. Yanari, who has lived in Palo Alto since 1937. "There were no difficulties and I think it was a good project. Everyone got along fine and that was good especially in those days when everyone was so conscious of it."

Mona and Edward Key, a white couple, were relative latecomers to the tract, first renting a home, then buying it. They learned of the street's unique history afterwards.

"We were delighted that that part of Palo Alto was integrated. Previously we had only lived in an all-white neighborhood," said Mrs. Key, director of the Ta'Enna Nursery School at the South Peninsula Jewish Center in Palo Alto.

Among those involved in the Fair Play Council were the Danas, Frank Duveneck and the late Josephine Duveneck, Gerda Isenberg, C. Stanton Selby and Paul Lawrence, a black man for whom the track was ultimately named.

"We had no illusions of solving the housing problem but we wanted to do something," Mrs. Isenberg said. "I had no more idea of how to set it up than the man in the moon. The meetings were so frustrating. My lawyers said we should give it up.

"Besides having the idea, we had to get a piece of land. Some people were very opposed and said we were building a 'nigger shack town' and I received a few unpleasant phone calls."

Paul Lawrence, then a Stanford University doctoral student, negotiated with city officials because of his talent as a mediator.

During a phone interview, Lawrence, who lives in Sacramento, recalled some of the events of 30 years ago, although he admitted he was hazy on the details.

"All of us were a little concerned when the Palo Alto city council voted not to participate in low cost housing which was then being made possible by the federal government," he said. "A group of us were talking one night and felt that if the city couldn't do anything, maybe a group of individuals could go to work and try to do something on their own."

The group located some property and Lawrence was selected to contact the realtor, who agreed to sell the entire parcel of more than 25 lots to the council for $2,500 in cash. Ten people in the group wrote checks for $250, which Lawrence cashed.

When he arrived with the money the next day, another realtor was attempting to purchase it for a higher price.

"But the owner was a man of his word and said if I had the money on me, he would accept it," Lawrence said.

From there Lawrence negotiated with the city engineer for permits, engaged a landscaper and learned about utilities, sidewalks and sewers.

Larence never lived in the tract because he accepted a job in Washington, D.C., at Howard University, the nation's largest black school.

When someone mailed a Palo Alto Times clipping saying the integrated subdivision had been named the Lawrence Tract and one of its streets, Lawrence Lane, he was "flabbergasted."

He returned to Southern California as the first black superintendent of schools in the history of the state. But when he returned to Palo Alto in 1960 no homes were available in the Lawrence Tract. He purchased a home on the corner of Waverley and Oregon, but not before a confrontation with the realtor over selling to a black family. (Lawrence's daughters still live in Palo Alto. They are Catherine Lawrence, a teacher at Palo Alto High School, and Robin Lawrence.)

In the meantime the Lawrence Tract had rather successfully fulfilled its goal of an integrated neighborhood. In order to keep it such, the members incorporated to protect what was, in a sense, a restrictive covenant which said that a black family moving out would try to sell to other blacks, a white family to other whites and so on.

Among other early Lawrence Tract residents were: the Richard Stannards and George McCabes, who were white; Catherine and Vinson Jenkins and Shirley and Franklin Williams, who were black; the Peter Idas and Moriyo Nakamuras, who were Japanese.

The Lawrence Tract today retains many of the original families but the intended even racial ratio has fallen victim to Palo Alto's high housing cost and the tract is predominantly white.

Belle Jones still recalls the socials in the park area when their children were young.

"During the summer we'd have picnics and haul our picnic tables to the end of the cul de sac where each of us would bring a dish. I remember Reo Miles calling over the fence, 'Hey, are we Q-ing (barbecuing) today?'"

Mona Key said, "There is still a strong feeling among the founding group. One year we had the neighborhood Christmas party at our house. People who had lived here before showed up and felt they had a perfect right to come because they had lived on Lawrence Lane."

The purpose of the founding group was perhaps best described in a paper discovered recently by Elizabeth Dana. It was written by her mother, the late Josephine Duveneck, and said in part:

"Those of us who are involved in causes leading to changes in social attitudes and structures often feel frustrated by the theoretical nature of our efforts. We do a lot of talking trying to persuade by argument and oratory. Words spoken or written are, after all, only words, easily forgotten. One successful demonstration is more effective than a hundred speeches. Some of us working in the field of civil rights had this in mind when we inaugurated a small housing project in Palo Alto."

A distinguished leader recalls 'other' days

A former Lawrence Lane black resident who went on to become U. S. ambassador to Ghana says the late Joseph Eichler built him an Eichler home in another part of Palo Alto solely to keep him out of an Eichler tract.

The time was the '50s. The man, attorney Franklin Williams of New York, recalled the incident. He and his family lived at 988 Lawrence Lane and considered looking for a larger house.

As regional counsel for the NAACP and a member of a citizens advisory committee to the Palo Alto board of education, Williams was disturbed that Palo Alto had no black teachers. The superintendent assured him he knew of no one who was qualified.

Williams told him about Willis Williams (no relation), a teacher and assistant principal in Richmond. Williams offered to sell Willis Williams his house with no down payment so anxious was he to secure a black teacher. Besides, he was interested in a home in the new Eichler tract nearby.

At the Eichler sales office he was told no houses were available. A fellow Democrat and white friend, Ellie Heller (who later became a national Democratic chairwoman for California and member of the University of California Board of Regents), double checked the availablity of homes and told him he had "been given the business."

That night an Eichler salesman visited Franklin Williams with a message: Joseph Eichler would sell him a house in the tract if Eichler could ask the other buyers for their approval. An angry Williams refused.

"The next night he came back and said Joe would sell it if I'd be the last to move in," Williams said. Because he had to utilize a veteran's option, he reluctantly agreed and signed over his Lawrence Lane home to the black teacher. But, word came again via the salesman that the deal was off.

"He said Eichler's sister-in-law, a partner in the business, had seen me in the office and said she objected to selling the house to a black. I got very angry and went to see Joe Eichler," Williams related. "We had a vigorous debate. Joe advanced all of the standard arguments. He was a business man not a social innovator, he said. But he said that as I was regional counsel of the NAACP, he would build a whole tract for colored people. I said that was ridiculous."

Williams said Eichler offered to build him a house anywhere else and would charge him no more than for a tract house. Then, according to Williams, Eichler himself found a large lot on Coulumbe Street in Palo Alto.

Before the project could begin, word got out that Eichler was building a house for a black family. A Spanish rug cleaner and his wife, who lived across the street, started a petition to get the property owner to back off the sale. Eichler was forced to hire counsel to make the owner sell.

"I believe then that Eichler got angry that a man with whom he had a business deal was going to back away because of a racial issue," Williams said.

Shortly afterwards, according to Williams, Joseph Eichler began selling homes in his tract to everyone regardless of race.

The fact is Joseph Eichler became an adamant and courageous leader in fairness and nondiscrimination in housing.

In July 1958 Eichler carried out a threat to withdraw from the Associated Home Builders, Inc., for its failure to go on record opposing racial discrimination in housing. He not only personally withdrew but withdrew his firm, Eichler Homes, Inc., located in Palo Alto.

Eichler had taken issue with a statement attributed to Richard Doyle, former Palo Alto municipal judge, then executive vice president of the builders group, who said, "It is a generally accepted theory that minority races depreciate property values" in housing developments.

Eichler said there were "nonwhites" in most of his subdivisions and there had been very marked increases in property values. He also said he believed other realtors "detest discrimination as much as I do" but felt they were "bound by custom and fear of financial loss."

In October of 1958 Joseph Eichler tried unsuccessfully to get Stanford University to lease 200-300 acres to help solve the problem of minority group housing.

Today Franklin Williams says he has tremendous respect for Joseph Eichler, who died in 1974.

"Though a liberal, he was no different from other builders who were afraid to violate the unwritten code of conduct of the housing industry. Whatever the forces were that made him take that halfway step with me, I think when he came up against other people's bigotry he just got plain angry and turned 180 degrees. His contributions to the achievement of integrated housing in Northern California can be matched by no one else."

Williams said in the immediate years after Eichler built the special house on Coulumbe Street, they met at many civic affairs but Eichler never mentioned the incident.

Once when they both were invited to the same awards dinner in San Francisco, he said Eichler called and offered him a ride.

"As we rode up the El Camino I asked him about his experiences as a major open housing supporter. He told me he had never lost any business. But Joseph Eichler, not during that conversation nor at any other time before, ever suggested to me that he was aware that he had refused to sell me a house.

"However, years later when I was ambassador in Ghana, a package arrived. I opened it. There was not a letter, just a picture of a young black boy and a young white boy walking arm in arm down the street of what clearly was an Eichler tract. The inscription read:

"To Franklin, who helped make this dream possible. Joe Eichler."

—Loretta Green

How Gerda tamed the natives plants to fit into energy-conscious landscape

By Joan Jackson
Garden Editor

SOMEBODY once told Gerda Isenberg she might find a retirement condominium to her liking.

"Crazy! Can you imagine?" she asks indignantly. "This is my freedom. This is my pleasure."

Gerda's "this" is a beautiful expanse of mountain country off Skyline Boulevard. Here, in a valley of oaks, redwoods and shady trees, the Isenbergs started as ranchers in 1941. Gerda began to tame the native plants around her, started selling native ferns in the 1950s, and then brought in plants and ferns from all over the state.

Today, Yerba Buena Nursery, 19500 Skyline Blvd. above Woodside, is one of the best known and widely regarded nurseries specializing in native plants and ferns.

And Gerda is the expert. She will be 79 in June, a grandmotherly soft-looking woman with white hair pushed into a bun. Hiking boots, slacks and a smock over her sweater are her favorite dress; and her hands are grubby and worn — the badge of honor in the nursery trade. With a business acumen that belies her soft looks, Gerda has built up a business dealing with landscape architects, nurseries and individuals who find their way past Langley Quarry down the road to the nursery at the end of the two-mile dirt road.

Why native plants are so popular right now is a story in itself. "A few years ago," Gerda says, "nobody knew about conservation. Nobody cared about it. Then we learned the lesson of The Big Drought. Now drought-tolerant, low-maintenance plants are very much the thing."

Some of these "in" plants are native to the state of California, like the western sword fern. Then, there are plants that are endemic — that is, found in a certain area within the state and in that area only. The plants from the Channel Islands are endemic only to those islands in the Santa Barbara Channel. And then there are a lot of escapees that came out of the gardens and are now thought of as natives. Acacia, for one, is not native; they're escapees.

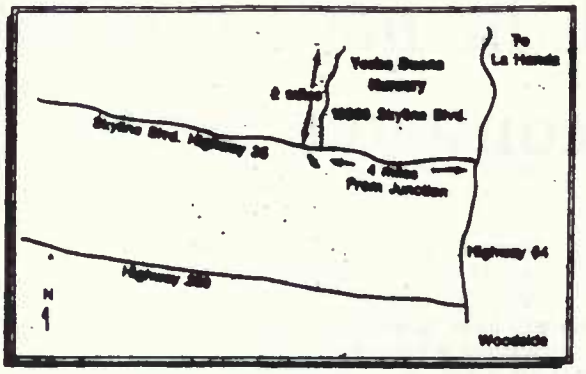
Gerda knew years ago that from native plants come color all over the place — some will have flowers in bloom for six days, some for six months. Others are just discovering the multitide of blues from the varieties of ceanothuses (wild lilac), and the bright yellow of fremontia, which is being used along Highway 280 now. "With natives," she says, "you can have a variety of colors and patterns. People just don't realize their versatility."

And then there are the ferns — Gerda's first love and own specialty. She has about 80 different kinds of ferns. Not all are natives, but some of the most popular ones are pure California.

The western sword fern is the most popular one. Its stems grow up to 20 inches long and there may be as many as 100 fronds on a big plant. It is valued for these massive fronds, and is the mainstay of rock gardens and shade gardens all over the state.

How does a person know what fern is right for his area? Gerda realizes lots of people may want "a fern" but beyond that, their knowledge is sketchy. So, she has carefully labeled each and every batch of ferns and natives, so that the casual looker

CONSERVATION'S IN: SO ARE GERDA'S NATIVES, San Jose Mercury News, May 23, 1980.



Gerda's nursery high on a hill

Continued from 1D

knows what he is getting. For example, the fern Polypodium Californicum bears the legend: "Hardy fern, native to California. Will grow in sun or partial shade. Deciduous, spreads through rhizomes."

This labeling is important, especially with native plants that need a certain elevation or particular setting to survive. "Cluster Glory," for one, is a delicate maidenhair fern that needs constant moisture and humid air. It dies quickly in other conditions. "Ferns in the Santa Clara Valley need a humid, moist spot," Gerda says. "You have to know these things, because if the humidity and situation are right, the ferns will grow beautifully for you."

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People come to Yerba Buena Nursery looking for everything from coast redwoods to ground covers, and Gerda can provide one plant for accent, or enough for an entire garden including that coast redwood and flowering ground cover. Some new home developments — Portola Valley Ranch, for one — require residents to plant only with native plants. "If you are starting out new, you need a couple of trees and things that grow quickly," she says. Most of the natives are made from cuttings, and the plants have been in the trade for some time. The starting price for established plants is $3.75 and upward.

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Gerda admits she is amazed at some of the requests she gets. Like the man who called from New York City looking for a Coast Redwood for his apartment. "I asked him what was he going to do with a Coast Redwood in an apartment? He said his apartment was acclimatized and the redwood would be perfect, so we sent it off," she says. It must be surviving, because he never called back.

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Gerda's nursery has grown to six small lath houses, three greenhouses and a propogation house. There is a pond near her home, and spill-over from this runs down a stone creek, between ferns in a shady glen. A few steps from the creek Gerda spends much of the day working with ferns.

Not one to sit back and relax, Gerda's newest project is a demonstration garden planted in a big field behind the greenhouses. "People can't visualize how big things will grow. We will show them here," she explains.

A path circles the area, past the manzinita, creanothuses, wild lilac and about 50 other plants already started.

A bench is placed on a small hill, halfway through the demonstration garden, and here Gerda will sit and muse about the future of her nursery. "I have four children and 12 grandchildren, but nobody has shown an interest in this yet," she admits. She has three workers, plus a weekend helper, and the "Open for Business" sign always hangs out. The nursery is open daily from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. except holidays such as Christmas and Easter.

"We can't turn away people because they have come so far to find us," Gerda reminds. More than likely, it will be Gerda herself who will welcome visitors, patiently answering questions, showing off the plants, and explaining their special needs.

"I guess you could say I was inspired by my surroundings to start this nursery," she says. "It has developed more than I ever envisioned, more than I ever intended."

It is an all-day, everyday job — and in Gerda's view, the best one ever. "I love it."

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People who are interested in landscaping with native plants should consult the book "Native Plants For Use In The California Landscape."

Written by Emile L. Labadie and illustrated with drawings by Denise Robertson Devine, this book will give you an idea on the needs of specific plants, and the drawings show how the plant will look.

The book is available at most bookstores.

Viewpoints

Off Beat by Hedy Boissevain

Gerda Isenberg will be honored

Gerda Isenberg walks quietly among her fern-filled lathhouses, a breeze from the ocean stirring the trees above her head. She nips a weed here, trims a frayed leaf there, her steady gaze missing no detail of the health of her plants.

The tranquility of her Yerba Buena Nursery, two miles down a gravel lane from Skyline Boulevard, is deceptive. There were other, earlier years when Mrs. Isenberg walked with that same purposeful step and that same steady eye into the storm centers of racial prejudice that swept California in the beginning years of World War II conflict with Japan.

"I suppose I got involved because of what was happening to the Jews in Germany," she says, a faint echo of her native German still in her spoken words. The Mid-peninsula Citizens for Fair Housing will honor her years of work as a pioneer in the Bay Area fair housing movement with a reception at the Atherton home of Clarence Heller Oct. 17. Frank Duveneck of Los Altos will also be honored that day.

If she were to walk into a controversy now, she would be working against the present military buildup.

"I don't understand it. It makes no sense to me," she says. "Nobody won the last two wars. Another war would make all the other matters meaningless."

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The fair housing organization is a lineal descendant of the Palo Alto Fair Play Council, formed to assist Japanese-Americans put their lives back together after wartime years of "relocation," either to Eastern cities or to internment centers. Mrs. Isenberg and her two close friends, Dorothy Lee and Josephine Duveneck, both now deceased, were leaders in that cause, as they had been in the effort to help alleviate the effects of the government edict.

"They were not sentimental," she stated. "Sometimes others would break into tears at some story of injustice, but not they. They checked the facts, and then took action."

Their actions set them squarely against the tide of public fear of Japanese-Americans that came with the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the start of war in the Pacific.

"Citizens and non-citizens were put behind barbed wire, and at the same time the young men were asked to volunteer for the Army," she said.

The three women kept in touch with Japanese friends through the turmoil and, through the American Friends Service Committee, helped organize aid of various kinds.

A quilt presented to Mrs. Isenberg on her 80th birthday this year has a hand-embroidered square that recalls one episode. Those swept up on 24-hour notice and jammed into a "relocation center" at Tanforan racetrack, needed supplies to construct boxes for their belongings. Mrs. Isenberg found lumber, but was refused permission to drive into the camp. She had to park a distance away and carried, board by board, the lumber into the camp, a scene depicted in stark brown stiches on a muslin square by Ann Loftis, author of a book on those tumultuous years.

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Some Japanese were successful in leasing businesses and having neighbors keep an eye on empty houses during the years of internment. They came out at the end of the bitter experience able to begin again. Others lost everything and needed help in finding jobs.

"People who didn't open their mouths during internment were anxious to get domestic or garden help, which didn't exist during the war. Returning Japanese took those jobs, simply to get a place to live."

She recalled that only a few years later she attended the festive opening of Sakura Gardens, a Japanese restaurant in Mountain View. Mrs. Isenberg says she looked around the room at all the smiling guests and thought, "Where were all of you a few years ago?" when the new owner needed a different kind of help from friends.

The work that brings her honors now brought threatening phone calls and hate mail in those days, Mrs. Isenberg recalled, especially after a newspaper story that reported the first Japanese returning to Palo Alto was coming to live at her home.

"There were letters of support, too, and in the end nothing bad happened," she says.

After about two years Japanese families "didn't need us any more" and the Fair Play Council turned its attention to other problems of discrimination, mainly problems of blacks. An office in Palo Alto tackled the problems of finding jobs and housing for discrimination victims. A small Palo Alto sub-division, the Lawrence Tract, was undertaken to set an example of racially-integrated housing. It's still there and still integrated, but not without some initial problems. Mrs. Isenberg was indignant to find that even victims of discrimination could be prejudiced against other minorities.

"If people can move where they can afford to live many of our present problems would not exist," she believes. School segregation, with tension-producing busing efforts, would evaporate with an end to segregated housing, for example. Bilingual education also hinders the integration of Spanish-speakers into American life, she believes.

"The parents must learn English, not just the children" if they are to get along, she says, describing her own work in setting up a program in Mountain View that is still functioning.

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There have been changes for the better, she is convinced. A post-war Unity Club installation dinner was held without the black president, since he believed the restaurant would not serve him. Long waits or outright refusals of service were common then if a black person were a member of the group in a restaurant.

"That would never happen now," she says, pleased to mark one step along the way to acheiving her own high goals.

A Native-Plant Pioneer in California

A visit with Gerda Isenberg

by Nancy Beaubaire

As I drove down the winding dirt road to Yerba Buena Nursery last March, I thought back to the mid-1970s, when I'd first bought plants from owner Gerda Isenberg. At that time, I designed and planted residential landscapes professionally. In my spare time, I tromped through the hills and woods of northern California, appreciating and learning about native plants. Many seemed ideal candidates for ornamental landscapes, as attractive as many of the exotics that dominated gardens of that era and, better yet, well adapted to California's typical cycle of summer drought and winter rain. But in those days I couldn't find a nursery that stocked a wide selection of decent-size California native plants.

Imagine my excitement, then, when one of my hiking companions told me that Isenberg had specialized in growing California native plants for the past 25 years. In short order, I sent for her catalog, found plants I wanted for an upcoming job, and hopped into my truck for the three-hour drive to Yerba Buena, tucked away in the coastal hills of Woodside, about 40 miles south of San Francisco.

At the nursery, I felt like a kid let loose in a candy shop, snatching up all the plants I dared to purchase on my client's behalf. Here were rows and rows of meticulously cared-for specimens of my favorite California native plants—California fuchsia, pink-flowering currant, buckwheat, penstemon, mountain mahogany and more. All were good-size and reasonably priced. Some were species propagated directly from the wild; others were improved varieties, better able to tolerate the less-than-native conditions that are often part of cultivated gardens. At a time when little was known about propagating these native plants, such a wide selection was evidence to me that Isenberg was a very skilled and innovative grower.

When I met Gerda that day, I discovered that she was a knowledgeable teacher as well. Though she wasn't overly chatty—undoubtedly she had hundreds of plants to pot up before nightfall—her advice to me about growing each plant and its idiosyncrasies was to the point, and clearly founded in careful observation and lots of hard work. Over the next 15 years, I enjoyed my visits to Yerba Buena as much for the opportunity to talk plants with Gerda as for those rarer moments when, at my urging, she shared bits and pieces about the evolution of her nursery. Of all the forward-looking horticulture people I've known over the years, Gerda Isenberg is one I'd like all my gardening friends to meet.

Starting out

Like many present-day Californians, Gerda is a transplant. She spent her youth on a large farm in northern Germany, surrounded by much that inspired her fascination with plants. Her parents were very interested in horticulture and maintained a park with beautiful specimen trees and a formal flower garden they'd designed.

At age 18, Gerda attended private gardening schools for women outside of Hamburg, in the towns of Ploen and Gross-Hansdorf. For the next two years, she grew fruit trees, vegetables

and perennials, all without the convenience of garden hoses and other materials that were nonexistent in post-World War I Germany. The most valuable part of her schooling was learning to work with her hands and to use tools. "We did have some 'lessons'," Gerda says, "but I was so tired when they came along that I hardly listened to what was taught. But I did have a great time and was happy to have escaped so-called finishing school."

Some of her contemporaries may have thought that attending gardening school was unconventional, but to Gerda the most unusual aspect of her education was her desire to work with her family's gardener, from whom she thought she could learn a lot. "It was almost sensational," Gerda remembers. "I think he thought I was kind of off my rocker." But in time the gardener missed Gerda's help when she couldn't come to work. After her schooling was completed, Gerda got her first job as a gardener, caring for a park and a perennial border on an aunt's estate.

By 1923 Gerda was married, and she and her husband settled in California's Carmel Valley and grew a commercial crop of strawberries. In 1941 they moved up the coast to the present location of Yerba Buena Nursery, and started a cattle ranch on 3,000 acres of undeveloped land. Here, when she wasn't busy fixing up the primitive house and raising her family, Gerda grew a big garden. Eventually, the cattle operation was discontinued and most of the ranch was sold.

Gerda began collecting California native plants in the late 1950s, "just because I was interested in them." At the same time, she grew all kinds of ferns, including a California native, the five-fingered fern. She had a vague notion that it might be nice to start a nursery someday in her backyard, so when a friend suggested she grow ferns commercially to meet a rising demand, she decided to give it a try. When her supply of native ferns sold out, she was astonished.

Gerda figured out how to propagate and cultivate natives on her own, since hardly anyone else was doing it. Cuttings came from plants growing on her property and, by special arrangement, from Tilden Botanical Garden in Berkeley. She frequently went on collecting trips with other native-plant lovers, who introduced her to the plants of California's many ecosystems.

For years, only a handful of enthusiasts appreciated natives, and selling the plants proved as big a challenge as growing them. "I didn't know how to sell them and nobody else knew what they were." The severe droughts of 1977 and 1988 changed all that. As people watched their ill-adapted plants wither away, native plants almost became a fad. "It took a hundred years for people in California to catch on to their native vegetation," Gerda notes with some amusement, "and now they want it exclusively. We always go from one extreme to another."

Pleased as she is with the proliferation of societies, classes and demonstration plantings devoted to native plants, she's not a fanatic. The lovely landscape surrounding her house is testament to her wide-ranging horticultural tastes, and she encourages gardeners to grow the natives she offers as well as drought-resistant nonnative plants supplied by other nurseries.

Today

From just one little greenhouse and a potting table, Yerba Buena Nursery has grown considerably. The propagation and stock areas occupy ten greenhouses; lath houses about six acres, including a two-acre demonstration garden, where customers can see the plants growing unrestrained by 1-gal. cans. The current offering is one of the largest of any nursery in the state, featuring more than 500 species of plants native to California, along with a large selection of ferns, both native and exotic. It's a far cry from Gerda's first one-page catalog.

Homeowners and professional landscapers alike make regular pilgrimages to Yerba Buena, their trip rendered more enjoyable by the nursery's homey setting. Gerda has sent plants to gardeners throughout the United States and as far away as France and Germany. When she first received requests from afar, she was proud that anyone outside of California would want her plants, yet somewhat bemused—why would anyone in Illinois want a California native? She finally concluded that plant collectors know no bounds. Today, she ships mail-order only to California, Washington and Oregon, the states where the plants are best adapted. (To order a catalog, send a self-addressed envelope with 45¢ postage to Yerba Buena Nursery, 19500 Skyline Blvd., Woodside, CA 94062.)

Gerda still seems somewhat surprised by the appeal of native plants. During my recent visit, she excitedly told me about the landmark sales the previous weekend—more than 400 plants in one day. "If you had told me several years ago that (we'd ever sell that much), I would not have believed it." Her role in stimulating and supplying this demand has been considerable, though she's too modest to admit it. In the past, she managed to give countless talks about native plants to groups all over California despite her seven-day work week, but she no longer has time to do so.

Gerda has produced more than plants at Yerba Buena. Ever since the nursery began, people fascinated by native plants have showed up on her doorstep, eager to learn what no university horticulture program could teach them. She's taken many of them on, sometimes as volunteers, and is quick to point out that she learns much from them, too. "I was not such an expert," she says, "but I gave many people the opportunity to learn from their own mistakes." Many of Gerda's staff are knowledgeable horticulturists as well, able to fill in the gaps for Gerda, who regards herself as "scientifically behind the times."

> ***"Those who work for Gerda feel great affection and respect for her, regarding her as much a mentor as an employer."***

Those who work for Gerda feel great affection and respect for her, regarding her as much a mentor as an employer. She's been a particularly inspiring role model for women, and many who have worked for Gerda now work professionally as horticulturists and gardeners. Gerda speaks of their accomplishments with pride. Of the 35 Yerba Buena employees, past and present, who gathered at a recent reunion, about 66% are still involved in horticulture, a good indication that the lessons took.

Last time I visited, Gerda was up to her elbows in potting soil as usual. At age 88, she's exploring ways to ensure that the nursery continues as a business and as an educational setting. A foundation is in the making that, it's hoped, will carry Yerba Buena Nursery for many years to come. Gerda hopes to expand the existing ten-week internship program, which includes a stipend and in some cases housing. Under the guidance of Gerda and her nursery manager, people learn firsthand about propagating, maintaining and experimenting with natives while they work at the nursery. Gerda believes that this practical experience, which isn't provided by academic institutions, is very important. (For more information about the internship program, write to Yerba Buena Nursery at the address given above.)

"I guess it's my age, or something," Gerda says, "but if I start something, I'm very reluctant to change. You can't always go by whether something is going to work out (or) going to be a financial success, but I think you should stick things out. There are many times that I ask myself, 'What am I doing?' But I guess if you stick to it long enough, (it works out)." □

Nancy Bearubaire is an associate editor at Fine Gardening.

San Mateo Times, November 2, 1990.

Woodside wonderland for California natives

by Don Burns

It doesn't sell pansies and primroses, but if you're looking for shaggy-haired alumroots or hairy primrose monkey flowers, you'll find them at Yerba Buena Nursery in Woodside.

These rare and unusual perennials are just a few of the plants available at this nursery specializing in California native plants.

In fact, more than 500 species of native trees, shrubs, ferns, perennials and ground covers are available to retail and wholesale customers. Seeds for native wildflowers are also available.

Many of these drought-tolerant natives are rare, endangered or already extinct in the wild. Some of them were collected in the wild by nursery employees, while others were acquired from nurseries and botanical gardens throughout the state.

The owner and spiritual leader of Yerba Buena is Gerda Isenberg.

In 1941, she bought a cattle ranch in Woodside that, to her delight, possessed a rich assortment of native flora.

She became increasingly interested in cultivating ferns and eventually decided to expand on this new avocation and open a nursery specializing in native plants.

As time went by, her business expanded and she began supplying wholesale nurseries like Leonard Coates Nursery of San Jose. She also discovered that reforestation projects were eager to buy her native plant materials.

Her business grew to include native plants from throughout the state, with a particular emphasis on coastal species that thrive in the Bay Area.

Today, Isenberg continues to work in all aspects of the business from potting new seedlings to watering ferns in the lath houses.

She has amassed an impressive inventory of common and exotic native flora and has listed each variety in a catalog that's available to the public.

Her plants are reasonably priced, paricularly when you consider that many of these species can't be found anywhere else at any price.

Native plant lovers and gardeners seeking drought-tolerant specimens will be delighted with more than 130 varieties of manzanita (Arctostaphylos spp.), including the rare and endangered Hearst's manzanita (A. hearstiorum), named after newspaper publisher William Randolph Hearst.

Ceanothus fanciers will have no trouble finding their favorite native lilacs, including endangered species like San Simeon lilac (C. hearstiorum), Napa ceanothus (C. purpureus), and Sonoma ceanothus (C. sonomensis).

Isenberg's selection of native pines includes unusual species like foxtail pine (P. balfouriana), knobcone pine (P. attenuata), and Guadalupe Island pine (P. radiata 'binata'). She also has the hard-to-find pinyon pine (Pinus edulis), famous for its edible seeds (pine nuts).

Her stock of trees includes white alder, mountain dogwood, incense cedar, madrone, and a large assortment of other native trees rarely seen in local nurseries and garden centers.

Popular native shrubs like western redbud (Cercis occidentalis), flannel bush (Fremontodendron spp.) and Matiliha poppy (Romneya Coulteri) are just a few of the flowering shrubs available.

Isenberg's stock of monkey flowers (Diplacus spp.) is outstanding, with showy yellow, orange, red and pink flowering varieties.

She also has an excellent assortment of colorful native perennials including penstemons, lupines, mallow, columbine, coreopsis, larkspur, iris, salvias, violets, sea thrift, California wild gingers and evening primroses.

In addition to Isenberg's famous collection of native ferns, too numerous to describe here, visitors will find a good stock of drought-tolerant vines and ornamental grasses.

Isenberg encourages nursery visitors to walk through the California native plants demonstration garden to see mature specimens of the natives she sells.

Demonstration gardens are seldom seen these days, yet they offer customers an excellent opportunity to see what nursery stock will look like when it matures.

Mulch is the miracle element that keeps weeds down and reduces evaporation in the demonstration garden, said staff member Tim Hyland.

Hyland, a graduate of Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo and one of the nursery's propagators, points out that 3 to 6 inches of bark chips from a local tree service was spread throughout the demonstration garden as mulch.

He feels that even drought-tolerant California natives can benefit from a thick layer of mulch.

Fortunately, though, with or without the benefits of mulch, most natives will tolerate just about any well-drained garden soil.

If your soil is really hard or rocky, Yerba Buena's Brenda Butner suggests drilling holes in the bottom of each planting hole, then filling those holes with gravel. This technique helps natives establish themselves on rocky slopes where poor drainage can cause root rot and other problems.

Knowledgeable salespeople like Hyland and Butner, quality nursery stock and an incredible selection of California native plants, make Yerba Buena Nursery a must-see destination for Peninsula gardeners.

The nursery is open 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. seven days a week and is accessible to the handicapped.

Catalogs can be obtained by sending $1 to Yerba Buena Nursery, 19500 Skyline Blvd., Woodside 94062.

First-time visitors are advised to call 851-1668 for precise directions to the nursery.

Don Burns is a horticulturist who lives and works in San Mateo County.

Profile

Yerba Buena's exotic ferns, native plants make trip worthwhile

By Dick Tracy
McClatchy News Service

WOODSIDE

TO SAY that the Yerba Buena Nursery is "off the beaten path" is putting it mildly.

Widely known for its selection of California native plants and exotic ferns, the nursery, whose name translates as "good herb," is best reached from by driving up Highway 84 from Woodside to Skyline Boulevard, then traveling 4.5 miles down a windswept two-lane road that follows the crest of the Coast Range, and then lurching 2.2 miles down a one-lane dirt road.

But native-plant enthusiasts who visit the isolated nursery claim the hard part isn't getting there — it's returning to the workaday world.

Located on part of what was once a large cattle ranch, the site owned by 88-year-old nurserywoman Gerda Isenberg is so serene and unspoiled that most customers enjoy lingering for a while before loading up their purchases and heading home.

And with the increased awareness of using California natives in drought tolerant "xeriscapes," more and more people are visiting the nursery.

"Oh, what a difference there has been," Isenberg said. "Just 25 years ago, it seemed that nobody even knew what California native plants were. Most of our customers are homeowners, but we also have a good number of landscape contractors who are putting in drought-tolerant landscapes."

Attractions that prolong a visit include deer-resistant plants in a rock garden bordering the parking lot; a pristine shade house displaying exotic ferns; outdoor areas where neat rows of specimen plants are lined up like soldiers; and a native-plant demonstration garden.

"We have the demonstration garden so people can see what to expect when the plants mature," Isenberg explained. "Everything out there is a California native. There's even a redwood grove where you can relax on a bench under the trees."

Although she plays an active role in the day-to-day operation of the nursery, Isenberg relies heavily on the managerial skills and plant knowledge of Bart O'Brien, 55 years her junior.

"We met about eight years ago, through activities of the California Native Plant Society," Isenberg recalled, "and I was so impressed with his knowledge of plants that I hired him — even though his degrees are in landscape architecture."

The rest of the work force at the nursery is made up of other full- and part-time employees and student interns, largely recruited from the ornamental-horticulture and landscape-design programs at California Polytechnic State University, San Luis Obispo.

"They come from all over," Isenberg acknowledged. "The one who just left was from Denver. The current one, Josephine Hoh, is from Borneo, and we're expecting another intern soon from Maine."

Launched in the late 1950s as an outgrowth of Isenberg's interest in exotic ferns and Pacific Coast natives, the nursery's inventory now includes seed for native wildflowers, and this year's fall catalog will offer over 700 species. That's 200 more than were listed last year.

O'Brien, with degrees in landscape architecture from the University of California, Davis, and Harvard University, has worked at the nursery for 18 months.

"There are all sorts of things we have lots of," O'Brien said, leading a tour of the greenhouses and lath structures. "Our three big items include 40 different selections of diplicus (monkey flower), 90 varieties of arctostaphylos (manzanita), and about 60 varieties of ceanothus."

One of the vexing things about raising natives, he acknowledged, is the years when precious few of certain plants are available — and the years when they arrive in unexpected abundance.

"We have some crops that just sort of 'happened' in massive quantity this year," O'Brien said, pointing to flats of seedlings. "This is *Myrica californica*, the Pacific wax myrtle which we're pleased to have lots of; here's some *Platanus racemosa*, the sycamore tree; over here's *Amelanchier pallida*, the Western service berry which makes a large shrub or small tree, and this is *Lyonothamnus floribundus*, the Catalina ironwood."

Plant selections arrive daily from such places as the Berkeley Botanic Garden; Tilden Park Botanic Garden in Berkeley; Rancho Santa Anna Botanic Garden at Claremont; and the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden. The nursery also receives numerous plants from enthusiasts such as Betsy Clebsch, a neighbor who receives seeds and cuttings of the genus salvia (sage) from around the world.

With that diversity, some plants have O'Brien and Isenberg guessing whether they're all truly California natives. Outside one greenhouse, for example, the showy flowers of a penstemon nod in the afternoon breeze.

"It's Penstemon Midnight, a hybrid that purportedly uses natives," O'Brien said, "so we're going to continue growing it until we find out that it doesn't."

And as Isenberg approached the redwood structure that shelters the exotic ferns, she recalled that the nursery really started here: "I was inspired by my environment here, and started collecting some of the California natives, but I really started with the ferns."

Will any family members follow in her footsteps at the nursery? Isenberg shook her head. "The family? They tolerate me and support me in what I want to do. That's the main thing. Some of them like gardening, but not to this extent."

Isenberg is launching a foundation to perpetuate the goals of the nursery, particularly the collecting and propagating of rare and endangered native-plant species.

Open from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. daily, except major holidays, the nursery premises have been designed for wheelchair access. Copies of the catalog are available by sending a stamped, self-addressed business-size envelope to 19500 Skyline Blvd., Woodside, 94062.

Above: Four generations gather in the garden. Gerda Isenberg, center, is flanked by her granddaughter Rebeka Malo (left), her great-granddaughters Anne Marie and Monika Malo, and her youngest child, Ami Jaqua. Below: Gerda Isenberg when she was a teen-ager in Germany.

Tending the World

by Diane Sussman

For nearly a century Gerda Isenberg has catered to the needs of others, fighting for human rights and the environment.

Today, like every other day, 89-year-old Gerda Isenberg slowly makes her way through her plants and greenhouses, looking for plants that didn't survive the chill February night. Although frost clings to every leaf and blade of grass and the water pipes have frozen, Isenberg walks without gloves or heavy woolen socks, in defiance of other people's well-meaning fussing about dressing warmly.

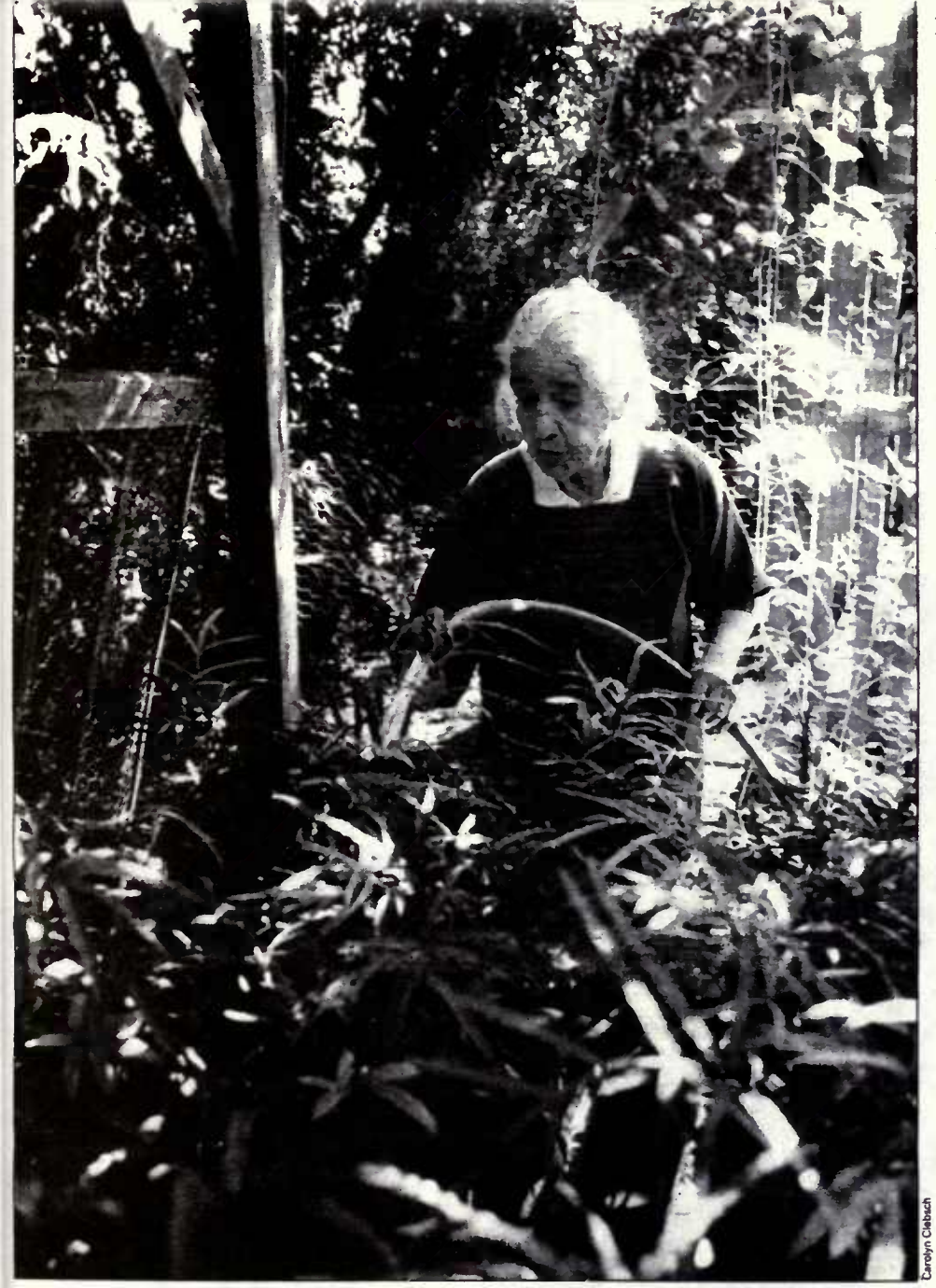
Gardening enthusiasts would instantly recognize this small, sturdy woman with the gnarled hands as the owner of Yerba Buena Nursery. The nursery, nestled in a serene, unspoiled sector of the Santa Cruz mountains, is accessible only by traveling down two miles of dirt road off Skyline Boulevard in Woodside. Yerba Buena, which means "good herb," is not a place to drop in for a six-pack of lettuce starter plants or run-of-the-mill marigolds. It offers only ferns and native California plants and specializes in flood-tolerant plants and "xeriscapes," or drought-resistant gardens.

Although many people's image of a native California garden is a dull wash of browns lacking any accents of rich, vibrant color, Isenberg's demonstration garden challenges that notion. Its soothing ferns and redwood groves surrounded by a profusion of California wild lilac, could put even a well-watered English garden to shame.

But there is more to Gerda Isenberg than Yerba Buena Nursery, as area old-timers, Quakers, human rights activists and history buffs can attest. People who knew her in the '40s remember her as one of the first Palo Alto residents to open her home to Japanese-Americans returning from internment camps after World War II, as a founder of the Palo Alto Fair Play Council, and as someone who provided safe harbor for German, Austrian and Jewish refugees during World War II.

A list of her friends reads like a "Who's Who" of local humanitarians and civil rights activists from the '40s and '50s: Josephine and Frank Duveneck, founders of Peninsula School in Menlo Park and Hidden Villa Ranch in Los Altos Hills; Elsa Alsberg, first president of the Fair Play League; Dorothy Lee, humanitarian and wife of Dr. Russel Lee, a founder of the Palo Alto Medical Clinic; and Dr. Esther Clark, well known physician and human rights activist and architect Birge Clark's sister. Of this group, only Isenberg and Esther Clark are still alive.

The people who know her intimately describe her as a "savior," "a turning point in my life," "an incredibly



Carolyn Clebsch

COVER STORY

Left: Gerda Isenberg never misses a day of tending to her plants, which includes hand-watering the ferns.

Below: The farm where Isenberg grew up had no modern conveniences. The work was hard and done by hand.

me. I have the greatest affection for her. She is a strong, remarkable woman."

With a shrug that is characteristic of Isenberg's self-effacing manner, she dismisses her friends' accolades on the grounds that they are all "too enthusiastic" or that they tend to "gush" unnecessarily.

But she also can be stern and critical at times. "She had a way of being matter of fact with people sometimes," said Leo, "and she kept everybody working. Sometimes you felt as if she was a micro-manager of your life." But Gerda was not humorless. At breakfast, Leo recalls, she liked to station the toaster at her side and lob toast directly from the toaster on to people's plates when they asked for more.

No one could have predicted that this child of turn-of-the-century German aristocracy would grow up to be a champion of environmental, civil and human rights. Born on a farm outside Hamburg in 1901, she was raised in a cloistered, secure environment, surrounded by servants. Carriage drivers shuttled Isenberg to private lessons with tutors who instructed her in subjects a well-bred, aristocratic young woman at the turn of the century needed to know—music, dance, languages and art history. Like most young girls of her class and time, her early education was marked by frivolity and lack of purpose.

"I tell people here at the nursery that I never passed an examination," she said. "I had a ball, but I can't say I learned very much. Now you try to educate children so they might learn something that would help them make a living, but that was not the way things were done then. We weren't supposed to learn anything practical."

The family's farm operation was extremely rustic. Servants with no garden hoses for irrigation carried buckets of water by hand. Although the new inventions of the industrial age were making their way into the world, her parents' farm remained relatively isolated from them. When a newfangled contraption finally did arrive—a brand new automobile owned by her uncle—Isenberg became so frightened she ran and hid behind the door of her house. And nothing her uncle said to calm her could coax her into going for a spin through the countryside with him.

The idyllic, aristocratic world ot turn-of-the-century Germany came abruptly to an end with the arrival of World War I. Her father joined the reserves. Out of necessity, her family sent her to a private gardening school in Germany, primarily for her own protection. Garden schools provided a safe haven during and after the war. "Garden schools grew up like mushrooms," she said, in her characteristic way of choosing metaphors that relate to gardens and plants.

(continued on next page)

dedicated, strong woman," even a woman who could handle her black stallion magnificently.

"My mother was really wonderful to people," said her youngest daughter Ami Jaqua, the only one of Isenberg's four children who still lives locally. "I don't ever remember a time when we sat down to a meal with just the family. During the war we took in all kinds of people who needed help. Of course, when you are little, you think your own family is the norm. I thought that taking people into your family was the norm."

People still move in and out of the household. Nursery interns and workers live on the property and eat lunch with Gerda every working day at noon. Every year at Christmas, family members, former household boarders, neighbors, nursery staff and friends come from all over the world to listen to Isenberg read the Christmas story in front of the fireplace in her spacious living room. The large but simply decorated room, with bookshelves in every corner, is a community room in the truest sense, having served as a place for memorial services, Bible study, wedding receptions and the like.

Bill Leo, a half-Jewish, German refugee whom Isenberg took into the family during World War II, returns almost every year from his home in Virginia to renew his ties to the clan. "They took me sight unseen," he said. "I ended up staying five years. Gerda was really like a mother to

Carolyn Clebsch

Isenberg emerges from the Yerba Buena nursery office, which is stocked with catalogs, gardening books and information.

Gerda

(continued from page 19)

She returned home from garden school full of recently acquired practical education and she decided to join in on projects around her parents' farm, to the astonishment, and chagrin, of the servants. "I told our gardener I was going to work with him," she said. "At first he thought I was going off my rocker, but he tolerated me. It took a long time for him to become accustomed to working alongside a member of the family."

At the age of 21, she visited Hawaii to stay with an aunt and met her cousin and future husband, Ruolf Isenberg. Her ties to Hawaii go back to her grandfather who immigrated to the island of Kauai in the 1850s and who established a successful German-operated sugar plantation and export business there. Now the company is American-owned and operated, and, to Isenberg's dismay, fully mechanized and surrounded by development.

"I went back there three or four years ago and I didn't want to see it that way," she said. "It was all high-rises and condominiums. Everything is mechanized. It was sad to see."

She moved with her husband to the Carmel Valley to farm. "It was untouched then," she said, "just small farms. I remember when Point Lobos was privately owned and writers and artists were everywhere." With the aid of their Japanese gardeners, they grew strawberries so delectable the luxurious Hotel Del Monte in Carmel served them to its fashionable guests.

Four years later, because her husband "was not the kind of man who liked to stay in one place very long," she said, they moved to Los Altos and built a house on Fremont Avenue, where, she notes, "we were the first ones there."

In 1941, the next time her husband got one of his typical urges to move on, they bought 3,000 acres on Skyline Boulevard to start a cattle ranch. The house itself was nothing more than a "square box with no plumbing," but the land was ample and good. In the 49 years since, Isenberg has transformed the "square box" into a home of unostentatious beauty—with plumbing. At the same time, the couple bought a home on Cowper Street in Palo Alto so their children could attend school more easily.

While Isenberg and her husband were developing their cattle ranch on Skyline Boulevard, word began to spread at genteel dinner parties in Palo Alto that Jews were being forcibly evicted from the homes in Germany.

At first, Isenberg found the stories unbelievable—until she met an eye-witness. "For a while you heard these stories and you thought, 'Where did they get these stories?' But then I met a German doctor at a dinner party. He was a refugee who had come over as a ship's doctor. He told us about the things that were going on there. Finally, you just had to believe that these things were true," she said.

The knowledge caused Isenberg to undergo a serious self-examination about her heritage. "My mother had to ask herself what it meant to be a German at that time, and it wasn't easy to do that," Jaqua said.

Helped by her religion, Isenberg landed on the side of the angels. Before the war, she joined the Society of Friends, or Quakers. The pacific tenets of this branch of Lutheranism, which include avoiding all wars and fighting as well as

Carolyn Clebsch

The house that was once a "square box" has been converted into a warm home—and now has indoor plumbing to boot.

a belief in the equality of all people, matched her own feelings and served as a foundation for her work.

"I was raised a Lutheran," she said, "and I took my children to church in Palo Alto. But the preacher was talking about driving out the devil and I didn't want to put that on my children. The Quakers don't have sermons. You sit silently and it's all up to you."

No one would have predicted that this child of turn-of-the-century German artistocacy, would grow up to be a champion of environmental, civil and human rights.

But Isenberg's religion didn't separate her from secular life. "She didn't have to change the way she lived," recalled her daughter. "My mother loved to waltz. She never had any religious restriction."

As a result of joining the Society of Friends, she became involved in a committee to assist Jewish refugees. She and Josephine Duveneck helped form a Wednesday evening open house at the Sutter Street Y in San Francisco to help refugees find housing or jobs. The Y also was a place where people could chat, learn about American culture and make friends. "People came who were not connected with the Jewish temple," she said. "This was one place where it didn't matter what race or religion you were."

As times changed, so did Isenberg's work as a community activist. When the Friends Service Committee learned that Japanese-Americans living in California might be put into internment camps, Isenberg took action. Days before the deportations, she hustled two Japanese girls who had worked on her cattle ranch onto a train to Philadelphia, where she had arranged a safe harbor for them with friends.

That effort resulted in her being reported to the FBI. "I was already reported to the FBI for being German," Isenberg said, "but you have to make a stand."

After the war she took a young Japanese piano teacher and her young daughter into her home and once again her actions met with a backlash of hostility and threats. "I got several harassing phone calls and letters," she said. "One man called me and said, 'If you hire a Jap you are a goddamned bastard.' But I also got letters of encouragement."

Although her daughter, Ami Jaqua, says she is proud of her mother's involvement, she adds that it was not always easy on the children. Her older sisters lost their babysitting jobs as a result of their mother's activities and occasionally the children overheard derogatory remarks about the Japanese woman living at their house.

"There was a tremendous amount of animosity toward people who helped the Japanese at that time," said Beverly Lawrence, executive director of Mid-Peninsula Citizens for Fair Housing. "People were really fierce. You had to be really courageous to stick your neck out way at that time."

In 1945, Isenberg helped set up the Fair Play Council, an organization devoted to helping Japanese-Americans incarcerated in internment camps re-establish themselves in the community. Isenberg became the first chairperson. With her home as an office, she went to work, matching the people who returned from the camps with jobs and living situations.

Two years later, prompted in part by the success with which Japanese-Americans had managed to re-establish themselves and partly because stories of area racial discrimination had begun to spring up —including the story of a black woman who attended dental assisting school but was shut out of local jobs—the Fair Play Council broadened its stance to include all victims of racial or religious discrimination.

"We realized there were other problems," Isenberg says. "So we turned to those problems as well."

The Fair Play Council developed several tactics for discovering cases of discrimination, such as calling landlords to ask them if they would rent to a individual "provided the person is of good character and meets other qualifications." If they found discrimination, the council took action.

One familiar legacy of the Fair Play Council is the annual Harvest Festival, still held in the spring at Hidden Villa Ranch. The festival began as "a day of interracial and inter-denominational fellowship," a fund-raiser for the Fair Play Council. "People of all races are invited," states a 1958 publicity brochure for the event. Photographs of the event show black and white children playing together.

In 1965, after 20 years of work, Isenberg stepped down from the council, which had again entered a different phase. "Our work became not that necessary any more," she said. "By then blacks and other groups were coming to us and saying they had to do this work for themselves. And they did." In 1971, the Fair Play Council strengthened its ties to the Midpeninsula Citizens for Fair Housing and changed its name to Palo Alto Fair Housing.

Isenberg divorced in 1951, which forced her to come to terms with how she could keep herself and the cattle ranch going. She sold some property to accumulate cash, phased out the cattle and turned her attention to her lifelong passion—plants. "She was alone there," said her daughter. "She had to think of something to do to keep the family together."

After a rocky business beginning, the nursery now offers seeds for more than 700 species of natives, including rare, endangered and extinct in the wild species, such as the giant Sequoia tree, huckleberry manzanita shrub, coast rock cress and Pitken marsh lily.

"You have to admire her," said Charlie Burr, former garden writer for the San Jose Mercury News. "She built up that nursery from nothing. She has people coming from great distances."

Gerda rarely misses a day of work. The nursery is open every day from 9 to 5, excluding holidays. "For me, this is the most important thing right now. This is what I am concentrating on," she said. Currently Isenberg is seeking to create a foundation dedicated to perpetuating the goals of the nursery, particularly collecting and propagating rare and endangered native plant species. But the future of the foundation, and the nursery, is unclear. All of Isenberg's children have family and occupations that preclude managing the nursery.

But Isenberg continues to work to preserve what she has built. And it is indisputably worth preserving, this garden of tranquility where an older woman is at one with her world.■

YERBA BUENA NURSERY

California Native Plants

19500 Skyline Blvd.
Woodside, CA 94062
(415) 851-1668

Hours 9:00 to 5:00 daily
Closed major holidays
Gerda Isenberg, Owner

About the Nursery

Yerba Buena is a retail nursery specializing in trees, shrubs, ferns, perennials and ground covers native to California. Ferns from other parts of the world, and wildflower seeds are also offered. A special feature is the Demonstration Garden, where visitors can see mature native plants growing. Our catalog is available by mail for $1.00. Please see reverse side for directions to the nursery.

Native Plants Defined

Native plants are those that evolved naturally in the varied geographical regions of our state. These are the plants the Native Americans knew, long before the arrival of the European colonists.

Reasons For Growing Natives

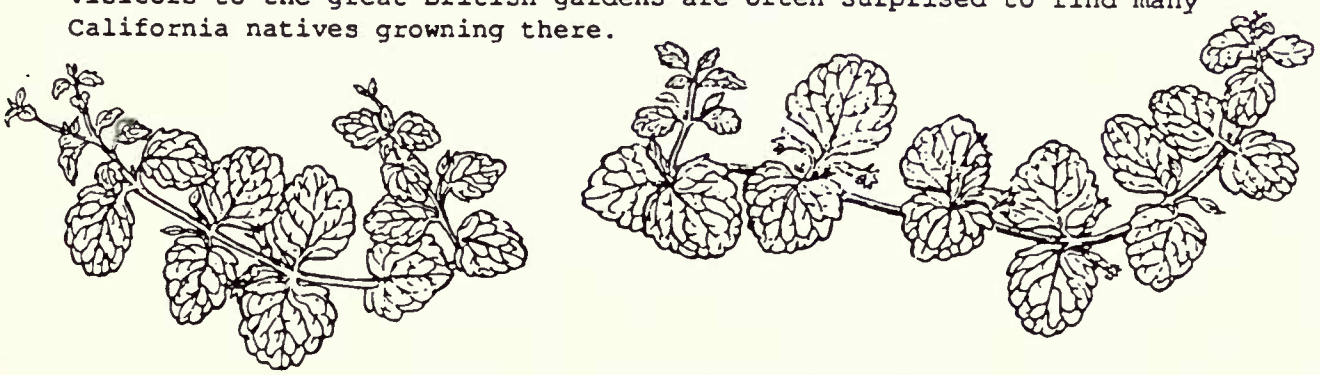
Being native here, they are well adapted to the weather patterns and soil types peculiar to California.

Much of our state has a prolonged dry season each year, and native plants have developed the ability to thrive on little summer water.

In addition to being drought tolerant, natives provide food and shelter for many types of wildlife.

Growing native plants allows us to establish a link between our own gardens and the natural world outside.

Finally, many of our native species are grown simply because they are beautiful. Ironically, the gardeners of Great Britain discovered California's native flora before most Californians did! American visitors to the great British gardens are often surprised to find many California natives growning there.



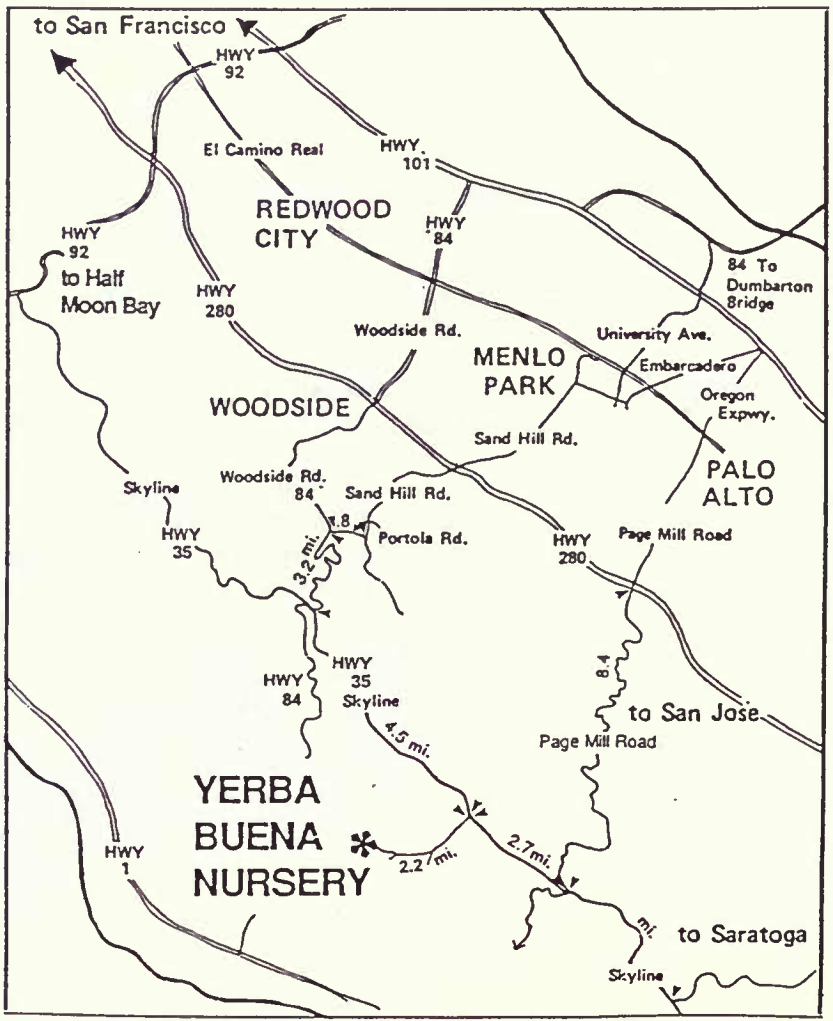
TO GET TO YERBA BUENA NURSERY:

The nursery is located on a small, private road off Skyline Blvd. Our turnoff is 4.5 miles south of the junction between Hwy. 35 and Hwy. 84. It is 2.7 miles north of the junction bewteen Page Mill/ Alpine Rd. and Hwy. 35.

If you are heading south on Skyline, our turnoff is on the right. Going north, it is on the left. Look for three signs: A Yerba Buena Nursery sign set back from the road, a small sign saying Rapley Ranch Rd. and a sign for Langley Hill Quarry. The Langley Hill sign is mounted on a tall post, and is the easiest to spot from the road.

Proceed down Rapley Ranch Rd. and when it branches off to the left, take the right fork. This is the beginning of Langley Hill Rd. Go past the rock quarry, staying to the right, and keep going until you reach the nursery. The distance from Skyline to the nursery is 2.2 miles, but it may seem longer!

Please call the nursery for more complete directions when coming from out of the area.



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THE YERBA BUENA NURSERY PEOPLE: 1991

*Gerda Isenberg • founded nursery in 1955 working to date
*Gertrud Aronstein • employee 1960-1962
*Karl Heinrich Rothe • employee 1961
Helmut Schneider • temporary employee 1962
Marielis Forster • volunteer occassional over time 1960's to date
*Hildegard (Sander) Jackson • employee1966-1971
Nancy Hardesty • volunteer 1971
*Carl (Matthew) Isenberg • part-time employee 1972 - 1988
*Judith Skinner • employee1971-1972
Marilyn Brandt • intern from UC Davis 1971
*Suzanne Schettler • employee 1972-1975
Gretchen Bartlett • part-time employee 1972
Keith Armstrong • part-time employee 1973-1974
Gregory Tye • part-time employee 1973-1974
Clico Gilland • volunteer 1973
Mabel Crittenden • volunteer occassional over time in the late 1970's
Janet (Kluve) Baniewick • intern from UC Davis 1973
*Joan Ward • volunteer 1976, employee 1977-1978
*Judith Larner Lowry • employee 1978-1985
*Catherine (Haydon) Bordi • employee 1978-1982 (76-80 ?BC) (78-81JL)
Don Thomas • employed 1978-1979
Ursula (Schulz) Apte • intern from UC Berkery spring 1979
Allison Rauzin (Ricki) • part-time employee 1979-1982
*Kathy (Kipping) Cardon • employee 1980-1982
*Wendy Born • employee 1981-1982
#*Barbara Coe • volunteer 1981, employee 1982-1985
*Joanne Mee • intern from Cal-Poly summer 1980, employee 1980-1981
Ruth Gurney Mandell • employee 1982-1986
*Amy (Schultz) Desmond • intern from Cal-Poly summer 1981
Helen Gillard • volunteer 1982
*Laurie (Horstman) Sugan • intern from Cal-Poly fall of 1982
*Steven Orr • part-time employee 1982-1985
*Klaus Perl • employee 1983-1984
Miriam Linder • summer worker from SF State 1984
*Eleanor Williams • intern from Cal-Poly summer 1984, employee 1985-1988
*Michaela Ivory • part-time employee 1985-1987
*Mike Craib • intern from Cal-Poly summer of 1985
*Brenton Wilcox • volunteer 1985, employee 1986-1988
Marilyn Daggett • employee 1986-1987
Gundula Freihofer • part-time employee 1986
Karen DeLapp • part-time employee 1986-1988
Mike Lutz • volunteer 1987

9/23

THE YERBA BUENA NURSERY PEOPLE:

Lori Hubbart • part-time employee 1987 to date
*Catherine Simms • employee 1987 to date
Karen Sullivan • volunteer 1988
Craig Swanson • employee 1988-1989
#*Bart O'Brien • employee 1988-1990
Brenda Butner • part-time employee 1988 to date
Annuschka Deb • volunteer 1989 to date
Jean Struthers • part-time employee 1989
*Marti Aiken • intern from Denver summer of 1989
*Josephine Hoh • intern from Cal-Poly San Luis Obispo (Borneo) summer of 1989
#Tim Hyland • employee 1989 to date
Ann Francis • intern from Cal-State Chico fall of 1989, part-time employee 1989
Erin O'Dourghty • part-time employee 1990
Steve Henson • part-time employee 1990
*Jan Visser • intern from Amsterdam spring-summer of 1990
Trudy Miller • part-time employee 1990-1991
*Kendra Sikes • employee 1990 to date
Lee Nimal • intern from La Honda winter of 1991, part-time employee 1991 to date
*Theresa La Mair • intern from DesMoines spring 1991
Joan Pelletier • volunteer/intern 1991 to date
Ellie Gioumousis • part-time employee 1991 to date

63 people counting Gerda
* people who lived at the nursery
# managers of the nursery

Yerba Buena Nursery Foundation Board Members:

Betsy Clebsch
Ami (Isenberg) Jaqua
Mabel Crittenden
Gerda Isenberg
Bart O'Brien
Bob Young

Yerba Buena Nursery Cultivars
1991

Yerba Buena Nursery has introduced a small but noteworthy collection of cultivars including (in alphabetical order):

Calystegia purpurata 'Bolinas' -named by Bart O'Brien, cuttings of this plant were collected by Bart O'Brien, Lori Hubbart, and Judith Lowry while visiting Judith's home in the town of Bolinas. (named in 1989)

Ceanothus thyrsiflorus 'Percy' -a selection from San Bruno Mountain given to the Nursery by customers who had named it after their son. This selection no longer survives at the Nursery, but it is probably in several Bay Area gardens. (named in the early 1980s)

Ceanothus thyrsiflorus "YBN Blue" -a particularly good blue-flowered plant of unknown origin. The "original" plant is planted in the Yerba Buena Nursery Demonstration Garden. The name is given in double quotes as no one is 100% certain that it is not another named *Ceanothus* cultivar whose identity has been lost at the Nursery. ("named" in late 1980's)

Ceanothus X *regius* 'Gerda Isenberg' -a plant at the Nursery that Dr. Roxanna Ferris suggested be named. Cathy Bordi named it after Gerda. (named in the late 1970s)

Chrysopsis villosus 'San Bruno Mountain' -named by Bart O'Brien after the mountain from whence it was originally collected by Ted Kipping. Ted had given the plant to the Nursery as "*Chrysopsis villosus* from San Bruno Mountain". (named in 1989)

Malacothamnus arcuatus 'Edgewood' -named by Bart O'Brien after Edgewood Park where the cuttings were originally collected by Eleanor Williams. (named in 1989)

Mimulus (*Diplacus*) 'Eleanor' -named by Gerda after Eleanor Williams who had a nice specimen of it by her apartment door at the Nursery. (named in 1989)

Mimulus (*Diplacus*) 'Indian Summer' -named by Lori Hubbart and Brenda Butner. (named in 1990)

Mimulus (*Diplacus*) 'YBN Maroon' -a chance seedling named by Gerda that came up in the *Ceanothus rigidus* var. *albus* 'Snowball' at the Nursery entrance. (named in the mid 1980s)

Mimulus flemingii 'Ted's Red' (*Diplacus parviflorus* 'Ted's Red') -named by Lori Hubbart after Ted Kipping who had given the plant to the Nursery. (named in 1988)

Solanum umbelliferum 'Bayo Valley' -named by Fannie Arnold on whose ranch cuttings of this plant had originally been collected by Eleanor Williams. (named in 1989)

The following plants are derivatives of Dr. David Verity's hybrid *Mimulus* (*Diplacus*): 'Brick Red' (named for its color, mid 1980s), 'Buff Ruffles' (named by Lori Hubbart in 1987) 'Chili Red' (named by Bart O'Brien in 1988), 'Grape Jelly' (named for its color, mid 1980s), 'It's A Girl!' (named by Annuschka Deb in 1989), 'Old Ivory' (named by Bart O'Brien in1988), 'Solid Gold' (named by Lori Hubbart in 1989), 'Tangerine' (named for the color, this was a series of plants, which was eventually narrowed down to one plant in 1989), 'V-8' (named for its color, mid 1980s), 'Valentine' (named by Marti Aiken in 1989), and 'Yellow Triumph' (named by a customer in 1989).

Among the ferns the most notable introduction has been *Llavea cordifolia*, an outstanding beauty with dimorphic fronds. This fern won a California Horticultural Society Certificate of Merit in 1977. Additional California Horticultural Society Certificate of Merit awards that have been won by Yerba Buena Nursery plants include *Keckiella cordifolia* in 1981, *Mimulus* (*Diplacus*) David Verity Hybrids in 1982, and *Solanum umbelliferum* 'Bayo Valley' in 1990.

INDEX--Gerda Isenberg

Suzanne Bassett Riess

Grew up in Bucks County, Pennsylvania. Graduated from Goucher College, B.A. in English, 1957.
Post-graduate work, University of London and the University of California, Berkeley, in English and history of art.

Feature writing and assistant woman's page editor, Globe-Times, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania.
Volunteer work on starting a new Berkeley newspaper.
Natural science docent at the Oakland Museum.
Free-lance Photographer.

Editor in the Regional Oral History Office since 1960, interviewing in the fields of art, environmental design, social and cultural history, horticulture, journalism, photography, Berkeley and University history.