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Alice Gerstle Levison

FAMILY REMINISCENCES

An Interview Conducted by

Ruth Teiser

Berkeley
1967

Mrs. J. B. Levison, January, 1967



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INTRODUCTION

Mrs. J. B. Levison, at the age of 93, is a woman of dignity, charm, and candor. Her memory is long, her perspective clear, her ability to explain events and attitudes excellent. The Gerstle family, into which she was born, and the Levison family, into which she married, are prominent San Francisco Jewish families. Many members of both have been leaders in the business, cultural, and social life of the city, and in its community affairs. So have members of other prominent families to which the Gerstles and Levisons are related.

Mrs. Levison was born Alice Gerstle on March 29, 1873, in San Francisco. Her father was Lewis Gerstle. He and her uncle, Louis Sloss, were principals in the Alaska Commercial Company, which from the early 1870's until 1890 held the exclusive concession for taking fur seals in the Pribilof Islands.

Alice Gerstle grew up in San Francisco and San Rafael, with two long stays with her family in Frankfurt, Germany. "We had a happy home life," she recounts in this interview, "because my parents were so affectionate and loved their family so much and were wrapped up in them."

In 1896 she married Jacob Bertha Levison, a promising young insurance man. His subsequent career as a business, community, and family leader made him, as Mrs. Levison recalls, "very much loved and admired." President of the Firemen's Fund Insurance Company from 1917 to 1937, he continued until his death in 1947 to be one of San Francisco's most valuable men.

Mrs. Levison's account of the customs and attitudes of her girlhood years, her descriptions of people and domestic events and social clubs, and her

recollections of the period of the 1906 earthquake and fire are all of interest. More significant, however, is the expression, both implied and stated, of the ethical concepts of her time and her people, their standards of private and public honor and responsibility.

The interview was held on four mornings between October 20 and November 7, 1966, in a pleasant upstairs sitting room in Mrs. Levison's home at 2420 Pacific Avenue, San Francisco. On the morning of the first interview, Mrs Levison was painting when the interviewer arrived, a continuation of a lifelong interest. Although in the course of the interviews she commented that she had too little to do these days, she continues an active social life. Her manner, interests, and activities are those of a woman perhaps twenty years younger than she is today.

The text of the interview is little changed from the original transcript. The interviewer deleted a few questions that led nowhere, changed the order of several passages so that they are now contiguous to related subject matter, and added a number of names and certain words for clarity. These additions are indicated by brackets. Mrs. Levison made several minor additions and corrections. Her son Robert M. Levison also read the original transcript and made a few corrections and a number of additions that are indicated by brackets and his initials.

Mrs. Levison has allowed the Bancroft Library to make a copy of the

reminiscences of her brother Mark Gerstle, to which she refers in the interview. Other immediately related works, cited in the footnotes, are J. B. Levison's Memories for My Family and Gerstle Mack's Lewis and Hannah Gerstle.

The Regional Oral History Office was established to tape record autobiographical interviews with persons prominent in recent California history. The Office is under the direction of Mrs. Willa Baum and under the administrative supervision of the Director of the Bancroft Library. This interview with Mrs. Levison was conducted at the request of Professor James D. Hart, Department of English, and with the advice of Professor Hart and Professor Moses Rischin, Department of History, San Francisco State College; the Chancellor's Office provided the necessary finances with a grant from the Harvey Endowment Fund.

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Interviewer

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INTERVIEW 1--OCTOBER 20, 1966

Family and Early Years

Teiser: I was just looking again at the family history. That is a very well done book, isn't it?

Levison: Which family history do you mean?

Teiser: The one written by Mr. Mack.* It is very good, I think.

Levison: Gerstle is my nephew, my sister's son. He was really named Lewis Gerstle Mack, and he was to be called Lewis, but he never was. I don't know at what point they decided to call him Gerstle and give him the family name, but we've always called him Gerstle Mack. He's a writer. I've read quite a few of his books. He wrote an interesting book on the Panama Canal, and he's written articles. He isn't in any business, and he lives in New York now. He wrote this book of the family, and he did a very good job of it--very thorough. Besides all that he had a family scroll made. Mine seems to have disappeared.

* Gerstle Mack, Lewis and Hannah Gerstle (privately published, 1953). The book contains data on many members of the Gerstle family and genealogical charts.

[Levison: I have found it. (Added to typescript by Mrs. Levison)]

Teiser: In the back of the volume there are genealogical tables.

Levison: He went even farther back than that with the scroll. It was a great big thing. We laughed at it and said it was perfectly silly. You have to get down on the floor and have a whole room to open it out. It is 12 feet long. He is a very thorough person; whatever he does, he does very well.

Teiser: You have a lot of writing talent in your family. Your husband's book, too, was excellent.*

Levison: Yes, my husband wrote that book about his memories. There were other things too. Someone mentioned a book, a Fireman's Fund book, which was called Romance of Insurance.** My husband didn't write that, but he collaborated with Frank M. Todd on it.

Teiser: That too is a very good book.

Levison: That, of course, is not a personal record; it's simply a history.

Teiser: There's a great deal about Mr. Levison in it, however. I was reading the Gerstle Mack book because I was interested today in

* J. B. Levison, Memories for My Family (San Francisco: privately printed by John Henry Nash, 1933).

** Frank Morton Todd, A Romance of Insurance (San Francisco: Fireman's Fund Insurance Company, 1929).

Teiser: covering the early part of your life, the background and family. Could you tell us of your earliest recollections?

Levison: I have kind of funny recollections. Sometimes you question your own recollection and you wonder how much of it is really memory and how much of it is talk you've heard. I do have rather a clear recollection of one time of my childhood when my parents went to Europe with the whole family. I was only four and a half when we came back, so I don't think my memories could be very valuable. At one time I used to tell my parents how I remembered the place where we lived and certain things in Frankfurt. Of course I've been there so many times since then that those memories have completely disappeared; at least I just think I had them. I was there again when I was between fourteen and sixteen, and those memories are pretty clear about the place and what we did there.

I also have a faint recollection of my oldest sister's marriage when I must have been about seven or eight. We lived on Sutter and Jones then; Dr. Herzstein had that house afterwards. My sister was married there. I have a recollection of her marriage and the dresses that my sister and I wore. We have a picture of it, so I don't know if I actually remember this or if, having seen the picture after it was taken, I carried through my life the impression that this was the way

Levison: we looked and the way we were dressed at the time of my sister's wedding.

I do remember some things about that period, however, because we used to play a game with a boy in the family, that we all went to New York to see my sister Sophie. We played this game on the back stairs of my house. We used to jump on and off the train, say "Hello," and pretend that we were seeing her. That was Sophie, my oldest sister, who lived in New York for about ten years. Then her husband became ill, and they went to Bermuda and to Europe. He died of tuberculosis afterwards.* Her husband was Theodore Lilienthal.

Teiser: Your mother was there in New York with her some of the time, wasn't she?

Levison: Yes. My mother went there when their first child was born. My father went when the second child was born. I remember certain things about that. I have some letters from my father written to my mother during the time that she was away at Sophie's, about the babies. They always called us "the babies."

Teiser: Who were "the babies"?

* Sophie Gerstle and Theodore M. Lilienthal were married in 1879. He died in 1891, she in 1934.

Levison: I and my sister Mrs. Fleishhacker.* We were much younger than my other sisters, and in the family they called us children "the girls," "the boys," and "the babies."** My father wrote to my mother about us and about how we were so cute: "They came into my bed this morning, and they were so sweet." That was my sister [Bella] and I. My mother was away for several months that time, because you could not get to New York so easily. She stayed there with my sister Sophie.

Teiser: Your first recollections of San Francisco would have been of which home?

Levison: I have a faint recollection of the house where my sister [Sophie] was married on Sutter Street. For the wedding they built in an empty lot next to the house a type of ballroom, where the wedding took place. I remember that vaguely. I don't think anybody could have told me about that; I must remember it. I can show you the pictures of my sister and me, and I can remember the dresses very well.

* Florence Isabelle, called Bella.

** The Gerstle children were: Sophie, born 1859; Clara, born in 1861; Bertha, born 1863; Marcus Lewis (Mark), born 1866; William Lewis, born in 1868; Alice, born in 1873; and Florence Isabelle (Bella), born in 1875. Sophie married Theodore M. Lilienthal; Clara married Adolph Mack; Bertha married John Leo Lilienthal; Alice married Jacob B. Levison; and Bella married Mortimer Fleishhacker.

Teiser: Your younger sister and you were the flower girls?

Levison: Yes. We had dresses with lace in them. One had a pink sash, and the other one had a blue sash. We always had that; our dresses were made exactly alike until I got so big and spindly that I had to have them made differently. But we still sometimes had the same materials made up. We were two years apart in age, but we lived the life of twins until I got big. When it came to the point that I was able to go to parties and dancing class, my sister couldn't go because she was too young. She was very jealous of all that until we grew together again, when we again did everything together. There was a period when I felt myself very superior and older.

Teiser: At what age did you start going to dancing classes?

Levison: We went to a Mr. Lunt,^{*} a dancing teacher who was very well known here. He was on Polk Street. We went to him as children to learn a little dancing. The dancing class I was talking about before didn't happen until after we came back from Europe. I was about sixteen, and I was doing up my hair instead of having it in braids. I wanted it turned up a little bit with a bow. Then I joined this dancing class, which was held in a private home, in the Walter house. It was my first contact with

* Lunt's Dancing Academy, operated by Mr. O. A. Lunt.

Levison: boys in any way, because up to that time I was such a child and knew very few people. The only men I knew were my cousins, my brothers, and a few friends. After I came back from Europe, I was supposed to be growing up, so I joined this dancing class in the evening. It was only a couple of blocks from where my parents lived on Van Ness, at the D. N. and E. Walters' home. We had our dancing classes there, and I got acquainted with some boys. My brother [Will] was a little older and had joined another class; and my sister [Bella] was not in that class.

Afterwards, we sort of grew together. My brother [Will] was five years older than I, and for a while he seemed much older than I. Afterwards, the difference was not so great, and we went to parties together. He took us to all the parties. My father never liked it if anybody else brought us home.

Teiser: Did your brother object to having to take his sisters to parties?

Levison: No, he didn't. He was pretty decent about that. I can remember even when he was courting his wife, Sadie Hecht, and we used to take the streetcar to go places, he and Sadie would sit outside on the dummy and we'd be inside so that we wouldn't bother them.

Levison: I found a book that my husband must have given me the day he proposed to me in Washington. There was quite an interval between the proposal and the actual engagement. My brother[Will], sister[Bella], and I were in Washington; my sister and I had been to Europe with my parents, and my brother met us in New York. Mr. Levison was there too. He had been attentive to me for a number of years, and he sent me flowers. There were some other men there who sent me things. My brother wrote to me from New York, "They're all here, Alice." He meant all my beaux. My mother and father thought it would be nice for us to go to Washington, so my brother was to take us to Washington. Mr. Levison announced that he was going to meet us in Washington, which he did. We went to the theater. On the way home from the theater, my sister and brother very tactfully walked ahead and left me with Mr. Levison. That's when he proposed to me. I have a book which I came across just the other day, The Prisoner of Zenda, which he dated with that date. I can't remember if he gave me the book on that day or if he gave it to me afterward and dated it just out of sentiment. The book must have been around here all these years. I dare say at one time I read it; maybe I never read it all. I came across it quite accidentally

Levison: the other day, and it gave me such a funny feeling. I said, "I don't know if I've ever read this book." So I read it. It is an interesting story, which since then has been made into a movie. The book itself looks rather faded and old.

My parents were pretty strict, and of course, Victorian. I haven't quite finished with this book called A Period Piece, written by somebody called Gwen Raverat. She wrote a story of remembrances from her childhood, and it's a period that I lived through, Victorian. This is in England. She was an American woman who married an Englishman, and this family was related to the Darwins and another family--the Wedgewoods, who owned porcelain factories. She was distantly related to the Darwin family. She writes a story of that period.

Teiser: Is it very much like your recollections?

Levison: Yes, some of it. One part amused me very much. The mother had a carriage (there were no such things as automobiles), a coachman, and horses. The horses always had to be rested after a certain amount of exercise. You were sorry for the horses. That brought back to me something that I remembered, and confirmed it. My mother had a carriage in San Rafael, but

Levison: the main use of it was to take people to the train and bring them back. The moment the horses got home, they had to be unharnessed and stood so that they could rest. The horses mustn't work too hard. That book brought back this whole recollection and other things, such as the way they dressed and the way they thought about a lot of things. Of course it was more English than American, but the whole book has been rather amusing to me.

Standards and Customs

My upbringing was, I guess, typically Victorian.

Teiser: Did you feel that you were more strictly brought up than other children of your age?

Levison: Yes, we were definitely strictly brought up, with all the love and kindness that you could imagine in a family, but my father was a very strong-minded man as well as very affectionate. He was very strict in one way and very affectionate in another, strict about certain things that "my children don't do." It didn't make any difference what other people did. We used to say that in other families the girls had more liberty,

Levison: and they could do things. We'd say, "Helen's going to do it." He would reply, "That doesn't interest me at all. That's their family. My children don't do those things, and if anybody says anything, just tell them that I have broad shoulders and I can take it." We had such respect and love for him and confidence that his opinions were right that, although we might not have always liked it, we never questioned the fact that his authority was there. He was that kind of a man. On the other hand, he was so gentle and so loving, particularly with his girls. He was much stricter with the boys.

My uncle [Louis Sloss] who had more boys than girls, always said, "Gerstle doesn't know how to treat the boys. He spoils his girls, but he's too strict with his boys." I don't know that he was too strict, but he was strict, and we had certain things that we didn't do. The kind of people we were didn't do those things. Do you know what I mean? It was sort of inborn in us, and I still have some of those ideas. I still don't think some things are nice for certain people to do, although they do them now. Everything is so different, and naturally (I'm a great-grandmother now) there are many things I don't approve of or I don't like, but I never

Levison: interfere, because I realize that I'm the one that's out of joint, not they.

Teiser: You mentioned something just now that brought to mind a usage that has changed. Men called each other by their last names.

Levison: Very much, particularly in California, I think. My husband was either called by most of his friends J. B., his initials, or Levison. He called one of his best friends, Arthur Small, never anything but Small. That was the way it was done, so much so that I hardly knew their first names. I never called them anything, of course, but Mister, even his best friends. I never had that intimacy with them. They were his friends, club friends and business friends, and although we did know many of them socially and exchanged house visits, there still was always this formality. They called me Mrs. Levison and I called them Mister.

Teiser: Did your father and his brother-in-law call each other by their last names?

Levison: They called each other Sloss and Gerstle, and they were partners and brothers-in-law. They always did. It was the custom then, and even more so in California, I think. They all came here as strangers and pioneers and didn't know each other

Levison: very well, and that's what most of them did. We never called Mr. Sloss "Uncle Louis;" he was always "Uncle Sloss," and my father was always "Uncle Gerstle," down through several generations. We never called them by their first names. Almost the only person I can remember who called my father Lewis was my mother, my aunt, and a few other very close people; otherwise, nobody did.

Teiser: Do you think that calling your uncle by his last name was a German tradition, or was it American?

Levison: I don't know if it was a German tradition. I don't think so. I think it was a pioneer idea. It was so accepted you didn't think too much about it.

Teiser: What did you call your aunts?

Levison: We called them Aunt Sarah, Aunt Emma, and so on. I didn't call my mother's brothers by their last names; I called them by their first names. Just Uncle Sloss was always Uncle Sloss, never anything else.

It was a peculiar period. We were happy. We had a happy home life, because my parents were so affectionate and loved their family so much and were wrapped up in them. There were so many connections. There were many connections between our family and the Lilienthal family in half a dozen different ways.

Levison: In a way, it continued into some of the later generations.

There have been some intermarriages between the various branches of my father's family and my mother's family, marriages of second cousins and that sort of thing. There have been quite a few of those.

Teiser: There was a rather small group of families, wasn't there?

Levison: Yes, comparatively small.

Teiser: What were the others besides the Lilienthals?

Levison: The Triestes were a big family, the Brandensteins were a big family. They were the biggest, but there were others, like the Schweitzers and the Walters. That was D. N. and E. Walter; Mrs. Isaac Walter was my cousin. The Haases were a good family, and there were quite a few of them.

Teiser: Was the Mack family large?

Levison: Yes. After my sister married a Mack I knew them, but I didn't know them very much before. The Hechts were another family which we married into. My two brothers married two of the Hechts.*

Teiser: You had not known them particularly before?

Levison: I had known some of the girls slightly.

Teiser: Was it the same with the Fleishhacker family?

Levison: Yes. My father and mother knew the Fleishhackers. We didn't

* William Lewis (Will) Gerstle married Sara (Sadie) Hecht, and Marcus Lewis (Mark) Gerstle married Hilda Alice Hecht.

Levison: know them too well. I remember that I was quite surprised to find that Mortimer Fleishhacker had a brother, Herbert.

I had never heard of that brother. For a while they had a home over in San Rafael, and there were quite a few daughters. We knew them then, just knew them. We grew up, and Mortimer went to parties where we went.

We spoke the other day about the San Francisco clubs, the Concordia and what was called the Verein but is now called the Argonaut. It used to be called the San Francisco Verein, run by a German named Kaufmann. It was a German club really, to begin with, but it finally ended up being a Jewish club. They were on Powell and Post, where the St. Francis is. Near the corner they had the club rooms.

Teiser: Was it more a family club than a men's club?

Levison: Yes. The men went there and played cards. I don't know what else they did, but they had parties and three or four balls a year, and the families all went there together. That was the great meeting place for men and girls. We had lots of good times and lots of wonderful parties because, being a club, they could go in for it in a big way, with costume parties and theatrical things.

Teiser: Were these mainly for the young people?

Levison: Yes, mainly for the young people. The old people, my parents for

Levison: instance, would always go if there was a ball, because they or my brother had to take us. Then my father would play cards. He used to say, "Have a good time. Stay as long as you like. I'm enjoying myself; don't you bother about me." But he would wait until it was time to go home, you know. He wouldn't let us go home with anybody, unless it was my brother once in a while. At the New Year's parties we always had, the older people would sit at one table and the younger people at another. When New Year's came along, we went around to see our parents, and my father always said, "Are you having a good time?"

I'd say, "Yes."

He'd say, "Well, go ahead. I'm enjoying myself, too." He wouldn't go home, but would sit it out. I had a lot of dance cards from those days. The cards had a little pencil attached, and you'd write down "Number 4--So-and-so." On one of them, a card full of names, somebody had written on the back, "Too bad you have to go home at 4 a.m." We'd stay that late.

Teiser: My word, your father was a good sport.

Levison: He was wonderful, and those things never bothered him.

Lewis Gerstle, Louis Sloss, and Gustave Niebaum

Levison: In this book (Period Piece), there is a character something like my mother. She was always delicate. We were always protecting her from worry. My father treated her just like a little girl who had to be protected all the time. He often said to us, "Don't tell this to Mother. Don't worry her. I'll see to it."

He always loved to give presents to us. I remember when we got a big doll one Christmas. If he had bought anything, he would have to show it to us, although he wasn't supposed to. I remember his showing us this doll. He took it down and said, "Don't tell Mother I showed it to you. I don't want her to know that you've seen it." He couldn't control himself; he had to show it to us to give us that pleasure.

If we were sick, he was the one who always got up at night and bathed our heads and took care of us, because Mother should not be disturbed and should get more rest. He always treated her so. He was fifteen years older than she and always had this protective feeling. He was that kind of a man; he

Levison: not only took care of his family, he generally looked after people. At the time of his death, Dr. Voorsanger, who was the rabbi, compared him to an oak tree, a big oak tree, with his arms spread protecting all under him. If anything disagreeable had to be done in the family, my father did it.

One cousin of mine and his second wife were killed in a train accident, and somebody had to go to identify the body. My father, inasmuch as he felt that he was very devoted to this nephew, went. We said, "Can't somebody else go?"

He said, "No, it's my duty." And that was it. He was that way about everything.

Teiser: About business too?

Levison: Yes. My Uncle Sloss was more genial than my father on the surface, and he was always taking people out and giving them drinks in those days. My father didn't drink as easily as my uncle did. Uncle Sloss never overdrank, but he was always a good fellow and liked to do anything pleasant. But if somebody had to be discharged, which wasn't such a pleasant task, he would say, "Oh, let Gerstle do it. He doesn't mind." He did mind, but he did it. They got along beautifully, were wonderful partners and brothers-in-law. After we had bought our home in San Rafael, they [the Slosses] bought the property next

Levison: door and lived there with their family. Every Sunday morning, either my father would go over there or my uncle would come to the house, and they would walk up and down. They had been together all week in business, but on Sunday mornings they'd walk up and down on the porch smoking and talking.

Teiser: During the business week, did they have lunch together, as partners often did?

Levison: I think they did a good deal of the time. In fact I have a photograph that illustrates how they were. There was a Mr. Niebaum,^{*} who grew wine grapes and made wines. He was a Finn, and he had been a sea captain. They called him Captain Niebaum always, and he was in the firm [the Alaska Commercial Company] too. He was much younger than my father and uncle. He had a big blond beard and was a very handsome man. His widow lived here at the corner [Pacific and Steiner] where the doctor lives now. I imagine the three men went out to lunch together often.

Teiser: Was Captain Niebaum a tall man?

Levison: Yes, very tall and very handsome and blond, the typical Finn. I have a picture in one of my albums. Somebody took the

* Gustave Niebaum, who established the Inglenook Winery.

Levison: picture thinking it was funny that every time they [the three men] came back to the office at 310 Sansome Street after lunch, my father was always way ahead. He would always get there first. He walked faster; he was more vigorous. Mr. Sloss was more delicate and slower that way. He would come in, and then Niebaum came. I have a picture of the three men going into their office, which was so typical of what they did always.

Teiser: What was Captain Niebaum's position in the concern? What did he do?

Levison: I don't know. They had so much to do with shipping on account of Alaska and the fur trade that I think he came into the business simply as another man who bought interest in it. Captain Niebaum had a very pretty wife; she wasn't very smart, but she was very pretty. They never had any children. I can't think of her maiden name now. Her brother, who had some daughters, died, and Mrs. Niebaum practically brought up the children. They lived here at the corner.

Teiser: Did Captain Niebaum start the vineyard at the time of your father's association with him?

Levison: Yes, he had the vineyards in Napa Valley then, Inglenook. He had a nice estate up there. He brought the vines from Europe and started making wines, and they were good wines. He was interested in that.

Teiser: Did he bring you wine? Did you have his wine at home?

Levison: Oh yes, we had Inglenook wine. Of course my father was very fond of Rhine wine, and at any dinners or other functions he always had imported Rhine wine.

Teiser: I suppose the people who had grown up in Europe didn't like California wines as well.

Levison: They didn't have much of an opinion of California wine. I think Captain Niebaum was one of the first people to start the vineyards up in Napa County. He had a lovely place up there. He was a nice man. I don't think he was a particularly brilliant man in any way that I can remember, but he was nice. I don't know if there is any more Inglenook wine made. I'm not particularly interested in wine, so I don't know. My father liked good imported wine.

Domestic Customs and Education

One of the things you used to have were these Sunday morning breakfasts, so-called breakfasts. They were nearly lunch, they were so late. You had a big meal; how people could eat it I don't know. They had goose breakfasts and wine. Am I

Levison: talking to that machine?*

Teiser: Yes.

Levison: Oh for goodness sake, I didn't even know it.

Teiser: That gave you all day to digest the goose, at any rate.

Levison: Yes. [Laughter] People were invited. It was really one big meal on Sunday.

Teiser: Did you have wine at the breakfasts to wash down the goose?

Levison: Oh yes. We children just sat there. We were allowed at the table; we were not kept out of the way. When we were little, we had our supper very early; but later when we grew up, my father believed that the children should be at the table and meet grownups. I always followed that with my children too. As soon as they grew out of their babyhood and knew how to behave themselves, we always had them at the table; and it didn't hurt them to eat a little heavier dinner. That taught them to talk up to people and not be afraid, but still not to talk too much. I made them go to bed early, but they were there. They learned manners, and they learned how to talk to older people. I believed in it because we had that too.

Teiser: Besides the wine, did you have other beverages, such as whiskey, in your home to serve people?

*The tape recorder used for the interview.

Levison: We didn't have what we call cocktails in my father's home. They might have had something like sherry, but I really don't remember anything about that. We had beer, of course. In San Rafael, in the evenings we always had some sandwiches and beer standing in the dining room for anybody who wanted to eat before they went to bed. Now we would think that unnecessary, but at that time it was done. Of course we had breakfast very early in the morning because the children and the men had to go to the city and take an early train. We had a very early breakfast, and we all came down to breakfast.

Teiser: At one time?

Levison: Yes. We often had sandwiches in the morning, too, before lunch out in the garden. Then every afternoon, Mother had tea. It was that kind of eating, which isn't done anymore. Nobody eats that many times, very few people anyway. I don't know how our digestion got away with all those things we ate.

Teiser: You must have had good cooks.

Levison: We had a wonderful cook, one for a long, long time, Dora. I can remember the help that my mother had because she had them such a long time and they were so much a part of the family. There were two or three. She had a maid, Josie, and a waitress, Katie. I remember all of them, even the Chinaman she had, who helped everywhere, and her coachman, and

Levison: afterwards her chauffeur. Those people stand out in my memory more than some of the people I've had, because they were there so long and they were faithful and nice.

Teiser: Where did they come from? Were they of American origin, or were they mostly foreign-born?

Levison: The girls--the cooks and the maids--were mostly German. ✓
We had an English coachman at one time. The chauffeur was South American, and there was the Chinaman. We always had a Chinaman.

Teiser: What was the Chinaman's function? ✓

Levison: He was a dishwasher, cleaner, sometimes laundryman, and he generally did the hard work. The laundry was done by the Chinese. They were sometimes cooks. I had a cook for thirty years, off and on, who was Chinese, but I'm talking now about my mother's period. She didn't change help very much, because people stayed with you for so long.

Teiser: You had, I suppose, in general, a German tradition of cooking in your home?

Levison: Yes, we had German cooking, but we had every kind of cooking that was good.

Teiser: Did your mother closely superintend the servants?

Levison: Yes, she superintended everything. She was a very thorough, good housekeeper. She didn't do much herself. She had done it in

Levison: her early days and she could do it, but she didn't because in the first place she was able to have help and secondly, she was never strong enough to do a great deal.

Teiser: Did you girls learn housekeeping?

Levison: All my sisters learned to cook except me. I never learned how; I never wanted to. It was my own fault, and I'm sorry now that I didn't, but the others all learned more or less.

Teiser: Who taught them?

Levison: Sometimes the cook taught them. There were no such things at that time as cooking schools. You learned it at home. That's one reason why I never did learn it, because Dora thought it was kind of funny if we came in the kitchen and never took it very seriously. My younger sister, Mrs. Fleishhacker, learned it more afterwards. She didn't cook much, but she knows more than I do anyway.

We learned sewing, and I could do that better than my sister. She didn't care much about sewing, and I did. I remember when my mother got a sewing machine. I read the book and taught myself how to use it. I always liked sewing and using my hands much more than my sister did. The rest of my sisters could all sew.

Teiser: What kind of schooling did you have?

Levison: I had a very peculiar schooling. My grandson says I never

Levison: learned anything. He always teases me, saying, "That's why you don't know anything, because you didn't go to school." I always tell him, "I know a lot of things you've never even heard of."

We^{*} went to so many different schools. We went to a school in San Rafael; the principal's name was Miss Anderson. She was a New England old maid, and she had a nice little school for girls only. Then we went to a French school on California Street, near where we lived, for a while. I don't remember the name of that school. Then, when we really started going to school, we went to Miss West's School, which was one of the good girls' schools. First it was up on Hyde and Sutter streets for a few years; then she moved to a place on Van Ness, between Sacramento and Clay, I think. We went there until I was fourteen years old. It was very near our house.

Then my parents went to Europe, and we left that school and were in Europe for two years. My sister and I had a German governess during that period and kept up our studies. We studied a lot of things that children don't study now. We learned German, had French lessons and drawing lessons. I had

* Mrs. Levison and her sister Bella.

Levison: had drawing lessons before that, but in Frankfurt we went to two old ladies whose names were Fräulein Hoefler.

We came back when I was sixteen years old. Then I joined a dancing class; I was supposed to be growing up. From the time I was sixteen until the time I was married, we had teachers, all kinds of teachers: German, French, a professor from Berkeley who taught us history.

Teiser: Who was he? Do you remember his name?

Levison: I'll tell you some other time, not this minute when you ask me. I thought of his name the other day.[Added later: Professor Sanger] We had these lessons at home. We had some music lessons, which didn't take with me, but my sister had piano lessons. We had a Mrs. Strachan, an Englishwoman and a teacher, who came to us in various periods and taught us different things. Another of our teachers was Miss Lazarus. We had that kind of education. It was spotty, you know, with private lessons mostly. I never actually went back to school after that.

Teiser: Did your sister have approximately the same academic career that you did?

Levison: Yes, it was pretty much the same.

Family Members and Friends

Levison: Then I got married about five or six years before she did.

The great separation that came was very hard for her, because she was and had been dependent on me. But she suddenly struck out and decided to be more independent than I had ever been. She was getting to be very modern: she went out with boys alone, and she did things that I had never been allowed to do. She married, a little later in life, Mr. Fleishhacker. The rest of our lives we've lived pretty much the same. We lived next door to each other. After my father died, my mother and sister sold the house on Van Ness Avenue. Then my sister was married and built the house next to mine, and my mother moved in and lived with her a number of years after she was married.

Teiser: Where was this house?

Levison: Right here, right next door to me, the house which the Frankels live in now. From that time on, Mother never lived alone. She lived with one of her five daughters. My second sister [Clara] died before she was fifty, but the others lived to be older, and my mother never lived alone. She never did much of anything alone. By that time she had nurses. She had always been more or less delicate, and we always treated her that way.

Levison: Just the other day I was sitting with one of my sons, my second son [Robert M. Levison] whose wife was away. We were talking together about all sorts of current interests of today, things that neither of us knew too much about. He knew a little more about space activities. When we got through, he and I both laughed, thinking how funny it is to think that a mother, 93, and a son can sit all evening talking about things of general interest--science, people, and things. He said, "Can you imagine Grandma ever talking like that to her sons?" No, she wasn't that kind of woman. And the times were different. But if you don't talk to them about those things, you can't talk to them at all, because after all, that's the period they're living in. They're always so pleased and amused that I am interested in those things. We talk about books, politics, science, and all kinds of things that come into my mind. They're always so pleased that I can talk with them. The next day Bob came here and said, "Mother, last night was just wonderful. Wasn't it wonderful the way we could talk on?"

I said, "Yes, it was." He is particularly responsive to that kind of thing. He's a very lovable, broad-minded, easy-to-talk-to kind of person.

Teiser: Let me ask you a little more about the group of families you mentioned. Was this your social world?

Levison: To a great extent, yes. Of course my mother and Mrs. Sloss were associated a good deal through the business connections, and because they were the kind of people they were, with a great many people other than Jews. They had a much broader association with people generally in San Francisco. I remember a visit to Mrs. Hearst with my mother. We didn't want to go calling, but we had to go once in a while when she went. In the same way that we learned to talk with older people at dinners, my mother believed it was good for the girls to be taken with her to see some of these ladies.

Teiser: This was Mrs. George Hearst?

Levison: Yes, Phoebe Hearst. There was also Mrs. Timothy Hopkins, whom my mother visited because of a business connection.

Teiser: That was down the Peninsula?

Levison: Yes. They had a place down there. I remember distinctly going down there one time on a visit. My sister and I were told to go and walk around in the garden. We got near the stable, and they had some dogs who commenced jumping up on us. We were always scared to death of dogs, and we were screaming at the top of our voices.

The Kohls were another family that we were very close to.

Levison: William Kohl was the father, and Fred Kohl was the son. We always called Mary [Kohl] "Mamie." We were all very close friends. At the time my parents went to Europe with their six children (Mrs. Fleishhacker was born in Frankfort), Mrs. Kohl, her son, and her daughter went too. My father chaperoned and took care of them all; the more people he had to take care of, the better he liked it. Fred and my brothers went to school together, and Mary and my sisters were together. We were always very good friends. I was very fond of Mrs. Kohl; she was a perfectly lovely woman. Mr. Kohl, to me, wasn't so much. He was called Captain Kohl, although he never had a ship. He was connected with shipping at the time of the Alaska Commercial Company, and somehow he got in there. Mrs. Kohl was very good-looking, very aristocratic looking. Mamie was not good-looking, but she also looked the lady. She was well-educated and a very nice person.

Teiser: What was Mr. Kohl like?

Levison: He wasn't much in looks or anything. I think of him as not very important, but he was in the business. He was a nice enough man, who came from a good Philadelphia family.

Teiser: Mr. Hutchinson had been in the Alaska Commercial Company early, had he not?

Levison: Yes, he was part of it. There was Senator Miller.

Teiser: What was he like?

Levinson: I remember the Miller family vaguely. They had a daughter too. They lived in Washington most of the time.

Teiser: Didn't he die when you were just a small child?

Levinson: Yes. The Hopkins were very good friends.

Teiser: What was Timothy Hopkins like?

Levinson: I don't remember him at all. I remember her and the daughter. The Hopkins' house was afterwards turned into an art school, until the time of the earthquake, when it was destroyed.*

You may have read about the Sproule property. Mr. William Sproule was a good friend of my husband's. His wife was Marie Baird, and I knew her. This is the way my mind works. It took me days to just think of her name. I had a friend who had gone to school with her, and we talked about her the other day, and she couldn't think of her maiden name either. Afterwards I thought of it. Then I said, "What was the school they went to?" There was Miss Lake's and Miss Burke's and other schools of that period. It was another school on Sutter Street. I finally thought of Miss Lake's, a girls' school. I didn't go there, but a great many of my friends did.

Teiser: While all the girls were going to these schools, where were the boys going?

* This was the Mark Hopkins home in San Francisco.

Levison: Most of the boys, as I remember, went to public schools. There were some private schools, because my boys went to Mr. Potter's school, but that was long afterward. My brothers went to public school. My husband went to Lowell High School, then Boys' High School. There may have been boys' [private]schools, but I can't seem to remember where they were.

Brothers and Sisters

Teiser: Did your brothers go on to college? ✓

Levison: My oldest brother, Mark, went to Harvard. At that time, it was most unusual to go to Harvard from California. Judge Sloss, Max Sloss, and Henry Brandenstein (now Bransten) went with him. Those three and the McCutcheon boys went there, but there weren't very many going to Harvard. At that time my brother thought he wanted to be a lawyer, and he stayed in Harvard three years longer to become a lawyer. So did Judge Sloss. The two of them joined the firm of Chickering, Thomas, and Gregory. It was a big firm. My cousin, Max Sloss, whom we always called Dick, stayed in and became a prominent lawyer. But my brother, after a certain length of time, after all the

Levison: studying and all the hopes that my father had for him, decided that he didn't want to be a lawyer. He became a businessman and investor, which was a great disappointment to my father.

Teiser: Your younger brother, however, continued in your father's career?

Levison: My younger brother Will went into my father's business. I don't know what he did. He became president of it at one period later on.

Teiser: Did your father have very high hopes for his boys?

Levison: He had high hopes for Mark because Mark, when young, was a great student and had a very good mind. My father was very proud of him, and he was very annoyed at Will because Will didn't study. Will was a dreamer; he painted and was always doing things like that. He would take his horse and go off by himself. He was a different type of person, and he was never ambitious about learning. I remember one story we told about him. One time in school, where they had the desks that you opened, he had some little chickens, baby chicks, because he wanted to paint them--in school when he was supposed to be studying. He did things like that. He was always very kind to stray boys on the street; he'd bring them in and give them something to eat and do things for them. He was that kind of a person, a dreamer more or less. But in

Levison: the end, I think Will became more successful as a man than Mark. Mark was a little flighty, and he married a funny kind of a woman after Hilda's death, who is still living. Will was more substantial in the end, I think.

Teiser: Your brother Mark married twice?

Levison: Yes, he married again after his first wife died. His second wife managed to get most of his money away from him. Somebody met her not long ago on one of these cruises, and she still is known as the rich Mrs. Gerstle. She wasn't so rich, but she was putting on all these airs. I never want to see her again, because she acted very badly at the time of my brother's death. She had a sister in Honolulu who was not well, and she left to go to the sister when her husband was dying and she knew it. I met her when I went to see my brother in the hospital, and that was the last time I ever saw her. My brother died while she was away. The sister didn't die. She came back here and wanted to see me, but I never wanted to see her and I still don't. She was a peculiar woman.

Teiser: Most of the marriages in your family, however, have been particularly felicitous, have they not?

Levison: Well, not so much. My two older sisters, who became widows when they were very young--the Mrs. Lilienthals--each had two children. Mark had two children. Will had only one. Bella

Levison: had two; my sister Clara--Mrs. Mack--had four; and I had four. I don't call that particularly many.

Teiser: I meant that they had been particularly happy and satisfactory marriages.

Levison: Oh, yes, [only two divorces in the whole Gerstle family, and--R.M.L.*] we have had no divorces in the Levison family until just recently, when one of my grandsons was divorced. He divorced and remarried, and his ex-wife lives over in Berkeley with three of the loveliest children. That is something that bothers me a good deal, because he is so neglectful of his father, my son John. Otherwise, the marriages have been very satisfactory.

Teiser: I suppose there is a long family tradition of it.

Levison: Yes. Except, of course, it was unfortunate that my sisters lost their husbands when they were so young. That influenced not only their lives, but all of us. My brother-in-law, Theodore Lilienthal, died when I was about eighteen and just at a very susceptible age. His daughter also went to Miss West's school. I was told to bring her home because her father had died, and it made a great impression on me as a young girl. I can't say it interfered with my pleasures, because I was at that age terribly selfish. But I was oppressed by it and by my sisters' going around in long black dresses, long veils, and long faces. They couldn't do this, and they

* Robert M. Levison

Levison: couldn't do that. It had quite an influence on my young life.

Teiser: Mourning customs were quite different then, weren't they?

Levison: They were entirely different. When I think of it now and see it sometimes it is a little shocking, although I believe in it. In that period, which was typically mid-Victorian, there were certain things you had to do and wear. I remember one woman who lost her husband. She lived in the East. She always suffered terribly from headaches, and she had to wear or thought she had to wear one of these long black veils, until finally her headaches became so bad that she couldn't do it. She was criticized for that. My sisters wore mourning. My one sister, Sophie, all her life (and she lived to be 72 or 73 years old) never wore anything but black or black and white. My other sister Bertha, who was of a different temperament and who was rather fond of having a good time, broke away from it. They both went to Paris at one time with their children and lived there for a couple of years. During that period, my sister [Bertha] just threw off all this mourning. But it affected her life, and neither of them married again. They could have, and there were times when we thought they might, but people weren't as charitable then about those things as they are now. The way people do it now, there is no such thing as mourning. I don't think they'd wear a black dress

Levison: even to a funeral, if they could help it. And it doesn't make a bit of difference. I don't think it means that people felt more. Maybe they did. They had a little more reverence.

I can apply this to myself. My husband's mother died a few years before we were married, and he was very devoted to her. He mourned very deeply. One of his habits was to go to the cemetery every single Sunday until we became engaged and I rather rebelled against that. He gradually went less than before, but he still went a great deal. When he went, he fussed around the grave, picked flowers, pulled weeds, and he stood there thinking of his mother. Having that in my mind, I have no feeling whatever about the cemetery. I never go, because when I go and see a monument there with my husband's name on it, that doesn't have anything to do with him. It's something that had to be done, and there it is. But the grave itself means nothing to me. I reproach myself sometimes and feel that that was a terrible thing to do, but to me it wasn't terrible. When I sit here and can imagine my husband at the desk back there, this house is his monument for me. What he was, what he did, his belongings, and his books mean something to me. It doesn't mean I've forgotten him because I don't go to a stone there that means nothing.

Levison: People, not everybody but most people, have grown away from mourning. It's just a part of a new world; I don't know if it's for the good or the bad.

INTERVIEW 2--OCTOBER 24, 1966

Brothers and Sisters--Continued

Levison: I must have known at one time that my brother [Mark] wrote this.*

Teiser: It seems to me important that people should record their memoirs in this period when they don't keep diaries and letters.

Levison: I don't feel like doing it, but some do. There's a nice picture of him with his library. He lived at the Family Club for many years, and he had his library there. He started this library when he was in college, in Harvard. My father always used to say, "When Mark doesn't know how to ask for money any other way, he'll always say, 'I bought some more books.'" My father never quite believed that he had this library until he came back. Then my mother had to fix up a whole room to keep this library.

Teiser: What was his particular interest? What kind of books did he buy?

Levison: I don't know. He bought all sorts of books. He was interested in many things as a boy and young man. The memoir that

*Mark Lewis Gerstle, Memories, May 28, 1943. A copy has been deposited in the Bancroft Library.

Levison: he wrote has some bearing on the period and contains certain things of interest. He talks about the founding of the St. Francis Hotel and the Emporium.

Social Customs and Costumes

Teiser: In the 1879 social directory [The Elite Directory, published in San Francisco] that I left with you, did you find any names you could connect with events?

Levison: Yes, I recognized names of families. You carry names with you, and many of the names were just names. We had closer contact with some of them.

Teiser: The main listing in that directory is followed by an Army list and a Jewish list. Does it seem remarkable to you that there should have been a separate Jewish list?

Levison: Yes, it is surprising that they should have been separated. Here I see the names of people I knew. Adolph Bissinger was my father's nephew and was very fond of him. Many of these names are very familiar to me, Mr. and Mrs. Meyer Brandenstein, Joseph Brandenstein.

My mother had her cards printed, and the second and

Levison: fourth Fridays were her days at home.* As we got older, we girls were supposed to sit there all dressed up. The older people would come, and we had to make a point of behaving ourselves. In those times, mothers expected their growing daughters to learn to meet older people decently and nicely. We didn't always like it, but we had to sit there. That's how I also went calling with my mother as I got older. She took me along sometimes to meet people.

I remember an incident with Mrs. [Samuel M.] Blair, who lived on Van Ness Avenue. She didn't know my mother very well, but she came on one of these Fridays and introduced herself. She said she lived on Van Ness Avenue too and that she would like very much to meet my mother. She knew when the day was, so she came. Imagine anybody doing such a thing now. Her daughter, Jennie Blair, was quite a society girl. We knew a great many people in a casual way. My mother and Aunt Sarah, Mrs. Sloss, were particularly acceptable socially, especially Mrs. Sloss. She was much more outgoing and wasn't as timid as my mother, so she made quite a place for herself. Her husband wanted her to make a place for herself; he was always anxious for her to do her share. My father didn't care. Through the fact that my aunt was so socially inclined,

* Calling cards had "at home" days printed on them.

Levison: my mother was dragged along and did her share of it.

Teiser: On your calling days, what hours did you have to be in?

Levison: I imagine it was between 3 and 5 or 3 and 6 o'clock, in the later afternoon.

Teiser: What preparations were made?

Levison: I don't remember that we served anything as refreshment, but I can't imagine people coming in and out all afternoon and your not offering them something. I don't remember if we did or not. I remember the rules so well. We had to sit in and be dressed nicely, and we had to say, "How do you do" to Mrs. So-and-so. Although we were always restricted in some respects, it was a period in which we were helped to be women and to grow up and to know how to meet people.

Teiser: What kind of costume was correct for that occasion?

Levison: In the book I spoke to you about, Period Piece, she describes the clothes of that period. She has one incident about the terrible braid at the bottom of the long dresses that we had to brush when we took them off. She told the whole story just as it was. In comparison to present days, our clothes were very uncomfortable. On Sunday morning, for instance, my uncles always came to see my mother. No matter how late we had been up the night before at a party, we had to be dressed and ready for the uncles when they came. We kept certain dresses for Sunday morning. Mother would say, "Don't put that

Levison: dress on. That's your Sunday morning dress." I had a pinkish flannel dress. We were supposed to be dressed nicely. My father, of course, objected to easy-going dressing at any time--dressing that looked sloppy.

My sister and I went to a gymnasium where we did exercising Saturday mornings. That was when people were wearing bloomers, which were not altogether as feminine as we were accustomed to being. If we put those dresses on and came down to breakfast, my father always objected. He would say, "The girls can wear those dresses after breakfast, but I don't like them to come down to breakfast with those things on." It seems so funny now. I remember when we wore corsets and laces, and the author of the book describes what a woman wore in those days. I said to my granddaughter the other day, "If I read this to you, you'll say, 'Oh, you couldn't have worn all those things.' But I can assure you we did." When I was married, I had to help make the scallops on my flannel skirts. Flannel skirts went over drawers, and over the flannel skirt there was another skirt. Then came the dress, corsets, and a corset cover. For many years we wore black stockings.

My mother, in some respects, was much more advanced than my aunt. Since she had daughters, she wanted to be more

Levison: fashionable. She cared more about that. So she bought some silk stockings and very shamefacedly said to my aunt, "You know, Sarah, I'm wearing silk stockings now."

My aunt said, "You are?"

She said, "Yes, I am."

So the next day my aunt had to go downtown and get herself some of them. Silk stockings in those days were heavy; you couldn't see through them. They went with party dresses. If you had a blue dress, you wore blue stockings, and with a red dress, red stockings. You always had stockings to match. For some years after I was married and moved into this house, I had some of those stockings, thick and colored. For years we wore black stockings. That was the only thing anybody did.

Teiser: Even with summer clothes?

Levison: Yes, we always wore long, black stockings.

Teiser: I have heard that even in recent years, some women wore hats when they received guests in their own homes. Did you ever hear of this?

Levison: No, I don't remember anyone's wearing hats in the house. Of course you put on a hat the minute you went out; you could not go out without a hat. This woman [Gwen Raverat] writes of the big, oversized hats that people wore. I have a picture of myself wearing the biggest hat you ever saw.

Teiser: Did you feel very stylish?

Levison: Of course we did. That's true of all fashions. If you are in the mode and the fashion, you think they are all right. The minute they go out of fashion you see how silly it all was. I think most women's fashions are silly.

Teiser: Today too?

Levison: Yes. Is there anything sillier than those spike heels they wore, or more dangerous? Now, of course, they are doing away with them. Often when I speak with younger people, I say, "Are those shoes comfortable?"

They say, "Yes, very."

Last night, my daughter-in-law was sitting here among the family, and the first thing she did was kick off her shoes. I said, "They're that comfortable, that you can't stand them?"

When I was married, the clothes all had big puffed sleeves. Then came the very broad shoulders--extremely broad shoulders--which then went out of fashion. I keep my things so long that I still have some clothes in which the shoulders are out of fashion because they are so wide. The wider shoulders you could get, the better your figure looked. It looked sort of straight.

German Heritage

Teiser: You have lived through so many interesting times. I don't know how much they affected you. For instance, were you much aware of the Spanish-American War?

Levison: I have very little recollection of that; it doesn't stand out in my memory.

Teiser: I suppose you were busy being a young housewife.

Levison: Yes. I was very busy with four boys. My husband was such a strong personality that I was mainly a housewife, mother, and wife. I did take interest in things and do what other women did, but I was never a very active public woman in any sense.

Teiser: I presume that you did not take part in women's suffrage.

Levison: No, I had nothing to do with that.

Teiser: Were there any women of your acquaintance who were active suffragettes?

Levison: I suppose there were, but I can't remember who they were.

Teiser: This was not in your domain?

Levison: I'm sure there were women I knew who were active, but I don't remember much about that.

Teiser: Did the first World War change life in general here?

Levison: I suppose it did, a good deal.

Teiser: Did it affect your life particularly? Was there any feeling here against people of German heritage? Did you feel it?

Levison: Yes. There always has been a feeling, more or less, against Germans. The Germans have never been liked very much in the world anyway. We had a kindly feeling towards many Germans because of connections, but Germans as a nation were never liked here too much.

Teiser: You felt yourself to be thoroughly an American. ✓

Levison: Oh yes. We didn't feel at all German. My sister, Mrs. Fleishhacker, resented the fact that she was born in Germany.* During World War I, when she worked for the government, she always had to register and answer the question, "Where were you born?" She said, "I will not say again that I was born in Germany. I'm going to change that." After that she wouldn't say anything about her place of birth. My brother says that my sister objected to having to register because she was born in Germany. When she was born in Germany, my father immediately went to the ambassador in Frankfurt to register her as an American citizen, because he

* She was born in Frankfurt in 1875, during a family stay there that lasted nearly three years.

Levinson: was an American citizen. The paper that came out in those days was green and printed in black, listing the births.

Her name, however, was printed in gold to prove that she was different and that she was an American citizen. She had that paper for a long time.

Teiser: Had both your father and Mr. Sloss become American citizens?

Levison: They became American citizens as soon as they could after they got here. My father was determined that he was not going to speak with a German accent. He was going to overcome that. He told us often how he used to sit in the room, listen to the people, and repeat what they said under his breath. He did speak without an accent. Occasionally in some of his letters, you will find a German construction, but there was very little in his speech. Very few of the early settlers from Germany accomplished that.

Teiser: You never spoke German at home?

Levison: Yes, we did. We did not speak it to each other too much, but we always had German servants. We spoke German to the German governess we had in Europe and to the people around us then. I doubt that we spoke too much German to my parents. When we came back, we had German lessons, German readings, and dramatics. We always kept up with our German, but not

Levison: among ourselves.

Teiser: With all that German heritage, tradition, and culture, you still felt no nationalistic spirit?

Levison: We felt no affiliation with Germany as a nation. It was a foreign country the same as any other, except we knew more people there and had more connections there. We felt thoroughly American.

Frankfurt and San Francisco

Teiser: When you were in Germany, did you know many people there?

Levison: My parents knew some families in Frankfurt, like the Livingstons, who had lived here but who moved back to Germany. My father belonged to a social club there, and we knew a good many of the people.

Teiser: Did you have relatives there?

Levison: No, we had no relatives in Frankfurt.

Teiser: How did your father happen to go there? Was that his birthplace?

Levison: No, he was born in Bavaria, in the little town of Ichenhausen. He chose Frankfurt because it was rather a nice place. It was a small city that had a great deal of culture in it and good schools. He knew some of the people there also. It had

Levison: a hotel, which was like a home. We had a whole floor there.

It wasn't a very big hotel. My sister was born right in that hotel in one of those rooms, on the later trip to Frankfurt, from 1887 to 1889. My parents had a living room and their bedroom. My aunt, who was traveling with them, had another bedroom. Upstairs, in the mansard roof, we had the rooms of our governess and us girls [Mrs. Levison and Bella] entirely separate. We had our breakfast upstairs. Our lunch was served at a long table with a hole in it--table d'hôte they call it. We had suppers up in our room. This was when I was fourteen. As a little child I don't remember anything of [the family trip to] Germany. On the whole floor there was only one bathroom, which was not connected with our rooms at all. It was at the back and was very dark. If you wanted a bath, you had to order it in time. We went to the theater, which very often started late in the afternoon, so we would have coffee in the afternoon and a cold supper when we came home. We always loved that--cold meats and salad--and we got to stay up a little later.

I remember very little of the period when I was there as a child. My sisters and brothers went to school there. My brother wrote all about that. The hotel we stayed in was

Levison: called Englischerhof, and it was on a big square. In the middle of this square, or on one side of it, was the Gutenberg Denkmal, which was a monument to the first printer. The streets opened out onto the Rossmarkt. Ross meant horse; it originally had been a horse market. When we were there the horse cabs stood there. I thought it was a big square, but I don't know how big it really was. The streets all opened out from it. It was the central place of the city.

Teiser: Did San Francisco seem like a big city or a small city when you returned?

Levison: We thought San Francisco was a big city.

Teiser: Did you often go to the theater with your family in San Francisco?

Levison: Yes, there was a great deal of theater. There was a German theater here for years, and we went there occasionally. My father always wanted us to take advantage of everything that was good for us. When Sarah Bernhardt came here we could not understand a word she said, but we had to go to hear Sarah Bernhardt because she was a great actress.

Teiser: Did you hear much music? Did you go to concerts?

Levison: Yes. There were no symphony concerts then, but there were operas and light operas. The Tivoli was an old theater on Sutter Street, and we went there quite often because we had season tickets. I don't remember going to hear any serious

Levison: music. Neither my father nor mother were particularly musical or interested in music. In their homes, of course, people played the piano and sang songs. My brother [Mark] writes that when the Wagner operas started he was in Boston. He was always so ambitious that he had to learn the score and listen to it. He said he got his education in music from that. He never knew an awful lot about music. Here, all through the beginning of the Wagnerian period, my sister in San Rafael would play these motifs, and everybody would try to follow along and become educated in this new music.

Teiser: When was this, before you were married?

Levison: Yes, before I was married, in the 1890's. My brother, who had come from Harvard and who had ambitions to do what other people did, thought he was learning a lot about Wagner. I was amused and interested in reading his own description of it in his book. My parents weren't particularly connected with music, but they did go to that German theater and the Tivoli.

In the Verein club, they had big balls three or four times a year. They had little balls called Kränschen, which literally means wreath, but in that context meant a little party or intimate party. Everybody, including the parents, went to the New Year's ball.

San Francisco Clubs and Jewish Membership

Teiser: At that time was the Verein for German people of all sorts, or was it mainly Jewish?

Levison: By the time I knew much about it, it was mainly a Jewish club, but it had started as a German club. It still had German members then, but it developed into a Jewish club.

Teiser: Did you go to any clubs that were not strictly Jewish?

Levison: No, I don't remember any other clubs. I very seldom went to the Concordia, because it was just a little bit (I don't want to use the word, but) below the standard of the other club, and my father wasn't a member of it. My father and Mr. Sloss were members of the Verein and the Concordia, respectively. I got to know some men who invited me to come to the Concordia, and I was allowed to go to it, but I think my father always looked at it with a little doubt. He would just as soon not have his daughters go to the Concordia. I don't know why; it was so foolish. My son is a member of it now, and those standards are broken down completely. They had not much foundation, anyway.

Teiser: You mentioned Mr. Levison's membership in the Bohemian Club,

Teiser: that he enjoyed so. At that time, did the Bohemian Club have quite a few Jewish members?

Levison: Yes, quite a few. Raphael Weill, who was one of the leading members there and who did a great deal for the club, resigned when his nephew, Michel Weill, was blackballed. Michel Weill was head of the White House for a long time. It was a great loss for the club, and it was a great heartache for him. Then there were my cousins, the Sloss boys. My aunt and uncle were always ambitious, but I don't know how they originally got in. All four of them were in the Bohemian Club. They knew my husband through business connections, because my uncle [Louis Sloss] was president of the Anglo-Nevada Insurance Company that my husband went into when he was a very young boy. He played the flute and knew the Sloss boys. I don't know if it was through their influence, but he got into the [Bohemian] Club.

Teiser: He must have been a very valuable member.

Levison: He was very much loved and admired. He was very active, and he contributed a good deal to the club. When we were married there was some of the family that turned up their noses and thought that he was putting on airs because he belonged to the Bohemian Club, but that never bothered him.

Dave Eisenbach was a member also. The original idea

Levison: of the Bohemian Club was that the members have talent and be able to contribute something. That's how it got the name Bohemian Club. It drifted away from that idea terribly, and now talent has nothing to do with membership. It's pure snobbery now.

Teiser: Are there any Jewish members now?

Levison: I don't know, but I doubt it; I don't know of any. My son John told me yesterday that he was invited to an event that was going to take place at the Bohemian Club. He has no feeling of resentment or hesitancy about going to the Bohemian Club; my other boys have. They will not go, but that is just a personal matter. John isn't like that. He has different affiliations. His wife was not a Jewess, and he would just as soon get away from the Jewishness.

Teiser: Isn't there a big spread in the Jewish community between those who consider themselves to be a part of a close community of Jews and those who feel themselves to be a part of the larger community of San Francisco and the United States?

Levison: I think there has been a broadening of view in that area.

Teiser: In recent years it has been made more obvious by the difference between the people who are active Zionists and the people who do not believe in Zionism.

Levison: Zionism has caused a great deal of feeling among the Jews.

Levison: My youngest son, George, was here yesterday, and his associations are very mixed--he has both Jewish and non-Jewish friends. We were talking about the whole feeling we have. There is a certain feeling, if you have it, within you, that you are acceptable anywhere. You don't associate yourself with one particular group. You are a person, and you have a certain dignity, a certain assurance, if you behave yourself and do the right thing. I have often talked about that, and George referred to it yesterday. He was talking about one of his friends in particular. He said, "You know, Mother, what you've always said, and that's what I feel too."

So many Jews, when they are talking about somebody, will tell you right away that he is or is not a Jew, as if that were the main object. They can't disassociate themselves from Jewishness. I don't feel that way at all. A woman friend of mine who worked in an art class with me--Mrs. Starbuck, a perfectly lovely woman whom I learned to like and admire very much--telephoned me this morning. She wanted to come and have lunch with me. We're not having our [art] classes, and she said she misses seeing me and telling me what she is doing. I am unconscious of anything but the fact that she is a friend of mine. She likes me for myself, and I like her for herself. Perhaps our family, or some in our family, feel that way more

Levison: than a great many other people. It's probably due to the fact that my father and mother always felt like that too. I inherited that feeling and some of my children have too.

Teiser: Your husband also felt that way, did he not?

Levison: Yes, he felt very strongly that way because of his association in business and in the club. He made his friends simply on the basis of merit--whether they were nice people and his kind of people or not. That's the way I liked to be judged.

At the end of Period Piece (she [Gwen Raverat] stops the story when she gets married, but she must have written it long after that), she says, "It's so nice to be old enough not to care what people think of you." I thought, "I'm going to take that as a comforting thought." I don't care what they think of me anymore.

The author of the book was a very sensitive child, and I could appreciate that because I'm a little bit that way myself. She was very conscious of criticism, and she disliked many things. But she apparently got to the time of her life when those things didn't make so much difference.

Teiser: The Pacific Union Club has never had Jewish members, has it?

Levison: Once some of my husband's very best friends were members of the Pacific Union Club, and they were very anxious to have

Levison: him join. Either C. O. G. Miller or one of his very good friends suggested putting up his name. Before it was voted on, however, he found that he would not be elected because he was a Jew. He told my husband, and of course he withdrew his name. I just thought, "It's just too bad they've lost a good member," because he would have been a very good member of any club. He used to go there once in a while with a friend for lunch, but not a great deal. I don't think that the Pacific Union Club has ever had any Jewish members.

Teiser: Has the Junior League ever admitted Jewish girls? ✓

Levison: They did have some. Just before my daughter-in-law, John's wife, married, there was a question of her becoming president of the Junior League. Everybody said, "Now that she's going to marry a Jew she'll never be president of the Junior League." She was a very determined person and made up her mind that she would be president, and she was. Finally, two or three years after she was married, she was president. She was in, but they never really did have a Jewish member. They now have and my daughter-in-law Gertrude is on their advisory committee.

Teiser: It's curious that a city in which so many groups that get things done are headed by Jewish people should have these little compartments.

Levison: It does seem strange, and it's due only to certain sentiments. ✓

Levison: This reminds me of a very funny thing that my daughter-in-law Gertrude told me last night. Originally my sister had two of the houses on Broadway and we had two of the houses. We levelled the land so that we wouldn't have our view spoiled, and we put up four houses on Broadway. One of my sons still lives there, and John did live there, but they sold the house. The next two belonged to my sister. Mortie Fleishhacker lived in one of them and the other was rented. Now the Harry East Millers live in that one; my son Robert lives in one; and the Morrie Coxes live in the third one. They have all bought the houses. The fourth one, which was a smaller one, was occupied by the Peter Folgers for a while. The Peter Folger separated, and a niece of Mr. Folger is now living there. When the Peter Folgers lived there, the other neighbors were all very friendly, but none of them became very intimate with Mrs. Folger, because she was sort of funny and snippy. One day my daughter-in-law said to Mrs. Cox, "She's so anti-Semitic. That's why she acts so snippy, and I won't have anything to do with her."

Margaret Cox said, "Yes, she's very anti-Semitic. I'll tell you what she did to me." (And Mrs. Cox is not a Jewess.) "When her house was being readied, she came over to my house all the time and used my telephone. Then, after she moved

Levison: in, she never had anything to do with me. Now that was very anti-Semitic, wasn't it?"

The woman who lives there now, the niece of the Folgers, is a very pleasant woman. We all had cocktails together. They're very neighborly on that block.

Jewish Families

Teiser: Was the Lazard family Jewish?

Levison: Sidney Ehrman's daughter married a man by the name of Claude Lazard [who is a member of that old Jewish family.R.M.L.] They live in France a good part of the time. They had a home up at Tahoe which they have recently disposed of. I think a state park is going to be made of the acres that they sold to the state. The Lazards got that house from the Ehrmans. Mrs. Ehrman was a Hellman. The house was originally Fred Kohl's place, sold to I. W. Hellman, whose daughter, Mrs. Ehrman, inherited it. Mrs. Ehrman's daughter, Mrs. Lazard, has lived there for some years. Now they have given a good part of their lake-front land as a park.

Teiser: Did you visit there when you were young?

Levison: I visited there when Fred Kohl was there. Mr. Hellman and

Levison: my father were very good friends, at least my father admired Mr. Hellman very much. He was successful first in Los Angeles and then here. The rest of us didn't like Mr. Hellman very much, but my father always had a sort of respect for him. He didn't like my mother very much. I remember one time when the Hellmans were up there, and some relatives and my mother were living at the Tavern. The Tahlmanns, our relatives, were invited over to Mr. Hellman's house. They didn't invite my mother. Young Mr. Hellman, Marco Hellman, not knowing anything, said to my mother, "Are you coming over with the Tahlmanns, Mrs. Gerstle?"

She said, "No, I wasn't invited." That was quite a grievance that we had against Mr. Hellman.

Mrs. Hellman was a fussy little woman. The older Hellmans and my parents were not very good friends because the women didn't hit it off and it wasn't very good. The son, Marco Hellman, who married Frances Jacoby, and his wife were very good friends of ours. They had four children, and we had four children all about the same age. They had a home in San Leandro where my sons were perpetual guests. Marco and Frances and I were very good friends. I knew Frances before she was married. Their children and mine grew up together, but only my son Robert has kept up the relationship. Fred[Hellman],

Levison: whom we called Fritz, died last year. He married the daughter of one of my cousins. There were all kinds of connections.

The Hellman history is rather interesting. Flutie Hellman, who was the daughter of Marco and Frances, has a son whose name is Lloyd Dinkelspiel, Jr. Young Lloyd is very prominent. I think he's become the campaign chairman of the Jewish Welfare drive this week. He's very nice looking. His father and mother were not particularly good looking, but he is, and from what I hear he seems to be a very nice fellow. The whole Hellman family have kept up a friendship with my children.

Teiser: Did the house at Tahoe change much from the Kohls to the Hellmans?

Levison: I don't know what happened to the house. My earliest recollection of the house is involved with Mr. Kohl.

Teiser: Did you spend much time there as a child?

Levison: We were invited to the Kohl house by Fred and his second wife, Edith.

Teiser: Was life pleasant at Tahoe in those early days?

Levison: Very pleasant for those very few people who had their homes there. Tallac was the only resort at the time we were there, when I was a girl. We went to Tallac, which was a hotel of the period with rather primitive but nice and comfortable

Levison: cottages. We had lots of fun there. Those were the days when you went out fishing and trolling. My mother was up there many times and loved it. I had a lot of good times at Tallac. Then they built the big hotel [Tavern] at the other end of the lake, and my husband and I went there a number of times with the children.

Teiser: Did the Chickerings have a home up there then?

Levison: I don't remember them from Tahoe, but Chickering, Thomas, and Gregory was the firm that my brother and my cousin, Dick Sloss, joined. Then the firm became Chickering, Thomas, Gregory, Gerstle, and Sloss, as they do with law firms. I heard only the other day that there is still a firm called Chickering and Gregory, who must be descendants of those men. Thomas had a daughter, Mamie Thomas. We knew all of them. Mr. [William H.] Chickering was the oldest; Mr. [William] Thomas was a middle-aged man; Mr. [Warren] Gregory was quite a young man, not much older than my brother.

Teiser: Am I correct in recalling that Jewish people who traced their ancestry to France felt that they were a little better than those families who came from Germany?

Levison: There was always that feeling between German and France. The Godchaux were really leading French people at that time.

Teiser: Were they Jewish?

Levison: Yes. They had money at one time, but they lost all their money and their sons and daughters had to go to work. One was a singer--Mrs. Solomons. Another, Rebecca, was a French teacher who taught me French for years. Edmond Godchaux was a politician, more or less. Another younger sister taught music. Mrs. Solomons went to school in their more prosperous times, before they lost their money. The family went to Paris, and she and my oldest sister, Sophie, were in school together. She married a man named Solomons who was not very successful financially. But the Godchaux were always a highly respected family. They had a house on Buchanan, near Broadway. They knew good people, intellectual people, everybody.

Teiser: Were there any Spanish or Portuguese Jews in San Francisco?

Levison: I never heard of any.

Teiser: Didn't the Sephardic Jews feel themselves to be superior?

Levison: They were, because they were educated people. The Ashkenazim were the ordinary people, but the Sephardic Jews were the superior Jews who came from Palestine and settled in Spain. They were a little higher ranking and better educated. People descended from those Sephardic Jews prided themselves on their superiority. The French considered themselves superior

Levison: to the Germans, and the Germans considered themselves superior to the Poles and the Russian Jews.

Teiser: The Poles and the Russian Jews were at the lowest level?

Levison: Yes, they were. Many people came from the part of Germany east of Berlin which the Germans called Hinterberlin. If your family came from Hinterberlin, there was a little bit of an insinuation that they weren't quite equal. They were on the Polish side, and Polish Jews were not considered quite equal to the German Jews. I suppose those silly things had some foundation.

Teiser: Someone who knows something of the history of Jews in Europe was saying that perhaps the fact that French Jews were given full citizenship some years prior to the German Jews accounts for their feeling.

Levison: There probably was some reason for it all, but as those things develop, there gets to be terrible prejudice. If you would say to somebody, "Where was your mother born?" and he would hesitate, you would say, "Oh, you mean Hinterberlin." That was the expression.

The Alaska Commercial Company

Teiser: I wanted to ask more about the Alaska Commercial Company.

Levison: My brother wrote quite a bit about that.

Teiser: Did it bring to you a glimpse of another culture as a child?

Levison: It put my father in touch with a great many people, such as Senator [John F.] Miller, and other people from Washington. My uncle, who was of a rather genial nature and played poker and made friends easily, went to Washington before they got the twenty-year lease for Alaska and the seal fisheries. He went to Washington to get this lease. He used to say, "I'll play poker with any of these senators, and I'll let them win." He finally put through the lease. Just as he was ready to leave for Europe with his family, it finally went through. I have letters from my father during that twenty-year period about the tremendous seal fishery. Seals were caught in Alaska; the skins were cured in some way and sent to London. Dresden was the market for the skins; isn't that funny? A great deal of business was done in London, and the actual sales of the skins took place in Dresden, Germany. My father wrote one letter to my mother, who was away at the time, saying that it had been a big year. They had sold so many thousand skins. He said, "I don't care if

Levison: seal-skin stays in for another ten years and is fashionable."

It was fashionable for a certain number of years; everybody had to have a seal-skin coat. When my sister had a baby and my mother and father wanted to send her a present, they sent her a seal-skin coat. I never had an inch of seal-skin in my life, because I was too much of a child to rate any fur. But my mother had two or three coats of seal-skin--long ones and short ones. That was the fur.

Teiser: Where were they made, here in San Francisco?

Levison: Liebes and Company were in the fur business. They afterwards joined the Northern Commercial Company, after the Alaska Commercial Company's lease expired. They were merchants in making up the seal-skins into marketable goods.

Teiser: So that's where most of the coats that people here had were made?

Levison: Yes. I suppose that seal coats were made all over the world. They had to be taken good care of. If you went out in the rain and the coat got wet, you would have to beat it to get the fur to stand up again, with a rattan instrument.

Teiser: At one time there was a good deal of public criticism of the Alaska Commercial Company because of its government contract.

Levison: Well, I was too young to be conscious of any of that. I didn't know much about it, really, until I read Gerstle Mack's

Levison: book. It didn't have much effect on me because I didn't remember it.

Teiser: I read somewhere that neither your father nor your uncle ever went to Alaska.

Levison: They never did. My brother Will went to Alaska; Louis Sloss [Jr.] went; and Leon Sloss went to Alaska for a visit. But my mother and father never did.

Teiser: They weren't that interested?

Levison: You didn't do things like that. It was a hard trip, and at that time it was a long trip. There were no accommodations there. They had agents up there who transacted the business. I have a letter that my father wrote to the agent at the time of the gold discovery.

Teiser: I saw it in the Gerstle family history.*

Levison: Yes. It showed the spirit of the company at the time.

Teiser: Was there any hullabaloo here about the Alaska gold rush?

Levison: I remember a good deal of it, the excitement of it. I remember some of the agents who used to come visit the men. My uncle, who was so easygoing, left a lot of the work to his sons. He had great faith in his sons; they were always right.

* The letter is quoted on pages 58 and 59 of Gerstle Mack's Lewis and Hannah Gerstle.

Levison: They had a little of his spirit of Bohemianism, and they were always very friendly with these agents. They overlooked a great many things that they should not have overlooked; I don't think those agents were as honest as they might have been, but they were all good fellows. We used to see some of them all the time. I imagine that my father, mother, and brother never went because it was more of a trip than they felt they could take. I went to Alaska on my honeymoon, but we didn't get that far. We went to Muir Glacier and some other scenic places, but not very far.

Teiser: I read that the Alaska Commercial Company had a museum of Alaskan artifacts.

Levison: I remember that very distinctly because when we lived in San Rafael and came home from school in the city, we often went to my father's office to go home with him on the 5:15. Before that, we would go to the office, and we were allowed to play around in this museum, which consisted of Alaskan stuffed animals and pottery used by the Aleutian Indians. I don't think there was anything of great value, but they called it the museum. I remember playing around in there.

Teiser: Was that given to the University of California?

Levison: I think it did go to the University of California.

Lewis Gerstle's Activities and Associates

Teiser: Your father was, for a time, treasurer of the University?

Levison: Yes, he was. My uncle was treasurer too, and one of his sons became a regent.

Teiser: How did your father happen to become treasurer of the University?

Levison: I don't know, except that he knew quite a few of the professors over there. The name of the German professor who gave us lessons was Professor Sanger. He must have been hard up to have come over and teach little girls.

Teiser: He must have enjoyed it.

Levison: He did. I think my father knew a number of the regents and professors. We knew a man named Herbst who was connected with the University.

My brother mentioned the principal of Lowell High School, Mr. Reid [in his reminiscences]. I remember a literature teacher that my brother had. Since he was going to be a lawyer, he had to learn to declaim. He had to read Shakespeare. I can see him walking up and down our big room declaiming these

Levison: Shakespearean things. His teacher was Ebenezer Knowlton.

Teiser: Did your father do many public services, such as holding this position?

Levison: Yes, he did a good many public services things like that. He was a very representative kind of a man. He was good-looking, dignified, and he was interested. He was the head of the Jewish orphanage for many years. He did many philanthropic things.

Teiser: Was he an active member of Congregation Emanu-El?

Levison: I don't remember that he was particularly active in that.

Teiser: You mentioned Rabbi Jacob Voorsanger. He was a very well-known man.

Levison: Yes, he was. I have a book of his sermons. He was a Dutchman, and because my father-in-law was also a Dutchman, they were rather good friends.

Teiser: What sort of man was he?

Levison: He was very learned, rather an uncouth, ugly man, but with a very fine mind. He had a wife, who was a little fat woman, and had a big family. Their son, Dr. [William C.] Voorsanger, is still living and is very old. [Dr. Voorsanger died on January 24, 1967, age 90.] I meet him fairly regularly through a mutual friend down in the country. They go down there every Thursday. He and his wife go, and I meet them once

Levison: in a while. Rabbi Voorsanger had daughters and another son [Elkan Voorsanger] who is also a rabbi, I believe. This son, William Voorsanger, was a medical doctor. He had a tuberculosis sanatorium.

Before Voorsanger, there was a man named Elkan Cohn. He had two daughters--Phoebe--Mrs. Gunst--who was Moses Gunst's wife. The other one, Eva Cohn, married a Colman, and Jesse Colman is her son. Elkan Cohn also had a son who was a doctor and had a sanatorium down in San Carlos. Elkan Cohn is the first rabbi that I remember anything about as a child, but Voorsanger was the rabbi who married us.

Teiser: Was Rabbi Cohn a learned man?

Levison: I don't remember much about him.

Recently I was asking some questions about the Brundage collection. I said, "I would so much like to talk to somebody who could tell me more about its origin." They said I should talk to Mrs. Stern. My daughter-in-law said that she would tell her that I was interested so that perhaps I could see the collection. Marjorie Gunst Stern has devoted a lot of time to that collection. She is the wife of Carl Stern from Chicago.

Moses Gunst had three sons and two of them died very

Levison: young, so that they had just one son, Morgan, left.

Teiser: Your family members always belonged to Temple Emanu-El, I presume, but were not extremely active?

Levison: Oh, yes. My father would never have thought of not being a member. He was very public-spirited and very good, but he wasn't particularly devout. We had no orthodox customs in our house. He was very liberal, but he was a good Jew, and he always held up his end of things. He was very liberal with money, very generous. In those days you didn't have any Community Chest or collections; people did those things individually. When people died, they left money to charity in their wills--a thing which isn't done much anymore. You have to give so much while you live that you have nothing left by the time you die. That's my fix.

Teiser: I read that your father was interested in a business way in the Union Iron Works. Was he a friend of Irving M. Scott?

Levison: Yes, of course he was a friend of everyone in that period. I don't remember Irving Scott, but my father was interested in the Union Iron Works.

Teiser: In the Alaska Commercial Company, were there also salmon canning interests?

Levison: Yes. That went on long after the seal business ended.

Teiser: Did people bring you Alaskan artifacts and toys?

Levison: Mother had, at one time, a lovely collection of Alaskan baskets-- the woven baskets. I had quite a lot of them at one time.

Teiser: Did they bring carved ivory and little dolls?

Levison: Not an awful lot of that, no.

Teiser: Your father arrived just too late to be a member of the Pioneer Society?

Levison: Yes, he arrived the year after. That was due to the fact that he came by way of Panama. He got the Panama fever and had to lay over there. He just didn't get in under the '49ers.

Teiser: And he regretted that?

Levison: Yes. I don't know if he regretted it so much as his children regretted it afterwards. I don't think he laid so much stress on it. Of course my uncle was a '49er, and that honor went down through several generations. I think his grandsons are still members of the Pioneer Society. My family couldn't be members, but the Sloss family are.

Teiser: I'm going to suggest we conclude this interview so that I don't wear you out.

Levison: I don't find this tiring. When you talk to me, you're here for the purpose of talking to me. You look at me when you talk; you're interested in what I'm saying and you listen. That way I can hear very well. I have no trouble hearing your voice. What upsets me and what makes it impossible for me to hear is

Levison: a situation like last night. My daughter-in-law sat in one chair, my son in another, and I sat here. They were talking to each other about a trip or something, and I couldn't understand a word they said. Considering my years, I guess I'm doing as well as I can expect to do.

Teiser: I would think that you were twenty years younger.

Levison: Twenty years ago I was better than I am now. Other people tell me, "Oh, that's nothing, I have that too."

I say, "You wait another twenty or thirty years and see how much the difference is." Still, sometimes when I compare myself to the few other people who are left of my age, I am better than most of them.

Teiser: You certainly think clearly.

Levison: When I think, I guess I do.

Teiser: You mentioned that your husband knew Mr. Louis Sloss.

Levison: Yes, as president of the company he was working for. But he knew the sons personally. They invited my husband to come over to San Rafael on a Friday night, and my aunt always had a lot of men there. She loved that. She was the only woman. My uncle always set her up on such a pedestal that he didn't think that anybody knew him unless they knew his wife. Every Friday their sons would bring home different friends,

Levison: and Mr. Levison was one of them. They invited him to San Rafael, where we had a mutual tennis court where all the young people met, and that's how I met him.

Then one summer the Levison family took a house over there. During the summer we were engaged, they also had a house there. I've told you about the book, Prisoner of Zenda, that I found, didn't I? Yesterday I picked up this book of my brother's [Mark Gerstle's memoirs] that I didn't know that I had. My daughter-in-law said, "Well, didn't you ever read it?"

I said, "Well, I suppose I did start reading it, but I doubt if I've ever read it through." I am reading it through now, because it interests me more than it used to. He tells some family stories that he interprets a little differently than I would. There is one story about my father that I think is rather funny. My brother writes it as an indication of his strong character. He gives as an example a time when my father was at breakfast or lunch somewhere where they were serving eggs. He looked around the table, and he thought that there were just too many people for that number of eggs. So when they were passed to him, he said, "Thank you, I never eat eggs." My brother writes that he kept that up for the rest of his life. Of course he didn't do any such thing. We used to have it as a saying. Once in a while, when someone

Levison: said they wouldn't care for anything, we would say, "What's the matter? Do you never eat eggs?" It got to be a slogan. It wasn't true that he never ate eggs again, but it was a good story, and that was the way Mark told it.

Relatives and Friends

There are other things that I remember that he told about that I have a slightly different slant on. That's natural; no two people will remember things exactly alike. He makes up a little of it and gets it distorted, and I do the same. I was surprised to find out again how many things he was active in in a business way--the St. Francis Hotel, the Emporium, and the telephone company when they first had the dial system, and many other things. He had a big fight with Herbert Fleishhacker and nearly came to blows. Mortimer came in and separated them. I don't know the cause of it, but Herbert said something that Mark felt was an insult, and he threatened to resign.

Teiser: Did Herbert Fleishhacker antagonize people?

Levison: No, he was a very genial man. In fact, he had many friends. Everybody liked Herbert Fleishhacker.

Teiser: I thought there was one member of the family that liked to

Teiser: fight.

Levison: Well, Herbert could fight, but generally, he was very much liked. Some people didn't like him because he was rather a flatterer. I dodn't like Herbert too much myself. He was a nice man and he had many funny stories. He was interested in the Fleishhacker Zoo; he gave many of the animals and much of the playground out there. At one time Mr. Kingsbury [the president of Standard Oil] sent him a lot of animals, down to the bank on Sansome Street--a camel and some others.

Teiser: They were a very active family, weren't they?

Levison: Yes, at one time. Old Mr. Fleishhacker had a paper factory which was more or less successful. I remember him as having something the matter with this eyes so that they watered. We used to talk about Mr. Fleishhacker as "liquid eyes," but we didn't mean it in the sense of beautiful. Mrs. Fleishhacker was rather a fat woman. She was nice, and she had a big family. At one point they had a house in San Rafael, too. I had never heard of Herbert. I had met Mortie, and I didn't know he had a brother until someone mentioned Mortie's brother and told me about him. They used to come down to the train like everybody else, with a big carry-all with horses to meet the men from the city. That was when I saw Herbert for the first time. He was considerably younger than Mortie. I think he was the youngest of the family.

Teiser: Whom did he marry?

Levison: He married May Grunebaum.

Teiser: His brother, then, married your sister Bella?

Levison: Yes.

INTERVIEW 3--OCTOBER 31, 1966

Relatives and Friends--Continued

Teiser: I was talking with your son George, and he mentioned that you knew Alma de Bretteville Spreckels and had told him a story about her.

Levison: She was a model for a cousin of mine who was an artist. As a young girl, she was very pretty. She posed for my cousin in San Rafael, leaning up against a tree. He painted a portrait of her. At the time, she was rather a poor girl who had very little money. I think that my sister and I gave her some things at that time. That was all I knew about her. Then, of course, she married Mr. Spreckels.

Teiser: Her maiden name was de Bretteville?

Levison: Yes, Mr. de Bretteville, her brother, was involved with the Spreckels Sugar Company because he was in the Hawaiian Steamship Company.

Teiser: She was from a good family, was she not?

Levison: Yes she was. I'm almost afraid to say these things because my memory is vague. When I say this is the way it was, it may not have been that way. As you get older, it gets more and more vague, and you're not sure. Certain things about my

Levison: personal family I can remember clearly and am not afraid to say so, but when I tell stories about others, I wonder, "Was this really this way, or is this just something that I've imagined?"

Teiser: I think you have a good evaluation of your own memory. Who was your cousin who was the artist?

Levison: Joe Greenebaum was his name. Some members of the family changed the name to Greene and left off the 'baum,' but he never did that. He was a bachelor who lived in Paris for quite a long time and was a good artist; not a great artist by any means, but a nice genial sort of a Bohemian fellow.

Teiser: Did he live in San Francisco?

Levison: Yes, after he left Paris he lived in San Francisco for a while, and he lived in Southern California for a while. He painted all sorts of things. His father was my mother's brother

Teiser: You spoke of the Hellman family. You said you didn't like the older Mr. Hellman very much. It seems to me that you have a very good set of values, and I wondered what there was in some men that you admired.

Levison: I admired men who were something like my father. Because I had such a high regard for my father, he seemed to me the ideal man. I remember once when I was quite young saying, "If there ever was a man like you, I'd like to marry him." That was my ideal of a man. His principles and his strong

Levison: character and his idea of what he was were my ideal. I couldn't imagine anybody better than that.

Teiser: Did you know other members of the Spreckels family?

Levison: I didn't know them very well. I remember one incident.

Mr.[Claus]Spreckels, the old man, had a way of quarreling with his own children and being on bad terms with them once in a while. At one time he wasn't speaking to Rudolph or one of the others because he was angry with him. While we were in Frankfurt, my father knew Mr. Spreckels quite well, and he said that he thought it was a terrible thing for a father to take sides against his own son and not speak to him. I think my father said, "I'm going to talk to him and tell him what I think of a man who won't speak to his own son." And I think he did speak to him and have some influence on him. Mr. Spreckels was that kind. They had a daughter who lived with them--Emma Spreckels--who married when she was not very young. She married someone in her father's employ, a secretary or something. He was always feuding with his own children, and my father was very indignant about it.

Teiser: His sons were quite good men, too, weren't they?

Levison: Yes. Rudolph was a very attractive man. He had the house that was just recently torn down on Pacific Avenue. His wife was very good-looking. She came from a big family, with a

Levison: number of sisters. They had a big family. The old man's name was Claus Spreckels. He had two or three sons and one daughter. I don't know why, but he was always having some difficulty with them. He was very German, and he wanted obedience; he wanted his sons to do what he thought was the right thing.

Teiser: Do you remember him?

Levison: I only remember him from pictures, but I never met him.

Teiser: Rudolph Spreckels was the one who was so influential in clearing up the Ruef scandals?

Levison: He and my husband worked on that together. My husband was very much mixed up with the Ruef-Schmitz graft prosecution. He was very much against Mr. Ruef in trying to straighten things out with the city; he was civic-minded. He was right in the midst of this at the time of the earthquake. His brother, Dr. Levison, had a car, a little runabout, at that time, and at night he would go out and see what he could do to help. There was always work to be done. One night not long after the earthquake, after we had left this house, Dr. Levison was out, and he met Abe Ruef somewhere. Abe told him that he had lost his house, and didn't have a bed to go to or a place to stay that night. My brother-in-law said to him, "Well, come home with me. You can have a bed in my brother's

Levison: house." My husband always said that he came into his own room here, and they had taken the top mattress off the bed so that four people could sleep there.

He said, "I came in, and I saw that big nose sticking up out of my bed, and there was Abe Ruef, the man I was fighting tooth and nail, sleeping in my bed." This was one of the stories my husband used to tell, and it was rather funny. My brother [Mark] also mentions the Ruef situation in his memoirs. Schmitz was the mayor.

Teiser: I didn't realize that your husband was active in fighting him.

Levison: He was very active in that; he was bound to fight Schmitz and Ruef. I can't remember if that was settled before or after the earthquake.

Teiser: It wasn't until afterward.

Levison: My husband fought against them and made quite an issue of it. I met Mr. Ruef socially; I didn't particularly like him, but he was one of the young men that I knew.

Teiser: Your son George said that you knew the Crocker family.

Levison: I knew one of them, Clark Crocker, who was a brother of the other Crockers, but who was one of the less successful Crockers. His daughter Julia was a school friend of mine, and I was very fond of her. She married a real estate man [Buckbee of

Levison: Buckbee, Thorne--R.M.L.] who lived in the next block. She had one daughter, but died in childbirth. Clark Crocker's family lived on Sutter Street, and I used to go there and play with Julia. She was very pretty. They weren't the leading Crockers; they were only a side issue, and they didn't have too much money.

Teiser: Did you know the members of the De Young family?

Levison: Yes. I knew Mr. and Mrs. [M. H.] De Young and their daughters. They had three daughters who were very well brought up and well-educated. The mother was very ambitious; all kinds of things were said about Mrs. De Young, but she brought up a very nice family nevertheless. They were well-educated and had traveled in Europe.

Teiser: Who was she before she was married?

Levison: I don't think she was anybody of much importance. Mike De Young was rather crude, but he was a good and kindly man. He was always with the Chronicle, the newspaper. His oldest daughter married a Cameron--Helen Cameron was her name. And he had one son, Charlie De Young, who was also connected with the Chronicle. Mike De Young had a brother who was connected with the paper too. They, of course, donated the museum in memory of their father. They have always been good citizens and nice people.

Teiser: Mrs. Cameron is still alive, is she not?

Levison: Yes. She had a house in Burlingame, which I have visited.

I haven't seen her in years, but one of my nieces knows her quite well. I've grown away from people I used to know; I don't even see some of my intimate friends anymore. The older people, of course, have all died off, and one can't keep up with the younger people too actively.

Teiser: Was your father a friend of Mike De Young?

Levison: He was a friend of everybody. He was one of the old citizens; he knew everybody. They were not particularly intimate friends.

Teiser: It was a small community at that time, wasn't it?

Levison: Everyone knew everyone else at that time. It was a very small city compared to what it is now.

Teiser: Everyone who was of any consequence knew everyone else? ✓

Levison: Yes. They all worked together to build up the city. My father knew a great many people.

Teiser: You mentioned working together to build up the city. This was a feeling people had then, didn't they? Your father had it, and Mr. Levison had it. The city was important.

Levison: Yes. As a citizen, you owed a certain amount of time and thought to your city. I think that's the spirit of all pioneers. There was a great deal of that in San Francisco. The rebuilding of San Francisco was another period. Of course,

Levison: my father didn't live to see that.

Teiser: Your husband certainly had an important part in it.

Levison: Yes, he had a great deal to do with it.

Teiser: Are you related in some way to the Koshland family?

Levison: In a way. Louis Sloss was the son of one of my cousins.

His wife, Margaret, was a Koshland. My father and the older Mr. Koshland came from the same place in Germany, the same little village. My father claimed that he remembered him as a boy, and he didn't like him there because he was a tattletale. They both came to San Francisco. As time went on, Mr. Koshland did a few things that my father didn't like. He didn't like Mr. Koshland very much, but he liked his wife. They had a big family of sons, and my father always used to say, "If those boys amount to anything, it won't be because of their father, but because of their mother." He had a great regard for Mrs. Koshland. I remember Mrs. Koshland because she lived long after he died, but I don't remember him.

Teiser: They must have taken after their mother; they turned out to be fine men, didn't they?

Levison: Yes. The mother held them together. It was a big family; there were two or three daughters and three or four sons.

Teiser: Was she born in Germany too?

Levison: Yes, I think so.

Teiser: Are you also related to the Heller family?

Levison: Only through the younger generation. George's wife was Aline Raas. Her sister married a Heller, so there is some connection. Elinor Raas married Edward Heller. Mr. Raas [senior] played the piano. He was a very ardent Christian Scientist, very strong for it.

Teiser: Who was the senior member of the Heller family?

Levison: There was Emanuel Heller and his brother, who was a doctor, and his two sisters. Their father, who was of my father's generation, I don't remember anything about. There was another Heller family, including Mose Heller and his brother. He married Adele Walter, daughter of D. N. Walter. Adele Heller's son is Walter Heller, who is a very good friend of my son Robert now. I knew Manny Heller's wife. What do you want to know all this stuff for?

Teiser: It's community lore that gets lost unless someone remembers it and puts it down.

Levison: There are people who remember much more about some of these families than I do. D. N. Walter had a brother, Isaac Walter, who married one of my cousins, one of the Greenebaum family.

Teiser: Were there men in the Walter family who were of your father's generation?

Levison: No, I think they were younger, but D. N. Walter may have been

Levison: in my father's generation. He was a much older brother than the one who married my cousin.

Teiser: Were they all involved in the family business?

Levison: Yes, D. N. and Isaac were.

Teiser: Who was Mrs. John I. Walter, the present Mrs. Walter, who is a bookbinder?

Levison: Her husband, Jack, was the son of my cousin who married Isaac Walter. Edgar Walter was the sculptor; their sister Marian married Edgar Sinton.

Teiser: That is quite a gifted family, is it not?

Levison: Talent runs right through that family.

The Lilienthals and Other Prominent Families

Teiser: I think you told me something of the Lilienthal men.

Levison: They are very closely connected with my family in many ways. Two of them married my sisters; a Sloss cousin married one of the brothers of these men. We and the Lilienthals are very closely connected.

Teiser: This is the San Francisco Lilienthals, is it not?

Levison: Yes. They came from New York and Cincinnati. The rabbi [Dr. Max Lilienthal] lived in Cincinnati and was a very prominent

Levison: man there both politically and religiously. They are a very high-class, fine family all the way through, exceptionally fine. One brother, [Samuel--R.M.L.] was a homeopathic physician and the other one [Max--R.M.L.] was a rabbi. Their wives were sisters. They both lost their wives very young and came to America after that with their families and lived in Cincinnati for a while. The doctor moved to New York. The cousins were always more like brothers than cousins. Some of the younger ones came to California and so did the homeopath, who had a son who was also a doctor. The old doctor and his son had a house on Van Ness Avenue, which we occupied at one time after the doctor's death. We were very closely connected in two or three different ways, and I still feel very close to them all. Theodore Lilienthal was my brother-in-law; he married my oldest sister, Sophie.

Teiser: There is a man they call Teddy Lilienthal.

Levison: He was a son of Philip Lilienthal, who was a brother of Theodore's. Philip Lilienthal was connected with the Anglo Bank. He was very handsome and was one of the nicest people I ever knew. He married a Seligman from New York; and he was a very fine citizen and a lovely man. Teddy is his youngest son. He had another son, Philip, who died a couple of years ago. Another son, Joe, lived in the East and had several

Levison: daughters and a son who is a doctor. One daughter, Elsie, married Edward Beer of New York, who is a surgeon. My brother-in-law [Dr. Levison] knew him and had high regard for him.

Teiser: That family ran to the professions then?

Levison: Yes, some of them did, but not that many. Ernest Lilienthal, who married my cousin, and Leo Lilienthal, who married my sister, were in the liquor business, in Cyrus Noble Whiskey. Another one, Albert, who lived in New York and who was a brother of Phil's, was in the importing business. Jesse Lilienthal, who lived here, was a lawyer [and president of the street railway company--R.M.L.]. He had a son. He died, but his wife, Dorothy, who was Dorothy Fries, is still living.

Teiser: Which one was in the Gelber-Lilienthal book store?

Levison: That was Teddy.

Teiser: Who was Gelber?

Levison: He was a book man, and I guess he knew his business. Teddy went in with him. The Lilienthals all have a distinction, a dignity. They were really extra-fine people. Most of them had very good backgrounds and very good minds. The old doctor and the rabbi and my father didn't know each other at all until my sister married Theodore. Then they got acquainted. I had some letters which my father and the rabbi exchanged. They

Levison: liked each other because they were the type of people who would like each other. Dr. Lilienthal, the rabbi, was a very handsome man. One nephew, Max Lilienthal, who was my sister's son, inherited, through different ways, a great number of family portraits, which his widow now has in her apartment on Broadway. Her children all live in apartments, and none of them want that kind of collection as a whole. She is very attached to it, and she doesn't know what she is going to do with it. She was only recently considering moving into a place where she wouldn't have to keep house, but I said, "What are you going to do with all your paintings?"

She said, "Well, I'll take them with me." Of course she could not, and that is one of the reasons she has decided to stay where she is. The portraits are enormous pictures, going back three or four generations. Some of them are very well painted, and as a collection it is very fine. But who wants it? In Cincinnati, there is a memorial to old Doctor Lilienthal, and they thought at one time that they would want to have them, but I don't think they do. They require big rooms; they have enormous frames. My niece-in-law is rather sentimental, and she was glad to have them and takes great pride in them, but nobody knows what's going to happen to them now. People wouldn't mind having one or two ancestors hanging

Levison: around, but there are so many of them and so many pictures. Some of them are really very lovely.

Teiser: Is the Haas family also somehow related to your family?

Levison: Yes. Mrs. William Haas was a cousin of mine on my mother's side. Her daughter married Sam Lilienthal, who was also on my mother's side in a different way. He was her sister's grandson. One of Alice and Sam's daughters married a grandson on the Gerstle side of the family, a grandson of my uncle. There the Gerstles and the Grunebaums* were connected again. Alice Haas Lilienthal's daughter Elizabeth married Jim Gerstley; he spells it Gerstley because my uncle lived in England.

Teiser: Was there any member of the Haas family who was a friend of your father's?

Levison: No, these men were younger than my father.

Teiser: What kind of family was it?

Levison: They were in the grocery business. I knew the two brothers who lived here. There was another brother in the East. The Abe Haases and the William Haases were the ones out here.

Teiser: Were they very successful?

Levison: Yes, they were very successful. They brought out any number of their nephews, who came out and went into business with them. Since then they have become fairly prominent.

* Some of the branches of the family changed the name Grunebaum to Greenebaum at different times.

Teiser: They brought them out from Germany?

Levison: Yes. Like people did in those days, they lived in their house with them. The Haases were good to them; they put them in their own business and started them in life.

Teiser: Did your father have any relatives that he brought over? ✓

Levison: He had quite a few nephews from two different families. My father had some interest in the hide and wool business. He put the Bissingers and the Heilbroners into that business, which was his originally, and they made a great success of it. Those were his nephews.

Teiser: He didn't bring them into your home, though?

Levison: They were around the house all the time, but they didn't live there. In those days people lived simpler lives, inviting families to come and stay. These cousins were always very kind to us. People don't do those things anymore. They hardly see their own brothers anymore. My boys don't see as much of each other as I'd like them to because life isn't like that anymore. Those people who came from Europe and succeeded felt an obligation to their families to bring many of them to America and help them get started.

Teiser: These were the Bissinger and Heilbroner families who are well-known now?

Levison: Yes, they were on my father's side. There is one Heilbroner here

Levison: now, but her father didn't come over. I help her a little bit; she is having a rather tough time of it. Her father was the nephew that my father liked best of all the brothers, but the others had come to America, and it was too much for the mother that this one should come too. So he never came. My father always said that he would have made the best American of them all. He was a very nice man. His daughter has a very hard time getting along, and I just help her a little bit, but I can't do everything for her. There are some other descendants of the Heilbroners living, but that isn't their name anymore. There are still Bissingers. Sam Bissinger was my cousin; he was married and lived here. There was another Sam Bissinger who was a nephew of my cousin.

Teiser: Were the Mack family San Francisco people?

Levison: They lived here most of the time. They had been in the East, but they were here, and we knew them. One of my sisters married a Mack.

Teiser: What was their business?

Levison: There were a number of sisters and brothers. Adolph, whom we always called Dick, married my second sister, and they were in the wholesale drug business. Afterward there was some sort of failure in the Mack Drug Company, and in the settlement, they didn't want Jules in the business anymore.

Levison: Jules, Adolph's brother, then went to Bakersfield, where he had a job in a bank for \$250 a month. Then he got interested in the oil business down there, and he made a big fortune. My brother-in-law shared some of that because he bought some shares at the time. It wouldn't have cost my husband very much to buy some shares that he was offered, but he didn't feel that he could afford it. They always said that if he had bought them it would have made him very rich, but he never did. Dick's brother moved back to San Francisco after he made all the money, rather than stay in Bakersfield. His sisters all married. The mother was a very nice woman; the father didn't amount to very much. My sister died before she was 50, and after her death Dick married again. He died about eight or nine years ago, and his widow is still living. I'm very fond of her; she's a very nice girl. She came from Chicago; she was a teacher; she was not a Jewess; and she was a very intelligent woman. My brother-in-law was intelligent too, and they were very well-suited and very happy together. They had no children, of course. By the time he married her, his children were all married. She has had kind of a rough life of it. At the present time she has lost her sight almost entirely and cannot see much. She had an operation for cataracts, but it didn't

Levison: do her any good. She fell down because she couldn't see and hurt her ankle so that now she can't get out at all. It's a rather miserable life. She's an awfully nice person, and I'm very fond of her.

Teiser: What about the Esberg family?

Levison: There was the old lady Esberg and her husband. They lived on Pacific Avenue, 'way down. They had a house, and they also had a windmill. At the time of the fire, when nobody could get any water because it was turned off, you could go down to Esbergs' and get a bucket full of water to bring home. They had the water on account of their well and windmill. Old Mr. [Mendel] Esberg was banished into the windmill. I don't know what was the matter with him or why they banished him. He lived there mostly. They never were very nice to him. The old lady, Mrs. Esberg, was a very nice old lady, very charitable. She was president of the Emanu-El sisterhood for years. She had sons and one daughter. The sons were Alfred, Milton, and one other; the daughter, Edith, married Joe Sloss. Edith had three sons. Her husband was in Sloss and Britten, a hardware wholesale business. The company is still running, and the two Sloss sons who were twins are still in the business. The third son lives in Montana, where he is a teacher. Alfred was a very nice man; and Milton's

Levison: wife is still living. She was a Lilienthal.

Teiser: Did you know the Dohrmann family?

Levison: I knew Mrs. A. B. C. Dohrmann, who was in the business with them. I knew A. B. C. Dohrmann and his wife. I once said to her, "Why have you got so many initials?" They all have three initials.

She said, "Well, with Uncle Abe and Uncle Ben and Uncle Something, the children all had to be named after them. That's the reason they all have these long series of initials." Mrs. A. B. C. Dohrmann was a Siebe, of the old German Siebe family. I got to know her one time when we went to a resort up in the mountains. I knew some of the other Dohrmanns slightly, not very intimately.

Teiser: Were they all involved in the family business?

Levison: Yes. Nathan Dohrmann was the name of the firm. Mr. Nathan Dohrmann ran it, but Mrs. [A. B. C.] Dohrmann was always around.

Teiser: What did the Siebe family do?

Levison: They were in the coffee business.

Teiser: This brings up the Brandenstein family, of M. J. B. Coffee.

Levison: Yes. I knew them very well; we were connected in many ways, both family and friendship. Old Mr. [M. J.] Brandenstein was a self-educated man, very ambitious. He used to sit around and read Shakespeare, and was very interested in it. His wife

Levison: was a fat little woman who produced many children. They had an enormous house on California and Octavia Streets, with a big garden around it and ballrooms. They entertained a lot for us younger people. They had a big family. The oldest daughter married a man by the name of Jacoby, whose daughter was Mrs. Marco Hellman, Frances Hellman. One of the Brandenstein family, Charlie, married a niece of mine. Henry, who was the lawyer, went to Harvard with my brother and married May Colman. Alfred wasn't married; another brother married a Jacoby. Agnes, the younger daughter, who was my age, married Joe Silverberg.

Teiser: Some members of the family changed the name to Bransten?

Levison: Yes, some of the younger ones did, like young Joe.

Teiser: Name changes must cause all kinds of business confusion.

Levison: It did, and it's confusing sometimes even now. My own son did that. Of course I wasn't particularly happy about it, but when he went into the movies and the theater, he thought that Levison wasn't as good a name for that purpose as Lane. So he's Charles Lane. By this time we're used to it, but I was never very happy about that. He thought it was to his advantage to do it. I don't think it made any difference.

Teiser: There was some family connection with the Lehman family of San Francisco, wasn't there?

Levison: Yes. My son Robert's son, Robert Jr., married Anne Lehman.

Teiser: Was that Governor Lehman of New York's family?

Levison: No. They're local Lehmans, of French descent. His widow since then has married Daniel Stone.

Teiser: Was the Lehman family prominent early?

Levison: Not especially. They were nice, very educated people.

They had a girl and a son. The son's name is Armand, but they called him Armie. Lehman's real name was Lucien, but they always called him Mike. I admired him very much. After a certain number of years, his wife married again. She married Mr. Dan Stone, who had been married twice before. She's recently been through a very serious illness, and she's better now. Her daughter, who is my grandson's wife, also had an operation last week and telephoned me this morning to tell me she was home and feeling all right again.

Teiser: You have so many people to keep track of, don't you?

Levison: Oh, so many. Still, I have a big family, and they are more than devoted. I couldn't complain about any; they are all so nice to me. Still, I'm very lonely at times. They come in for a minute, then they go out again. I'm not really part of their lives; I'm not necessary. I've always said that when you get to my age, you're really not needed by anyone anymore, and that's what you feel--a lack of really being

Levison: necessary to anybody. But you just have to keep up as best
you can.

INTERVIEW 4--NOVEMBER 7, 1966

[While the tape recorder was being set up at the beginning of this interview, Mrs. Levison mentioned that she had recently been going through family photographs and trying to decide how to discard them. She recalled that many years ago an artist had been commissioned to paint a portrait of her father, but after it was completed no one in the family liked it. It was stored away. Later her mother decided to give it to the Salvation Army because of the value of the frame. Mrs. Gerstle told a representative of the organization that the portrait itself should be destroyed.]

Levison: My mother said, "I want that picture destroyed. You can have the frame, but please take the portrait out and destroy it." But he evidently didn't, and he put it in his window down on McAllister Street. Somebody we knew saw it and told my mother. It nearly killed my mother that his picture was down on McAllister Street being sold. She got terribly excited about it and said, "You've got to get that picture back. I won't have it." So we had to go down to the store and literally

Levison: buy it back and then destroy it. If you give pictures away in the frames, somebody will think they're antiques or that they are worth keeping.

My son says, "I have no such sentiment. I don't care what they do about it."

I said, "All right. If that's the way you feel, I can't make you feel the way I feel."

Teiser: If you do have photographs of members of your family, most of whom were interesting. . .

Levison: You can't be so conceited as to think they are of any great importance.

Teiser: You cannot tell who is going to be interested in whom.

Mr. Gerstle Mack, when he was preparing the family history, worked at the California Historical Society, and the librarian there told me that he got a good deal of material there for that.

Levison: He did a lot of research; he did a really good job. I think he said all that needs to be said about the family, and I don't see much sense in adding to it.

J. B. Levison

Teiser: I wanted to go on today with Mr. Levison and his really remarkable career.

Levison: I'll be glad to tell you anything about him.

Teiser: Have you ever been able to account in your own mind (you probably have) for his extremely rapid rise?

Levison: Yes. I think it would be due to industry. I was just reading a quotation from Lincoln which I happened to find. He must be right, because he agrees with me. It's about never putting off for tomorrow what you can do today. He says that industry is the most important thing in a man's life. I believe that could be the key to Mr. Levison's life. Of course it came through necessity. When he was about thirteen, his father lost the little money he had and wasn't very strong, and Mr. Levison and his brother had to go to work when they were very young boys. My husband was first an apprentice in a dentist's office. He worked there until someone under anesthetic squeezed his hand and caused trouble with his hand. At that time he went into the insurance business as a nobody.

His brother went into a drug store when he began working, and from that he became a doctor because he became interested. One story that my husband told about his brother was that

Levison: he was a little boy, and they had a lot of bottles and fancy boxes sitting around for pills. He didn't think anything of it, and he brought some of them home. Of course his mother was very indignant and said, "That's stealing. You have no right to those things. You take them back and tell them that you're sorry, but you didn't know it was wrong to do it. Tell them your mother told you it was wrong and you're bringing it all back again." That was the beginning of his career. I don't know how many years he was an apprentice there, but from being a druggist he decided to study medicine.

My husband started working, and as soon as he was able to afford anything, he helped his brother get his medical education. At that time they thought you couldn't be a good doctor unless you had been to Europe--to Heidelberg, Germany. So he sent him to Heidelberg. That's how my husband started, and he always did help his family one way or another. Even to the day of his death he did things for his sisters. He worked very hard and very conscientiously, and I suppose that was the secret of his going ahead. I don't know any other reason except that he was able to do the work and was very ambitious and very honorable in his treatment of people. What really put him on top was the aftermath of the earthquake, when he helped rehabilitate the Fireman's Fund.

Levison: Of course the Fireman's Fund, being a local company, was terribly affected by the earthquake and was almost wiped out. Some of the companies were. They had a good reputation and wanted to pay as much as they could. One day after we were living in the country, my husband came home all excited and said to me, "Well, I think I have an inspiration as to how, possibly, the company can be saved." That was a suggestion that they go to all the policyholders and ask them to accept 50% payment and 50% stock in the new company, which changed the name temporarily. I didn't know what he was talking about.

I said, "Is it something so good?"

He said, "If I can put it through, it will be." From that time on, he started personally, with others helping him later, going around to every policyholder and talking them into this arrangement, which was finally accomplished. That put the company on its feet again. That was always appreciated by the company, and he gradually became more of a force in the company. Mr. [William J.] Dutton died; Mr. [Bernard] Faymonville died; and he gradually ascended to the top. He was Chairman of the Board, and then he was retired on a pension. But that was how he started.

Teiser: Was he not a director at the time of the earthquake and fire?

Levison: Yes, he was an officer of some kind.

Teiser: So he had got that far already.

Levison: He had different titles. When we were first married, his first title was Marine Secretary. That's all in the Fireman's Fund history; there's nothing new about that.

Teiser: Except your view of it is a little different from the business view of it. You can't account for people's careers entirely, but conscientious work, although it was a large factor, could not account for it all. There was ability too.

Levison: Yes. It was a combination of ability, ambition, and hard work and devotion. Whatever he did, whether it was his family, Mt. Zion Hospital, or fighting Mr. Ruef, he did wholeheartedly and with vigor and integrity. That's what gets you there. That's all you can say. He never lay down on his job. I think the most remarkable part was that he was that kind of a man in public affairs and business, and at the same time combined that with a great love of home and family and culture. ✓

He left school at thirteen, never finished high school, didn't get much education; but because he was so ambitious and belonged to the Bohemian Club and met people of culture, he liked people like that and tried to educate himself as

Levison: much as possible. He really did educate himself by reading and associating with people. He was primarily interested in music. Whenever he traveled, going to Europe on business trips that took a long time in those days, he never missed a chance to go to a concert or to a picture gallery or go to meet people of importance. He always kept in mind that that side of himself had to be developed, as well as his family life.

As a family man, he was most devoted. He could come home, as a great many young people today don't and can't do, and throw away his business worries and be all father and husband. He loved his home, liked to buy things, and wanted everything to be nice. He loved his friends and loved to entertain and have a lot of people around. He was a many-sided man. He had all the tenderness that I think goes with a fine and strong man. I always claim that the finest type of man is a man who has the practical, sensible, manly qualities combined with a tenderness and an understanding. That's what my son George has to a very great extent in the same way, except that his life has been much easier than my husband's.

Teiser: Was Mr. Levison very ambitious for his sons?

Levison: Yes. He was very ambitious. I think he would have been disappointed if he had lived until now to see that some of

Levison: the things he planned did not work out. His great ambition,[✓] or rather dream, when the boys were growing up, was that someday they would go into business together--all four of them. Of course that didn't happen. They tried it. John and Bob went into insurance together, and it didn't work out at all. Then George went in and that didn't work out. So they didn't stay together in business.

Teiser: They've all done well.

Levison: Yes, they've all done well. Of course you can't go into the next generation and what the grandsons are doing. You always hope they are all going to be so wonderful, but they're not so wonderful. They are just people; some of them have done better than others. I don't think any of them have quite the push and ambition that their father had. They didn't have to have so much drive. Bob has done very well; he's built up a very fine business, and George has too. He has a son who is going to follow him. He has the brain if he has the ambition to do it, which I think he has. I'm very happy to think that they are together. Bob also has his son in the business, and he is a great help to Bob. I think Mr. Levison would have been very pleased to know that part. You know how it is in a big family; there are some disappointments. They start in by being pretty little babies, and you think

Levison: they are going to be Adonises, they are going to be so beautiful, but they don't turn out to be so beautiful. But you love them just the same.

Teiser: Was it Mr. Levison's dream that they all follow his path?

Levison: He thought they could all be in an insurance company together. Of course Bob was completely educated and brought up to be an insurance man. After he left college, he went East and he was trained. From the beginning, that was his life. When John was a boy, he had a tubercular infection, and we were all worried about him. Somebody told us he ought to lead an outdoor life, so we bought a ranch for him down near San Jose. The Rosenberg brothers were big fruit people, brothers all in one business together. I think that my husband's idea was that John work up some sort of business that they could all be in, but it didn't work out, for many reasons. When John sold the ranch and left it, he went in with Bob and tried that. John and Bob never understood each other even as children, and to this day they don't. They couldn't get along together, but they stayed together for a while [25 years--R.M.L.]. Then George came in for a while. They tried Charlie, but that was no good, because he was too much interested in outside things. They said they would send him out on a mission to collect something, and he would get

Levison: sidetracked listening to a play, acting, or doing imitations. He was simply no businessman, so he left them first and never amounted to anything as an insurance man.

When George bought the Cardoza business, John went in with him. That didn't work out too well. Then John went out on his own, and since then he's been playing around with business. I don't think he has ever done a great deal of business. His wife had plenty of money and has left him very comfortably; still he works at business.

Teiser: Is he the family representative in the Fireman's Fund interest?

Levison: He is a director of the Fireman's Fund.

Teiser: So you have maintained that connection?

Levison: Yes. I'm very pleased to think that none of the Page boys, none of the Dutton boys, or any of the other men's sons were directors, while John was made a director. It was a compliment to Mr. Levison. John still takes a great interest in it, of course. My husband had three interests: the Fireman's Fund, the Mt. Zion Hospital, and his family. His music was his recreation. He loved the Fireman's Fund. I showed you an article that called the Fund a "corporation with a soul," and that's what it had.

Teiser: I imagine much of that soul was due to your husband.

Levison: Yes, I think it was. Mr. Dutton was a man with great ideals too.

Teiser: What were your impressions of Mr. Dutton?

Levison: I had a great regard for him, and so did my husband. He was a very fine man, of fine character, and devoted to his work. Mr. [D. J.] Staples was president when we were married, but I think he died shortly after that. There was one president before Mr. Staples.

Teiser: You knew Mr. Faymonville, didn't you? What sort of man was he?

Levison: Yes, I knew him very well. He was a peculiar man. I don't like to say too much about him. In the first place, he was rather fond of drinking, and that was his downfall, because toward the end he wasn't of much use. But he was a pleasant, nice gentleman, and his wife was a fussy little woman. They had children. Sons seemed to run in that Fireman's Fund family. Mr. Dutton had four sons and one or two daughters. Mr. Faymonville had three sons; Mr. [Charles R.] Page had five sons; we had four sons. It seemed to run that way. Mr. Page was a very fine man, Charles Page, Senior. They [the Pages] were neighbors of ours; they lived in the next block. Mr. Levison and Mr. Page used to walk downtown together all the time. He had one son, Charlie, and another. Charlie married quite young and had all those children. The present Charles Page is still living; he is Charlie's oldest son. They are all fine

Levison: people. They came from South America. The first Mr. Page came here from South America with the rest of his family. One of his sisters was Mrs. Maillard.

Teiser: Was the senior Mr. Page something of a protégé of Mr. Levison?

Levison: Yes, he loved him almost like a son. You might call him a protégé, but he made a way for himself because of his own merits. He was nice looking and had a very pretty wife, who was also very sweet.

Teiser: Was Mr. Page in the company at the time of the 1906 fire?

Levison: I don't think so.

The 1906 Earthquake and Fire

Teiser: This house was the Fireman's Fund headquarters briefly in 1906. Can you describe the events of the earthquake?

Levison: They turned my dining room downstairs into the Fireman's Fund office.

Teiser: Where were you at the time of the earthquake?

Levison: We were here, but we went to San Rafael after the earthquake.

Teiser: Were you in this house when the earthquake hit?

Levison: Yes, that part of it is very clear to me. We were right

Levison: here in this room.* Two of the children were in this room too. The first night we slept here; we stayed in the house. Then my husband realized that we couldn't stay in the city. There was no water and no lighting. He was able, through his connections with shipping, to get a tug at the wharf. We all piled into a little automobile, a little runabout that belonged to a man that lived at the corner. I had a nurse for Charlie, the youngest child, and I said, "I won't leave until my baby can come too." So they hung on by the hair, and we drove down to the tug, which was tied up at the Marina, and we went across the bay to Sausalito. At Sausalito, they had trains that took us to San Rafael. I don't remember how we got from the station to our home. The house was all closed up for the winter. The chandeliers were covered with some blue cotton material. I didn't take any clothes along; you see, we just left. We had no clothes for the children and didn't know if we would ever see their clothes again. I started taking down this blue material and making rompers for the children. We landed there with not only our own family, but with quite a few others. Mr. Levison went to his father and brother--the doctor--and sister, who

* An upstairs sitting room.

Levison: were living on Van Ness Avenue, which was dynamited. My husband went right down to see how his father was getting along, and the door was so jammed that he almost had to break it to get in. It had jammed during the shaking. When he got there, he found his father sweeping up the glass that had fallen from the chandelier. He said, "Come along, Pa. I'm going to take you away from here. You can't stay here."

His father said, "Why can't I stay here? I've been through earthquakes before. It's nothing."

My husband said, "Well, this is worse. You come with me." He picked up as many of his brother's surgical instruments as he could, put them in a box, and brought them all out here.

Teiser: Was his brother living with his father at that time?

Levison: Yes, and his sister was living there too. His brother had a little runabout, so he didn't stay. He did a lot of very good work at that time,^{*} but the father and the sister came here that night and went to San Rafael with us. They were with us for the rest of the summer.

Teiser: Was your mother still alive at that time?

Levison: My mother was alive, but she and my two sisters were in Europe.

* See also pages 84-85.

Levison: One of my nephews, Mr. Gerstle Mack's brother Harry Mack, was studying. I think he was going to college in New York. He was in New York at the time of the earthquake and decided to come out here. On the way he stopped in Chicago, got a lot of money, and sent a cable to my mother, who was in Paris, to reassure her that he had heard (when he really hadn't heard) this: "Family all well and settled in San Rafael." That relieved my mother, but all the other San Franciscans got upset. They said, "If Mrs. Gerstle has heard from her family, why haven't we heard from ours?" Harry didn't know any more than anybody else, but he thought he better say something to reassure my mother, which was a very wise thing. He was only a 21-year-old boy. He got the money. His sister had just had a little baby, and he thought perhaps there wouldn't be food for the baby, so he brought a big bottle of malted milk tablets for the baby. When he arrived, he walked to San Rafael. My brother [Mark] said something about the same story in his book. We were in San Rafael the whole summer.

My two brothers and their wives, who lived on Washington Street next to each other and had two children, were asked to join us on the tug. They refused, saying that they had made their own arrangements to go to the hotel in San Rafael,

Levison: which they did. As my brother tells it, after they had been there about a week, they got their bill charging them for full hotel service although they had very little service. They decided they were not going to put up with that, so they decided to come up to the house. They had been there some other summers, and they had occupied one of the houses which we always called the lower house. When they got there, they found that there were some other people in it, people who had come with us but whom we didn't know. They were very indignant that these strangers were staying there, and they told them that they would have to get out because they wanted to move in. There was a family row about that, but it all passed over afterwards. So we all lived there that summer. We had servants, and we could say to them, "Do you want to come along?" I had a Chinese for many years as a houseman, and we said, "Yan, do you want to come with us?"

He said, "What boss going to do?"

We said, "Boss going to stay here."

He said, "I stay with boss." He stayed here. They cooked, as everybody did, outside on old bricks, because you weren't to light fires in your house. Yan stayed with my husband all summer. In those days Mr. Levison was naturally a good citizen and acted like all other men with decency did,

Levison: and stayed here and did his duty. There were a few who didn't.

His duty was first to watch his own property. At certain hours of the evening, these men who had never held a pistol in their hand (my husband hadn't) had to act as police and watch for people looting the empty houses. He did his duty that way. He came to see me and see how we were only once in a great while. His duty was here, with the city and the men. They had great contempt for one family, whose name I won't mention, because all three of the men of the family went straight to Menlo [Park] and never came back to help. In those days, that was considered very disloyal to the city.

We stayed the summer in San Rafael. John showed the first signs of having the lung trouble that worried us a great deal at the time. I became pregnant at a most inopportune time, and we were advised, because of John's condition, to go someplace where we could sleep outdoors instead of moving back to the city for the winter. They thought that was the thing to do; it was kind of a crazy idea. We rented a house down in Fair Oaks, which is now called Atherton or Menlo. We were there for a year. Then I came up here. By that time the Fireman's Fund had moved out. Dr. Levison had his offices here, also, and the old Chinaman had stayed in the house. I came up here to have the baby--George. He was

Levison: born here, but the family was still down in Fair Oaks until the beginning of the following winter, when John was well again.

The period of rehabilitation was a terrible year. It was hard on everybody, but things gradually got better. It was remarkable how the city commenced to grow again. Only parts of it were destroyed, but that was a good part of it. A great deal was destroyed south of Market, and Van Ness was dynamited because of the fires. Except in a few blocks, the fire never went beyond Van Ness. It was a very wide street, and they blew up the houses, so that Franklin and Gough were some of the few other streets that were affected.

Teiser: Were the houses of some of your family dynamited?

Levison: Oh, yes. My aunt, Mrs. Sloss, and her son and daughter, who had houses next door to hers, all had their houses destroyed. One was the Carroll house, which was the fourth one on that side of the block. Opposite from it was the house that my mother had sold by that time, so she wasn't occupying it at that time. The house that we had lived in for so many years and the [George] Hearst house, on that side, were destroyed. There were only seven houses on that block, Van Ness between Pine and California. The number was 1517. After the fire, instead

Levison: of building new homes, they started building the automobile businesses.

Teiser: Were all seven of the houses dynamited?

Levison: Yes, and many blocks further than that were dynamited.

Teiser: Was reparation made to the owners?

Levison: No, not a thing. My aunt, Mrs. Sloss, didn't even have time to save a photograph of her husband. After it was all over, she asked me, "Do you happen to have a picture of Uncle Sloss?"

I said, "Yes." She asked me to give it to her. She saved nothing. The house of another member of our family, who lived a few blocks from there, had been dynamited. The family was in Europe, and they had also left one of these faithful Chinese servants, who had been working for them for thirty years, to take care of the house.

When they said they were coming to dynamite the house, this man said, "I want to do something first." He took the silver that was there and put it in the outside chimney. The chimneys were outside the house, and they had doors on them. He put the silver that he could save and things he thought were of value into this chimney. Then he finally went over to San Rafael with some of their family. One day when we decided we'd like to go back to the city to see the ruins,

Levison: he said he wanted to come too. We tried to talk him out of it, telling him there was nothing for him to go for, but he said, "I have to go. There is something I have to go for." We took him. What he had to do was open that chimney to see if the silver was still there, and it was.

Teiser: What family was that?

Levison: The Grunwald family, who afterward married into our family. In fact, Mr. Grunwald was a partner of my father's at one time. Three of his daughters all married cousins of mine--different branches of cousins.

Teiser: When you came back, was this house much damaged?

Levison: It was damaged very little. I was just showing my maid the heavy chimney in the middle room yesterday. Right below the chimney is a space where the chimney settled at the time of the fire, but that is all you can see. Mr. Levison and I had been to New York for several weeks, and the opera season was to start. The earthquake came the second or third night of the opera season.

Teiser: Had you been to the opera that night?

Levison: We had season tickets because Mr. Levison loved music so. We were in New York and wanted to get back in time for the opening of the opera. We came back on a Friday or Saturday night, and the earthquake was on the following Tuesday.

Levison: We had some flowers in a fragile, lily-shaped vase. The flowers had been sent to me because I had been away. There wasn't even a drop of water spilt from the vase. Nothing happened, as far as we know, except the chimney. Many chimneys were knocked over from the top, but ours weren't.

Some years after that, Andrew McLaughlin, who is my daughter-in-law's brother, stayed here just before he was married. One morning, when I was still in bed, he knocked on my door and said, "Mrs. Levison, I think it would be a good idea if you would get the fire department, because the chimney in my bathroom is smoking." He was very deliberate and slow in the way he talked. That was the same chimney that had become loose, and when he lit the gas stove, it commenced to smoke. So we got the fire department. That is the only damage that was done in the house as far as I know.

Teiser: Pacific Heights is on a rock formation, is it not?

Levison: There was less damage here than there was in some places. Of course, the Nichols' chimney, across the street, fell down. Many people's did. You saw bricks on the sidewalk.

Teiser: I suppose the Leale house across the street just swayed.

Home and Neighbors in Pacific Heights

Levison: The [John] Leales used to live in the little white cottage.

They were here at the time of the earthquake.

Teiser: That must have been built long before this house, was it not?

Levison: Yes, long before. It was part of an old Spanish grant.

The father wrote a book called Recollections of a Tule Sailor.


He wrote that after he already had diabetes and had had an operation on his legs. He was home all the time, and he wrote this book. His daughters edited it afterwards. He and Mrs. Leale lived there for years. The girls weren't born there. They kept that property and other property they owned. These two sisters lived there for many years, until Edith died just a few years ago. The other sister died some years before that. Captain Leale was the captain of a ferry boat. He never had a bigger boat than that. They were people of great refinement, and they had many friends. Mrs. Leale was an educated woman. She was one of the founders, or at least a member, of the Browning Society. They used to meet over there.

On New Year's Day, the Leales always had a New Year's reception. Captain Leale got a ship's cabin from a ship

Levison: and put it up in the back yard as a club room for himself.

He had bunks in there, and he slept in there for a while after his wife died. Every New Year you would go into the Leale house, and from the front door you would go right into the living room and be received there. Then you would go through the kitchen, where they had an old-fashioned copper boiler, out into the garden and into the little cabin and sign the log and have something to drink. Every New Year that was the ritual at the Leale house. They had all kinds of people, and prominent people. They kept that up as long as he lived.

After Edith Leale's death, the house was sold. A woman bought it for her daughter, who is married and whose husband is a medical student. He is still not finished with his studies, but he will be soon. Then they will move in there. In the meantime, they have rented it to all kinds of people. The woman was Mrs. Alexander's daughter [Mrs. Gerbode--R.M.L.].

Teiser: This has been a block of very pleasant people, then, hasn't it? 

Levison: Mrs. [Paine]Knickerbocker, whose husband writes for one of the papers, lives across the street. I knew a lot of people who lived in that red apartment building.

Teiser: Did you and Mr. Levison plan this house?

Levison: Yes. When we were first married, we rented a house on

Levison: Buchanan Street that belonged to Mrs. Stern. She had gone to Europe. The house was all furnished, and we lived there for a year. John was born there. When summer came, we went to San Rafael with my mother. Then we stayed a little while in our house on Van Ness, and later we rented a house on Van Ness Avenue, 1316, where old Dr. Lilienthal and his son had lived. They died, and we rented that house. That's where Bob was born, and we were there about three years. There was a cleaning establishment right in the next block across the alley, and my father always fussed about that. He always wanted his children to own their own houses; he didn't believe that people should live in rented houses. My brothers and sisters had their own houses, so my father always said, "I don't like the idea of your living near that cleaning establishment. It will blow up some day." We laughed at him and thought that was a funny idea, but it did blow up. They did have an explosion there. Nobody was hurt. My children weren't in the block; they were walking along further up the street. We were very frightened by it, and my father said, "See, I told you it would happen some day. Now I want you to look around and find a lot, and I want to give you part of the cost of building a home." So we did.

We wanted to come out in this direction because it was

Levison: a newer part of the city. We found this lot and started planning while we were still at 1316 Van Ness. When it was finished, we moved in. That was 63 years ago. We planned it all. It was a pretty ambitious thing for us to do. My father gave us the lot and, in addition, \$15,000, but that wasn't enough, of course. We added to it. We had our third and fourth children here. It was rather an ambitious undertaking for us at the time, but we wanted to have a family, and the house wasn't too big for us then.

Of course it's miles too big for me now, and I wish it were smaller, but I can't do anything about it. I always wish I didn't have all this and a place down in the country too, but still I won't give up either of them. For the little more time I've got to live, I'm going to have my home, even though it's hard to run now. It's very difficult. Of course the help situation is very bad, and I'm helpless myself; I can't do anything. As long as this house is home to my children, grandchildren, and even great-grandchildren, I'll stay here. But I have this enormous house for no reason at all; I get nothing out of it. My maid brings up my meals. When I'm alone, I don't go downstairs; it's too lonely. This morning when she brought up my breakfast, she was telling me how her heart was thumping from climbing the stairs. She's not so young either. I said, "I wish that long, long ago when we

Mr. and Mrs. J. B. Levison, 1946



Levison: built this house, we had put in an elevator, but you don't think of those things when you are young." When it became difficult for Mr. Levison to walk the steps, we considered putting one in, but it wasn't feasible at all. They couldn't have done it well, so we just let it go. I don't mind the steps; I can take them all right.

Teiser: Doctors think it's a good idea for people to keep walking.

Levison: I think it's a very good idea for me, because otherwise I don't get much exercise. I take it very slowly and carefully. My heart is all right, so I don't feel it at all.

J. B. Levison's Community Activities

Teiser: In Mr. Levison's book, he often doesn't mention the part that he played in events. I know he was president of the San Francisco Symphony organization for many years. Did he take a very active part in that?

Levison: As a director, he took an active part and was very interested in it. He played the flute himself as a pretty good amateur. He hired a number of symphony musicians to come here every week or every other week so that he could play with them. He had a tremendous library of quartet and quintet music, which I

Levison: gave to the public library after his death. Those evenings were just sacred to him, and the musicians enjoyed it, too.

Teiser: How did he have time to be active in so many things?

Levison: He had the time because, as I said, he didn't overlap his business and his family life, and he didn't let either one interfere with the other. He always made time for these things.

Teiser: What did he do specifically for the symphony?

Levison: He was the president, and had duties similar to those of a president of any organization. He employed some of the people; I'm not sure if [Alfred] Hertz was hired under his regime. He was tremendously interested in the symphony.

Mt. Zion was another one of his loves. I remember many occasions when we would be out in the evening, and he would say, "On the way home, we will stop at the hospital. I want to see what's doing there at night." He would go there and snoop around to see what was happening at night, when they wouldn't expect a visit from him. His brother was chief surgeon for many years. Just like everything else he did, he did it wholeheartedly and thoroughly. When Mt. Zion started, it was a little bit of a place.

Teiser: Was Mr. Levison instrumental in starting it?

Levison: Not in the very beginning. I think he became interested

Levison: in it after we were married. They had the first hospital on Sutter Street, where the nurses' home is now. Then they started building at the other corner, where the Hellman Clinic was. Since then, they have taken practically the whole square block.

Teiser: How long was Mr. Levison president?

Levison: For many years.

Teiser: Your son George told me that when he announced that he was not going to be president for another term, you applauded from the back of the audience. [Laughter]

Levison: No, I don't remember that. He had given a great deal of his time and his life to it. I don't think it is ever good for a person to occupy a position too long. You need new blood and new ideas. My husband would not recognize Mt. Zion or the Fireman's Fund today. The other day somebody said that when they wrecked the old, beautiful [Fireman's Fund] building on California Street to erect a big new one, "This never would have happened if J. B. had lived." Of course you can't say that at all. I'm sure my husband would have gone along with the times, but you hate to see a lovely building and a landmark torn down. My son Robert, who has his insurance office on Sansome Street right behind the Fireman's Fund building, says that if they put up a modern high-rise building,

Levison: he will have to move because it will be so dark. Their windows will be blocked.

Teiser: Following your husband's presidency in the Fireman's Fund, Mr. Page was president.

Levison: Yes, then Mr. Hannah, and then Mr.[James F.]Crafts. Mr. Hannah was only president a very short time. He became sick and died. His wife had died before that, and she was so heart-broken at his wife's death that when he had his operation, he didn't want or try to get well. I always said he just let himself die, but I don't know if there is any truth to that. He wasn't president for long. After he died, Mr. Crafts came in.

I don't know too much about the recent history of the Fireman's Fund except through my son John, who is a director and who is very pleased to be there. The assets of the company have grown tremendously. It's not the same business at all anymore.

Teiser: You mentioned the feeling of personal gratification that you and your husband had about his career. You said that you and your husband were proud of his career and his being able to rise so high.

Levison: Naturally we were proud and gratified.

Teiser: Were there other areas of activity that Mr. Levison was interested

Teiser: in?

Levison: He was sufficiently interested in local politics to be opposed to the Ruef-Schmitz thing and work hard on that. ✓

Teiser: I suppose that, for a variety of reasons, he could not be one of the most aggressive opponents.

Levison: Yes, he didn't want that. My husband always used to tell that story about Dr. Levison putting Abe Ruef in our bed. He said, "Imagine me fighting Abe Ruef tooth and nail for years and then coming home to find that big nose sticking out of my bed."*

Teiser: Abe Ruef must have been a very curious man.

Levison: He was a curious man. I think he had a good mind. He was smart enough, but he was as crooked as he could be. I don't know anything about his family or anything about him personally. I met him socially before my husband ever bothered about him, but I never liked him very much.

Teiser: Did you know Schmitz?

Levison: I had seen him, but I never really knew him. He was rather a nice-looking man.

Teiser: There must have been a lot of interesting talk and conversation at that time.

* See pages 84-5.

Levison: When I compare those times to these times, I think they were very simple, but you always think that when you look back.

Teiser: Did World War II greatly disrupt your lives? Were you and your husband involved in bringing people out of Germany or bringing Jewish relatives and friends here?

Levison: No, we didn't bring any people out. Some people did come here, but we didn't sponsor them. I still help one girl a little bit. She works at the Athletic Club. She is the daughter of one of my cousins who was a big favorite of my father's. I liked that cousin when we went to Europe when I was a child, so I have a feeling that I have to help her a little bit--but very little. There are other members of the family here who are all self-supporting. We did help one family to get here and get started, but other than that, we haven't done a great deal for them. We didn't have many direct relations left in Germany, except some sons and daughters of cousins of ours. Indirectly we did help a little bit.

Teiser: Were your sons in the service during the war?

Levison: They were all in the service [in both wars--R.M.L.], but none of them was in the active service. George was stationed in Cairo for a long time, working for the government [in World War II--R.M.L.]. Bob was in the Army

Levison: for a while [in World War I--R.M.L.]. Charlie was in the Coast Guard [in World War II--R.M.L.] for a while. John had his twenty-first birthday while in the Navy [in World War I--R.M.L.]--he was just a gob. They served, but not in active service [although Charles was in the Pacific, in the Philippines, before Japan surrendered--R.M.L.].

I don't think all these things I tell you are of much interest, but maybe you find something that is.

Teiser: They add to our knowledge of the period and of a representative family and a fine group of people.

Levison: Sometimes, however, I question my own memory. I read my brother's account, and I remember some things differently. I don't think he was accurate about it. He felt he was, and that was the way he saw it from his point of view. Memory is a peculiar thing; it plays such tricks on you.

Teiser: Some people heighten things a little in the telling or writing to make them a better story.

Levison: It makes a good story even if it isn't actually true. Often the best stories are only partly true.

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