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FROM THE PRESIDENT

The Mill Valley Historical Society is thrilled to send you the 2014 Review. Editor Abby Wasserman has assembled a group of talented writers and an interesting mix of articles covering different facets of Mill Valley history. Several of the articles offer perspectives on places we will visit during this year’s Walk Into History on May 25th. The walk covers the Locust Avenue district and highlights the sites of John Reed’s adobe, Chief Marin’s birthplace, and an emergency plane landing in 1911, among many others. We hope you will plan on taking part. We promise that you will gain a whole new appreciation and understanding of the Locust area. Please watch your email and posters around town for more details on the walk.

The MVHS remains committed to educating the public by gathering, preserving, researching, publishing, and disseminating information about local history. We are always interested in hearing suggestions from our members on how we can improve our service to Mill Valley. I’d like to thank the contributors to this issue, the volunteers who helped bring it to fruition, and our advertisers, who believe in the importance of what we do.

I hope you enjoy reading this Review now and in future years.

– Stella Perone

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COVER: Ray Strong, *Tamalpais*, n.d. Oil on canvas, 19 x 23 ½ in. At right is the complete painting. Collection of the Lucretia Little History Room, Mill Valley Library. An almost identical painting is owned by the Outdoor Art Club.


Mill Valley Historical Society
375 Throckmorton Avenue, Mill Valley, CA 94941
www.mvhistory.org
Ray Strong’s Marin County Years

Ray Stanford Strong (1905-2006) was one of the great California artists of the 20th century. From rugged, masterful portrayals of the Cascade Mountains in his native Oregon to his extensive body of work throughout California, he strove to paint with exuberance, sensitivity, and a profound knowledge of the earth, in a career that spanned over eight decades. The artist hit his stride during the years he painted Marin County, especially West Marin, where he fell under the spell of her sensuous grass-covered hills, picturesque ranches, and dramatic seashore.

He ultimately succumbed to Marin’s seductive charms and moved to Mill Valley on the southern slopes of Mt. Tamalpais in the late 1940’s; but the seeds of enchantment with this beautiful rural county had been sown much earlier.

In 1933, after four years at the Art Students League in New York, the 28-year-old artist and his wife, Betty, a violinist and native of Palo Alto, settled into a rickety Russian Hill apartment in San Francisco. Despite the harsh economic realities of the Great Depression, Ray was upbeat and idealistic about his fledgling career in fine art. Within the next two years he established himself in San Francisco’s art community and attained some extraordinary triumphs. Foremost was his huge 1934 painting depicting the erection of the Golden Gate Bridge, painted under the auspices of the federal Public Works of Art Project (1933-34). Ray recalled his first day field-sketching on the San Francisco side of the Golden Gate above Fort Point:

I walked to the end of the line to the big concrete [cable anchors], stretched a thirty by forty [canvas] and took it in right on location, sketched in those big blocks and put two little figures down there for scale. But the main thing was that I used grocery string for the vanishing point from here to Marin County for the catwalk. I was mostly fascinated at doing the old Civil War fort, the keeper’s cottage up on the shelf, and the brick structure. When I turned it in at the end of two weeks, the fellow who was in charge said, “My God, you did a job on this!”

Later that spring, while Ray worked on a Public Works of Art Project landscape mural for a school, word came from Washington, D.C. that President Franklin Delano Roosevelt had chosen his Golden Gate Bridge under Construction to hang in the White House as a testament to his New Deal reforms.
By 1935, Ray had organized the Art Students League of San Francisco with, among others, famed Western painter Maynard Dixon, with whom Ray collaborated on many important large-scale works over the next 10 years. Ray and Betty also opened a cooperative art store and gallery adjoining the school. They later added a Photographic Forum, which included top instructors such as Ansel Adams, Dorothea Lange, and Imogen Cunningham.

While working on his bridge painting, Ray became intrigued by the Marin headlands, which dominated the background of his composition. Soon he ventured north of the Golden Gate and discovered the sunbaked, rolling hills of West Marin. He made regular trips there starting in the summer of 1935, and in 1936 produced a canvas that is his most iconic work, *Indian Summer*, a close-up view of Black Mountain, on the west side of Nicasio Reservoir. For the rest of his career Ray painted Black Mountain through all seasons, preferring late afternoons when shadows were long. He anthropomorphized the mountain, imagining that he was painting Betty’s nude female form:

*It’s very feminine. I’ve always said that when I painted it [that] it’s a portrait of my wife’s breasts, body, buttocks, the whole works—and you get these beautiful erosional patterns when you get light left to right.*

Ray saw nature’s patterns unseen by others, and later in life poetically reminisced about the natural wonders of the Marin landscape:

*In Marin County there’s one valley called Olema Valley and the San Andreas Fault goes right through it [with] a little earthquake pool here and there. Corot-like stuff surrounds it and you break into the rolling hills, meadows, and conifers talking on the ridges. Well, it’s just shape, form, color . . . It just bowls you over!*

Simultaneously, dioramas and murals captured Ray’s imagination. He painted his first diorama backgrounds for San Diego’s 1935 California Pacific International Exposition, and grew to become an innovator in the field. In the late 1930’s he added WPA post office murals in California and Texas to his repertoire. Commissions in these new fields led the Strongs to close their businesses in San Francisco and move to Berkeley. Here Ray painted murals and dioramas for the U.S. Forest Service. A most lucrative assignment came as a joint venture with sculptor William Gordon Huff (1903-1993), best known for the monumental caryatids at the 1939 Golden Gate International Exposition.

1 Author interview with the artist, June 19, 2005.
2 Ibid., June 20, 2005.
3 Ibid., November 18, 2004.
Gate International Exposition. The U.C. Berkeley Paleontology Department hired Ray to do backgrounds and Huff to sculpt prehistoric animals for six large diorama backgrounds within the larger exhibit at the exposition, *Science in the Service of Man*.

Inspired by this project, both artists designed a science wing for the Palo Alto Junior Museum in 1940. Columbia Foundation money paid for their *Life Through the Ages* exhibits, which they completed in late 1941 as World War II was about to engulf the United States. The most important lesson Strong and Huff hoped to impart to young museum visitors centered on the key dilemma of modern man: whether to live in peace or destroy humankind and the planet. The fear that the Axis powers would do just that led Ray to join the war effort, and he used his carpentry skills as a ship’s joiner for Victory and Liberty ships at the Kaiser shipyard in Richmond. He worked swing shift for four years and painted landscapes mornings and weekends. A welcome respite from the monotony of the job was an annual two-week vacation at Inverness in West Marin, which allowed him to spend prolonged time painting pure landscapes.

Through a friend, Ray heard of an available lot in Mill Valley adjoining the property of artists Richard and Ann O’Hanlon, and bought it with money borrowed from Betty’s aunt. Ray built the house and studio at 383 Lovell with assistance from his father, H.W. Strong, and moved there in 1948. By this time, the Strongs had two children, Tim and Barbara. Betty did the lion’s share of child-raising while also finding time to play her violin with other accomplished musicians.

Once situated, Ray quickly became an integral part of the art scene in Mill Valley. That first year, he had a major show of Marin landscapes at Cowie Galleries in Los Angeles, and in 1949 joined the faculty at College of Marin as an art instructor. He implemented a comprehensive course of study in the arts based on Bauhaus school principles, which emphasized good functional design, aesthetics, and use of a wide range of materials. Students not only learned painting and drafting skills, but gained experience with woodworking, ceramics, printmaking, and other crafts. Meanwhile, Ray became a member of the Marin Society of Artists in 1950 and served as president in 1953.

In 1950, an architecture student visiting Ray’s Lovell Avenue studio commented on the 1940 scale model for the Palo Alto Junior Museum, and that conversation hatched a plan to build a similar museum on the College of Marin campus. Enthusiastic students persuaded the administration to explore the idea, dubbed “Spiral Toward Freedom.” Ray approached architect Frank Lloyd Wright (who seven years later would design the Marin Civic Center), and the school arranged for Ray and a few students to travel to Wright’s studio in Wisconsin. Wright predicted that while Ray ably designed the model for his “Peace through Understanding” museum, Cold War politics and hot Korean War fighting would stifle grant money, and indeed, when Ray returned, the school’s president had soured on the idea. When Ray proposed renovating the historic art barn on campus to house the museum, the board of trustees...
demolished it. Ray’s stubborn refusal to back down from his ideas cost him his job at the college that year. He secured a major commission in 1951 to paint a large background at the Academy of Sciences for the Greater Kudu display and continued to work there part-time for five years preparing exhibits. He also reconfigured “Spiral Toward Freedom” as a portable exhibit with an emphasis on Marin County history. Supported by state funding, his display opened in the spring of 1952 at the Art and Garden Fair in Ross and that summer traveled to the century-old Academy of Sciences in San Francisco. Here, controversy erupted once more. A thematic abstract spiral by sculptor Robert B. Howard (1896-1983) led some viewers to fear secret Communist connotations. The Academy pulled the sculpture under protest from Ray and his exhibit collaborators.

Through the 1950’s, Ray stayed active with the Marin Society of Artists and taught landscape painting in outdoor classes to both adults and children. On field trips around the county, he sometimes demonstrated brush technique by painting directly on his students’ canvases.

The artist received an important commission in 1959 from the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History to paint nine dioramas in their new Bird Habitat Hall. He spent most of 1960 to 1964 working on this project and a similar one at the Morro Bay Museum. By 1965 the Stronges had sold their home in Mill Valley and permanently relocated to Santa Barbara. In spite of the move south, Ray never really left Marin County. To him it remained the most paintable and “humanized” landscape on earth, and he regularly returned to paint, to reconnect with friends in Mill Valley, and to exhibit in the annual Marin Agricultural Land Trust show. His time here was his most productive as a landscape painter. He was at the height of his powers as an artist and produced his most cherished works. His paintings of Mt. Tamalpais, depicting the mountain as it might have looked to the original inhabitants before Anglo settlement, are especially prized in Mill Valley. No other artist, before or since, has portrayed the landscape of Marin as extensively or as beautifully.

Mark Humpal is an independent art historian, curator, and dealer currently working on a biography of Ray Strong. He previously published “Artist Ray Strong: An Enduring Vision of the Oregon Landscape” for the Oregon Historical Quarterly (Spring 2008). He lives in Portland.

Ray Strong won a Milley Award for Achievement in Visual Arts in 2001. Two of his Marin County paintings are on view in the Mill Valley Library. Fog Over the Golden Gate from Tamalpais hangs above the fireplace in the main reading room, and Tamalpais #2 is in the Mill Valley History Room.
The origin of Mill Valley’s first two commercial centers could be called “A Tale of Two Shopping Districts,” the tales describing two very different parts of town.

Between 1834 and 1835, the Mexican government granted Irishman John Reed and Englishman William Richardson large parcels of land, or ranchos. In 1889, the Tamalpais Land & Water Company (TLW) took possession of Richardson’s former rancho after a series of financial failures by subsequent owners. The TLW brought in a spur line of the North Pacific Coast railroad in 1889, and in 1890 a portion of the land was divided into lots and auctioned off. In 1900 the area was incorporated as the town of Mill Valley.

The TLW board members imagined that the auctioned lots would become vacation spots for well-to-do San Franciscans, anxious to spend their summers away from the grit and cacophonous traffic—as well as the fog—of the growing metropolis. And most buyers did build summer homes. Mill Valley’s first business district soon emerged where the railroad line ended at Throckmorton and Miller, and it catered primarily to the part-time residents.

A glance at the TLW land auction map reveals that not all of modern-day Mill Valley was part of that initial sale. Though much of John Reed’s former land was annexed to Mill Valley sometime before 1905, it remained the property of just a few individuals, mostly Reed’s descendents. None of that land went on the market until 1906, six years after the town’s incorporation. Those six years made all the difference.
On February 25, 1906, 60 acres of land were sold and converted to a subdivision known as Tamalpais Park. Jessie O. Sollom, John Reed’s granddaughter, owned a significant amount of that land. A roughly drafted map identified Tamalpais Park’s 308 lots. Mrs. Sollom kept a large lot near the corner of Locust and Hilarita for herself. By March 30, 1906, the first advertisement for Tamalpais Park appeared in the San Francisco Call, describing it as “the tract that will more than please your every desire . . . Prices $350 to $700 . . . Think today and act quickly.” Indeed. On April 18, the earth literally shook.

The San Francisco earthquake and fire left over 200,000 San Franciscans homeless. Tamalpais Park quickly became the new, full-time home for some displaced San Franciscans, and an appealing investment for real estate speculators. New price? “$450 and Up.”

To accommodate the growing transportation needs of the area, the Millwood train stop was moved to the corner of Miller and Locust and renamed Locust Station. The need for commercial services around the station grew quickly, and soon small businesses appeared.

The area had challenges from the start. John Reed’s original rancho had been on the shore of Richardson Bay, and included a great deal of marshland. The marsh came just block lengths from what would become the Sollom lot on the 1906 subdivision map. By the beginning of the 20th century, silt and human engineering had transformed some of the marsh into dry land, but it remained vulnerable to flooding. Even today, while the former Sollom lot never floods, the nearby intersection of Locust and Miller is often under water after bad storms.

Miller Avenue itself provided the other primary challenge for business owners. First installed for wagons, it later became a frontage road to serve the new railroad; it was not designed for significant pedestrian or horse and buggy traffic. Newspapers of the day reported complaints of muddy roads with no boardwalks to navigate them. And of course, trains rumbled down the track all day.

Unlike the appealing and visitor-oriented downtown at the end of the railroad line—where day-trippers and vacationers hiked into the redwood groves and rode the Scenic Railroad to the top of Mt. Tamalpais—the Locust business district was a much more prosaic enterprise. Developed out of necessity, and burdened with regular floods and a teeth-rattling railroad line, it didn’t appeal to anyone interested in the amusements of window-shopping, ladies’ teas, and elegant dinners.

Most Locust businesses were on the northeastern side of Miller Avenue. But across the train track, various services catered to the proudly unincorporated Homestead Valley. In 1934, the Homestead Improvement Club erected Brown’s Hall, a community center for Homestead residents. Years later it became the venue for dances and theatrical productions. (In 1972, the Buddhists of Marin bought it and converted it to a temple.) Being unincorporated had its benefits for the popular saloon, Brown’s Jug. When Mill Valley passed an ordinance in 1939 requiring drinking establishments to shut their doors by midnight, the owner of Brown’s renamed his bar “The 2am Club” to advertise his more liberal closing time.
Beginning in 1908, the city of Mill Valley tried numerous times to annex Homestead Valley’s revenue-generating commercial strip of Miller Avenue from Montford to Reed. It finally succeeded in 1951 by invoking the “Annexation of Uninhabited Territory Act of 1939.”

Over the years, the Locust business district expanded, becoming the primary shopping center for residents from all the surrounding neighborhoods. When the railroad stopped running, town boosters tried marketing the area as a shining example of progress. A 1950 advertisement in the Mill Valley Record promoting the virtues of the Locust business district rang with hyperbole worthy of a Madison Avenue ad agency. “The miracles of yesterday become the commonplace of today,” the ad proclaimed, “[but] the greater miracle is the growth of the LOCUST DISTRICT, where these improvements are available to those in the humble as well as the glittering stations of life.” The advertisement featured a map illustrating a wide variety of businesses, including a butcher shop, bakery, grocery store, delicatessen, five and dime, a few inexpensive eateries, and a number of car dealerships, auto repair shops, and filling stations.

The artist of that 1950 map must have found the Miller Avenue Shopping Center (opened 1947) a challenge to portray as a “golden milestone of human progress,” since it was housed in a series of Quonset huts. For years the shopping center provided excellent services. By the 1990’s, however, but for Gosser’s Meats and G & G Pharmacy, the Quonsets were nearly empty when a small chain of health food stores took it over and put in a market. The chain was Whole Foods.

Also on that 1950 map was The Brothers Tavern, a watering hole that was still in business decades later. Brothers is remembered as a raucous place where bar brawls often spilled out onto the street.

The rowdy parts of the commercial district weren’t limited to adults. In the 1950’s and 1960’s, C’s, a burger joint south of Locust, was a popular hangout for many town teenagers, and the site of some infamous rumbles. In 1971, Kentucky Fried Chicken opened in the building, and misbehavior continued at the locale into the 21st century. In 2002 a KFC employee was arrested for allegedly selling marijuana from the fast food spot; his buyers were instructed to use the code “extra biscuits,” of all things. KFC closed in 2013.

In the 1970’s The Port, on Miller between La Goma and Evergreen, sprouted up where Jolly King Market had been destroyed by fire years earlier. A series of small shops lining a dark and moody interior space, The Port reflected Mill Valley’s growing counter-culture population. Typical of the items for sale in its shops were macramé plant holders, “sensuous essence oils,” and the ubiquitous peasant blouses and roman-style sandals so popular in the seventies. Also in The Port was the original Mama’s Royal Café, now relocated to 393 Miller and a virtual museum of artifacts from when the neighborhood pulsed with local artists and musicians like Charlie Deal, inventor of the toilet seat guitar, who had an office over Mama’s. Another important hangout of the time was the Prune music shop, which supplied many local musicians with instruments. In 1985, Marin Theatre Company opened in the location where The Port had sold patchouli oil 10 years earlier.

Turnover is nothing new for the Locust business district, but a few businesses have managed to stay put, though some names have changed. Among them are Malugani Tire Center, Mill Valley Coffee Shop, Tamalpais Paint and Color, Jolly King Liquors. And before Sloat’s there was Egger & Son Nursery.

Over the years, many ideas have circulated on how to make the district more appealing to consumers. A 1967 master plan
even included a hotel, but nothing came of it. A plan for improved parking got off the ground in 1974, but was never completed, leaving today’s residents baffled by the two blocks of awkward pullouts between Locust and Evergreen. Despite these efforts, by the late 1980’s closed storefronts with papered windows had become a common sight in the area.

In 2003, the Miller Avenue Precise Plan (MAPP) tried to anticipate the future of Miller Avenue, but significant community opposition—particularly regarding the Locust area—scuttled it. Currently, the more modest Miller Avenue Streetscape Project has been approved and is awaiting implementation. It is hoped that the changes will encourage more pedestrian and bicycle traffic in the area.

Any longtime Mill Valley an can recall a favorite Locust district shop such as the Locust Variety store, Star Herbs, Locust Bakery, or General Hardware. And colorful memories include a tiny pet store beside Brown’s Hall that sold horsemeat, regular Hells Angels assemblies in what is now a commuter parking lot by the Marin Theatre Company, and people canoeing down Miller and Sycamore avenues during floods. Perennially potholed and often soggy, the district has never competed for aesthetic appeal with its prettier, downtown sister, but it can rightfully claim one significant feature—an outstanding view of Mt. Tamalpais.

Today the Locust business district, with its diversity of small businesses, faces a difficult marketplace. Whenever a shop closes its doors, theories abound on why it happened, and the question of how the district can best serve the community in the years ahead is the cause of much hand-wringing by civic leaders. Meanwhile, Miller Avenue just moans on past it all, like the Mississippi River, sometimes overflowing its banks, obstinate to all efforts to change it.

Joyce Kleiner is a writer and former columnist for the Mill Valley Herald. Her new book, Legendary Locals of Mill Valley, will be released in May 2014.

Nothing conjures up a picture of the Mexican era in California better than a large cattle ranch and an adobe home. John Thomas Reed had both of those in the mid-1800’s. He and his family lived on present-day La Goma Street and Locke Lane in an environment that included elk, bear, coyotes, wolves, and even a drunken priest from the San Rafael Mission!

John Thomas Reed was a formidable figure in early Marin because he was the first to receive a grant for land from the Mexican government in the San Francisco Bay area. It encompassed northeastern Mill Valley, the Tiburon peninsula, Corte Madera and part of Larkspur. His sawmill was the first in Marin County. Before settling in Mill Valley he lived in Sausalito, where he provided the first ferry service on San Francisco Bay. By 1834 he had constructed a wooden house, the first non-Indian home in Mill Valley, and replaced that with a small adobe in either 1837 or 1838, then with a larger adobe in 1843.

All that remains of John Reed’s two adobes today are photographs taken after a fire in the 1880s which burned the wooden floors, roof, and supporting beams but left intact much of the adobe walls. These pictures tell us the scale and proportions of the building and support a description written in 1880. Fortunately, there are numerous restored adobes south of San Francisco, giving us an excellent idea of the appearance of Reed’s adobes.

A SHORT HISTORY OF ADOBE
Adobe bricks were first introduced in California at the missions. Knowledge of adobe construction had travelled from the Middle East to Spain and then to Mexico where the priests and soldiers knew the techniques well enough to instruct the Indians. Adobe became the preferred construction material for the homes of settlers and ranch owners before the American period.

Preparing adobe was simple: it required a dampened pit of large enough proportions (approximately 20 feet in diameter and two feet deep) in which to mix a suitable loam consisting of clay and sand, with added straw and occasionally manure, plus bits of broken pottery, roof tiles or shells, and water. Indians helped to stamp on the mixture to reach the right consistency to be placed in wooden molds, which were left in the sun to dry for three or more days. The molds, larger than most bricks today, varied in size up to five inches thick, 12 inches wide, and 20 inches long. A mud mortar, again reinforced with broken pottery, tiles, or shells, helped bind the bricks together. Adobe ranch homes of 1830–1850 were either a simple single-floor structure with a covered veranda, or a larger and more elaborate adobe of two stories with an additional veranda on the second floor and a picket fence in front.

The exterior was covered with a mud plaster, onto which a white coating was applied yearly to protect it from the weather. A two-storied adobe had a stairway either in front or back to provide access to the bedrooms on the second floor. The three-feet thick walls provided a buffer against the chill of winter and heat of summer. The roofs were often made of redwood shakes or shingles; in areas where there was no redwood, curved tiles formed on logs were used.

In a two-story home, the ground floor included the living room, dining room, kitchen, storeroom, and the fireplace on an interior wall. The floor was either of tiles, wood, or dirt, while the wooden ceilings acted as the floor for the rooms above. The second floor included the bedrooms, accessible through doors off of the veranda. Two-story adobes typically have a full wrap-around veranda, or a veranda on two or three sides.
Three of John and Hilaria Reed’s children were born in a 30 x 18 ft. one-story adobe, still standing in 1880. Most of the tales we have from Reed’s visitors took place in this first adobe. Visitors praised the hospitality, but complained of the fleas and the noise at night of wild animals. One guest, H.A. Peirce, described an incident in which Reed’s wife hid in the woods from Padre Quijas, known for his alcoholic antics. When Reed came home and confronted the belligerent priest, Quijas lunged at Reed with his penknife, striking Reed’s thumb. The ashamed cleric capitulated and asked Reed to kill him. Reed calmed him down, and they all sat down for dinner.

Reed died in 1843 before his second adobe, a two-story wrap-around veranda style (later called “Monterey”), was finished. The lumber for this 45 x 24 ft. structure came from his own sawmill. Although fire destroyed the wooden elements (including the veranda), there are existing photographs of the remaining adobe walls. There is also a detailed description from 1880, when the adobe was occupied by Reed’s daughter, Inez Deffebach, in Munro-Fraser’s History of Marin County. The second-floor veranda was described as five feet wide, which is exactly the width of the veranda of the adobe of Francisco Sánchez, Hilaria Reed’s brother. The Sánchez adobe, in Pacifica, has its outdoor stairway at the front. (Inside stairways were added later to refurbished adobes.)

Both of these styles are still popular in California today, with brick and/or wood replacing adobe, giving the adobes of the Mexican period a contemporary look. At least 12 of these old adobes with second floor verandas can be seen in California today: in Pacifica (www.historysmc.org), Petaluma (www.petalumadobee.org), Milpitas, and Martinez. Farther afield is the lovely Leonis Adobe Museum (www.leonisadobemuseum.org) in Calabasas, Los Angeles County.

Sources
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BY BETTY GOERKE

In December 1911, when flying was still a dangerous, impractical novelty, a homemade plane made an emergency landing in a muddy field in Mill Valley.

It was no ordinary plane and no ordinary pilot. Weldon Cooke, a 1907 graduate of U.C. Berkeley, had more recently been a race car driver, and had taught himself to fly only that summer, surviving a spill in Lake Merritt. He sat in a chair exposed to the wind, fog, and rain, resting his feet on a bar and his hands on what looked like the steering wheel of a car. Behind him was the engine with its propeller, and above and below the engine were a pair of canvas-covered “biplane” wings. Canvas ailerons, control structures used for banking, projected from both sides of the body of the plane. Jutting in front of Cooke and in the plane’s rear were canvas-covered elevators, devices that tipped the plane up or down. Below him were small wheels, similar to those of a bicycle.

“The Cooke Snatches Crown from Tamalpais, Wind Gods Lose Battle in the Skies.”

The unusual plane, named The Diamond, was built by two young men with no experience in flying: Land P. Maupin, a dredge captain, and Bernard Lanteri, a shipyard owner. They assembled the airship at Lanteri’s shipyard in Pittsburg (then known as Black Diamond), California. The engine was modeled on what they could discover in magazines about the Curtiss engine, used in other early planes. They hired Weldon Cooke to fly The Diamond competitively.

According to the Mill Valley Record Enterprise, the flight was sponsored by the Mill Valley and Mt. Tamalpais Scenic Railway Company. Although a $1,000 prize had been offered for anyone who would fly over Mt. Tam, by the time Cooke took up the challenge, the prize had been withdrawn because the flight was eventually considered too dangerous.

Cooke’s original plan was to fly from Oakland, circle over Mt. Tam, cross the Golden Gate, continue above Market Street to the bay, and head back to Oakland. His final plan, necessitated by the weather, was more modest. He left Oakland later than he had planned on December 19 because of his concerns about the effect of the strong winds on his light aircraft. Taking off at 3:46 p.m., he flew over U.C. Berkeley and dropped two letters from the plane—one for his brother and the other for University President Benjamin Ide Wheeler—their first air mail letters. The San Francisco Call-Bulletin reprinted the text to President Wheeler as follows: “Greetings from the alumnus who has gone highest in his profession 7000 feet. It is good to be here. Weldon B. Cooke, ’07 University of California, elevation 4,200 feet. Tuesday December 19, 4:15 pm.”

Leaving Berkeley, Cooke flew over the Bay at 4,200 feet and dropped down above San Quentin, but it was too foggy for him to see or be seen by the prisoners. Above Larkspur, startled residents feared for his safety as they observed him flying overhead. He circled Mt. Tam, flew over the “Crookedest Railroad” and heard the train whistle. At his elevation of 3,000 feet he still had light, but the fog was moving in, the wind was increasing, and fearing frozen fingers, toes, and face, he headed for Mill Valley, where his sister-in-law lived. As he descended, his plane’s engine failed and he dropped 2,000 feet in two minutes, yet managed to glide in a circling motion toward a darkening landscape and the
Enterprise headlined the feat, “Fearless Aviator Circles Peak on Mt. Tamalpais” and proudly announced that “Mill Valley has been added to the famed towns in aviation.”

Cooke’s return flight three days later was also full of drama because of treacherous winds. After he was in the air, he fought to keep his plane in control and considered returning to Mill Valley, but was unable to find a safe flat spot to land, so continued to Oakland. The headline in the Call Bulletin read, “Death Rides Plane as Cooke Battles in Air. Unable to Turn Back, Intrepid Aviator is Forced to Fly in Teeth of Gale.” Everyone breathed a sigh of relief when he landed safely.

Cooke’s safe return to Oakland was not the end of the story, however. In reporting of his departure from Mill Valley, the editor of the Record Enterprise claimed that the reputation of Mill Valley had been harmed, indeed “scandalized,” when an unnamed source implied that Marshall Staples wanted to charge for the time the plane was parked on his property, and that the men who watched over it had demanded money. The editorial of Dec. 29, 1911, attempting to rescue the town’s reputation, explained that Staples had not asked for rent, that the men who were paid to watch it were not displeased, and that Manuel Fostine (who lived on Miller near Locust) had given Cooke free use of his phone to make a long distance call to Oakland to say he was safe. The editor stated that “The alighting of the airship in Mill Valley was one of the best advertisements the Town ever had,” and suggested the speedy creation of a proposed Booster Club to lessen the possibility of any future damage to Mill Valley’s reputation, and to foster its good name.

Cooke flew The Diamond in a Los Angeles air show in January 1912, and broke two records: flying at an altitude of 5,800 feet, and flying 18 hours and 22 minutes over a five-day period. The prize money of $7,400 was split among Maupin, Lanteri, and Cooke. The Diamond was retired, but Cooke remained active, building planes himself using a Roberts motor made in Ohio, and flying hydroplanes that he had constructed, proving that he could land a plane on water. As a barnstormer he travelled to county fairs, doing tricks for the crowds who came to see him. Cooke died in one of these demonstrations in Pueblo, Colorado in 1914, just missing the opportunity to fly in the U.S. Army Air Service during World War I. The cause of his crash was due to unexpected gusts of winds, no stronger than the ones he had experienced on his return flight from Mill Valley three years earlier.

One can view the reassembled Diamond at the Hiller Aviation Museum in San Carlos, California. A plaque near East Peak on Mt. Tamalpais is dedicated to Cooke and the first flight over the mountain.

Betty Goerke is currently writing a book about her father’s exploits in biplanes in 1918-1919. Lt. Ralph Bagby flew during WWI with the French, and later with the U.S. Army Air Service. By 1918 there had been a rapid evolution in plane design: pilots and observers sat in open cockpits, the body of the plane was covered with fabric, and the planes were mass-produced. However, there were still no parachutes.
The Milley Awards logo, designed by Craig Frazier, recipient of the Visual Arts Milley in 2006.

BY TRUBEESCHOCK

The Milley Awards logo, designed by Craig Frazier, recipient of the Visual Arts Milley in 2006.

THE CREATION OF AN ARTS AWARD

Mill Valley boasts more artists, writers, performers, and musicians than usual in a town our size. They’re attracted by the town’s natural beauty, the solitude our redwoods and hills afford, the proximity to San Francisco, and the vibrancy of the community. Mill Valley boasts a city art commission, a resident theater company, arts and film festivals, a chamber music society, a symphony orchestra, art galleries, and performance venues. Mill Valley also has a formal system in place to honor artists. The Milley Awards for Creative Achievement, launched in 1995, celebrates its 20th anniversary this year.

The Milleys grew out of an Art Commission program from 1988, a lifetime achievement award which was presented first to Ann O’Hanlon, the painter who created the non-profit art center Sight and Insight in 1969. The award was a certificate, calligraphed by hand, presented before the City Council. In 1990 the award was given to Bob Greenwood, long-time Tam High music teacher. Art Commission Chair Abby Wasserman, who grew up in Mill Valley, spearheaded the annual award and nominated both O’Hanlon and Greenwood.

I joined the commission during the last year of Abby’s term, and was very impressed with Bob Greenwood’s event and the enthusiastic turnout. Max Perkoff performed with some of Bob’s former students. After Abby left the commission, I determined to carry on her dream.

Leah Schwartz was the next honoree. Among those who attended was Phyllis Thelan, founder of Art Works Downtown, symbolizing the esteem artists held for Leah. As we waited and waited for the Council to come out of “Closed Session,” Phyllis and other Leah fans left before the program started. The following year, Art Commissioner Jack Beck recommended novelist Don Carpenter, who regularly held court at the Book Depot. An intimate turnout waited a long time for the Council to emerge; Don nearly fell asleep. In 1993, Mark Fishkin was the recipient. The wait was shorter this time. Film Festival co-founder Rita Cahill and board members Ann Brebner and Evelyn Topper spoke. Evelyn recalled how the Art Commission had given Mark a grant to help start up “Saturday
Night Movies,” the festival’s precursor, in 1977. The Mayor presented Mark his certificate before a spirited crowd.

Clearly, the Creative Achievement Award was a success, but the annual presentation in Council Chambers had become disappointing. I also believed the Art Commission needed to honor more than one person a year. I wanted a more distinguished event and an improved nomination procedure. I was frustrated by the commission’s casual attention to the whole process. Priorities change with each new group of appointees, and there was no guarantee that the award would continue.

In 1994 I began recruiting former Art Commission members to plan something bigger and better. I invited Abby, Bob Greenwood, former Mill Valley Mayor Alison Ruedy, Val Binns, Barbara Veatch, Anne Neeley, Susan Rabin, Rean Canon, Queenie Taylor, and my good friend Connie Kroeck—people who demonstrated leadership, were dependable, worked well together, were knowledgeable, professional, interested, and willing to take on this project. We met at Alison’s beautiful home at Shelter Bay. Everyone was enthusiastic, and planning began. The target date for the first awards event was fall of 1995.

At our first meeting we decided the event would be an elegant catered dinner hosted by a master of ceremonies. The award would be a work of art (more appreciated than a plaque or certificate, Bob pointed out). Bob also suggested a name for the award: the “Millie.” We debated the spelling, settling on “Milley.” We considered possible venues; the Marin Theatre Company wasn’t available when we wanted it, but the Outdoor Art Club, through Connie, offered us a low rent and full cooperation. We had found our first home.

We needed a clear description of eligibility for the award. Bob developed selection criteria and a list of five categories—music, visual arts, performing, literary, and contributions to the creative life of the community. We refined these and produced a brochure. Nominees had to be born, raised, or educated in Mill Valley, live here now or in the past, or have a strong work connection. To avoid conflicts of interest, we agreed to appoint an outside panel of judges who would change every year. Nominations would stay in force three years, with an option to re-nominate. We also decided to remain a citizens’ group, connected in important ways to City Hall but not a city-appointed committee with time limits on service.

Members of Artisans, the artists’ cooperative, were invited to submit designs for the award, which should be three-dimensional, have lasting intrinsic value, and be made of glass, wood, ceramic, or metal. The designer would receive a $300 prize. Submissions were displayed in Artisans’ window on Forrest Street, where our committee could evaluate them. John Libberton of Sausalito submitted the winning design of an abstracted female form in bronze. John has overseen production of the statuettes for 19 years, and attends every Milleys event. All five Creative Achievement Award recipients, from Ann O’Hanlon to Mark Fishkin, received statuettes retroactively.

We received some 15 nominations and selected the judges: Tyson Underwood, Katharine Mills, Larry Posner, and Mark Fishkin. (The next year we would add a fifth judge.) We left them...
to deliberate alone, which made their job harder. Every panel of judges faces the same challenge, to choose from excellent but very different candidates in each category—a classical pianist versus a pop singer for the music award, or an architect versus a painter for the visual art award. The next year we appointed a facilitator to answer judges’ questions and resolve issues.

Time was getting short. We asked Mill Valley artist Henry Breuer to design the event invitation and logo. Artisans and the Marin Arts Council gave us their member lists. Marin Theatre Company contributed a list of their board members. Abby defined the guiding criteria for our emcee—someone “beloved” by Mill Valley who would be an attraction in themselves. I phoned my friend Cyra McFadden, the author of the brilliant satire The Serial, in England, where she was teaching. Cyra’s warmth and humor would set the standard for future emcees.

On October 22, 1995, Miriam Perkoff’s Ensemble added a classy touch to our pre-dinner reception in the patio, Mayor David Raub inaugurated the evening, and Alison Ruedy introduced the Milley Award to the capacity crowd.

The first awards went to Tamalpais High’s drama teacher Dan Caldwell, Fall Arts Festival and Artisans leader Allester Dillon, The Sweetwater’s Jeanie Patterson, legendary author George Leonard, and the Fromer Family. Significantly, the very first person Abby had proposed for a Creative Achievement Award back in 1987—at the urging of her friend Rona Weintraub—was Irving Fromer, an artist and the patriarch of a multi-talented family. The other Art Commissioners liked the idea of an award but didn’t know Irving, and voted no. Abby persisted, retrying the idea with Ann O’Hanlon as a nominee. Now, eight years later, Irving’s sons David and Jon, his grandson Reed, and his daughter-in-law Jacki were awarded a Milley. Irving Fromer, who passed away in January of 1994, was surely present in spirit.

Jeanie Patterson had a family event and couldn’t attend, so Village Music’s John Goddard read Jeanie’s letter recapping her life at the illustrious and tumultuous Sweetwater, documenting a piece of Mill Valley’s history. This led to a lesson learned. The honorees are the Milleys program. Surrogates can’t take their place. (John would win his own Milley years later.) We set one condition for our recipients. They must commit to attend and accept their Milley Award in person. We have never veered from this policy.

The Outdoor Art Club was resplendent, with décor created by Elaine James. D’Angelo’s catered the buffet-style dinner. The room was packed with 138 people, and lines were long. Our $35 ticket price was very reasonable. A little too much so: for the first several years we operated at a loss. We learned from our mistakes and the price is higher now. We have broken even, or better, these last 10 years.

As early as 1997 our attendance climbed to over 200, requiring tables on the Outdoor Art Club porch. We moved to the new Community Center in 2003, the year the numbers topped 275. New committee member (and Milley awardee) Joe Angiulo carried 30 chairs from the Middle School, and swore “never again.” Another lesson learned. We set the maximum seating at 250 for future Milleys.
Seating was always a big deal. Each awardee had to be seated with family and friends, yet we didn’t know everyone’s connections. At our first dinner we sat the Fromers’ uncle in the back of the room. Never again. Since 1996, each nominee reviews our table plan and is invited to make changes.

The Milley Award is only for living artists, but each year we present tributes to Mill Valleyans in the arts who died recently. They represent the depth of our town’s creative past. Tributes were formerly read aloud. Their bios now appear in the program booklet and their images appear as part of a slide show. Community is the point of the Milleys. It’s a celebration of the entire arts community, not just five or six honorees. It’s also important for the city to be involved, and we invite the Art Commission Chair and the Mayor to speak.

For our first decade or so we asked each awardee to choose someone who knew them well to hand them their statuette and speak about their accomplishments. Eventually, we decided to simplify. Now the emcee presents the statuettes, the honorees speak, and the printed program describes their accomplishments. Our latest improvement, added in 2007, is a video show-and-tell.

The video slide show that precedes each presentation has been narrated sequentially by John Blackstone, Phil Sheridan, and Susan Zelinsky. It developed out of necessity. In the past, only music awardees performed at the event. We have enjoyed performances by George Duke, Jeannie Chandler, Phil Fath, Jon Hendrix, Max and Si Perkoff, Bill Champlin, Peggy Salkind, Cathy and Tony Angelo, and Dick Fregulia, among others. Mounting an exhibition by visual art awardees, or organizing a reading or performance by literary or performing winners, was too much for the already stretched committee members. The slide show has partially rectified this oversight, providing images of artwork and film or theater stills for the audience to appreciate.

By October 19, 2014, our 20th Milley Awards, we will have given statuettes to 118 awardees. The committee (now board of directors) also gives a Sali Lieberman Award, a green-patina Milley statuette, for lasting creative achievements, and an elegant certificate, to organizations or businesses who support local arts in a variety of ways.

The Milley Awards are a hometown event. Former awardees help us, such as Craig Frazier, who designed our newest Milley logo. The all-volunteer board, working nine months a year, operates at a professional level. When one leaves after years of service another takes his or her place, and always, a core group remains. The Community Center continues to be our generous venue. Deer Park Villa has catered the dinner for 18 years. Local restaurants and wineries donate to the pre-dinner reception.

Our Creative Achievement Award dream is a reality, and as far as I can tell, we’ll never run out of Mill Valley artists to honor.

Trubee Schock is Coordinator of the Milleys Board of Directors. She chaired the Mill Valley Bicentennial Committee in 1974-76 and worked on the 1977-78 N.E.A. survey of Mill Valley Arts. She served on the Art Commission from 1989 to 1994. This article was adapted from a speech given by Trubee Schock and Abby Wasserman to the Outdoor Art Club in February 2014. For more information, visit milleyawards.com.
or a small town, Mill Valley has supported a big number of gas stations. Competitors have lined both main roads into town at one time or another; in 1972, for instance, there were six filling stations in just four blocks of Miller Avenue between Locust Avenue and Reed Street. But back in 1948, when Frank Hickman started his gas station business in Locust, he had few competitors. A great many drivers, especially in Homestead Valley, patronized Hickman’s Chevron Service. The Hickmans were Homestead folks. Frank and his wife Mary lived on Brabo Terrace with their children, Jane and Ken. A genial man with a dimpled smile, Frank made sure his station was much more than a place to gas up.

The parcel the station stood on was owned by grocer Louis Ferrera, owner of numerous other properties, including the Quonset huts across from Frank’s station and buildings on Miller and Locust. There had been a business on the spot since 1935, initially Shell, then Chevron/Standard Oil. Swallows nested and raised their young in the tiled roof of the Spanish-style brick, three-pump station.

Frank Hickman employed mechanics for the exacting work of maintaining and fixing vehicles and high school and college boys from Homestead Valley to pump gas, change tires, and wash cars. He watched over them with a fatherly eye, encouraging them to put away money for their futures. He was a smart and caring businessman. His tow truck, with a “Follow Me For Service” sign on the back, was not only available to answer customers’ service calls, but was a resource during neighborhood emergencies.

In 1953 Frank enlarged and modernized the station, and the swallows had to find other nesting places. The Chevron burgundy and cream colors were changed to red, white, and blue. In 1971, the three-stripe Chevron corporate logo was redesigned to two stripes, which local wits described as “a demotion from sergeant to corporal.”

Hickman’s was a source of pride for Chevron. A feature story in their July 1965 Bulletin boasted that gas sales at Frank’s had gone up eight-fold.

Success, alas, did not protect the station from reversals of fortune. On October 6, 1973, the Yom Kippur War began, and the subsequent Arab Oil Embargo against countries supporting Israel triggered an energy crisis. In 1974, with gasoline in scarce supply, long lines developed at gas stations. Supplies were short, and Standard Oil decided to close one of their southern Marin stations. They selected Hickman’s. The station was closed and dismantled, and Frank retired. He remained an active citizen and respected figure in Mill Valley. No one built on the property, which eventually became a parking lot for Whole Foods.

These days, buying gas is an impersonal transaction. Customers pump their own fuel, fill their tires with air and their radiators with water, and check their own fluid levels. They pay through Plexiglas screens or inside mini-marts, or at the pump itself. “Service Station” as a term is nearly obsolete.

Chuck Oldenburg recently published a booklet of 137 one-page articles on the history of Homestead Valley. When Frank Hickman opened his station, the corner of Miller and Evergreen was still part of Homestead Valley.
Working for Frank

BY PRESTON MCCOY

Frank Hickman was a truly conscientious, honest, and hardworking man with a deep understanding of human nature as well as sensitivity to people’s needs. I worked for him part-time as a high school and junior college student for about five years, starting in 1956.

Frank ran a tight ship, but a fair one. Hickman’s Chevron Service was a real “Service” station. In those days there were plenty of cars from the 1940’s and even some that were pre-World War II. All of them required a lot of maintenance, so service was a big part of the gas station experience. When a car pulled up to the pumps we washed the front and rear glass, checked the oil and water levels, and even the battery fluid, brake fluid, and tire pressure if they looked low, or when we were asked. Those cars typically lost oil, water, and air between fill-ups. All this service was provided for just three or four dollars’ worth of 32 cents-per-gallon gas. Sometimes for only one dollar’s worth!

Hickman’s had a fully equipped lube room, which was the real profit center. Car suspensions had many grease fittings, sometimes 18 or 20, and they needed an oil change and grease job about every 3,000 miles, which involved topping all fluids—gear oil, brake fluid, and so on. Brake linings wore out quickly and with little warning, so they had to be checked too.

Saturday was our biggest day. Many customers wanted their cars washed and/or serviced, so there was a wash rack, just a parking space really, with a hose and a drain. I disliked washing cars because we had to clean all the windows inside and out, vacuum the floors, dust the dash, and wipe down the paint. Sometimes we applied wax. Everything was done by hand. I was paid $1.50 an hour, the minimum wage at the time.

And then there were tires! They only came in four or five regular sizes and two grades, and all of them fit on the standard 15-inch rims. We sold Atlas tires, the Chevron brand, and also recaps for the penny-pinchers. The recaps failed at an alarming rate but some people bought them anyway. I liked installing tires and repairing flats because it required both strength and skill. When I started we were still taking them on and off the rim with hand tools, but we got a hand-powered tire machine later. I remember that the first tubeless tires arrived about 1960. They represented a new technology and we had to learn how to work on them.

Because I was young and inexperienced, I didn’t get to do everything in the lube room, but I did learn to do brake jobs and lube and oil changes. The mechanics, Lloyd Merritt and Paul Warne, did tune-ups, carburetor adjustment, fuel pump and water pump replacement, valve adjustment, and other fairly minor repairs, such as replacing the occasional leaky head gasket.

I built my first hot rod in 1957, and fabricated a sports car with a home-made steel tube frame and fiberglass body during this period. I was given the free use of the lube room lift to work on the bottom side of my cars now and then.

I heard in 1993 that Frank was hit by a car while helping divert traffic around a stalled vehicle on Highway 101 near Larkspur Landing. That was Frank, always the helpful gentleman. To this day I am grateful to him for the life experience I learned, about cars and about people, about being conscientious and doing the right thing.

Preston McCoy grew up in Mill Valley near Sycamore. He lives in San Rafael.

Home Ground

BY JANE HICKMAN KONING

Growing up, I spent lots of time in or around my dad’s station. Before the train tracks along Miller Avenue disappeared, a favorite pastime was to walk the tracks, one foot in front of the other, seeing how far I could go without losing balance. Often I would stop in at the station to see if I could catch a ride home with Dad. While waiting until he was ready to leave, I’d cross the street to the tracks and, hands out like a tightrope walker, I’d walk on the rails as far as I could until I lost my footing, and then start all over. In those days there was less vegetation on the hills above the station, and I could look up and see our house on Brabo Terrace, above Reed Street.

Other times, while waiting for Dad, I would cross to the Miller Avenue Shopping Center building. At that time, in the 1950’s, several different businesses were housed under that corrugated tin roof of the Quonset huts: a meat market, a grocery store, a pharmacy, a lunch counter, and a tiny post office. There was always plenty to do and see. I might visit with Joyce Gelardi at the pharmacy, or with Ned Henry at the post office, who was my classmate Carla Henry’s relative.

One summer my friend Margo Malugani and I set up a lemonade stand on the small patch of grass between the station and Brown’s Hall. We couldn’t have picked a better spot for our little enterprise—Dad’s customers waiting to pick up their cars, station employees on their break, and pedestrians passing by on the sidewalk would all stop for a cool drink and perhaps a brownie.

Today the station is gone, replaced by a parking lot, and I live in another state. Yet when I’m back in town for a visit, sitting there in my parked car, I can almost see my dad young and smiling, waiting on his customers. For me, that parking lot is a sacred space.

Jane Hickman Koning, Tam High Class of 1958, lives in Bellevue, Washington.
How the Dimitroffs Came to Mill Valley

All of us have stories about how we came to live where we do. My family’s story about coming to Mill Valley involves a happy convergence of friendship, nature, family, music, and art.

**Ernest Bloch, 1924**

In 1917, Mill Valley residents and pianists Ada Clement (1878-1952) and Lillian Hodghead (1886-1972) opened the Ada Clement Piano School in Lillian’s parents’ remodeled home in San Francisco. They started with 40 students and soon attracted many more. Such was their success that in 1923, recognizing the need for a music conservatory on the West Coast, they incorporated their school as the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. It offered a broad selection of instrumental classes as well as theory, composition and voice. They continued to live on Magee Street in Mill Valley, commuting daily to the city by ferry boat.

In 1924 Ada and Lillian invited my grandfather, the composer Ernest Bloch (1880-1959), to teach during a summer session at the new conservatory. Bloch had emigrated to the United States from Switzerland in 1916 and was the founding Director of the Cleveland Institute of Music. Asked to do more fundraising than teaching and composing, he soon became unhappy in the post. That summer in San Francisco he taught 12 master classes. When Ada and Lillian invited him to be Conservatory Director the following year, he accepted.

Bloch directed the San Francisco Conservatory for five years, taught composition and theory, and built the faculty. He lived with Ada and Lillian at their Magee Street home, which they called “The Shack.” Bloch had the downstairs (one large room) for himself, but ate, visited, and composed upstairs on the upright piano. He loved Ada and Lillian because they understood his music, were serious musicians, and allowed him to compose in their home without interruption.

While they took the ferry into San Francisco each day and back each evening, the three discussed music, politics, and especially nature. Lillian and Ada were avid hikers, as was Bloch. They would hike up Mt. Tam, often on the weekends, and Lillian and Ada also backpacked in the Sierras. They all looked for mushrooms while on those hikes.

My grandfather composed one of his most famous works,
America: An Epic Rhapsody, in 1926-27 while living at The Shack. It won many awards and was premiered in 1928 in multiple cities, including San Francisco. In 1987, thanks to Louisa Cagwin and a group of music lovers, it was performed in Mill Valley by Marin’s Emeritus Orchestra at Our Lady of Mt. Carmel Church.

Because Bloch loved The Shack and where it was, he spoke often of it in letters to his daughter, Lucienne. He loved that the redwoods surrounded the home and that the peace and quiet of the country was absolute. Without that peace of nature around him, he probably would not have stayed as long as he did.

In 1930 he was commissioned by the Rosa Stern Foundation to compose a service for Temple Emanuel in San Francisco. He left the Conservatory and lived in Roveredo, the Italian part of Switzerland, where he composed his critically acclaimed Sacred Service.

Stephen and Lucienne, 1948
My Bulgarian father, Stephen Pope Dimitroff (1910-1996), and Swiss mother, Lucienne Bloch (1909-1999), met when both worked for the Mexican painter and muralist Diego Rivera in New York. After their marriage they lived in Flint, Michigan, where their three children were born. In 1948 my father, not wanting his family to grow up in the industrial town of Flint, drove across country with my mother, my brothers George and Pencho, and me, looking for a place to live and raise the family. We traveled in a ‘48 Buick sedan piled high with all our camping equipment, the three kids in the back seat raising hell the entire way. My mother had written to Lillian and Ada that they were going to come to Mill Valley on their way to look for a place to live. The ladies told them that they would be on one of their hiking trips to the Sierras but that the house was open and they could just walk in and stay there until they got back.

As we kids were playing cards downstairs one evening, the outside door opened and two women dressed in hiking attire poked their heads in, scaring us to death. After the ladies introduced themselves, we yelled for our parents.

It just so happened that the house above Lil and Ada on Marguerite was up for sale. The owner, Jessica Shaft, had been the music librarian at the Conservatory for many years and was a good friend. My parents went up to visit, and Jessica told them that indeed, the home was for sale because she was moving to Mexico. It had a terrific view of Blithedale Canyon and the San Francisco skyline. Peter Pan Heights, a beautiful place we often hiked to, could be seen to the east. Jessica just told them to call PG&E and the water company and have the utilities changed into their names, packed her bags, and left. The icebox had milk in it as well as food. All the furnishings came with the house. We couldn’t believe our good fortune. The 32 fruit trees on the sloping property especially thrilled us.

Mom made many jars of jam with the blackberries, Satsuma plums, apricots, and apples there.

My dad remodeled a bit, making huge picture windows in the kitchen and dining room area that brought in the sun and made it easier for my mother to paint many, many pictures of that view. Then he went looking for work in San Francisco. After commuting for a few months working as a draftsman, my dad couldn’t do it anymore. He and my mom discussed the best way to start a business in Mill Valley. Finally they decided on a frame shop. There wasn’t one locally and my mom’s paintings needed framing as well.
He started his first shop up at the corner of Lovell and Bernard streets. The place was so small that to make a large frame, he had to open one of the windows to allow the corners out. Then “dimitroff’s” (the lower case “d” was deliberate) moved down to 32 Miller Avenue next to Eastburn Tool Rental and Locksmith. A seamstress from Stinson Beach named Madge Kilby, whose business was changing the stripes on the uniforms of men stationed at the Air Base on Mt. Tam, asked if she could set up her sewing machine in the front of the shop. So Madge moved into half of the front of the business. Then dimitroff’s needed a larger space. At that time, the Bank of America building at 60 Throckmorton was divided in two. One side was the bank, the other side held the telephone company. The phone company had just built a new building across from the tennis courts at Boyle Park, so that space became free. The bank was having trouble renting it because there was no standard storefront window. However, my dad believed that if people knew where he was, he didn’t have to advertise. dimitroff’s and Madge stayed in that building on a monthly lease for over 10 years. During that time my dad started carrying art supplies, but running both businesses was becoming too much for him, so he split The Art Store from dimitroff’s. The Art Store moved up to East Blithedale next to Gilmore’s Camera Shop, and dimitroff’s moved to Throckmorton, in the old El Marin Florist space.

Mom painted many views from the Marguerite house. She won awards for her views of Mill Valley from different angles. Both of them were members of the Marin Society of Artists and both had paintings in the rental gallery at the Marin Art and Garden Center. Mom sketched “3-Minute Portraits” at the Art and Garden Fair each year for many years. She was also a glass artist, printmaker, and an avid photographer (as was Bloch), and her photographs, especially of their friend Frida Kahlo, are frequently exhibited and sold. My daughter, Lucienne Allen, is her archivist (www.luciennebloch.com).

Over the years, Lillian and Ada kept in contact with Bloch, who by now was living in Agate Beach, Oregon. In the 1950’s the Griller String Quartet, based in Berkeley, would visit The Shack and play my grandfather’s music. I remember visiting with my parents and listening to the talk about Bloch’s music, along with experiencing a musical performance. It was a fascinating musical afternoon and inspired my own singing studies. When I was young I took piano lessons with both Ada and Lillian. Lillian taught me the major scales and Ada the minor. Both were very strict and I wasn’t a very good piano student. But I was able later to attend some of their classes at the Conservatory and was amazed at their knowledge of music and pedagogy.
The Griller Quartet also visited Bloch at the Agate Beach home. There they would go over his string quartets. When the celebrated Berkeley pianist Roy Bogas was a youth, he visited too. Each summer, Roy brings a quartet of musicians to Gualala, many of them first chairs in the S.F. Symphony, for a weekend of music. Often these concerts feature Bloch’s Quintet for Piano and Strings (1923).

By 1963 my parents wanted to move to the country; Mill Valley was getting too commercial for them. They sold the frame shop to Richard Pervier and Matthew Davis and bought 35 acres in Gualala. Dick and Matthew eventually sold the business to Tom Craig. Still named for its founder, the frame shop is now in Tiburon.

Growing up in Mill Valley was the best possible youth I could have had. The people in town were always very kind and open. My dad was a Lion so he met many businessmen, and everyone supported everyone else. My mom taught art classes which I sometimes modeled for. I learned respect for teachers. If I hadn’t taken Bob Greenwood’s choir class at Tam, I don’t know if I’d be still singing today. All those wonderful people who made an impression on me have never left me.

After graduating from Tamalpais High, Sita Dimitroff Milchev studied at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music on a two-year scholarship, then attended Juilliard School in New York City. She has performed all over the United States as well as Europe and Israel. She lives in Gualala.
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