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September 15, 1893

John A. Miller

THE BRENTWOOD PLAN FOR AGRICULTURAL LABOR

An Interview Conducted by

Willa Klug Baum

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John A. Miller, Washington 1942

INTRODUCTION

During the second half of the 1930s when agricultural strikes shook the rural counties of California, Contra Costa County remained quiet. In June of 1934 a brief and explosive strike of the apricot pickers in Brentwood had ended unsuccessfully for the strikers; after that date no attempt was made to organize the farm laborers of the county with the possible exception of the arrival of a known labor organizer in 1936. He departed rapidly with sheriff's escort. This industrial peace was in large part due to the Brentwood Plan, a system of registering and keeping close check on farm laborers, which was worked out before the 1935 picking season by the newly-elected sheriff John A. Miller with the cooperation of the leading growers.

Sheriff Miller, a self-made man, had defeated the previous sheriff of forty years standing in the fall of 1934 with a vigorous radio and newspaper campaign in which public dissatisfaction with the handling of the Brentwood strike made a natural issue. The young sheriff immediately

set to work devising a scheme to prevent further labor upheaval. How he achieved this end was the subject of an inquiry by the LaFollette Committee in 1939* as well as of this interview.

The interview was taped on December 5, 1962 in Sheriff Miller's home in Martinez, a comfortable stucco house not far from his travel bureau office on Main Street. The living room was decorated with mementos and trophies of his hunting and shooting skills and of the sheriff's mounted posse which he directs and which performs at distant and nearby civic celebrations. A film projector, screen, and rolls of film were standing ready for his next invitation to lecture on a travel subject.

Miller, a tall, heavy-set man with his greying hair in a youthful crew cut, pulled no punches in answering questions on the setting up and operation of the Brentwood

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*Testimony by Sheriff Miller and exhibits illustrating his role in the Brentwood Plan appear in the LaFollette Committee hearings and report as follows: U.S. Senate, 76th Congress, 2nd Session, Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor pursuant to Senate Resolution 266, 74th Congress. Violations of Free Speech and Rights of Labor. Part 49, pp.17999-18195. Part 73, pp.26905-26968. Same, 78th Congress, 2nd Session, Report, Part VIII, pp.1298-1329. [WB]

Plan. The interview was terminated just in time for Miller to dash to a meeting of the city council on which he serves as vice-mayor of Martinez. He later went over the transcription of the tape making careful corrections and donated a number of requested photographs that illustrate material in the interview.

This interview forms part of a collection of interviews tape recorded by the Regional Cultural History Project to document significant persons and events in the history of Northern California. The Project is under the administrative supervision of Assistant Librarian Julian Michel.

Willa Klug Baum, Head
Regional Cultural History Project

27 June 1963
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Note: Further information on the Brentwood Plan appears in a history seminar paper by Gerald A. Rose entitled "The Brentwood Plan for Agricultural Labor: A Study in Suppression," summer session 1962. Mr. Rose has deposited the paper in Bancroft Library.

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BACKGROUND OF THE BRENTWOOD PLAN

Baum: I thought we'd start with the beginnings of the Brentwood plan. I believe the whole thing started with the trouble in 1934. This was before you were sheriff?

Miller: Yes. The sheriff of Contra Costa County, whom I succeeded, had been sheriff for forty years, and of course more or less operated in horse and buggy style. He was a wonderful gentleman, perhaps the best sheriff we ever had, but the transition had not taken place yet when I was elected.

In 1934 there was the birth of a new group of labor people trying to organize groups that heretofore had not been taken into unions, and one of them was the initial effort made to organize the fruit pickers. There was infiltrated into the early movement, of course, certain communistic elements and certain people who were more or less red in nature, and this whole idea of striving to

Miller: get a better wage and striving to get better conditions for the fruit workers was the initial move in the state of California. It culminated in a series of riots, at Brentwood.

Baum: Are you saying that this was the first organization activity and that it began right in the Brentwood area?

Miller: Yes. This was the first that I know of.

Baum: In the fruit season of 1934?

Miller: Yes, which would be July 1934. It culminated in a series of riots and very bad feeling, and that culminated in a series of incarcerations by certain peace officers in a cattle corral or series of cattle corrals in the vicinity of the apricot fruit farms in Brentwood. Of course, this aroused the people, and in particular the agitators, who were known at that time. Some had national connections and were in the files of the peace officers. And of course this repercussion moved over into the fall campaign. I fell heir to some few votes because of it and because the peace was not kept, and to my surprise I was elected by an almost two

Miller: to one vote, over a man who had been in this office for ten terms, or forty years.

Baum: That was Sheriff Veale.

Miller: Sheriff R.R. Veale, Richard Rains Veale. He had been sheriff for forty years.

Baum: He must have been very old, wasn't he?

Miller: Yes, he was quite an old gentleman.

Baum: Did he want to retire?

Miller: No. He was a peace officer at heart and had devoted almost all his life to it. He had no hobbies of any kind, no way of exercising the energies of man, and therefore within a few years after losing the office of sheriff he passed away.

Baum: Was this organizing group the Cannery and Agricultural Workers Industrial Union?

Miller: Well, that would be generally the name that I would think of. It probably got its birth right there in the embryo stage, probably out of Stockton or San Francisco. I wouldn't know exactly, but it was what you would call a disorganized organization. They had absolutely no prior knowledge of what to do in matters of that sort and they had no pattern to use

Miller: from what I could see.

Baum: Were conditions particularly bad in that year for the pickers?

Miller: Well, the wages in California were bad all during those many early years. I had been a picker in the Livermore valley area of grapes and prunes and almonds, way back from 1898 till the time that I left for Richmond, California, in 1913, and the conditions were very very bad those years. We used to get about a dollar a day for a twelve-hour day, or $30 a month. No field workers ever got a decent wage. Of course, I had been not only a picker but a small farmer with my dad, and I had seen both sides of the picture -- the farmer's side and the picker's side. I came well equipped to cope with situations exactly like this.

CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH OF JOHN A. MILLER

Baum: I wanted to get a little biographical information from you. Where did you come from?

Miller: Mother was a blue blood, born in Hamburg, Germany, and Father was a peasant, born in Denmark. Mother came here with her uncle. Her father was the postmaster of Hamburg, and she came here with her uncle to Chicago about 1891 in preparation for the World's Fair in 1892. Germany took over Denmark in 1870, and when Dad was nearly twenty years of age he didn't want any of this military conscription by Germany; he got on a saltpeter boat somewhere along the German river near Hamburg. He came out of the province known as Schleswig-Holstein, and he then went as far as Chile and absconded from the vessel. He then worked his way over a period of several years to North Carolina and there stayed the customary period to get his first papers. At the time that he did the judge said, "You are now to be an American citizen and you should have an American

Miller: name," and my father said, "What is American for my name?" The judge said, "It's Miller." My father's name was Moeller. Father said to change it to an American name, Miller.

He then worked his way to Chicago and there met my mother, fell in love with her, married her, and they immediately proceeded to get themselves ostracized and cut off -- she had married beneath her station. They said, "Well, the heck with the folks in the old country, we'll make our own way." Mother then went to work as an artist in the Marshall Field store in Chicago, and Father went to work as streetcar horseman -- on other words, he drove a horse for a streetcar on Halstead Street, one of the longest streets in Chicago and in the world, and they put their money away in a bank. Unfortunately, the Cleveland administration had a very severe panic and at that time the bank busted and the folks saved seven cents on the dollar on their money. They packed what few things they had, and me, as a babe in arms -- I was born in Chicago September the 15th, 1893. Soon thereafter, 1894, they took me to the little island,

Miller: Boulden Island, which is in San Joaquin County adjoining Contra Costa County, California, and they stayed there until about 1896 when they moved to the city of Livermore, Alameda County. We resided there until I left for Richmond January the 4th, 1913.

Baum: So your home was in Livermore up till the time you were grown.

Miller: That's right.

Baum: Was your father of Danish or German extraction?

Miller: Danish.

Baum: Your father had a little farm, is that right?

Miller: We moved four times while in Livermore, and finally wound up on a 52-acre farm near the Cresta Blanca Winery on the Arroyo del Val, which is now used by the Country of Alameda for the juvenile tuberculosis home. This lies between Livermore Veterans Hospital and the adult tuberculosis home, right on the corner around the bend of the creek, a very beautiful location.

I went to work on the first day of June 1906 in the viticultural business, in the winery of the Costa Blanca Wine Company at Livermore, and worked

Miller: my way all the way up, burning corks and making champagne and doing all the necessary things. As shipping clerk later I went to San Francisco during the Christmas period in 1907 and 1908. We were getting $30 a month for twelve hours a day and six days a week in this winery, one of the largest in the world at the time. Father got the same wage as I did, and there were nine children in the family, a total of eleven people. Unfortunately there wasn't enough money to go around to have us eat properly and we went on strike the fall of 1912. I got a $5 raise for a couple of months, but after the Christmas rush was over the boss come along and said, "I'm sorry, we don't need you any more."

So Mother then went around crying to the neighbors and gathered enough money to buy me a suit at $22 and put me on the Southern Pacific train, and I went to San Francisco, seeking a job. There I met an old friend of mine, blind political boss, Chris Buckley, a former political boss of San Francisco before the Ruef time. He had his summer home next to ours in Livermore, and he said to me, "Hello, Johnny Miller, what are you doing in San Francisco?"

Miller: I said I was looking for a job.

"What do you know?"

"I'm sorry; I don't know anything but the wine business, the grape business, and the farming business."

Then he had a letter written and he told me where to go, to Third and Townsend Street to see Mr. A.R. Morrow, general manager of the California Wine Association.

I went in to see Mr. Morrow that day, started to tell him my story, and he said, "Johnny Miller, I don't want to hear your story, I know all about it. But I can use you; so if you'll take the streetcar out to Richmond and go over there, there is a job waiting for you." He said, "Your wage will be $2 a day and you will be a department foreman at $2 a day."

Baum: What year was that again?

Miller: That was 1913. I took the streetcar with $2.20 in my pocket, to the end of the line, which is now where the Standard Oil Building is in Richmond, main office. That was the terminus of the streetcar. I walked over the hill and ran into a terrific snowstorm

Miller: and slid downhill. When I got to the winery I was a mess. My suit was gone and what little I had in a little wicker basket. I remember very distinctly they all laughed at me. I went to work at $2 a day. I had thirteen girls and men working for me for I did know this business and what my work was. For five years I worked all the way up through the various channels. My work was packing the various different types of wine in the various cases and shipping it out around the world. Later on I became shipping clerk and internal revenue stamp clerk. Much of the time I went to Oakland Technical High at night, three nights a week, putting on a raincoat and walking into Richmond, catching the streetcar, and getting myself very much laughed at because I was striving to learn to speak foreign languages -- I speak three or four languages very fluently. I type eighty words a minute now very well, and I have no diploma of any kind. I'm very proud of the fact that I have no diploma.

Baum: How far had you gone in school as a boy?

Miller: I went only about to the eighth grade.

Baum: And the rest was night school?

Miller: No. From the Italian people there I learned my Italian, from my mother and father I learned my German -- I still speak it very fluently, I read it and write it. The teaching I had in Oakland Technical High was spasmodic, three nights a week, and I learned there some bookkeeping and some typing and Spanish, and of course while here I picked up Portuguese. I speak some Portuguese too.

Baum: You picked that up just from the men you worked with?

Miller: That's right. Of course every day of my life is an important one. I strive to learn something from everybody and I'm learning every day of my life. I have a different psychology of education than anyone else. I say school only provides a foundation, and upon that foundation if you will strive to learn from everybody you can build a beautiful temple on top of it, and you'll come out all right.

A few years after I came to Richmond I was still sending my money home for the support of the family when Dad passed away in October about 1915. I'm the oldest of a family of nine children. Then I

Dean: And the rest was at his school?

Willis: No. From the [illegible] William, from my mother [illegible] German -- I still speak it very fluently, [illegible] and write it. The teaching I had in [illegible] [illegible] I [illegible] and [illegible] mile, and of course [illegible] [illegible].

Dean: You picked up [illegible] just from the men you worked [illegible].

Willis: That's right. Of course [illegible] my life [illegible] important one. I [illegible] everybody [illegible] my life. [illegible] [illegible] else. [illegible] [illegible] on [illegible] from everybody you [illegible] [illegible] it, and you'll come out [illegible].

After [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] when [illegible] [illegible] the [illegible] family [illegible] [illegible]

Miller: went to Mother and told her frankly that she'd have to come to Richmond or I could not support her, because there wasn't enough left over, so she then sold the house and the place, and I think after she paid all the bills they had less than $10 left when they got into Richmond. The whole family moved down there.

Baum: How many children were still in the home?

Miller: There were nine children; I was the oldest one. They are all quite wealthy now, every one has made good. I had a sister next to me, Emma, I helped her through the Alameda sanitarium so she could be a registered nurse. She was in World War I. There's a star in her honor in the veterans' building in Richmond. She married a captain and they both were gassed in France and came back to live in Elsinore, California. She lost her husband two years ago. All of my brothers have done well. They're scattered around close by.

Baum: How long did you work in the winery in Richmond?

Miller: I worked in Livermore almost six years, and then I worked from 1913 to the beginning of 1918 for the California Wine Association at Wine Haven, and then

Miller: the war came.

I couldn't go to war but I wanted to do something productive for the war effort. I was publicity chairman there for all of the various war drives in Richmond and I had a very very illustrious career nighttimes helping in every way that I could, but that still was not going to war. So I felt obligated to do something that was for the war effort.

I went to work as an assistant to the superintendent at Point San Pablo for the Visayan Refining Company. Most of my work there consisted of making out bills of lading and shipping and doing the shipping work for carloads of cocoanut oil. It came in from the island of Visayan. I remember very graphically an incident there: you see, we had loads of oil that went from the Standard Oil Company at Point San Pablo to the Orient and the vessel returned with cocoanut oil, which was pure white. When the vessels got to the Golden Gate I went out there to meet them. Under the pressure of steam heat this oil became liquified and it looked yellow like olive oil. We then pumped it from the ship at Point San Pablo docks

Miller: into storage tanks and dropped it by gravity into the tank cars and shipped it to Ivorydale to Proctor and Gamble in Cincinnati and around the world.

I stayed there three years and at that time I was getting $100 a month. My wage had gone up. The problems of the home were still very rough. I wasn't married yet. I was engaged, but I didn't have money enough to get married, so one day the captain of the "Princess Arrow" came to me and he said, "Johnny Miller, I've heard your story."

I said, "What's wrong with it?"

"Well, I know you're in need of money, and I can help you. If you will gather five $20-gold pieces for every trip, I'll get you an extra $50 by taking them to China and selling them at the rate that is in China because China can't get any gold." So he took $100 and brought back $200, and I got $50 and he got $50, and this went on for a year or two, one voyage every two months, and this way I could continue my education and was able to keep my body, my clothes, and the family together.

Then another very peculiar thing happened in my

Miller: life at that very important time. The captain of the "Royal Arrow," which was a sister ship, came to me and he said, "Johnny Miller, I've heard your story."

And I thought, "Well, what have I done wrong now? This gold?" There wasn't anything wrong about it at that time because in California we had nothing but gold. I remember distinctly that in 1914 when the depression came people wouldn't take paper money, and I then urged them to take paper money enough so that they could buy their food with it, half in gold and half in paper. So the gold that they had they could hide in the ground or do anything they wanted with it. This was the way I used to satisfy them. I went every month by horse and wagon into Richmond and cashed these checks for these men for around $40,000 a month.

Anyway, the captain came to me and I got quite worried about it. He said, "Now, you know you're getting some gold for the captain of the 'Princess Arrow.'"

And I said, "Well, I can't get any more. I can just do with so much and that's about as much as we

Miller: [illegible]

Miller: can get." Gold was running out rapidly then.

"That wasn't what I wanted," he said. "I want you to gather 100 empty Velvet cans for me."

I said, "Where will I get those?"

He said, "I guess you can go out to the dumps and pick them up." These were tobacco cans, brilliant in color, green and red. He took them back to China. Because the war was on they couldn't get any chemicals in China and they couldn't get any lacquer. By vacuum suction they sucked this red and green lacquer off the Velvet cans and transplanted it onto their toys, so 40¢ a can was the price we received. That meant $40 every two months; divided by him and me it meant $10 a month to me. This is what saved our lives. You can still find Velvet cans on the market.

One day I had been working with newspapers and had received an award from the Call Bulletin for the finest slogan in the state of California -- I think it was quite a nice award -- and I had been put on a lot of publicity campaigns for almost everybody for nothing. This newspaperman, Jack Galvin, came to me

Miller: and said, "Would you like to work for the government?"

I said, "At what?"

He said, "Well, I think you're not getting enough money, and maybe you can stand a little more money, and I could get you a job in the income tax department, Internal Revenue, because you have the very qualifications that they need. You have the German, you have Spanish, you have Italian. You have knowledge of bonded wineries and they pay tax on these, and you have the farm experience, and the government needs you." (A great many farmers took a piece of raw land and developed it and sold it for a profit and forgot to report the income tax on it.)

So Senator Will R. Sharkey, whom I had just helped and whose paper is still here, and I helped to get him elected senator of this county, took me one day by train to San Francisco. There in the custom house I met John P. McLaughlin, who hired me, and I worked then from 1921 to 1930 for the United States government for $150 a month.

In all of the larger income tax cases, the important ones, I acted as a judge, although I was a young

Miller: man. I went from one part of the state to the other on the larger cases in every city in this state. Those days we had a little Ford car and we'd drive through the state and we'd get the return on what was the actual railroad fare only. From Richmond to Fresno if the fare was $4.80 this was all we would get. We had a regular monthly allowance, of course, to stay in hotels, and we stayed in every town and got a check practically out of nearly all of the early farmers of the day. So I had a tremendous experience from one end of the state to the other.

Baum: You specialized in agricultural cases.

Miller: Yes, and wineries, and interpretation cases. Then one day they needed a new postmaster, and all of a sudden out of a clear sky I was appointed postmaster by President Hoover. I was postmaster during the depression years from 1930 to 1934 for the city of Richmond, California.

Baum: Does this mean you were a Republican?

Miller: Yes, I am a Republican.

Baum: Had you been active in politics prior to this time?

Miller: No, ma'am. I'm just a registered Republican and I'm

M Miller: man. I went from one part of the [illegible] to [illegible]
on the larger cases in New York City in that [illegible].
Those days we had a little [illegible] and [illegible] drive
through the state and we'd get [illegible] return on which
was the act I [illegible]. From [illegible]
treaso[illegible] the [illegible] was [illegible] we would
act. [illegible] monthly [illegible] of [illegible],
to stay in hotels, [illegible] in [illegible] and
[illegible] a check practically out of [illegible] all of his
early years of the [illegible]. [illegible] dramatic
experience from the end of the stage to the [illegible].

[illegible]: [illegible] specialized in [illegible] criminal cases.

Miller: Yes. Into witnesses, and investigation [illegible]. [illegible]
one day they needed a new [illegible], so [illegible] of a
[illegible] out of a [illegible] [illegible]
[illegible] President [illegible]. I was [illegible]
Prohibition years from 1920 [illegible] the city of
[illegible], California.

[illegible]: Does that mean you were [illegible].

Miller: Yes, I [illegible].

[illegible]: Have you been active in [illegible] [illegible]

Miller: No, ma'am. I'm just a real [illegible]

Miller: not a party Republican. I vote for people the way I see them, regardless of church, color, creed, religion or politics. I've always been that way. I pick a man if I think he's a good man, and I'll vote for him regardless of what his religion is or what his creed. This has been my way of life and I'm not a party politician. I was active in this way: I managed many campaigns, yes.

As a young man I managed a number of campaigns, particularly for congressman, and I did manage Senator Sharkey's campaign when he had a terrific fight to be re-elected senator of this county, and that's why he took me into San Francisco. There had been a fight on between the sheriff, Veale, and Sharkey, in which they placed a man by the name of Tony Reggiardo to try to beat the sheriff, in 1918. The year might not be correct. But anyhow, this is what happened. In retaliation the cohorts of the sheriff put up a candidate against Senator Sharkey, and Mr. Galvin asked me if I would manage this campaign and I did. Later on I managed campaigns for four or five various people who were congressmen seeking re-election, and

Miller: I managed a number of local campaigns but only strictly as an independent.

Baum: But you did have political experience.

Miller: Yes.

Baum: Where did you live during this time?

Miller: I lived in Richmond.

Baum: You were married by then?

Miller: I got married in 1922. I'd been engaged five years to the one girl and I couldn't get married since I didn't have money enough, and she said she'd wait and she did, and we got married. We never had any children. There are no children in the Miller family. We've just gone out of the picture altogether.

CAMPAIGN FOR SHERIFF OF CONTRA COSTA COUNTY, 1934

Miller: Anyhow, I was going to run for sheriff, I think in '32, or it might have been in '28, and they diverted me to run for county assessor and I did run and I was defeated by thirteen votes. I was elected up until 10 A.M. the day after election, and then four or five precincts came in and all of a sudden I found myself defeated. I found that I got in politics -- what do you call it? -- a doublecross, and this excited my ambition to someday pay back.

Baum: What do you mean, a doublecross?

Miller: Well, the people who had told me they were going to support me for this election did not, and I found myself defeated. So I made up my mind then that someday I would run for sheriff. Well, the fact that I ran for sheriff was not of my own accord, really, because I used to come up once in a while to Martinez on political matters and the sheriff then was a pretty good friend and he used to say to me, "Johnny Miller, whenever you want a horse race

Miller: we'll get on the old horse and we'll put on the old spurs and we'll have a horse race."

Baum: This was Veale?

Miller: Yes. And he laughed quite extensively at me and they all haw-hawed. So one day I was ready to run for sheriff and I walked up to the sheriff and shook his hand strenuously and I said, "Sheriff Veale, I'm getting on the old horse, I'm putting on the old spurs, and by god if it kills me I'll be the next sheriff of this county."

He said, "Let's go to it."

And we did. It was perhaps one of the most terrific campaigns ever put on in this county, but I was top man by 552 votes in the primary, out of four of us.

That same election night before I went to bed I went to the other two candidates and I got a written statement that they would support me, and two o'clock in the morning I went back to Richmond and put the two statements in the safe and went to sleep. I never brought them out until a week before the final election. I never said anything about them and the

Miller: [illegible]

Brown: [illegible]

Miller: [illegible]

Miller: opponents were saying they had the endorsement of these two men and I just laughed and didn't say much about it, and then a bombshell struck. I took a photostatic copy and threw them into the press all over the county and here was the endorsement written the night after the primary election. So it bounced on the incumbent and I was elected by a tremendous vote.

Baum: This means that all the people who had voted for the other candidates --

Miller: Voted for me, yes. I later hired those two men -- their names were Ralph Harrison, and he stayed with me until he died, and the other man was Joe Longo, and he stayed with me until he became a judge in Rodeo.

Baum: Getting back to the 1934 trouble then, in the apricot district. I read about this corralling of the agitators.

Miller: Yes. I just never did know how many, but quite a large group were temporarily detained. This probably was the easiest way, because they had no fast means of communications, to detain them until such

Miller: time as they could get them to the county jail or get them before a justice, but it was, of course, a very, well, it was a very vicious way of doing it and not an American human way of doing it and it brought tremendous resentment into the hearts of the working people. This had reverberations all through the county and this of course had something to do with the campaign.

There were a number of other items that came into the campaign. In the early days in Richmond, while I couldn't go to war, I told the government that I would go to war if they would take care of Mother and the children, and they couldn't, so there was quite some discussion about me. I was a controversial figure to the extent that some people thought I was a slacker, being partly of German parentage. This came into the campaign, but the people in Richmond, all of them knew that I was not a slacker and they knew how well I had done so they really got out and got mad when this was used. They, the opponents, used everything they could and this was one important thing in the campaign that bounced on them again.

Miller: [illegible]

Miller: This led, of course, to the fact that when the Second World War came and I was in better shape, financially and every other way, at the end of my second term for sheriff, after the eight years, I chose not to run again and I chose to accept a position for a dollar a year to go to Washington as area coordinator of civilian defense of Contra Costa County for Northern California. This was my way of paying back my country and my people for the way they had helped me.

So I devoted several years in Washington, back and forth, getting flour and food and steel and schools and sewers, and everything that was necessary here to help win the war, in this area. Of course, I increased my education. I hobnobbed with all the biggest people of the nation and the world. Many of the highest people in the whole nation slept right in this house, my home. When the war came along I was sheriff here and immediately they came through to see how well we had our country protected, and one of the men who came through and stayed right here was Doolittle, General Doolittle.

Miller: Another one was President Eisenhower, who was a general at the time. They just pulled off their boots and they slept right on that couch right there. I met all the various high dignitaries and continued daily to get my education. This was my pay of course, for I had only a dollar a year with no other emoluments whatever.

Baum: How did you make a living?

Miller: I had all those years -- my big problem of course was to retain what the sheriff had gotten. This was one of the best-paid jobs in the United States, as sheriff of this county. There was salary, there was prison food, there was civil mileage and state mileage and all types of emoluments. This former sheriff had seen to it in all his life to gather for himself, and he was a great fellow to help people. For instance, if they'd come in and say the roof of their church was leaking he'd give them a new roof, or another colored group would come in and say they needed a paint job, he'd paint their church. He would up almost broke by doing it. He had a lot of income but he gave much of it away.

Baum: Personally, or out of the sheriff's fund?

Miller: Out of his own pocket. So, of course, my job was to follow in his footsteps. They all thought that I should do the same thing. Well, I followed the old creed of Robert Louis Stevenson: "To make a little money, to spend a little money and to save a little money, and to spend a little less than you make." So therefore my big job was like a tightrope walker, to keep the people happy, and there were many years that I made as high as $42,000 gross, but when I got through on the income tax return there was about $6,000 left. I invested it wisely in stocks and bonds and my wife was very frugal and we lived very cautiously on the few dollars we had -- $150 a month was ample to take care of us, and the first thing you know, little by little, I had just about enough to keep me comfortably. Many people think I'm a millionaire and many others think I'm broke, but I never have been either and I'm just in the middle ground and I do have just about enough to comfortably keep me.

[illegible]

Bamu: [illegible]

Miller: [illegible]

Baum: You invested your money during the time you were the sheriff?

Miller: Yes. I invested it -- I had a little bit prior, I practically used all my savings except my home and a service station which I had bought while I was in the post office, and a few stocks which I had bought. As a matter of fact, I started buying stocks in '29, a few, and then in '30 a little bit more, very, very frugally, but I bought them on margin and I was rather in trouble because as they kept going down I tried some way to buy some more and finally I was about to lose my stocks, so this particular year -- I think it was '33 -- they were just about to close me out. When I got my month vacation as postmaster and I took my wife, we went to San Leandro, and with the Negroes and the Mexicans and the Portuguese we picked currants for 20¢ an hour each. We worked Sundays and every day, and everybody there laughed at us, with a big Packard car, and wondered how people in a Packard car would get down there and pick those currants and stay. The man said, "You won't last for two days, Mister," and finally when

Miller: he paid me off he said, "Who in the world are you, anyhow?"

I said, "I'm the postmaster of Richmond."

He said, "Why in the world did you stay here in these kind of conditions?"

I said I had to.

"What are you going to do?"

I said, "I'm going to take that money and save my stocks and bonds." And soon the depression was over, and the stocks rose, and I was in good condition again, and I sold them and I ran for sheriff.

This was one of the different ways in which I accumulated a little here and a little there, and of course as sheriff with, say, $6,000 a year net, because I had all these emoluments and everything, according to my income tax return. So it was invested, it mounted up here and there, and I reached the place where I wasn't wealthy but I could have enough to comfortably live.

And many other things we did. As soon as I became sheriff I started a move to publicize the state. The old spirit of congeniality and

Miller: conviviality and hospitality remained in my blood. I thought the best way that we could do it was to go around the world with our posse. I organized a sheriff's posse. We started then and there, in a small way but growing all the time, during the eight years I was sheriff. I organized a great many horse groups and a great many posses and had a big hand in all that in those early days. Then by train and later by boat. After I had been sheriff and had finished with the war effort, I went into the travel business, not because I had to, but simply for something to do. In this way again I didn't use up any surplus I had.

MODERNIZING THE SHERIFF'S OFFICE

Baum: Well, when you became sheriff, Sheriff Veale had been in there for forty years. Was it a problem for you to take over?

Miller: Yes, it was a problem, because this was an office run in the horse and buggy days, and it didn't seem to me like it was modern in any way. In the first place, they did all their communication by the old system of telegraph. I immediately junked the telegraph and went into the telephone communications and started right out to go to the state and ask them for a teletype service. So I installed the first teletype service by which we entered into communication with the various sheriffs' offices of the state and police chiefs of the state. This didn't satisfy me either because we were beginning to get some radio service out of the Berkeley office, and we installed immediately a radio connection with the Berkeley office. Unfortunately, the Berkeley office could not always reach us because at that

Sheriffs of Contra Costa County, 1850-1959

Inauguration Day, January 5, 1935. Newly-elected Sheriff John A. Miller showing cup presented to him by former Sheriff R.R. Veale to Mrs. Esther Miller.

Miller: time a radio wave could not be bent. They didn't have enough power to bend it over the hills and down into this hole here in Martinez. Many times the lower elevations didn't get good reception.

So we conceived immediately to build our own radio station. We installed here the first radio station, under my supervision. And about a year later I wasn't satisfied with that. We had lost a prisoner and they directed us all in our cars to a cul de sac type of place back of Mt. Diablo. When I found that they were directing all the men to the same road that I was on I then and there made up my mind that I'd stop this practice. This was the father of the two-way radio whereby I was able to talk back to my office. We then gave service to many cities and many counties around the state of California, including Lake County.

We now have the three-way radio station, but we made another innovation. We couldn't get into the holes, like Berkeley could, because we didn't have the power to bend the wave into the lower elevations. So we installed on the top of Mt. Diablo what is now

Miller: known as a reflector set. Thus we sent our radio message from Martinez to the radio reflector set on top of Mt. Diablo and bounced it down into the holes and it was very easy. Without bending the wave we just had a straight wave up and a straight wave down and we solved that problem.

Also in the early stages we built what was known as an honor farm. I wasn't satisfied with the incarceration of the prisoners. It didn't seem like we were doing them any good. We weren't deliquoring them and we weren't getting them out into the open. So we made a survey of the state and had built here the Honor Farm -- the first of its kind around these parts. There still stands a monument built by the prisoners for me at the Honor Farm. This Honor Farm was an innovation here that I enjoyed very much.

We were beginning to have a great volume of boat traffic and waterway traffic in the use of our waterways. We were beginning to have a great many drownings. So we had installed here in the various cities and the various areas of the county sets of grappling hooks. If somebody were drowned -- and there is

Miller: nothing worse than to have a mother knowing her son is dead in the water down there -- we would immediately set out, and many and many a time I set out with a rowboat and a set of grappling hooks and we recovered those bodies for the families. We had twenty-three of such drownings in this county in my eight years.

In many other ways we strove to modernize the office. Each and every move was an important one. Specifically the most important one of all was the fact that I perform as a trick shot, and perhaps am one of the world's greatest trick shots. So every noontime I used to shoot in the basement of the courthouse here. We'd bring a prisoner out from the jail and have him witness my shooting, and not brag about it at all, just simply shoot, and then lead him back into the jail. And the jailer would say, "Well, Sheriff, you shot well today."

"Well, maybe I won't so so good tomorrow."

But it was impressive to the prisoner that here was a man that was shooting and was able to shoot and able to handle a gun. So from time to time I

Miller: went to Folsom and San Quentin and shot, and the fact is that they would nudge one another and ask, "Who is this fellow?"

"He's the sheriff of Contra Costa County."

And of course they'd say to one another, "Keep out of that county."

So we solved much of the crime problem by scaring them away.

Baum: How come you were such a good shot?

Miller: Well, as a boy in Livermore I did shooting. It was one of my hobbies as a kid.

But the point I wanted to make was this, and this is the first time this has been divulged: I never carried a gun for the eight years that I was sheriff, on routine duty. I didn't have to carry a gun. I had the heck scared out of them, and they behaved, and we lost less than $1,000 a month here in this county, a month! while now we lose more than that every day here. I did have a gun, several of them, in the car, a rifle and a shotgun and a revolver; I did strap a gun on me when I went after several important criminals -- I can give you the names of them -- but I

Miller: never always carried a gun as a police officer should do. This was unnecessary. I don't think you can find a similar case in the whole United States where the sheriff for eight years didn't have to carry a gun. I just had them frightened to death.

I'll give you an instance here: I shot one time in Antioch at a carnival. A few people started coming in and pretty soon a very large crowd of about 200 when a colored man stepped up and said [in dialect], "I understand you's the high law."

I said, "Yes, sir."

"You the high sheriff of this county?"

"Yes, sir."

"I'se an escaped murderer, Missouri State Pen. When the law shoots like that, they're gonna get me sooner or later. I give myself up."

I was never so surprised in my life. I clapped the handcuffs on him, put him in my car, rushed him down here, called the warden at Joplin State Pen, and he said, "Yes, sir, that's the worst criminal we've ever had. Hold him."

Miller: That fellow just simply got frightened out of his skin. He gave himself up. This is an indication of how people respect the law when the law knows what to do about it. And I guess I'm one of what you'd call the old-time sheriffs, because we lived by our ability to shoot a gun and to ride a horse, not because of our political ability at all.

Baum: You've given in a considerable detail, I understand, a report of how you modernized the sheriff's office to the Contra Costa College. Is that available for scholars to look into?

Miller: Yes. I made two tapes, one last Saturday and one last Sunday, of an hour apiece, for the junior college, and this is the exact thing that I just said now. I gave in detail how I modernized the sheriff's office. I guess this should be available through the junior college.

Baum: Do you know if they're going to make a transcript of that?

Miller: No, I don't know that. I know they played it back and it sounded very, very wonderful.

Baum: If you ever get duplicate copies we'd be happy to

Baum: have a copy to deposit in Bancroft Library.

I was wondering if when you took over the office the men who had been working under Sheriff Veale for many years were immediately loyal to you, or if you had any discipline problems.

Miller: No, I let them all go -- I never kept a single one. We went in cold. There was only one man that started to work for me that had ever had one day of law enforcement experience. We learned from the bottom up. I did have a radio man there who knew how to build a radio, but had never built a police radio. I did have men who were sensible. I went to my leader in each town and said to get me a man, not to turn them over. I didn't care whether he was Democrat or Republican, black or white, I didn't care whether he was Catholic or Protestant -- get me an honest, honorable man in your community. And I thus made an appointment in every town, every major town, of one man, and they'd had no experience in law enforcement.

Baum: You weren't satisfied with the previous law enforcement officers?

Miller: In those days, to the victor belonged the spoils.

Baum: That was a pretty bitter campaign, too, I think.

Miller: Oh, yes, it was bitter. Not bitter between me and the incumbent sheriff, at all. As a matter of fact, this cup that you see here was the cup that he gave me the day that I was installed. It was a loving cup, and he stood as staunch as a rock and smiled, and I was crying. He was a gentleman all the way through. He and I wound up as friends. But the bitterness came from members of his staff and friends in his behalf, and there was considerable bitterness there. Not particularly between me and him, but between my friends and my family and various others. There was a lot of bitterness, but most of it has disappeared. It's pretty well cleaned up.

THE BRENTWOOD-MILLER PLAN IN OPERATION

Baum: You went into office in November 1934?

Miller: I went into office January the 1st, 1935.

Baum: So this was the time to begin thinking about the picking season, wasn't it?

Miller: That's right, and this was the thing that occupied my mind extensively. The farmers were very, very worried. If a man who had been sheriff for forty years could not hold the situation down, if the riots were going on as they had in the past year, in '34, then how, in their mind, could a young sheriff without experience hold the fort? And they were tremendously concerned, and I was tremendously concerned. They expected me to keep the peace.

I then called them into conference at the very earliest date. I would say this was in May, at Brentwood, and I said to them, "How much do you pay these men?"

They said, "We pay 20¢ an hour."

Miller: I said, "As a picker and a former farmer, this is not enough. If you expect me to keep the peace here you've got to pay these men what I think is a fair wage, or don't expect a full measure of support from me."

They said, "What do you think, Mr. Sheriff, is a fair wage?"

"Fifty cents an hour."

And they said, "We will go broke paying that. We don't get a good enough price for our apricots."

So we compromised at 40¢ an hour. (In other words, I was able to raise the wage of the workers to 40¢ an hour.) This is an accomplishment that I did all by myself with the farmers. They asked me then and there, "How do you expect to keep the peace?"

And I said, "This is my business. I'm going to run this show and I'm the boss, and I'm going to keep the peace."

Now they said, "How do you propose to do it?"

"This is my business."

So a month before the picking season started, I left my office here with my radio in my car and I

Miller: opened up a temporary office in Brentwood. I there and then asked all the potential pickers who expected to be ready when the picking season came, somewhere around the Fourth of July, to come into my office and register. I told them that I had seen to it that wages were increased from 20¢ to 40¢ an hour. I asked them to register here with me and I gave them a card, and asked them, Please, if they weren't satisfied with the conditions, to come to me first and not to strike. Then I would try to straighten out the situation for them. I did give them a card, I registered them, and unless they had such a card and had passed this examination by me, they couldn't get a job.

Baum: This was an agreement between you and the farmers?

Miller: This was an agreement that I would register them, I would look over the type of people, and that I would give them a card which entitled them to go to work, and they did.

At this critical time I set up unknown to anybody but myself a subsidized shooting gallery and I put it in the city of Brentwood at my own expense.

Sheriff Miller's Registration Card

THE BRENTWOOD NEWS

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21

NAME

NO.

CLASSIFICATION KEY		
1	PICKER	
2	SORTER	
3	CHECKER	
4	GANG BOSS	
5	DRY YARD	
6	SCRAPER	
7	SHED	
8	SULPHUR	
9	DEHYDRATER	
10	TRUCKMAN	
11	SWAMPER	
12	TRUCK OWNER	
13	TRACTOR	
14	PRUNER	
15	IRRIGATOR	
16	THINNER	
17	MECHANIC	
18	HANDYMAN	
19	WATCHMAN	
20	GENERAL	
21		
	GENERAL DESIRABILITY	

RATING - A—EXCELLENT B—GOOD C—FAIR D—POOR X—UNDESIRABLE

IF UNDESIRABLE, GIVE REASON

IF FAMILY WORKED, STATE ABILITY OF FAMILY AS A WHOLE

REMARKS:

MAY / MAY NOT BE } REEMPLOYED

FOREMAN

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21

NAME | DATE REGISTERED | NO. | M____ W____

ADDRESS - TEMP. PERMANENT | CITY | PHONE

AGE | HEIGHT | WEIGHT | MARRIED / SINGLE | CHILDREN____ AGE | FAMILY WORKERS MEN____ WOMEN____

WORK DESIRED | EXPERIENCE | CAN SUPPLY ADDITIONAL MEN____ WOMEN____

WORK HERE BEFORE | WHEN | WHAT WORK | FOREMAN

CITIZEN | NATIONALITY | UNION AFFILIATION, IF ANY

CAMPING EQUIPMENT? | AUTO - MAKE | YEAR | LICENSE NO.

REMARKS:

If employed, I agree to uphold the Constitution of the United States of America and the Constitution of the State of California. I agree that the Employer has the right to discharge me at any time without cause or previous notice; that if I quit or am discharged for any reason whatsoever, I will remove myself, my family, and my belongings from the quarters furnished by Employer, and from his land; that if I do not do so upon verbal demand by Employer, Employer shall have the right to remove my belongings from his land, using whatever means necessary to do so; provided however, that Employer shall not be obligated to remove them further than the nearest public highway.

REGISTRATION AND SIGNATURE OF THIS AGREEMENT DOES NOT IMPLY ACTUAL EMPLOYMENT.

Miller: I had a man running it. I went there every night between eight and nine o'clock and shot my rifle. No gun, no star, in workingman's clothes, no evidence of being a sheriff, but I always had a deputy sheriff with his gun strapped on and his star handy who would say to me, "Well, you didn't shoot very well tonight, Sheriff," making sure that the assembled crowd and the whole town that was there would hear the word "Sheriff," and I would say, "No, I'll probably do better tomorrow night." At that time, being tired, I would go up to the Brentwood Hotel where I stayed and go to bed.

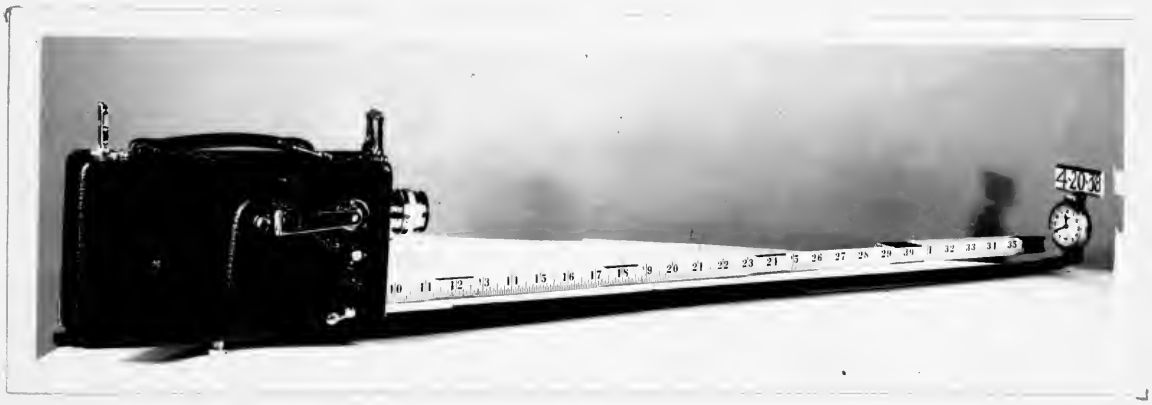
The next morning at five o'clock I got up and without breakfast I'd go to a different field every morning, I'd see the pickers there with their buckets, and I'd beckon to one to come over and hand me his bucket, and he'd ask me, "What are you going to do?"

"Mister, I'm just going to pick you a bucket of apricots and show you how I pick apricots."

So I climbed up the ladder, picked a bucket of apricots in jig time, brought it to the man, and walked away. And I always looked back in the mirror

Miller: of my car as I drove away and I could see the assembled pickers probably saying, "My god, isn't that guy the sheriff, the one that shot last night?" "Yes, it was." So I educated them in a way that they knew that I could shoot and handle myself, in a way that they knew that I was a worker, in a way that I got the admiration of both the pickers and the farmers. And of course the farmers thought that this was mythical, that this was almost impossible. "He got by this year, but I don't think he'll get by another year." But as each succeeding year went on and each succeeding year I did the same thing, we wound up an eight-year service without the loss of a single life and without one single man getting hurt, and not a single arrest. I have always contended, and this is the biggest fault I have -- overseriousness with my work -- that I was so serious about it that if I had one person hurt that would have been a black mark on my record.

I also did this: I put a tape recorder in my car and I put an extension arm on my motion picture camera with a small watch at the end of the extension arm, recording the time, and a little slot underneath the watch in which I could push in a small card with



Motion picture equipment, Sheriff's Office.
Extension arm, motion picture camera, clock,
slot for title.

Miller: the name and the date of the incident, and I always carried those in my car so that I would not have to verbally testify against anybody. If I expected to see an altercation I'd switch on my tape recorder and I would get the words, and if one word led to another and if one of them led to the flying of a fist, I always was ready to take the picture of that first blow, and with that knowledge that I had those instruments in my car nobody struck a blow.

Baum: This was a preparedness campaign.

Miller: Yes. Now, I also knew this: this is all that I testified in front of LaFollette, and I feel to this day that I made the biggest monkey out of that gentleman -- and he was a wonderful man -- that any man ever did, for a guy that never went to school, and he was supposed to be a reputable man of high intellect. I actually will describe to you how I did it, if we have time.

Anyhow, we had heard about those reds coming in there. These were not organizers, these were just agitators. We had heard the names of a few and of course the farmers were very anxious and there were

Miller: some mutterings around about a lynching this year if this wasn't taken care of. So one day there was a fellow by the name of Nathan, he was a known agitator. He came into town and I had him pointed out to me.* I said, "Come here, Nathan, here in my car."

He got in the car and he says, "What are you doing to do, Sheriff?"

"I'm going to take you to the line and get you out of here."

"Well, why?"

"I'm going to take you out of here to save your life. There are some mutterings around here, they don't want you around here, and I think I have a right to save your life." So I took him to the Contra Costa -Alameda County line and gave him $5 and said, "Don't come back. I don't want you dead. I'd rather have you alive." And this was my way of getting rid of agitators in such a way as to save their lives and save trouble.

Baum: I think Nathan had been run out of town in 1934.

Miller: Yes. Yes, he'd been run out and he was one of the main agitators.

Baum: He was a recognized organizer, I think.

*J.B. Nathan, a union organizer, arrived in Brentwood on June 20, 1936; was persuaded to leave the area under escort the following day. [WB]

Miller: Yes, I think he was. Of course, he was in the hair of all those farmers up there and he had helped to cause all this agitation up there before, which led to the trouble, and led to people being put in cattle corrals, and I had made up my mind there would be no riots and there would be no cattle corrals and that this would be handled in a business-like way. I took the position that anyone who wanted to could win this strike but not with violence, and there is where I stepped in. When violence came along, this was my job and I governed, or expected to govern at that stage.

Baum: When you asked Nathan to leave the county, or took him to the line, did this get any reaction -- this was a heavy labor-organized county, I think -- did you get any reactions from organized labor?

Miller: None whatever. No, I had no reactions; this was just done so easily and so quietly and so beautifully that if anybody had any ideas they just quit it right then and there. I had no other altercation that I remember. This was the nearest I had in the whole eight years. I learned this later -- can we go into the LaFollette

Miller: situation now?

Baum: Well, I'd like to get a few more questions in. Getting back to the beginning of your plan, there was this registration. I think you also had a committee, didn't you, of farmers who worked with you there?

Miller: I had a committee of farmers. I represented the workers, and of course they weren't organized, so naturally I had to be the representative. There was no such a thing as organization here, and I had to be the go-between between the farmers and the laborers. So I did have these farmers agree that they would not cut wages, and that they would not raise wages, that they would stabilize the industry, that there would be no incident by them of any kind, and no agitation and no more mention of this or that or agitating within themselves, because in the farmers there were some agitators too.

Baum: Agitators for what?

Miller: Well, agitating on behalf of the farmer.

Baum: For lower wages?

Miller: Of course; anything to break the situation, to gain control again. I said this to the farmers, just the same as I said to the workers, that if there's one of you

Miller: here that's agitating I'm going to bring him before this group and make a charge against him. I am not going to be dominated by any particular agitating farmer nor any particular agitating laborer. If you have any just cause, come to me and I'll call a meeting, and I'll form a committee out of the farmers themselves to come to me daily and report that everything is going all right or if anybody isn't living up to the wage, so that you help me to make it possible to get this crop off and smoothly. I'll do my part, you're going to have to do yours.

I will say this, they cooperated very well, and the workers and the farmers all did cooperate wonderfully well with me.

Baum: This committee was called the Diablo Valley Public Relations Committee?

Miller: That's right.

Baum: I think that's the one you explained to LaFollette was made of five big farmers and five small farmers and five local people.

Miller: Yes, they brought in five and I appointed mine.

Baum: Who chose the five big farmers?

Miller: The farm group.

Baum: Did they have a meeting? Or were they of another farm organization?

Miller: No. They had a meeting among themselves and they gave me the names.

Baum: These were the apricot-growers only.

Miller: Apricot-growers only, yes. And there were three groups that made that one. If I chose to call them into emergency session I wanted them there immediately, and I wanted to lay down my problem with them. I will say this, I didn't have to use them -- only as individuals reporting that everything was going along all right, but I very, very seldom had to ever consider using them. I used to meet with them once a week and we'd go over these mutual problems together.

Baum: Did they gather once a week?

Miller: Oh, yes.

Baum: And they were cooperative in coming together?

Miller: Oh, yes, they never missed.

Baum: How long before the picking seasion did this group get appointed?

Miller: I was in there I would say three weeks before the picking season.

Baum: And would this committee begin to meet that soon?

Miller: The committee would meet even during the winter sometimes, getting ready for the next season, and go over the whole situation yearly in regard to wages, and of course the wages went up little by little, in regard to the whole picture.

Baum: And were there any other problems they considered, such as camping facilities or other problems, as a committee?

Miller: No.

Baum: Wages?

Miller: Wages and harmony; living conditions, wages, and harmony.

Baum: How about grievances? If a picker came to you and he complained -- or didn't any of the pickers come to you with grievances?

Miller: I'm very proud to say that I never had a single solitary grievance of any kind by the pickers. I'm very proud of those pickers. They were wonderfully behaved and I never had one instance where I had to intervene.

Baum: They didn't come in and complain to you?

Miller: They never complained. And I had them nailed right to the cross, because they made me a pledge that if

[illegible]

Miller: [illegible]

[illegible]

Miller: [illegible]

[illegible]

Miller: [illegible]

[illegible]

Miller: [illegible]

[illegible]

Miller: [illegible]

[illegible]

Miller: [illegible]

[illegible]

Miller: something didn't suit them they would come to me first so I had them pledged; I had the farmers pledge to me that if there was something they didn't like they would come to me too. So I had them pledged on both sides.

Baum: All information would come to you?

Miller: I handled everything and stayed on the job from five o'clock in the morning till eight o'clock at night. I worked fifteen hours a day there.

Of course, I made a note of all these various things and made a regular report. Now, this is something I had learned from the government. In the government income tax work we had to make a daily report of what we did in the hours and whom we collected from and this was my way of making a daily report and documenting everything that was done. Anything I did was documented -- where I went, what I did -- there was no secrecy about it at all. It was absolutely open to the public. Nobody could do anything to me because I had it all down and it wasn't just hearsay. Because hearsay and talk is no good. When you've got something documented, and who came to see you, and

Miller: [illegible]

[illegible]

Miller: [illegible]

Miller: -- well, everything was in detail, beginning with the minute that they came to see me. This was all learned from the United States government.

Baum: Would the pickers come to you if there was somebody in their ranks that was agitating for a strike?

Miller: I asked them to do that and they promised me to do that, and apparently there was none of that. Apparently this method frightened agitators out. The agitators knew I was in control because I had no problems of any kind.

Baum: So nobody reported to you an agitator because probably the agitator was afraid --

Miller: He was afraid to come in. Oh, I saw a couple of fellows that I knew quite well, they were labor organizers, they had organized other different branches of labor; I saw a couple of fellows from Martinez. They came in there but they couldn't get a foothold because everybody was happy. All the workers were happy and there was no dissension. You see, when the workers are unhappy then an organizer can come in and he can organize them very easily. But if they were happy, they knew they were getting a square deal, then this couldn't apply.

Baum: I did notice on your work schedules that you did say

Baum: that somebody came in that you recognized, I think from Martinez, as an agitator, and he was picked up right away by one of your men and sent on his way.

Miller: That's right. I think his name was Roberts, if I'm not mistaken. We became fast friends later on. He was a painter and what you would call an organizer. I also picked him up during the Crockett trouble and took some weapons away from him and many, many others in the Crockett trouble, all by myself. This is another story, of course, but a very interesting one, but this had no connection with the Brentwood case.

Baum: So you had experience in this labor situation in other aspects?

Miller: Oh, yes, we had a very tough problem over there in Crockett because that was the birth of the CIO organization and of course the CIO was making inroads into the AFofL and of course there was resentment there. That has all been breached, the sore has healed over, but those were the early days where somebody would come into your gravy train and pick off the apples and take some away from you. It was quite a serious breach there, a statewide breach. It was a situation whereby

Miller: they marched people in from all over the state on me from both sides, in a show of strength, and where again I without a gun and without a star said just simply, "Drop those weapons, fellows; step down here, any one of you, I'll take you." Because I knew ju jitsu and I knew how to dump 'em, I could have dumped them right on their rear ends, and they knew it. And I gathered the guns and they're still in this house right here. I have all the hay hooks and all of the clubs, they're all labeled and they all can be seen. I solved that!

At that time Mr. Tyler, who represented the United Press, said he'd never seen a man in his life, a law enforcement officer, all alone do something like that. He never saw in all his life anybody so brave. I said, "I don't care, boys, if it means my life. I'm willing to give it, but you're not going to hit somebody else over the head, because this is America. Drop those weapons!" And they did. They poured down like rain, and I packed 'em up and put 'em in my car, and they're still here at my home.

Baum: When you were registering workers, I believe the state employment service helped in registration?

Miffler:

Miller: No. I'm the father, definitely the father of that plan, and the state employment service was not in the field as far as I know at that time. I don't believe there was such an agency then. So far as I know I never saw any. Later they took over.

Baum: In 1935 you were alone?

Miller: Yes, and later, perhaps 1938 or 1939, they took over, and they made themselves a job. They did come in and they did the same thing that I did only in quite a different way. They weren't law officers. They were only in here doing a job.

Baum: Getting the pickers together with a job.

Miller: That's right. They employed my complete practice -- with the exception, of course, that they didn't go as far as I did. They just registered them and acted as liaison between the pickers and the farmers.

Baum: When did you go out of the picture as the registering agent, then?

Miller: I didn't have to do it any more after two or three years. They took over more and more and I then went my own way into the law enforcement part of it, going through this in the same way as the prior years with the

Miller: exception that I didn't have to register them any longer.

Baum: Was this an assistance to you?

Miller: No. They reported to me and they followed the Miller Plan -- they call it the Brentwood Plan, but they followed my plan.

Baum: So they cooperated with you?

Miller They cooperated with me, yes.

Baum: Did you continue checking each man as he was registered to make sure if he'd be a reliable worker?

Miller: That's right.

Baum: Even after they took over the registration?

Miller: Yes. I wanted to be in control of the situation so that I would know who was there and who was happy and who was unhappy and what type of people they had who had a good record. That's all. This was all I cared about.

Baum: Did you have trouble in your committee of farmers getting them to agree on a wage? This came up every year, I expect, and was a little --

Miller: I -- I had some skeptics. Yes, I had some skeptics who thought this was something extracurricular, that they'd never seen anything like that and didn't believe

Miller: exception to it didn't have to [illegible] longer.

[illegible]: Was this an [illegible] to prop?

Miller: No. [illegible] wanted to [illegible] plan -- they [illegible] the [illegible] forced [illegible].

[illegible]: [illegible] by contract [illegible]

Miller: [illegible]

[illegible]: Did you continue on again [illegible] to make sure [illegible]

Miller: [illegible] it's [illegible].

[illegible]: [illegible] after [illegible] over the [illegible] to [illegible]

Miller: Yes. [illegible] I would [illegible] good record. [illegible] This [illegible]

[illegible]: [illegible] in your [illegible] [illegible] everything, [illegible] --

Miller: I -- I [illegible] some [illegible] to [illegible] they'd [illegible]

Miller: it could be done, and each year those same skeptics would say, "Well, he did it all right last year, but I want to see him do it next year." I had some very good friends who were very skeptical. I think this was just really a club over my head to be sure that I would be in there again and keep the peace. I think this was merely propaganda.

Baum: What were they skeptical about?

Miller: They just simply thought it was mythical that this could be done this one year, and they couldn't see how it could continue to be done.

Baum: To keep the peace, or to stick on one wage?

Miller: To keep the peace.

Baum: Did you have trouble in getting all the farmers to agree on a wage and to keep it?

Miller Yes, there were some skeptics of course, those same skeptics all the time wanted to continue to keep the lower wage.

Baum: They wanted to cut wages a little if there was an oversupply of labor?

Miller: That's right, and a couple of times I did have a couple of farmers who dropped the wage, and a couple of times I did have a couple of farmers who increased the wage,

Miller: and both times I squashed it immediately by calling the committee and I said, "Here, this man is doing that. Tell him to stop it." And I used the farmers to do that for me; I didn't have to go to the man at all, never had to go to the man himself, never. "You will stop this right now." And they had pledged me they would and they did.

Baum: So the committee kept all the farmers lined --

Miller: The committee reported to me and they kept the farmers in line.

Baum: How did the committee operate in setting the wage before the season began? Did they have big squabbles as to what the wage should be?

Miller: Not too much, not too much. We had a very heavy fight, a close scare, because I was a young man and, well, I was a white collar man and until I told them I knew more about the business than they did -- I told them that I was a farmer as a kid and could show them the picking and the business of growing farm products -- until they knew I was the boss it was a turbulent time here for a few meetings. I said, "Listen, I'm running the show, not you. You're not telling me how

Miller: [illegible]

[illegible]

Miller: [illegible]

[illegible]

Miller: [illegible]

Miller: to run this show. I'm telling you. I'm telling you now that I'm going to run this show. If you want to cooperate, all right. Otherwise, don't look to me to break my neck to keep the labor peace here." And they recognized it, and they never have forgotten it, either; to this day everybody recognizes that.

Baum: They expected labor trouble, didn't they?

Miller: Well, they must have. This I found out later. I was the most surprised fellow in all my life because it came out in the LaFollette investigation, something that I had never known and which I resented very much. The farmers had laid in a supply of poison gas and this came out in the investigation. You know it's illegal for anybody to put a weapon or money in a law officer's hands to keep the peace, because then you're bribing him to knock somebody down, and these farmers had laid in a heavy supply of gas, tear gas. The LaFollette committee asked me if any money had been supplied and I said, "Absolutely not a dime, it couldn't be. This would be illegal. You can't put a gun in a peace officer's hand and practically invite him to shoot somebody down just so that you can harvest

Miller: your crop peacefully. This is strictly illegal." And this is one thing that I have resented over these years. I know now who bought the gas. I didn't say very much about it because they didn't ask me. The LaFollette committee found out. I never even knew who bought it or where it was stored, but this came as a distinct shock to me to learn this at the tail end of the investigation.

Baum: One of your subordinates had this gas --

Miller: No, no peace officer had it at all. The farmers had it.

Baum: The farmers had it in their own warehouses?

Miller: You asked me a question and I answered it by saying, "Yes." The farmers were frightened. They were frightened sick and they knew in their own hearts that this young snipe of a sheriff couldn't keep the peace, and so they were prepared to keep it in their own way. This is what I found out later. But after I cured them of sucking eggs and kept curing them over the years, then of course there was no need for any of that any more. What they ever did with that I don't know. I never did ask and it was a question I

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

[illegible]

Miller: didn't want to get into.

Baum: Let's see. The Associated Farmers was organized in 1935. They were all farmers, I think, not just the apricot growers.

Miller: Yes. Of course, this I think was a branch of the Associated Farmers insofar as Brentwood was concerned; the apricot farmers were involved, no other farmers were involved.

Baum: Most of the apricot farmers were members of the Associated Farmers.

Miller: That's right, the larger ones were, yes, the larger ones were. They had small farmers on that committee, too, so that the small farmer was taken care of.

Baum: And you chose the small farmers?

Miller: That's right.

Baum: And who chose --

Miller: The two of them together then chose the other five merchants. So I had a cross section, the small farmer and the big farmer and the merchants. This was, of course, laughed at to begin with, and I had been laughed at many times. Many people tell me I do

Miller: [illegible] .

Bum: [illegible] .

[illegible] . [illegible] , [illegible]

[illegible] .

Miller: [illegible] . [illegible] , [illegible]

[illegible] .

Bum: [illegible]

Miller: [illegible] .

Bum: [illegible] —

Miller: [illegible]

[illegible] .

[illegible]

Miller: things in the funniest way, but I get them done. After all, that's all I was interested in, getting them done, and it's the same way that I have operated many things in my life. I don't attack anything orthodoxly. I contend experience is the greatest teacher, experience builds the beautiful pyramid on top of an education; down here is only the foundation. And unless you have experience all the books in the world and all the education in the world won't help you unless you merge the experience onto the education that you have. And I don't care what you do, if you don't know how to do it you can't make a good life out of it.

Baum: It looks like you devoted at least a month of your time, 15 hours a day, to the apricot --

Miller: I devoted a full month to a month and a half. I never came back to the office, but I was in touch with them by my radio and I could talk to them later on when I got my two-way radio, all the time.

Baum: Did you have to do the same intensive kind of work with any other crops?

Miller: No, this was the only place.

Baum: The other crops didn't seem to be in any danger of labor

Baum: unrest?

Miller: No danger whatever. Apricots are a very volatile crop. They have to be picked when they have to be picked; if they don't they're lost, so if they aren't picked the worker loses his wages and the farmer loses his money.

Baum: You can't afford to lose any time at all. I guess walnuts are a little bit slower.

Miller: I never had any trouble with walnuts, I never had any trouble with pears, I never had any trouble with any other fruit but the apricots. You see, walnuts can be gathered one day or the next, and so can hay, but apricots, today they're ready, tomorrow they turn black. They have to come off. And the agitators knew that. So the agitators are the ones who thought they had these people by the nape of the neck, and I proved to them that I had them all by the nape of the neck. This was a very interesting thing to me.

Baum: Those farmers are a pretty independent lot. Did they resent the fact that you had control of the situation?

Miller: Oh, yes, they did. I made good people out of them and I cured them of sucking eggs very, very importantly, and after it was all finished -- when I was through

Miller: being sheriff -- both sides at different times came to me with gifts. I still have some. Not of money or anything but personal gifts like a pair of chaps or something. Unknown to the other, they'd take me over to San Francisco and give me a pair of chaps or another buckle or something, just a keepsake, and I accepted those graciously, of course -- after many years. It was a long, long period before I knew that certain farmers were [growling], "This guy is a kid, you wait and see." Always the same. "He'll never do it! He'll never do it! It never can be done." Yep. It wasn't universal, it was just a few. I knew who they were, and I number them among my best friends today. There isn't a one that I have any animosity toward, workers or farmers. Today I have nothing but friendship among them.

Baum: How about your next election campaign, in 1938? Did these growers support you?

Miller: I told them frankly, "You can stick your votes in your left ear, gentlemen. I don't need them. I've got enough votes to be elected." And I did. And

Miller: nobody fooled me. I got elected by a bigger majority the second time. This is a beautiful thing, when you do your job. Because you can tell them what to do with their votes, and brother, when you can do that, why this is wonderful. A peace officer, this is what he has to do. If he has to cater to them, if he has to get down on his knees to them, then he can't do his job right, and this is what's wrong about a sheriff's job. Some of them have to be elected. I didn't have to be elected.

Baum: Perhaps that job should be appointive.

Miller: No, still if you make it appointive of course you'll have sledge hammer tactics from whoever appoints you.

Baum: Then you're under a politician.

Miller: Oh, I had my battles. I had my battles, statewide and every other way. They tried to get me and it didn't do 'em any good; long as I didn't break any laws and long as I was honest and fair to everybody, there was no way they could touch me. This was a wonderful thing to me, I could just laugh at them, sit there and laugh at them. Just like the cat that had just licked the rat and was licking his

Miller: [illegible]

[illegible]

Baum: [illegible]

Miller: [illegible]

[illegible]

Miller: [illegible]

Miller: chops. I was in control at all times.

Baum: Did any other regions or counties ask you about your plan? Or was there interest in spreading this plan to other parts of California?

Miller: I had a lot of reactions; different counties were told about how I was doing it. There were a great many people that came down and interviewed me on how I did it. I never bothered about it much, I never paid much attention to it. I was too busy to worry about it. All I had in mind was getting a job done.

Baum: You stopped registering pickers in about 1940; why?

Miller: Because the state had taken over that job, the federal government or the state, and they kept coming in there more and more and more, and I thought as long as they're doing it they just relieve me of that much work. After all, it actually was not a sheriff's duty to do all that.

Baum: It seems you had given a lot of extra service.

Miller: Yes, I gave that extra service because I wanted to be in control of it, but I knew all the time that this was extracurricular and it shouldn't be a part, the extra work that I gave.

Baum: Was there any more chance of labor unrest about 1940?

Miller: I had it under complete control at the time when I let the state come in here and do the registering.

THE LAFOLLETTE COMMITTEE HEARINGS, 1939

Baum: The LaFollette committee hearings were in 1939, in San Francisco.

Miller: That's right. Apparently some group -- I know the name of it now but I can't remember -- complained because they weren't in control of the situation and they wanted to be in control of it, and apparently they were striving to make some unrest. Of course, Senator LaFollette in those days was taking the side of the working man and I'm sure it was the working group that was dissatisfied up at the top -- not the pickers themselves, because there was no trouble there, but somebody who under the circumstances could not come in here and organize those workers because they were satisfied. This was as far as I could understand it at that time.

Baum: This was not particularly for your area but for the state of California?

Miller: I don't know all that. I know that I was a central

Miller: figure in the investigation and the senator asked me how I kept the labor peace here.* Well, I related the many incidents to him of how I did it, such as this one: At the time that I registered these people I got their names, of course, and being a type of a psychologist working on just certain things I know, if the name was a German name I spoke German to them, "Wie sind sie heute?" Anything in German. And sure enough, they liked it. This got me very close to the worker. I got under their skin immediately. It was awfully easy to distinguish a Spanish name, so I would speak Spanish to the Spanish worker. I could see it by his dark face, his features, or by his name that he was Spanish. I had used this same policy when I was postmaster. People used to come in to buy stamps during the depression years and I would stand at the desk and greet them in their native tongue, and they liked me, and they'd go many miles to get another quarter to buy a book of stamps, and of course when you're postmaster in those days your salary increased by the amount of sales you had and also in depression years I wanted to be the only

*Sheriff Miller's testimony was given on December 18, 1939, in San Francisco. [WB]

Miller: post office in America that had an increase, and I was, I think, the only post office in America, if you'll look it up, in the early 1930 years that had an increase in postal sales. And this is how I attained it. I got close to the people.

So I said, "Senator, when the fellow looked like he was a Spanish fellow, I spoke Spanish to him, 'Como estamos, caballero.' And he liked me. And if he was an Italian, of course I have several dialects, and I might sing him a little song in Italian, a short little ditty. He'd look at me, and he'd like me. And if he was a Portuguese, I spoke Portuguese to him. And he liked me."

"Well," he said, "Sheriff, what did you do if they came from Missouri?"

I said, "Senator, I gave them the donkey call, [Giving donkey bray and wiggling hands on ears] and they liked me." [Laughing] I nailed that senator like he was never nailed in his life before; every move he made I had him nailed.

So then I brought along with me two suitcases; one suitcase I had loaded with my clothes, and here

Miller: in the lobby were some eighteen reporters and the senator was up at the head table. I put these two suitcases on the table and I took out of one suitcase: "This, Senator, is my shirt. These are my trousers. These are my shoes. This is my coat. And this is my hat. I want you to see, Senator, there's no star on that costume, and there's no gun. I didn't need it."

"Why didn't you need it?"

"I had subsidized a shooting gallery and this was evidence enough. I didn't have to pack a gun, Senator."

I put the suitcase and my clothes away and I opened the other one. "This is my voice machine and this is my camera." So I took a little footage of Senator LaFollette and the investigation, and I turned around -- this was a very thought-out plan -- and I took the press.

"Sheriff, what are you taking the press for?"

"Senator, if they don't write the right story, if they come out into this county I'll see to it that I get them out, too." And, whew! away they went to

Miller: [illegible]

Miller: the papers. And they photographed my shoes and everything I had. I had the press licked, oh, beautifully. I never licked anybody so beautifully as I licked that press, all those red writers that were in there, see, "Don't you dare come to this county or I'll see to it that I take you across the line, too."

So, these were the ways that I cured them of sucking eggs and boy! it was beautiful! I enjoyed it like I never enjoyed anything in my life. If I didn't make a monkey out of that guy! I mean Senator Robert LaFollette.

One day I saw him in Washington, about five, ten years later, and he says, "Oh, this is Sheriff John Miller." He remembered me.

I said, "Senator, how do you remember me?"

He said, "I'll never forget you. You're the only man I know of that licked the stuffings out of me." And he said, "Won't you please come in and I'll buy you dinner." And we sat down and we chatted there with thirteen other big high senators and we enjoyed our meal together. I had made a good man out of Senator LaFollette and I enjoyed doing it.

Miller: I also had a documented, written statement which I demanded go in the record before I testified, and I had my lawyer there and it was an awful long skirmish between them.

Baum: Yes, I read that.

Miller: Before they would allow me to get on with this testimony there was this awful long skirmish. Finally he gave up and he said, "Okay, we will do this. We will let this go in after you get through testifying."

And I said, "Okay."

So under those circumstances I testified. And I wasn't mad, I was just having the fun of my life. I was using human psychology, the thing that I had learned. Father told me, when I was a kid, if I had a bale of hay to roll and I had my hay hooks on it, and I had it against the wall and it wouldn't roll, "Don't break your back on it, Johnny. Take your hay hooks out and put them on the other side of the bale, and you'll find it'll rolleasily." And this iw what I was doing with the farmers, with the workers, and with Senator LaFollette. I was rolling the bale of hay from the side that I wanted to roll it on,

Miller: not their side. It was as simple as that.

Baum: You were subpoenaed before the LaFollette committee; would you rather not have gone unless it had been necessary, or were you glad to go and give your...?

Miller: I was glad to go, I enjoyed it very much.

Baum: Some of the farmers resisted going.

Miller: I enjoyed it very much, because I was clean on the thing and I knew that I was, and I knew that I had taken on important people like LaFollette before and beat their brains out, like Harry Bridges in Crockett one time. [Laughing] He's a shrewd one too, plenty shrewd, and brother, I knocked his brains in, too. I thought, Well, if I can lick Harry Bridges I can lick LaFollette. So this was really one of the most enjoyable times of my life. I had the answers and the open records. I documented everything; there was nothing to hide. I had no skeletons in the closet.

Baum: I think Philip Bancroft was in that same hearing.

Miller: Yes, he was there too.

Baum: He wasn't in apricots.

Miller: No, he was a farmer and he was of course heading up the Associated Farmers. But Philip Bancroft and I have

Miller: become very close friends, too, since that time. He called me up not so long ago and congratulated me again; he said, "I'm getting old, but," he said, "the most enjoyable day I ever spent in my life was in the LaFollette committee when you were making a monkey out of LaFollette." [Laughing] This is what he said to me, last December a year ago, a year ago for Christmas he called me up. Yep.

There's been no feeling that I know of out of this; it's all been smoothed over, everything that happened.

Baum: Did you use or need to use anybody to keep an eye on the pickers; could you have complete confidence the pickers would come to you?

Miller: I had complete confidence in the pickers. I had no spies, no spies of any kind. I didn't operate that way. I had absolute confidence that when they raised their hand and pledged me that they would report to me that they meant what they said, and we operated on confidence with them. I'm very proud of the way that they behaved. We saw them practically every night downtown. They knew who I was. I didn't know

Miller: [illegible]

[illegible]

Miller: who all of them were, but it didn't matter to me who they were, just so long as they behaved.

Baum: I suppose your nightly job was to put in an appearance and cruise around. [Laughing]

Miller: That's right. I milled around and then I cruised around the orchards, two things I did. And this is practically all that I did, except of course make up my reports and be ready, in my office, at all hours of the day, with a car in front of the office, to take care of any possible trouble that might happen, any reports of any problems. I had no problems whatever with the workers. I had quite a few problems with the farmers who wanted to pay more or less than what we'd set. Then I squashed it immediately, immediately, through the committee. "So and so isn't behaving. Get him in line and do it right now. Right now. Otherwise, count me out. I'll go back to Martinez." Were they scared! They moved.

Miller: [illegible]

Bunn: [illegible]

Miller: [illegible]

AREA COORDINATOR DURING WORLD WAR II

Baum: Then, when you stopped being sheriff, you left to go into your dollar-a-year job.

Miller: Yes. I made a deal with the board of supervisors that I would be area coordinator for this county and represent this county on all matters concerning winning the war, and I mostly busied myself with getting the things necessary to win the war. I mean, so many people here didn't have enough food; it was my job to see that they got enough food. And so many people here that we didn't have any sewers for. My job was to see that we got sewers. They were sleeping in trailers and they were going to school in two and four shifts; it was my job to get schools here. Couldn't fight the fires, had no fire houses, so it was my job to get fire houses here.

And I was a Republican and I must say that I went to -- we had a fellow named Sheridan Downey who was a Democratic senator, and I brought him my credentials and he looked them over and I told him what

Miller: I was doing, that I was getting a dollar a year and devoting my energy to my country, that I loved, in return for something I couldn't do when I was younger.

He said, "Johnny, I'm awfully busy. Here is Miss Gerling," -- her name was Miss Madelyn Gerling -- "my private secretary, and whenever you need anything she has orders from me to give you priority. You take her by the hand and you go to the various departments, and whatever you need for your county to win the war, you have my blessings. Don't bother me while the war's on if you can help it." So all these various projects that I went to Washington with, I got everything that I wanted for my people, because I didn't want anything for myself.

But I had a habit, a peculiar habit, of bringing things from California, little tokens, and putting on a little California dinner. Never tried to win their confidence by giving them bourbon or Scotch or steak, but always bringing a duck or some venison or some elk or some moose or some type of California meat, carrying it on my back and bringing it over there. I brought many, many hundreds of my horse

Miller: pictures, beautiful color pictures. I brought many, many redwood burl bowls, many, many small cases of apricots or asparagus, and each person in Washington always got a little bunch of apricots or a little sprig of asparagus or a picture of my horse for their grandson, or some little token. Since I didn't smoke and they couldn't get cigarettes, I was able always to get a carton of cigarettes from my grocer once a week, and I threw them under my bed so when I went to Washington the cigarettes went with me. I was able also to get a little liquor and the liquor went with me; I didn't drink and so the liquor went with me. Each time I would bring something from California, a typical California approach. I was strictly a Republican and got all the help I ever expected in my life from the Democrats, because they knew that I had this job to do, and to do it honestly, for my country.

I had many severe fights and I used strategy and always won my fight, every time. I had a bitter battle with Culbert Olson in Los Angeles one time, when the government was sending foamite to fight oil

Miller: [illegible]

Miller: fires, and they were storing it all down there with this tremendous oil storage up here, and I wanted half of that foamite here. I couldn't get it because the votes were down there. So I made a statement. I said, "Governor," -- there was a packed gallery of people -- "Contra Costa County outships Los Angeles and San Francisco and Oakland combined in tons of water-borne freight."

"Can you prove that?"

"Yes, sir. I can use your navy statistics."

The people from Los Angeles gasped.

"And Contra Costa County has more vulnerable inflammable explosive material than anywhere else in the United States."

"Can you prove that?"

"Yes, sir. Governor, you want me to prove it? These are secret things that I get from the army and navy in Washington. I have them here. Would you like me to prove it?"

He turned to the navy and he turned to the army, the general and the captain, and he said, "No, Sheriff.

Miller: You don't have to produce those."

I said, "I want one prerogative, Governor, that tomorrow morning one half of that foamite comes to Contra Costa County."

He said, "Just a minute, Sheriff, we can fly it to you any time you need it."

"Yes, Governor, and we can fly it back to you any time you need it. You store half here or I am showing this document."

"You don't have to show it. It'll be flown in."

And the next morning we had our foamite powder in Contra Costa County.

Baum: You were still sheriff?

Miller: This was right at the beginning of the war, when I was sheriff, and right after too, because I followed right on. I had three jobs. I was county coordinator, area coordinator, and sheriff, all without extra pay, only a dollar a year until I finished my term as sheriff.

I had another instance there where I wanted to get a road because it was blocking the way in Richmond, at Tenth and MacDonald, and I wanted to get a

Miller: cut-off road to Standard Oil and those places where they were building one ship in every seven in the United States, right down there. I had an awful fight in Washington with General [Ulysses S.] Grant III, and finally he said to me, "Sheriff, there's a personal reason why you want that cut-off road; is there something there that you have a reason for wanting this?"

"Yes, sir."

"Oh," he said, "I thought so."

I said, "I want to tell you something."

"Well?"

"I own a service station three blocks down the road, and when this new road goes in it cuts off my service station. I'll lose about a third of my business. That is the reason, because I know this is good for the winning of the war and the government."

He said, "You mean to tell me that this will cut off traffic from your service station?"

I said, "Yes, sir."

"Project is granted!" Just like that was his response.

Miller And I won case after case after case in Washington. I remember specifically I fought for the church people. The Italians had to have wine to win the war, and certain people had to have church, and certain people lost their church by fire or something else and they could not get priorities to get the lumber from the War Production Board. I went to Washington and while there made my case, in which I proved to them that unless they had church they'd go back to Missouri or Oklahoma and wouldn't build ships. And I won my case. I got church after church for Vallejo and Richmond and Martinez and all over this state built. They took the steeples off, didn't have any extraneous stuff up there, but we got a church for the people that had to have church. This was a very peculiar thing too. And I could go on for hours and relate how during the war I won case after case, the various psychological ways of attacking the problem, and with common sense.

POST-WAR ACTIVITIES

Baum: What did you do after the war?

Miller: After the war I devoted my time to building up tours of my posse, and sometimes it took me a year to build a good one. For instance, we got an invitation to Rio de Janiero for the Mardi Gras, so I'd take a trip back and forth and worked out with the government and the mayor of the city all the details, regarding the horses and so forth. I went to New Orleans, I went to Washington twice and took our posse there and built up these parades. It took me months upon months, --

Baum: Took the men and the horses?

Miller: Yes, we took men and horses. It took me month after month after month in all these places -- Honolulu and Calgary and Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Washington, D.C., and New Orleans and Rio de Janiero -- to build these beautiful trips up. And this is how I devoted my life for a number of years until 1954. Then I

Following photograph:

Juneau, Alaska, where Sheriffs Posse leads the parade for inauguration of new state: Left to Right, former Sheriff John A. Miller, Sheriff Walter Young, Del Becker, Dick Crowe, George Azevedo.

Juneau Alaska - where we lead parade for inauguration of New State

Left 2 Right

1. Former Sheriff John A Mills
2. Sheriff Walter Young
3. Del Becker
4. Dick Crowe
5. George Azcredo

Miller: opened my travel bureau and I devoted my energy to my own two travel bureaus. I have one in Richmond and one here. And, of course, I still take the posse here and there. Last year we went to Seattle and won the first prize at Seattle, and each year we go a different place.

Baum: You're also vice-mayor here in Martinez.

Miller: Well, [laughing] I didn't want to; they kind of drafted me and I was surprised one day to learn that I won the election by the top vote. This was the biggest surprise of my life. And I enjoy it, of course, and I keep active that way. I want to wear out, I don't want to rust out.

Then, too, of course, I made a few sallies into Africa hunting and I went into Wyoming on many big game hunts and I show my pictures or do my shooting stunts. I have taken some ninety-two motion pictures that I can show; I can pick one out any time I want and show it.

Baum: That you filmed?

Miller: I took them. I took many thousands feet in Africa,

Miller: and I shot publicly all over the world in the last eight years.

Baum: Then this year you were on the committee for the Martinez-Benicia Bridge celebration.

Miller: I was the coordinator of the two counties, I was the secretary, and I was designated by the chairman, who was busy on his election last year, to manage the whole thing. Yes, I was the top man in the whole show. We raised some $14,000 and we spent it frugally and we had money left over, and we're still distributing the surpluses, which is another very unusual thing. I wanted very much to handle that thing because I wanted to wind up my career with it; I had handled so many similar ones down in Richmond, I had been part of the San Francisco Bay Bridge celebration, and a part of the Golden Gate Exposition and had been chairman down there, chairman for Richmond at the Crockett Bridge, and I've had many experiences over the years running parades and have been leader of parades all over the world, so this was a final fling that I had in mind, and we came

Miller: out very well in it. I got lots of nice help, lots of nice people, everybody helped us wonderfully.

Baum: I'll bet it's not going to be final.

Well, I think that's about as much as we can do today.

Trans: LW
Typed: SR

ORARY
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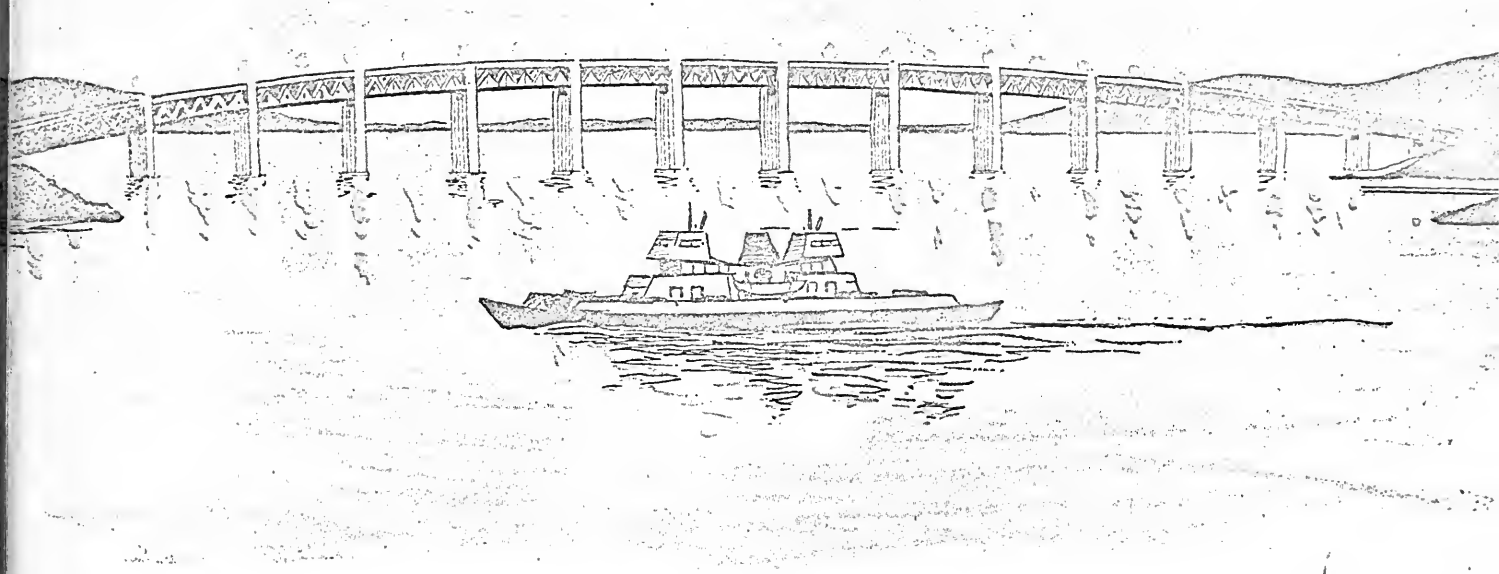
MARTINEZ-BENICIA BRIDGE Celebration

1962



Nov.29.,1962

Mrs.Willa Baum,
Head,Regional Cultural History
Rm.486,
University of California
Berkeley

Aptmt accepted

Dear Mrs.Baum :

I shall be delighted to assist you on Wednesday December 5. It would seem that my home would be much quieter, and if you will meet me at my office,925 Main, at say 3 P.M. I can dismiss for the day and go up to the house,say from 3 to five or 6.

At 7.30 I will be required to attend an important Council meeting,as Vice Mayor,so between 6 and 7.30 I should have time to grab a snack.

Every minute detail is clearly in my mind so that I will be able to answer extemporaneously and rapidly as fast as you pour the questions in.

Some people call it the Brentwood plan,others call it the "Miller" plan..Whatever it is I am the father of it,and it seemed to have worked to the satisfaction of everyone,and we hope you will like it.

Very Sincerely,
John A. Miller

Another Step Forward in the Progress of California

PARTIAL INDEX