



## ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

An interview with  
**Lora F. Wright, 1908-2000**  
(*Mrs. Robert F. Wright*)

**November 4, 1994**

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### PREFACE

Robert F. and Lora Wilder Wright had a sound and lighting business in downtown San Diego in the early 1930s. In 1935 they secured the contract for supplying all the sound and lighting equipment for the Exposition. Mrs. Wright recites a detailed description in this interview of the buildings, activities and programs of the Exposition.

Mr. Wright was a natural-born and self-taught electrician and technician. In the early days of radio he built his own and then progressed into building television equipment and sound equipment so that he supplied the electronic and searchlight displays for the gala events throughout the city. February 23, 1999

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## **INTERVIEWER'S NOTE**

This is an oral interview for the San Diego Historical Society's oral history program with Mrs. Lora Wright. She and her husband were responsible for the lighting in the Exposition of 1936 in Balboa Park and other projects. My name is Robert G. Wright. The date is November 4, 1994.

**ROBERT WRIGHT:** Can you give me your full name?

**LORA WRIGHT:** Lora Florence Wilder was my maiden name. I was named for an aunt, my mother's favorite sister.

**RW:** Where were you born?

**LW:** In Warsaw, Indiana. I think it was Pulaski County, [Kosciusko (?) County] named for a Polish General who was in the [American] Revolution.

**RW:** When were you born?

**LW:** August 17, 1908.

**RW:** You lived your early years there?

**LW:** No, the family had to leave town; that's a joke. My father had a large chair manufacturing company in Warsaw. There was another Depression, one of our fluctuations of economy and the bank in which he had money failed, thus forcing him into bankruptcy.

They had heard about a community in Alabama called Fairhope. It was an experimental colony, a single-tax colony, financed by Joseph Felz, who had the soap. We went there when I was a year old. My sister, who was four years older, and I felt that no matter where we lived afterwards, that was always home. It's a place that we really cherished.

However, after a bad hurricane, we left there when I was about seven or eight. We were marooned for three days in our house and the trees all around it had blown over. My dad said that was enough for him. It seemed like the weather always chased him out of wherever he was living.

We went from there to Detroit and it got too cold for him. So we came back to Mobile, Alabama. And then World War I started. My mother went to business college and in 30 days had learned shorthand and typing and passed the exam for a position in Washington, D.C.; thus we moved to Washington.

**RW:** Your dad tagged along?

**LW:** Oh, sure, the whole family. We never separated. We lived in Washington for four or five years.

**RW:** You moved there during World War I?

**LW:** Yes, and when we were in Washington there was the worst snow storm in 20 years. Even the snowplows were tied up for three days on the streetcar tracks trying to clear those. So my dad said, "It's too cold for me," and so we decided to go to California. At that time my mother, who was

working in the Public Health Service, found that Alpine was one of the healthiest spots in the country. There was even a tuberculosis hospital for soldiers who had been gassed in the war.

To move to California, my dad bought a seven-passenger car from which he took out the two extra seats. My grandfather and grandmother, his parents, my sister and myself, mother and father, all traveled in the car. Coming across the country took two months, driving and seeing the country.

**RW:** You had to camp out?

**LW:** In those days, 1922, there were very few paved roads and no directions, no maps. We had what we called the Blue Book which was issued by the American Automobile Association. You had to read it as you went along or you got lost. You would set your odometer to zero, and then at seven points of a mile you would come to a fork in the road, bear right, or four corners, turn left, etc. We traveled from Washington, D.C. to San Diego up the northern way through Chicago, Yellowstone [National Park], clear up to Spokane and down.

**RW:** Why did you go all that way?

**LW:** Because that's the way we wanted to go.

**RW:** You wished to see the country, or what?

**LW:** My dad didn't want to go through the desert.

**RW:** I imagine you had to change tires, and that gas was hard to come by.

**LW:** One day we had nine flats. That was our introduction to California. We hit a real hot day and the pavement was so hot that it would melt the patches right off the inner tubes. We thought we had been pretty well abused by California until we got to the campground at Redding. There, we learned that the young couple we had met in South Dakota and were on their honeymoon, had had 12 flats, so I didn't feel quite so bad. I was the son my dad never had, and so I always helped him on the farm. I was kind of his pal getting the front seat and reading the Blue Book to him. When we had a flat I helped him fix the tire. I was almost 14 then.

We had a wonderful time. As there were very few campgrounds, we would stop at various places, one time at a big place where the circus was held and all kinds of farm meets and things. We had a book that listed camping facilities. In one little town listing a campground, when we got there it was a lovely park with a bandstand. On arriving we asked one of the women at the social taking place, where the campground was. They said they didn't have one. My dad pointed out that they were really losing money because travelers had to stock up in the towns getting gas, food and things, which meant that they were really passing up some good business.

**RW:** Was this in California?

**LW:** No, that was way up in one of the Dakotas. The people were very apologetic and said if we could do something until their social was over, we could stay overnight in the park bandstand. So we went to a movie. The movie house was very primitive with folding chairs. Each reel was separate and the patrons waited for rerolling the shown reel before the next one could be put on. One reel was upside down.

Anyway, we finally got through the movie, went back to the park and found the townspeople had left a big box of their unused cakes and food for us, plus a note. We stayed in the bandstand that night. Other nights we would stop at farmhouses and if they had nice barns we would sleep in the hay. We slept in schoolhouses because it was summertime. Some farmer near a school generally had the key to it.

**RW:** Do you remember the car you were driving?

**LW:** It was a 1917 Jeffrey. Have you ever heard of it? Jeffrey • was a motor company that became Nash and this car was made the year before they sold out to Nash. It was made in Kenosha, Wisconsin. We stopped there on our way. The president of the company came out and had his picture taken with our car and everything.

We did have one problem in Missoula, Montana. My dad was just getting the car ready to start and he found something wrong, a cracked part; I've forgotten what it was. As the replacement had to be sent from the factory, we stayed at a small hotel in Missoula for six or seven days. And the strange part of it, my grandfather came out, told my dad one of our chairs is in his room. one of the chairs that they had manufactured back in Indiana before 1908 had landed in the hotel in Missoula.

In Livingston, Montana we also had to wait because we couldn't go into Yellowstone as the roads were clogged with snow, even in July. We waited there for about six days and found that there were stray dogs in the campground, all over. At that time, as one couldn't take a dog into Yellowstone, people would just abandon their dogs. I would have abandoned Yellowstone rather than the dogs.

I rescued one of the dogs, calling him Monty for Montana. The dog sat in my lap or beside me the rest of the way out here.

**RW:** So you went directly to Alpine?

**LW:** No, we came to San Diego and decided to stay. We rented a place for a month and finally bought right by San Diego State College, the old Teachers College on Park Boulevard. We purchased a house on Campus, which was the other side of the college. My sister was going to go there and my grandparents bought a house up in the next block.

**RW:** Sounds like you had the money to do all that.

**LW:** Well, we had sold our house in Washington for cash and my father put it in a bank in Washington until he got settled out here. When we got to Montana, he was running out of money, but thought that was no problem. He showed his Certificate of Deposit to the bank, but they wouldn't allow him any money on it unless he transferred the whole amount to that bank. My dad didn't see any reason not to, and so he did.

When we got to San Diego and were going to buy a house, he went to a bank to have the money transferred, expecting to pay for a good portion of the house. He found that the Montana bank failed almost every year, depending on the wheat crop. We had several days of worry wondering if we were going to get our money or not. That was everything we had. But it finally came through.

**RW:** Did your dad and mother start to work?

**LW:** My mother didn't work. My dad worked for Burnett's Furniture for a short time and two or three other jobs before he became manager of the Commonwealth Building at 5th and B Street. The Pantages theater was in the corner.

**RW:** Oh, the Orpheum theater?

**LW:** Yes, it became Orpheum; it was Pantages first. The building was called the Commonwealth Building. He was there for five or six years and then became manager of the Capital Company which managed the Bank of America Building down on Broadway. He also was manager of all Bank of America holdings in San Diego and Imperial County, which was called the Capital Company. He was there for quite some time but when the Depression hit, someone with a higher rank had to be assigned to a lower position was put in my dad's job.

So he decided then ... They had built a vacation home up in Suncrest. The people that started Suncrest, subdividing it, were working for the Sun newspaper and they divided it into 50 x 100 foot lots, and if you subscribed to the Sun you got a lot for \$25. [Suncrest] had an office in the Commonwealth Building and that's how my dad got acquainted with them. So he was in the office one day and they were planning the different layouts, tennis court and grocery store, and so forth. My dad showed them how they could put in a nine-hole golf course on some land they were leaving for park space. He laid out the golf course for them.

**RW:** Was he a golfer himself?

**LW:** No, he never played golf, but had designed courses in the south and one in Terra Haute. He and my mother had started the country club down there. They were just a young married couple then. So they gave him two lots for designing the golf course. He just laid it out on paper for them.

At that time the Mills Company which developed Point Loma, Sunset Cliffs, also had an office in the Commonwealth Building and they had built this beautiful big lodge up at Suncrest for their employees when they had conferences and things and we had used it several times. My dad had gotten quite acquainted with Suncrest, but two lots were not enough for him. Thus he sold those and bought five acres on what they called South Lane, right at the south side of Suncrest. I don't believe it was a part of the original Suncrest.

**RW:** Was there water out there?

**LW:** He dug a well - wonderful water.

**RW:** No electricity, of course?

**LW:** Yes, electricity had been brought up for the subdivision. I think the land had originally been homesteaded by the Cornelius family who sold the part which became Suncrest. The land was subdivided and later the part to the north was subdivided and called Crest, the name the whole place has now.

**RW:** Did Ed Fletcher get involved?

**LW:** No, but a colored man named Saunders, who lived farther south, I think, had homesteaded the part we bought. My dad built a big cabin with a tremendously big fireplace that went up two stories.

**RW:** Is it still there?

**LW:** Yes. A Dr. McCall bought it.

**RW:** There was a flutophone (?) player ....

**LW:** That's Bill McCall's parents. The rock for the fireplace was dynamited from where Sutherland Dam was built. There's a picture of it in my book. You might say they were refugees from the Depression.

**RW:** So when the Depression hit and your father lost his job, he went out to Suncrest?

**LW:** Yes. My great uncle, who had lost his wife, was already there. He had been a florist in Boston. They had their own growing greenhouses, he and his brother. He was the kind of a person that could stick a stick in the ground and it would take root. So he had gone up there and started growing geranium cuttings and shipping them back East. He knew how people loved geraniums in the East. He had a couple of geraniums that we had been given at Sunday School at Easter time and we had a flower box out on our lawn and they never produced any flowers. But they sure grew and people would come from all around and talk about those geraniums.

When my dad went up there he went in with his uncle and they had quite a business of just sending the rooted cuttings back East. As my mother was always a good cook, she started taking one or two people that wanted a rest and good food, maybe after an operation or something. The minister from the Episcopal church in La Jolla came out, a couple of doctors and their wives. It was more semi-vacation rest. Then that grew into Sunday dinners and one Thanksgiving they had four or five different families who were going to come out for Thanksgiving dinner. About a month before six turkeys flew into our chicken yard. We didn't know where they came from, but they started eating and fattening up on the chicken feed.

My dad inquired around as to where they belonged. He asked the colored man who had the homestead, and was told a friend of his had brought them up there and just dumped them. He said, "If they are eating your feed, keep them." So each table had a full turkey and regular home style dinner. I went up and helped. My mother had a girl that lived there to help her. She and I did the waiting on the tables and my mother dished up five turkeys.

**RW:** In the meantime you were going to school in town?

**LW:** I started with the 8th grade at Roosevelt which was in the final stage of construction. We had to step over piles of lumber in the halls. After that quite a few girls whom I knew there went to Francis Parker [School] as did I. I would have graduated from there but I only had two subjects to finish, and being a small school, only 50 in the whole high school, I would have had to go all day in order to get those two classes in.

Thus I decided to go to San Diego High School where both courses were in the morning. I wanted to go to business college in the afternoon intending to be a doctor. The business college was to help me take my notes more easily and also maybe help pay my way through.

So I went to San Diego High School, and talk about fate, the second semester I switched from a one-period class to another, but the same teacher, and thus got out an hour earlier. But in that class, which had all new student, I met my husband.

**RW:** What was his name?

**LW:** Robert Wright. The first day, Ruth Price, head of the history department and a wonderful woman, always had us alphabetical. That way she could pick you out quick. She called the names of everybody supposed to be there including Robert Wright. He didn't answer; he wasn't there. But that name, some way or the other, just hit me. But I wasn't interested in meeting any boy.

I had gotten out of a very messy relationship which involved the mother and everything. They blamed me but he was just the overjealous type which I just couldn't bear. I was in my church and had four boyfriends so that we were just five pals. I was perfectly satisfied, was having a good time and wasn't interested in anybody else. But that name just rang a bell.

The next day I made a point of watching who answered to that name. And the next day she still hadn't seated us alphabetically. On Thursday she did and I had already figured out that I was going to sit in front of him because my name was Wilder. The first day he didn't say a word to me and I didn't to him. The next day he handed me a note and asked if I came to school on the streetcar. And I said, "Yes." He said, "I will be by for you tomorrow morning." I gave him my address but he didn't ask me where it was. Most people didn't know where Campus Avenue was. I found out later he used to live in the neighborhood so he knew. But he didn't ask. I wasn't sure whether he was stringing me along or not, but I kind of stalled that morning and pretty soon here he drove up in his Ford Model A and took me to school. He was 17.

From then on Bob and I were a pair. We went together for three and a half years. I was his first girl. He worked seven days a week, eight hours a day, managing a service station at 7th and C Street. On Saturdays he worked from 7:00 a.m. so he had that one night off.

**RW:** Do you remember what year that was?

**LW:** That would have been 1926 or '27. Armando Verdugo was the other one working at the service station. He had gone to Roosevelt; I knew him. In Bob's spare time he had been building radio sets. They were not beautiful sets, but were built for distance. He made them for lawyers, one of whom lived out in Talmadge Park, and told other lawyer friends in LA [Los Angeles]. He also made them for judges, mostly from Los Angeles.

Kirk Jewel, the Talmadge Park lawyer, became quite a pal of my husband's and was over at the house a great deal. Among the judges, one had a big vacation home in Laguna Beach at which they would see what distant stations could be received. They hired Bob to come up and spend the weekend with them to tune the sets, sending out for anything he wanted for dinner. Oh, they treated him royally. He was the pet of the bunch. This was strictly a man's deal. They were not interested in social stuff at all.

At that time we didn't even have a radio. In talking to my dad, my dad got interested and he went down and bought one. Bob was a little bit peeved because he was going to make him one. Our first one was a Freshman with a wet battery down at the bottom on a shelf and three knobs to tune to get one station. The year before I had heard [President] Hoover make a speech on the radio.

**RW:** Wasn't that the Mutual Broadcasting Company?

**LW:** I don't know what it was called. I remember the first TV [television] we saw. The owner, who was the son of a policeman living out in Crown Point, had to go to LA to buy it; he bought an RCA [Radio Corporation of America] seven-inch. They could not buy one in San Diego because there was no San Diego stations and as San Diego could get LA only weakly, it would be a bad advertisement for TV. He put up the highest pole, a regular power pole which required a special permit and with a red light on the top of it. This was out at Pacific Beach. He set it up in his shop and everybody whom he knew came out to see TV on this little seven-inch screen. You'd go out and find that all kinds of stools and chairs were set up. You would feel around until you found a stool that didn't have a body on it.

From there, on another evening, I think just Bob and me, we went to a fellow who owned one of the Tijuana stations and had a 12-inch set. The set was gigantic. I think it was a Dumont. There wasn't very much to watch. I remember I got pneumonia about that time and in the daytime all there was to watch was either Roy Hof(?) orchestra or Smokey Rogers orchestra. Roy had been with Smokey and then they separated.

**RW:** When was this, mid-thirties?

**LW:** No, it was in the forties.

**RW:** I think TV had been invented. I think the first one displayed was around 1938, somewhere in there.

**LW:** San Diego was kind of late in getting any stations. I used to get so bored watching those two western orchestras.

**RW:** When did you get married?

**LW:** 1930, June 21.

**RW:** Going back to the TV, the man about whom they are talking when going out to Pacific Beach, was named Frank Aamodt.

**LW:** No, no, it wasn't Frank Aamodt. Frank was in the service and was stationed in Australia; met his wife over there. I think the fellow's last name was Smith.

**RW:** What's so special about Frank Aamodt? **BW:** Because he's now the chief engineer at Channel 69 in National City or Chula Vista. He's way up in years, but he's the chief engineer now.

**RW:** How old a fellow do you think he is? **BW:** He must be in his mid-seventies.

**RW:** When did you start having children?

**LW:** We got married June 21, 1930 and a month and two days later, July 23, the bank where I was working and had all of our money, failed. It was California Bank, 5th and B. R.R. Irwin, who had a big feed and grain company down below Broadway and had been involved in another bank earlier, the Commerce Bank, started this bank three years before and then the Depression hit.

It's difficult for a small bank to start anyway, but to have the Depression so soon was just more than the bank could handle. Mr. Irwin was 84 years old and president of the bank. His son, Oscar Irwin, who was assistant cashier, and Harry Hopkins was the other assistant cashier, with Mr. Yeager, the cashier. They ran the bank, Mr. Irwin being more the figurehead. When the bank failed, of course, Mr. Irwin was the one who had to take the rap for it.

The bank had been examined and, I don't know whether it was before or after, but in order to make the books look good, Mr. Irwin and two of his long-time employees of his feed business, signed notes, one for \$125,000 and the other for a smaller amount. The whole amount was around \$240,000 which is nothing nowadays. The notes were just fictitious.

We all thought the proceedings were strange. First, there was a bank examiner, and then in about three or four weeks another bunch of bank examiners were there. But there was no answer to it. The examiners discovered these notes and so Mr. Irwin and the cashiers tried to arrange a loan to cover them. Mr. Irwin got panicky and went around asking some of his so-called friends in town - I understand Mr. Forward and John P. Mills, who did Sunset Cliffs and some others - to lend the money. Instead of lending it to him, they came to the bank to take their money out.



The day the bank failed, July 23, Mr. Yeager walked up and down trying to decide whether he would open the doors and let the would-be lenders get their money while the little people would get nothing. He refused to do it, thus the bank was closed. The little people, three years later, got 10 to 20 percent. I had my account there as did my dad.

My husband was building a transmitter for one of the big fishing boats and had been given the first of the two payments he was to receive. He hadn't touched it because the bills hadn't come in, so it was in his checking account. I had cosigned a note for my dad after he had gone up to Suncrest to get all his bills paid. He had every intention and the ability to pay them. The bank claimed it was a savings note, thus the money went into a checking account and so I was made to pay the note. That meant I not only lost everything, but I had to pay about \$350 more.

Due to my working there, the only person in the family who didn't have money in that bank was my grandfather. By that time, too, some of the bills connected with the transmitter my husband was building, were coming in, but the suppliers were scared about getting paid.. Even though it wasn't past due, one of the companies here in San Diego brought suit and put a deputy at \$5.00 a day in my husband's business to collect any money that came in. So he couldn't even get in to finish the transmitter. It was a bill of about \$250. We went out to see grandfather, explained our situation to him and he gave me a check. We promised to pay it back whatever might happen. We were concerned because the man who was to sign the checks for the fishing boat had gone back East to see his sick father. As it happened that extra week the man was away was handy. But he returned, signed the check, and we paid my grandfather back. That's the only time we ever borrowed any money.

**RW:** And the transmitter was built?

**LW:** The transmitter was built and put on the air. My husband trained as an operator one of the fellows who worked for him. The boat was the Santa Amara and was one of the first to have a transmitter on it.

**RW:** And your children?

**LW:** My husband had a store down on B Street, 222 West B Street, and I would go down and help him, not too much. But when he was out on a ship installing equipment or something, I would be there to answer the phone. One day as I was going to lunch I saw this store on 1st Street which was empty and was big. It had two windows upstairs which got me to thinking that we could live up there. I went to the gas company and found out how long since there had been any power there. It had been two and a half years.

So I told Bob my thought was we could rent the place pretty cheap; it hasn't rented for two and a half years. He said, "Oh, it's more than I can afford." I said, "Well, you never know until you ask." Finally, I talked him into going to see the man who was handling it for the owner who was back East in Iowa or somewhere. We offered the agent \$35 a month. "Why," he said, "it rented for \$250." And I said, "But it hasn't been rented for two and a half years and although \$35 a month isn't much, it will help pay the taxes, which is better than nothing."

He agreed to talk to the owner and get back to us in ten days. So in ten days he called us and said if we would pay \$35 we could have it and he would get a dollar for collection. I told him that we would rent on a month-to-month basis, but if he could rent it for more, give us one month's notice and we'd move out. We were there for nine and a half years.

**RW:** You said this was on 1st Avenue?

**LW:** 1141 1st Avenue. The California building, I think, is there now. We rented without even going inside. Originally it had been a Buick [automobile] agency when agencies were small. When I went upstairs I learned that somebody had whitewashed the floors. It took two or three days

scraping to get the whitewash off. I painted it a dark maroon, floor and deck enamel. I fixed it up (we had good furniture) into a little apartment - no partitions. We lived there for five years.

**RW:** What is it about these motorcycle races?

**LW:** Well, motorcycle races were started on Lane Field and held once a week using English bikes. As they were just starting out, Bob knew what was needed, so he worked with them, made his fees, and was there the whole time they had races. He also set up searchlights but there was another company in town named Phillips which was nonunion, and the unions couldn't convince the owner to hire union operators.

The union operators needed work because it was the Depression, but he would hire others. Consequently, the unions really helped my husband get into the outdoor sound and light business. The business manager of the electrical work helped my husband build his own generator for outside lights. At that time he had the big 24-inch searchlights and floodlights. All the auto agencies and the theaters felt the lights were the thing. When there was an opening you had the searchlights up in the sky and the floor lights flooding the building.

**RW:** I know after the Second World War you would see a lot of surplus being used.

**LW:** But this was in the 1930s. I have a picture in there of my husband at that time. What he would do was to buy old Lincoln sedans. One of them was a chauffeur-type with the glass between, which had belonged to Mary Miles Minter(?).

**RW:** Who's she?

**LW:** She was a movie star, one of the big ones way back. He would tear them all apart using the chassis and the motors for his generators. I can remember that one. The cushions were all in down and in sections so that they never got squashed. There was a used car lot on 1st Street just up from Broadway and she always kept her eye out for old Lincolns. Then there was one LaSalle which he dismantled for equipment.

**RW:** Did he go to school and learn his profession, or was he sort of a natural technician?

**LW:** He was a natural and self-taught. When he was eight he got his first amateur radio license. He had studied, passed his exams, all at eight years old. He had built his own equipment. He needed (they called them shacks) a radio shack. When he was about 12 he drew his plans, went down to the building inspector, got his permits and built his own house for his radio in the backyard. His parents owned a lot next to theirs so he put it over there first. Later they moved it to the backyard of their house on 32nd Street off of Adams.

His mother wanted him to go to college but we had met at the time and so both of our plans kind of changed. We didn't want to be separated. I was going to go to college and be a doctor but decided my preference was to be called Mrs. Wright rather than Dr. Wilder.

**RW:** Later you got the contract to light the Exposition?

**LW:** Yes, that was in 1935.

**RW:** How did that come about?

**LW:** Well, before that this Mr. Phillips was a very difficult competitor. If he knew that Bob had a job he would go down and offer to do it for nothing, just to get it, to hurt Bob. But Bob never fought that way. He always was a clean businessman, never cheated, either his customers or his competitors. The feeling was rather bitter between us. When the Spreckels redeveloped and refurbished their building (this was in 1930, on Broadway) they changed it from a stage theater to a movie house. Western Electric put in all their lines for the movies and Bob put in sound. Bob also had the grand opening when they had movie stars. I have pictures of all of that. I may have given those to you.

As Mr. Phillips didn't get the contract to do the work, he was angry. Two years later I was telling the Western Electric man, when he happened to be in the office, how Phillips put steel phonograph needles through some of my husband's wires cutting them off so you couldn't find them, and shorting out the lines. This Western Electric man almost jumped out of his seat. He said, "That answers a problem that we've been trying to find out for two years." He had done the same thing to their lines at the Spreckels and they had never been able to figure out who had done it and why.

**RW:** How did you know it was Phillips? I know it's obvious, but you can't prove it though.

**LW:** No, we never tried to. However, we knew there was no other reason why anybody would do it. One evening we came back (we were still living over our store) and there was a note on the door from one of the stagehands to please call the Union [newspaper] about Phillips who died today. This was on a Sunday night. My husband got on the phone and called the Union. Phillips had been down to dinner and on the way home died. They wanted information for an obituary in the paper. My husband gave him a wonderful obituary telling all about him, but never a bad word. He gave him a good sendoff. And that was the end of our competition.

**RW:** So getting back to the Exposition ...

**LW:** Well, when we got the Exposition we often said, "Oh, would Phillips have loved this." But my husband had no competition really. There was no one, maybe a couple of very little ones. It was a small town and we were the sound and light people. So when the Exposition came (I don't know exactly the details) I think Bob just went up there and made contacts. He had everything except the background music which went through the whole Exposition. That was handled by a Los Angeles outfit. It was done before Bob even arrived on the scene.

**RW:** I assume that what he did, he suddenly lit the buildings up, all the buildings?

**LW:** No, mostly he had the sound.

**RW:** Wait a minute. You said the background music was installed by a Los Angeles firm.

**LW:** No, that was background music for the whole park.

**RW:** What is this sound then you are talking about?

**LW:** The sound is ... Every little outfit on the midway would have a microphone and some speakers to get people in. I will never forget one woman. She used to say, "Come in and see the two-headed baby, the most wonderful thing in the whole wide world." She was all dressed up like a nurse. And there was Ripley's (that was a big exhibit, must have been over 50 feet) and they had these different little stages and the lights would go on one and the curtain would go back and this would be some odd figure.

One fellow put golf balls in his mouth, like a bunch of grapes. There was another one called the Elephant Man who had the elephant-type skin. There must have been 15 or more exhibits in the Ripley's. There was one man who all he did was contortions and then he would pull his abdomen back until you could almost see his spine. I remember when they did that. My dad had come in. My mother and I went around by ourselves and he had gone around by himself to see the things he wanted to see. He hadn't eaten lunch, was tired, and when the fellow did that my dad collapsed.

**RW:** Where were these booths?

**LW:** You know, where the Spanish Village is. It was built for the Exposition and from there north was the midway.

**RW:** Where the zoo parking lot is?

**LW:** Yes. the zoo was kind of packed away. I thought the other day (I guess it would be competing) but, of course, the zoo wasn't as big as it is now. It was kind of stored. Up by Roosevelt Junior High [School] was the Indian Village which had been built in the first Exposition in 1915 and was like a Hopi village.

**RW:** That was still there when I started going to Roosevelt in 1941.

**LW:** That was made into the Indian Village where we put in the sound. All of these places would have shows, putting on performances at certain hours, and that's when they used sound. One of the boys (a blonde fellow from National City) who worked for my husband had as his permanent assignment just sound for the Exposition. That's all he did. He had to have a pass and an Indian name, so they named him Rain-in-the-Face which was on his ID [identification] card. Just below the Village, to the south, I think, was a kind of a nightclub thing called the Days of '49. I think that was the name. The second year it didn't do so well. That's where we got all that liquor. We took out their bill in liquor towards the end. A lot of it was sealed bottles and some of it was off the bar. It was a voluntary thing; they were glad to pay off their bill that way. They said, "Sure, might as well do that as get five cents on the dollar." In fact, I still have some of those bottles. We used some as business gifts, but what's left of the open stuff is still underneath that counter over there.

**RW:** Did you do anything with the Nudist Colony?

**LW:** Oh, yes, he put in all the sound.

**RW:** What did they have to say?

**LW:** This piece put out said they put on special shows, but I don't know about that. They were not nude, but were covered, looking like they were unclothed.

**RW:** They had a sheer, stocking kind of thing?

**LW:** When the boys put in the sound there my husband used to say the first day they didn't do anything. The second day it was like a bunch of cows. It's surprising how many people thought ... I know my cousin and her father came out as that was one show they wanted to see. I went to it that time also. I didn't go to many of the shows because I was so busy.

**RW:** What were you working at? Busy doing what?

**LW:** Running the office, running the store when he was out and collecting money. on the Midway you collected every week because if they got behind you never got caught up. Then we had the Days of Saladin; that was a big show. That was the story of the Crusades and the Crusaders who came from England and France to the Holy Land and fought with Saladin. It was all acted out with beautiful, big Arabian horses.

**RW:** What part of the park was it in?

**LW:** It was on the opposite side of the street, down near the Indian Village, but not quite that far, and across the Midway. It was a big affair, the buildings and everything, quite a production.

**RW:** That is still the area where the parking lot is for the zoo?

**LW:** Down near that building, Veterans building, down that way. Park Boulevard wasn't changed. This "on Air" mentions the rattlesnakes in the Indian Village. I never went to the Indian Village, so I couldn't swear to that. But I know that they did have snakes on the Midway. There was one show which was all snakes and things and it had rattlesnakes as well as a lot of different kinds of snakes. But all the way along the Midway there were various things, just little small exhibits.

**RW:** Did you do any lighting or sound, like down around the Ford Building?

**LW:** The Ford Bowl my husband had. That was quite an engineering feat. They had a Hammond organ. If you look at the Ford Bowl now, about one-third of the way down in the middle there is a concrete platform amongst the seats. I'm sure it's still there. The Hammond was there. At that time the Hammond had no sustained notes yet they wanted it to sound like an organ. So they had on the arch of the stage there was a screen which hid the 96 speakers with two speakers to each box and an amplifier for each box making 48 amplifiers. The Hammond would play and would be picked up by a microphone, a big Western Electric microphone.

A pit which was cement lines went down about 20 feet. The sound was bounced in this pit from wall to wall, then brought up to the speakers and made a pretty good resonant sound. He didn't have the Ford building as it had its own sound. He did have the Palisades Restaurant. Dinago(?) had the orchestra there. He had the Cafe of the World which was the big restaurant.

**RW:** I know that Cafe Del [Rey] Moro is there now.

**LW:** Yes, but that wasn't much in the Exposition. I don't know if it was there. The Cafe of the World was in a building on the opposite side of Laurel, about where the new art gallery is - Putnam. The Cafe of the World had good drinks. I am not a drinker, but will take a Sloe Gin Fizz which was 25 cents. Their dinners were delicious, filet mignon for \$1.25.

The second year business was not as good as the first year and was really a mistake. Several of the places were beginning to owe us money so I went down and talked to the manager of the Cafe of the World and said, "Well, we have to eat, can we take out some of the indebtedness in trade?" He said, "Great," so we ate at the Cafe of the World every night. Also we entertained, having my husband's whole family, sister and brother-in-law. My sister, who was going back to college, had a lot of friends, so we entertained them there one night. We had some good times there.

**RW:** He did the sound. Did he do any lighting at all?

**LW:** Oh, yes, any of the special events also had lighting. Like when Sally Rand [fan dancer] was there, he had the sound and lighting, especially his searchlights. At that time, if one saw a searchlight in the sky, it was his. In the fall of the year when all the new [automobile] models came out, he had one place after another, sometimes two a night, just with his floodlights and searchlights.

**RW:** Were they effective? Say I had an automobile agency and I had a new model coming out ...

**LW:** When you saw those searchlights in the sky, something was going on. It was like a magnet.

**RW:** I don't know whether it's curiosity or nosiness.

**LW:** I think it was more curiosity. People were not as blase then. When they saw those searchlights, maybe having read in the paper that a new model was coming out, the lights would remind them. Every theater opening or a new show to be ballyhooed would have the searchlights. He did a big business with theaters.

**RW:** Years ago, back in 1968 or '69 on, I helped restore the organ at the Fox Theater and know that in the early days when special movies were on, there were searchlights and so forth.

**LW:** During the Depression, there was ten Fox theaters all tied up by phone to the main Fox theater. There was a drawing once a week for a car. My husband had sound in all ten theaters so that people in any theater could hear what was going on at the Fox. Much of the installation had to be put in special each time because it was in the way and then, of course, there were lights at the big Fox. Sometimes I think they had lights out at the North Park, too. But there were ten theaters and my husband had the sound in each for the drawing. Other nights there would be different giveaways, like sets of dishes - any way to get people to come to the movies.

**RW:** I remember back East we would go to the movies and would get a dish. Gas stations did that, too.

**LW:** I recall one time going to the Orpheum theater with a little girl who was staying with us and my number was drawn. I let her go up and get it and it was a bunch of groceries in a shopping bag - anything to get people to come.

**RW:** We've gone through part of the Exposition. Did you ever start thinking about having children?

**LW:** That was in 1935 and '36 and was kind of the end of the Depression as far as we were concerned. So we decided it was about time, having postponed a family, to buy a house and have a family. We bought a house on Meade Street on a cul de sac. It was a brand-new house and was bought for \$4,000. Then we added on one room for \$500. Robert was born there in 1937. In 1939 our daughter was born, Lucia.

Being on a dead-end street, we put a fence around our front lawn to protect the children from the cars. Delivery trucks and all would go to the end of the street, then back out instead of turning around. I felt it was dangerous for a small child. Thus we put up the fence which got me in trouble. The building inspector said it was too high and I said, "It is the same height as the one next door." "Well, that was built before the ordinance." And I said, "Well, I am building it to keep a child off the street and if it comes down, a judge will have to make me take it down." So the building inspector asked if I would take it down when he is older. I said, "Probably." He said that he'd put it down as a temporary fence.

Next door was an elderly, lonesome couple who was always trying to get Robert to come over there. I told them I didn't want him going out of the yard without me. One day when we had gone to a theater the night before, as I got up I threw my hip out or my back so that I could hardly move. I

was in bed (I had a girl who was living with us) and she went outside to hang up some clothes and could hear Robert crying.

She looked all over and finally to the man who lived next door and was across the street talking to another man, she said, "Have you seen Robert?" He said, "Yes, he is in my hen house." So they walked down the canyon and Robert couldn't have got in there by himself because there was a turnbuckle high on the door which was turned. He opened the door and Robert was inside. And he said to Robert, "If you get in here again I'll lock you up for a week." I was mad. I went over and I said, "I am not asking you how he got in there, although he couldn't have gotten in there by himself, but if you so much as speak to him again, I'm going to call the police. Just don't have anything more to do with him." Robert was having nightmares and would half-wake up crying and saying, "There's an old man at my bed and I don't like it." He was three. So we decided that it was too close quarters. On the other side by our bedrooms was a woman who did her dishes at midnight or thereabouts. She was a dish-banger and sang at the top of her voice at midnight, waking us all up. The old couple I felt was a danger. As we had always wanted to live in La Mesa, we went out there looking for a house and ended up with five acres of vacant land.

**RW:** Where in La Mesa?

**LW:** On Mariposa Street. We traded our house for the land. It was the site of the original subdivider of La Mesa. This five acres was one half of a lot which Robert Allison had originally filed as a first map. He owned most of La Mesa, Spring Valley, parts of Lemon Grove and had a sheep ranch. This was in 1870 or thereabout. They brought those sheep from the Midwest all the way out here. He had also planted olive trees.

We asked the real estate man who owned the land if there was water available. Yes, there was a six-inch line that came right up to the boundary of our property and all we had to do was pay the irrigation district \$300 and it would be run through our property. Because we were in a hurry to get a house built we started construction.

The contractor who had built our other house and added on a room started right in. We used the water from a neighbor for the cement. Our builder, Silverberg, was a big, heavyset Jewish contractor who did mostly business construction in San Diego. Having been in some kind of an accident back East where a child had been killed, he swore he would never drive again. So, he made an agreement with me that if I would drive him back and forth to the job, handle the payroll, and do all the errands necessary, he would build our house for ten percent of the cost, or something like that. I have forgotten exactly. This was in 1940, a year before the war. I lost 15 pounds in the six weeks it took to build our house, just running and with two little kids. I had a friend who stayed with us and she took care of the kids when I wasn't there. But there were times when I went out to the site three different trips, like maybe they needed a hundred more bricks for the fireplace. I would go way down to the commercial area in San Diego and bring them back.

**RW:** What did you do during the war years?

**LW:** When I went to the irrigation district to pay the \$300 I found out that there was a neighbor, a dentist, who owned the land next door. He had 100 feet in between and wanted to hold me up. Every time I would go to see him he would want more. Finally, the last thing was he wanted to build a street right through our property to some property he had behind ours. At that time I told him to go to a warmer climate and left.

Thus, for five years we had a one-half inch line for our water, under the street and up to the next corner where we paid his water bill for five acres of lemon trees. It was enough for the house but that's all. Finally, when the property was sold next door, we had no problem getting a permit to put the line in. During the war my husband built things for the 11th Naval District ships. He put a system all through the 11th Naval District for communications, disaster, and so forth. His whole company was deferred, including his employees, because of the work he was doing. It was very

important work on the ships. He put in different equipment and there was no question. He did work for Convair and then after the war he took in a friend, Dick Shanks, whom he had known since school days, as a partner. They went into the wholesale business which is still there on Kettner.

**RW:** Oh, Shanks and Wright? I've been in there.

**LW:** So I retired from working with him. I didn't want to interfere with the partnership.

**RW:** He got more into the electronic business?

**LW:** Well, he was in electronics. He built all kinds of things like radio stations down in Tijuana. He equipped most of the theaters with the first sound systems for talking pictures. At KGB he built some of their equipment when it first started. You name it, he could build it. Then after awhile, several years, he wasn't happy in the partnership. It was the first time he had ever had a partner except me. By agreement, if either partner was dissatisfied, either one could buy or sell, so he told Dick he would like to withdraw from the company. He had found that he was doing most of the work. Dick was interested in ham radio which was what Bob did when he was eight and ten years old with one of the first call letters, but was through with.

**RW:** It's still big business.

**LW:** It is, but youth business. Bob had the call letter, W6MB, which the Marine Base would have loved to have. Now there are three-letter calls. The boys that handled the radio at the Marine Base were all friends of ours. They used to come down to the store and would say, anytime you want to give up that number ... Bob came home and told me he had made an agreement with Dick to sell and wanted to go into the hi-fi [high fidelity] business with me to go in with him. We opened the business on (it's not a good place now, but at that time it was a very good location) 52nd and El Cajon. Robert was graduating from Helix High School and took over the record department. He tried to go to San Diego State, which we were very much in favor of his doing. He found that in the classes in salesmanship and that sort, he knew more than the teacher did, having been a salesman all through school. My daughter wrote a piece for my book in which she said that Robert was always interested in making money selling soap or greeting cards, but always busy.

**RW:** Tell me that story about selling the pictures to the boys. How did that work?

**LW:** At school with his first camera.

**RW:** You bought a camera?

**LW:** He bought a camera, a Kodak Pony camera, when in the 5th grade. Because the boys were all getting interested in girls, he would take pictures of the girls and sell them to the boys.

**RW:** But he wasn't interested in girls himself?

**LW:** That didn't make any money. The one girl that he really liked, when he went to nursery school, was a little redheaded girl. When we would talk about what his sister had done at school, he would always say, "Ill bet Kathleen could do that." He had quite a crush on Kathleen. He got into girls later. He was a born salesman.



When the war started, of course you didn't use searchlights as they would be a magnet if you were bombed or something. In fact, there was one night when we had gone to a show and left a girl as a baby sitter (this is out in La Mesa) and told her where we were going, she hadn't paid any attention.

The Navy called, expecting a bombing from Japan, and wanted Bob's generator. It was listed to provide lights for a field hospital and they wanted to warn him to stand by. She called everybody in our telephone book trying to find out where we were. We were down at the Fox theater. So, finally when we came home, she told us that he was to call the Navy. He called and was told not to go to bed, but stand by, to expect to be called and to be ready at a moment's notice. So we sat around, close to midnight, and I said, "Well, at least just take off your outer clothes; you can pull those on pretty fast. Lay down and get some sleep," which he did. The next morning, since he still hadn't gotten the call, when he got to work he called them and was told that they forgot to call him.

**RW:** Before I forget it, a little side story here. I understand Don and Irwin Igo(?) had something to do with the Hollywood theater.

**LW:** I told you I don't really know anything about that except I do know that they took it over for a little while. I don't know why.

**RW:** And he was a drummer down there?

**LW:** Yes, he had an orchestra at the Exposition. He was at the Palisades Cafe but he played all through the Depression. He sold cars in the daytime and played at night. He had one of the best orchestras and kept busy, one of the few people that really kept busy with two jobs during the Depression. I have a picture of him in my book, too.

**RW:** That would be in the 1950s then?

**LW:** To me, it was just kind of a passing ... The Hollywood was not my type of theater and I wasn't that much interested in it.

**RW:** What does Clyde Beatty's circus - your son here, Bob?

**LW:** Oh, he was saying that after the war, or maybe it was during the war. I remember Lucia was four when we had that other little girl staying with us. They were both four. And we went to the Clyde Beatty Circus. So that would be during the war. Bob sold all his searchlights to the Clyde Beatty Circus. He knew Clyde Beatty. He could use them anywhere but California, which had the blackout.

**RW:** Well, we had the blackout but didn't he know that after the war there would be a need for them?

**LW:** Well, like amateur radio, he had graduated from that.

**RW:** What did he graduate to?

**LW:** Hi-fi and more engineering. Hi-fi was the thing then. I remember our first television set. For the New Year's Day Pasadena Parade we invited his scoutmaster and his wife and their two boys and the assistant scoutmaster and his wife plus their two boys over to watch the parade because they didn't have a TV [television] set. That was in the morning and they finally went home about 8:00 or 9:00 p.m. He built his first TV set.

**RW:** Your husband?

**LW:** Yes, that was before you could buy a set.

**RW:** One starts with the basic tube?

**LW:** As he could get the parts, he and another fellow, Ray Farer(?) (who had been in the Coast Guard and later lived down in Imperial Beach) built their own sets at our house, and then from it we went to a 27-inch. It was an odd size being built for home installations. That was the biggest tube you could get at that time.

**RW:** You knew Edgar Hastings?

**LW:** Yes, he had a Wallensack(?) recorder. We used to keep it repaired for him.

**RW:** Was that a wire recorder?

**LW:** No, it was a tape recorder. He came out to our store often and my husband always kept his set in order.

**RW:** What kind of a guy was Hastings?

**LW:** Nice.

**RW:** Was he a big guy?

**LW:** Not as tall as you - very nice guy, always wore a hat. I think one time when I was at the Historical Society in Old Town I gave him a little booklet on Don Igar(?). I think it was about him.

**RW:** Do you have any literature of the fair?

**LW:** No, not much - not really. We were so busy. People think it's funny that I didn't go to a lot of those things, but after it started so many of these Midway people, they watched their pennies pretty close. They go from town to town and they wouldn't give Bob an okay to put in sound until the last few days before the fair was to open. Then everybody wanted service at once. And there were three days that Bob never slept. Finally, when he did go to bed he almost had a breakdown. He sweated so that I changed the sheets and his pajamas.

**RW:** I want to thank you for the San Diego Historical Society for the tape and then you have this for the family, the video part. I guess it brought up a lot of memories for you. So, thank you.

**LW:** I've had a lot of memories in San Diego. Everywhere we went we were getting out of weather in the south - hurricanes, Washington. When we got to California there was no reason to move.

**RW:** So thank you very much.

***END OF INTERVIEW***

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