

MILL VALLEY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

REVIEW

SPRING 2023

MILL VALLEY
SCIENTISTS

PRUNE MUSIC
STORE

THE **COVEY**
SCHOOL

CURTAIN THEATRE
AT 23





Mill Valley Market, 1937.
Frank Canepa is third from left.

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EST 1929



Three Generations of Grocers
David, Bob, Jim, Eugene, and Doug Canepa

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This issue of *Review* is lovingly dedicated to the memory of our dear friend Chuck Oldenburg, longtime member of MVHS, author, and historian, who passed away on March 29, 2023.



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EDITOR: Abby Wasserman
COPY EDITOR: Linda Moore
DESIGNER: Lesley Gasparetti
RESEARCHER: Phil Rhodes

THANKS TO: Lito Brindle, Che Covey, Matt Dolkas, Nancy Emerson, Olivia Jacobs, Russell Johnson, Skye Knutson, Judy L. Luce, Gerard McBride, Joan Murray, Eric Newton, Chuck Oldenburg, Natalie Snoyman, Gary Yost

COVER: A scene from Curtain Theatre's 2014 production of *The Tempest* in Old Mill Park. Actors on Steve Coleman's set, from left: Carole Swann, Phillip Percy Williams, David Naughton, Alison Sacha Ross (behind ship prop), Paul Abbott, and Emily Ludlow. Photo by Russell Johnson.

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Mill Valley Historical Society

375 Throckmorton Avenue, Mill Valley, CA 94941

FROM THE PRESIDENT

The Mill Valley Historical Society is pleased to present our 2023 *Review* magazine, with its collection of stories about historic cultural institutions in Mill Valley in our more recent past. The descriptions of scientists, a unique private school, a beloved music store, and a tiny but powerful theater company may remind you of an earlier era or they may surprise you. ("I didn't know my town had these.") Only one of the subjects still makes an appearance in Mill Valley every year! For this issue, Abby Wasserman makes her 12th consecutive appearance as the *Review* editor, and as always, brings her considerable professional talent to the project, finding a diverse set of authors to uncover the secrets of their subjects. Behind the stories are the skills provided by our researcher, copy editor, and designer, as well as essential support from the MVHS Board of Directors. Much of the history and accompanying photos come from the Lucretia Little History Room in the Mill Valley Library, a rich source of archives for all of our projects.

This year, MVHS celebrates its 45th year, and the 45th year of *Review*, first conceived as a semi-annual magazine. As the new president of MVHS, I am the latest in a long line of leaders of the Historical Society, whose service to the organization and the community I admire. I especially want to thank our immediate past president, Eric Macris, who was creative in his vision of how MVHS could be more visible in the community and endlessly energetic in activating projects. He was the driver of our focus on programs to attract young families with children and he led us to deeper relationships within all areas of the City of Mill Valley government.

Working with our Board of Directors, I hope to expand that mission to include more relationships with other civic organizations who share our purpose of service to the community. Our Board members are enthusiastic about programs for historic preservation, engagement in the schools, providing and sharing our history with more historic signage about town, the First Wednesday series, oral histories, and our annual "Walk Into History." If you haven't been involved with these programs, now is a great time to start! In fact, we are always looking for volunteers to execute these programs (and others), and we would love to have you join us!

With great expectations for the year ahead,
Nancy Emerson

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Actors in Curtain Theatre's 2021 production of *Twelfth Night*, directed by Michele Delattre. From left: GreyWolf, Lindsey Abbott, Glenn Havlan, and Steve Beecroft. Photo by Russell Johnson.



FROM BIOTECH TO PI DAY: Mill Valley Scientists

In the sea change that swept the country after World War II some of the best minds ended up in Mill Valley. They helped create the new field of biotechnology, eradicate smallpox, track and predict volcanos, protect the coast and open space, and even establish the Exploratorium and Pi Day.

BY POTTER WICKWARE

In his pivotal book *Science, the Endless Frontier*, Truman-era Presidential Science Adviser Vannevar Bush proposed initiatives that led to the creation of the National Science Foundation, NASA, and a greatly expanded health research establishment, the National Institutes of Health. With important outposts in the Bay Area these agencies accelerated a population shift from east to west that was already underway before the war. Local scientists were caught up not just in their fields but in the spirit of the time and place and were involved beyond science with their interests in government, business, media, philanthropy, the environment and, of course, local music.

THE CUTTING-EDGE BIOLOGISTS

Henry Bourne, retired chair of pharmacology at UC San Francisco, a longtime Mill Valleyan (now of Corte Madera) who came to the Bay Area from the NIH in Washington in 1968, recalls, “The East Coast was a place of grand old men and hard-to-budge traditions back then. But there was a big change in biology going on, and in science overall, and it was centered here in northern California. I had once naively thought that science was copying from other people, and when I found out it’s not, it was an absolute thrill to know that you don’t have to memorize and follow some theory, but instead can control and manipulate your own problem and ask all sorts of what-if questions.”

During his tenure from 1959 to 1967, Governor Pat Brown was building canals and highways and adding campuses to the University of California, a public, state-supported university that enrolled a flood of mature and motivated GI Bill students. “Clark Kerr as president of UC was a visionary public figure, and under him UC became one of the world’s great universities. It was just spectacular. And northern California was just the right place for it. People used to say there must be something in the water out here,” Bourne says. “And in those days it was affordable!”

Opposite: Exploratorium wizard Larry Shaw in front of the Exploratorium at Pier 15 in San Francisco on Pi Day, March 14, 2014. Courtesy of Catherine Shaw.

UC San Francisco, where the biotech revolution began unfolding in the late 1960s, was at the time transitioning clinical studies from Berkeley to the new campus in San Francisco. Sausalitan Sam Barondes, now retired chair of psychiatry at UCSF and former director of the Langley Porter Institute, says “in those days UCSF was a rather ordinary medical school,” one of about 200 in North America, “and to think it was going to become the world leader, the place where biotechnology was to be invented, was a far-fetched idea. It could have happened at other places, like MIT, for example, but UCSF was the institution that was really setting the pace. All through the 1970s they had brilliant recruiters going around finding the smartest young people they could find and bringing them in. San Francisco was incredible; it was my favorite city, and I moved my family up to southern Marin from San Diego. I loved it here.”

Creativity and invention took root and flowered. The collection of techniques known as genetic engineering is an example. In the early '70s the Mill Valleyan (now southern Californian) UCSF postdoc Herb Boyer was pondering the failure of conjugative strains of the bacteria *E. coli* to properly transmit inserted sequences. An equally esoteric question was bothering the new Stanford faculty member Stan Cohen: the role of the cellular elements known as plasmids in antibiotic resistance. Boyer supposed it might have something to do with the recently discovered enzymes called restriction endonucleases. When the two scientists met at a conference in Honolulu and compared their work, they realized that with techniques they had devised, which came to be known as recombinant DNA, they had discovered what they had not been looking for. Among the first applications that made it out of the lab and into the world was synthetic human growth hormone, which formerly had been extracted from cadavers and used to treat dwarfism, and the core metabolic regulating hormone insulin, which used to come from swine. In the earlier era these products brought to human patients, along with their healing properties, a burden of viruses and other infectious agents. Eliminating this lethal hazard via recombinant technology led to the industry that came to be known as biotechnology. Boyer and Cohen linked up with the venture capitalist Robert Swanson to found Genentech, their start-up company, which is today an enterprise with over \$26 billion in annual revenue and 14,000 employees, joined by hundreds of other such companies worldwide.

The metamorphosis of UCSF from also-ran to world leader stemmed in part from the efforts of Holly Smith, dean of medicine, who arrived from Harvard in 1964. To revitalize a sclerotic biochemistry department he recruited Bill Rutter and Gordon Tomkins to build a new department of biochemistry and biophysics. Tomkins, who moved to Mill Valley from the NIH in 1969, joined Rutter, from the University of Washington, as vice chair and together they began to recruit key researchers who laid the foundation for a new kind of academic medicine that merged multidisciplinary practice with basic research science.

Tomkins, recalls Barondes, “was this kind of magical person, like a Pied Piper. He got things right away. He was very generous,



Henry Bourne, retired chair of pharmacology at UC San Francisco, in February 2023. Photo by Potter Wickware.

and you could come talk to him anytime, not only about science. He had some great ideas. He understood everything. When the *Journal of Biological Chemistry* came, a big thick journal, he grabbed it and took it home and read the whole thing, and the next day he knew everything in it. Back then the double helix was still a new thing and people didn't even use the word molecular to talk about biology. Gordon Tomkins was the only person in the world at that time I think who understood conceptually the shift that was happening. He conceived that the way hormones worked was by regulation of gene expression. I myself didn't know what this meant because the work hadn't been done and vetted yet.”

R. L. Bernstein, retired professor of biology at San Francisco State who'd been a postdoc in Tomkins' lab at UCSF, recalls that Tomkins, who did fundamental labor working out the steps of gene expression, “was not a physically dominating presence, not a prepossessing-looking man, but somehow when he entered the room everyone immediately recognized how intelligent and competent he was, and all attention focused on him. He radiated a kind of power, was full of energy, curiosity, and ideas and if he thought you were of like mind he immediately bonded with you. He was fantastically capable in a lot of different areas.”



Molecular biologist Gordon Tomkins in 1968 with his wife Millicent and their daughters Tanya (left) and Leslie in Chevy Chase, Maryland. They moved to Mill Valley in 1969. Courtesy of Tanya Tomkins.

Tomkins' daughter, the cellist Tanya Tomkins, recalls big gatherings of scientists, writers, and artists at the family home on Eugene Street in Mill Valley: biochemists Bruce and Giovanna Ames, writers George Leonard and Mike Murphy of the Esalen Institute, and many others. Tomkins had played sax with Stan Kenton's band (he also played flute, clarinet, and piano) and musicians gravitated to him, Bernstein recalls. "People would come to the lab and talk about music for hours. He spoke several languages; the French postdocs in our lab said he had a perfect Parisian accent. He'd worked at the Pasteur Institute in Paris, had been a chief resident at Harvard—not an easy post for an MD to attain—in addition to his PhD from Berkeley. It was a tragic loss to science and the community when he died at 49, due to a medical error."

THE RADICAL EPIDEMIOLOGIST

Longtime Mill Valley resident Dr. Larry Brilliant, formerly an epidemiologist with the World Health Organization and on the team that stamped out the last remnants of smallpox in India in the 1970s, a founder of the early internet portal The Well, and former director of Google and other companies, and now a CNN

medical analyst, recalls looking for a summer job when he was in medical school in Michigan.

"The job I found was civil rights specialist for the U.S. government. It was 1967, the Civil Rights Act had just been passed and Lyndon Johnson had created a new agency, the Office of Equal Health Opportunity. Many hospitals were still segregated in those days and our job was to inspect them for discrimination, mostly against African Americans. I was sent to Mississippi with another medical student from Utah. Part of our job was to sneak into the hospitals when no one was looking, mostly at night, and see if they were hiding their Black patients or treating them badly. It was noble work; I had marched with Martin Luther King and was part of the civil rights movement."

But being a civil rights specialist in Mississippi in 1967 was not a comfortable occupation. "The hospital administrators down there hated us. There was an incident where gunshots were fired, and I discovered that the other medical student had brought a gun with him and shot back. We were evacuated and I was reassigned to, of all places, San Francisco. I was brought out in a federal aircraft into Crissy Field. It was the middle of the Summer of Love. I had no way to resist the temptations of San Francisco, and it was a life-changing experience for me. I met

David Crosby and Jerry Garcia and became lifelong friends with Wavy Gravy, and hung out in the Haight-Ashbury, and smoked dope, and oh, the girls! It was the most wonderful time of my life.

“As a civil rights specialist I had some authority and I also got important work done. In San Francisco, I remember going into the old Southern Pacific Railroad Hospital on Fell Street. Railroad work injuries were notorious back then and the standard of care needed to change. I was 23 years old and I was telling the head of Southern Pacific, ‘I’m gonna close you down!’

“I went back to Michigan and finished medical school and returned to San Francisco in 1969. I tried to get an internship at San Francisco General, but every other radical doctor in America had the same idea, so I ended up at Presbyterian Hospital, which was the hospital of the rich and famous. They’d never had an internship class like us. They selected us because of our academic records but they didn’t know anything about the culture we’d absorbed. I’d go out and march against the war in Vietnam and some of the older doctors would say I should be fired. When the Indians took over Alcatraz I went to the island

and delivered a baby there, and when I came back some of the doctors thought I should be fired for that too.

“How I got to Mill Valley was I was doing my internship at Presbyterian and one of the attending physicians went on a month holiday to Italy. He was Italian and he asked me if my wife and I would like to house-sit for a month, so we house-sat. It was a big act of bravery for him to let a couple of hippies live in his house for a month. We were in the middle of the redwoods. It was magnificent. Girija and I’d go down to the Depot for coffee and breakfast. What a scene! People were so kind, and everybody seemed so smart and there was great music and I loved it.” After Alcatraz, Brilliant spent a few years at an ashram in India, “but I always wanted to come back to Mill Valley because there’s no other place like it.” After India he did come back and has been here ever since.

There is a downside, he acknowledges. “It’s gotten so damned expensive. Back then rents were lower here than in New York and Chicago and many other places. There were these large old mansions in Pacific Heights that had been abandoned by



Dr. Larry Brilliant (left) with Wavy Gravy and Ram Dass (seated), three founders of Seva Foundation, an international nonprofit health organization based in Berkeley, specializing in the prevention and treatment of blindness and other visual impairments. Courtesy of Dr. Larry Brilliant.

their owners and you could rent a huge mansion on Broadway and have 20 or 30 young people sharing the place with you.

“Today it’s changed a lot. You don’t have as many hot tubs and hippies, and they’re not gonna film *Serial* here, and yes, it’s become more elite, with more bankers and hedge fund capitalists moving in. But what has not changed is that people here have a high consciousness and a tremendous amount of compassion, are interested in the world, and care deeply about the poorest and most vulnerable people. The conversations you have with people here in Mill Valley! They’re wonderful conversations; ‘give me mine and I want more’ are not what you hear, not what you talk about when you’re having a cup of coffee at Equator or lunch at D’Angelo’s.”

THE VOLCANOLOGIST

People sometimes feel that scientific topics can be a little boring and off-putting. The cryptic vocabulary, the bureaucratic complexity of big grants with their lengthy time frames—especially in this time of institutional big science—can make science seem daunting. But the essence of the work, going back to the time of Archimedes and before, can be reduced to a simple formula: observe, understand, explain.

Volcanologist Wes Hildreth, senior scientist with the U.S. Geologic Survey at its regional center in Menlo Park, who grew up in Mill Valley, graduated from Tamalpais High, and got his degrees from Harvard and UC Berkeley, sees a bare simplicity in the work he does.

“I’m kind of a classic naturalist, interested in outdoor geology and understanding the stratigraphy and lithology of the folded rock of Marin County and Mill Valley. What was nice about Mill Valley was they left you alone and let you figure things out on your own. I spent a lot of time hiking in the Coast Range and the Sierras and in the Cascades wilderness with Mill Valley girl Nancy Williams, looking at the rocks and listening to what they have to say. There’s a lot of interesting geology here in Marin. I was a lover of granite long before I was a lover of volcanos. My model, in some ways, was John Muir. A lot of what I learned was before I went to graduate school.

“My interest in volcanology started in February of 1943, when I was not yet five years old, with the eruption of Parícutin in Mexico. It made the headlines of the Boston newspapers, and I was just on the edge of learning to read. It was the first time I ever read a newspaper. And when I first flew out of the United States to Europe the summer after I graduated from college, we flew over a volcano island off the coast of Iceland which was actively erupting. The pilot of this Icelandair plane actually swung right down over the crater and the passengers on this ordinary commercial flight got a close look at the eruption going on down there off the south coast of Iceland.”

Travels after college took Hildreth in a VW bus down to Mexico where he had a closer look at Parícutin, then to Central America back when Somoza was expelled from Nicaragua and Ortega came in. Then down to Chile and up to Alaska in the Katmai Range.



Volcanologist Wes Hildreth at Devils Postpile National Monument in June 2022, explaining to a party of National Park Service interpreters the cooling process of the 80,000-year-old basaltic lava flow. The “pile of posts” has accumulated since the last deglaciation (16,000 years ago), falling from the cliff one earthquake at a time. Photo by Fred Murphy.

Left: Wes Hildreth. Courtesy of USGS.



Botanist and Marin Agricultural Land Trust cofounder Phyllis Faber at the Gale Ranch in Chileno Valley, 2012. Photo by Lou Weinert, courtesy of MALT.

“I was at Mount St. Helens in 1980. There had been a month and a half of intermittent seismic and to a lesser degree steam magma activity and other hotspot stuff in the crater. I’d worked the previous summer at Katmai and had been out to Augustine Island, which had erupted in 1976. That had been the basis of Dave Johnston’s PhD thesis; and Dave and I were very tuned in, in a premonitory way to the things that lead to eruptions, so when the activity started in late March at St. Helens, Dave and I went up there. We had several days and lookout points on opposite sides of the volcano and observed. We took a plane flight to have a close look at the crater and I was scared to death because there was fog and you couldn’t see and neither could the pilot, but we made it. After that I went back to Menlo Park. But Dave stayed and he was killed by the main eruption when it happened on May 18. Then a lot of USGS and other academic people came up and swarmed around, and it led to the establishment of the Cascades Volcano Observatory in Vancouver, Washington, where they try to anticipate natural processes and prevent them from becoming natural disasters.

“I work closely with seismologists and other geophysicists who are basically in front of their computers. But the field work I do defines the product that gets published and studied. I work out the eruptive history of the volcano and do a lot of dating on

different eruptive units in order to establish how long and how often the volcano’s been erupting, whereas the other people are in committees and chasing grant money.”

THE BOTANIST

With degrees from Mt. Holyoke College (zoology) and Yale (biochemistry), botanist and activist Phyllis Faber was another transplant from the East Coast who joined the throng moving to northern California in the 1970s. In Marin County, Faber, who died January 15, 2023 at age 95, found a rich flora in a diverse county in a very diverse state. “We’ve got a great diversity of wetlands,” says botanical illustrator Kristin Jakob, Faber’s friend and colleague in the California Native Plant Society. “Marshes to streams to seasonal ponds, and freshwater and saltwater marshes abound in the coastal land along the bay, so she had a lot of material to work with here. The nature she found here after her move just inspired her.”

Faber’s interest in marsh plants, both freshwater and saltwater, led to her involvement with the California Coastal Commission, which grew out of the Proposition 20 citizen initiative of 1972 to regulate development along the coast and prevent the kind of runaway development that occurred in

Santa Clara County and other heavily populated areas of the state. She was alarmed by uncontrolled growth in those years of proliferating freeways, harbor districts and marinas, bay and ocean sewage outfalls, and master plans that only presaged more uncontrolled development stretching into the future.

After passage of Prop. 20, former State Senator and Mill Valley City Councilman Peter Behr appointed her to the regional Coastal Commission, where she served from 1973 to 1979. She also served for many years as chair of the advisory committee to the signature natural areas program of the California Department of Fish and Game and was a cofounder of the Marin Agricultural Land Trust, in 1980 joining Ellen Straus—a botanist and a rancher—and local ranchers and conservationists in the goal to protect family farms from mounting development pressure. Today more than 55,000 acres in Marin County have been safeguarded, and more than \$1.8 million invested in projects that improve soil health, protect water quality, and increase grassland vigor. A prolific writer and publisher, Phyllis Faber received a Milley Award for Literary Arts in 2004.

THE SCIENCE WIZARD

People might think that the language of science is daunting, the ideas abstruse, the equipment too intricate and specialized for normal people to use, but Mill Valleyan Larry Shaw would laugh these objections off: Science is interesting! Science is fun! he proclaimed. He had been a physicist at both Lawrence Livermore Lab and UC Berkeley when he was recruited by Frank Oppenheimer in 1972 to help build the Exploratorium, the new “science for the people” museum initially located at the Palace of Fine Arts (now at Pier 15) in San Francisco. Shaw’s widow Catherine explains that her husband was a practical Thomas Edison type, good with his hands, who helped artists and other

presenters with technical issues getting their displays up and keeping them running.

In 1988, Shaw noted that the date March 14 in month-day format corresponds to the famous irrational transcendental number π , which has fascinated mathematical people ever since the ancients began using geometry for practical purposes. (Some people have tried to discern a repetitive pattern, or any pattern at all, in the endless flow of numbers to the right of the pi decimal point, and some are still trying, but they have never succeeded. At least not yet.) Because March 14 is also Einstein’s birthday, the date is mathematically doubly important, and Shaw and his colleagues began observing it annually. The celebration starts at 1:59 p.m. (which when combined with the calendar date makes 3.14159) and consists of people marching around a circular space at the Exploratorium 3.14 times, eating pizza and fruit pies, wearing pi-themed attire, and reading books and watching films that have π in the plot. The tradition caught on and continued, and in 2009 the U.S. House of Representatives passed a nonbinding resolution certifying March 14 as Pi Day, making it a designated U.S. national holiday.

Shaw was a follower of Buddhism, an appropriate belief system for scientists, Catherine explains, because it does not have a doxology that prescribes what you have to believe. Larry added art to the traditional STEM curriculum, so now at the Exploratorium there is STEAM: science, technology, art, engineering, mathematics. The Exploratorium’s focus has extended beyond science to human perception more generally and aims to show that these activities and experiences can help us understand how the world is made, meet its challenges, and have some fun while doing so.

Mill Valley science writer Potter Wickware has written for *Nature* and other journals and was an assistant in the Department of Pathology at UCSF in the 2000s.

Alice Eastwood, Botanist

Eastwood Trail, Camp Eastwood, and Camp Eastwood Road are on Mt. Tamalpais maps. Eastwood Way and Eastwood Park are in Tam Valley. They are named for the self-taught botanist Alice Eastwood, who botanized Mt. Tam actively from 1912 to 1929. She was the curator of botany at the California Academy of Sciences from 1892 to 1949. Born in Toronto in 1859, she died in 1953 at age 94 in San Francisco.


In 1920, she built a house at what is today 609 Summit Avenue in Mill Valley. Her three-acre garden was a botanical museum. After using the place on weekends, she rented it out for several years. It was destroyed in the 1929 fire. In 1912, she became a charter member of the Tamalpais Conservation Club. She was also one of the few women permitted, by reason of her hiking prowess, to become a member (but only as an associate) of the all-male Cross Country Boys Club. She and a few of her club friends were known as the “Hill Tribe.” A member described her as “a famous plant-hunter who trudged easily twenty miles a day carrying her heavy plant presses on her back.” —Chuck Oldenburg, from *Mill Valley Vignettes*

Right: Alice Eastwood in 1949. Courtesy of the Lucretia Little History Room, Mill Valley Public Library.



PRUNE MUSIC: SO MUCH MORE THAN A MUSIC STORE

BY **DEBRA SCHWARTZ**



In the 1960s and '70s Mill Valley was a bastion of musical creativity and performance. Village Music, Sweetwater, Prune Music, and local music venues, all located within a one-mile radius, made Mill Valley a destination for Bay Area musicians and touring bands.

But it was at Prune Music where musicians and music lovers found a funkier, less exclusive version of a “Bohemian Grove” environment, a place where business, music, conversation, camaraderie, and other mischief flourished inside a small building on a side street next to a dive bar in a small town, just miles from San Francisco.

The birth of Prune Music and how it came to Mill Valley is a story within a story and begins with a kaleidoscope of intersecting events involving four different men and a motorcycle accident.

In 1968 David Kessner and Randall Smith were members of a “not very good” band, living the free and easy lifestyle in Berkeley, California. The two young men harbored other natural abilities, soon to be discovered. When an amp blew and Randy, whose only training in electronics had been in the Boy Scouts, effortlessly repaired it, David perceived the commercial opportunity. He said to Randy, “You can fix shit, and everyone is playing in bands, and nobody is doing this. Let’s open a store!”

Youthful exuberance and receptivity forged by an adventurous hippie lifestyle of experimentation opened the door to the unexpected. Starting a business with no business acumen or practical experience did not seem out of the realm of possibility. David found a tiny store on Berkeley’s Grove Street for \$75 a month and their partnership became official. The actual story of how Prune Music got its name is lost to time in a thicket of pot smoke, LSD, and rock and roll music.

Prune Music’s relocation to Mill Valley in 1969 coincided with a general increase of violence in Berkeley. An unsettling protest march on Grove Street turned into a riot and left the store with shattered windows and its owners with a sense of unease. Then an offhanded remark by a friend caught their attention: “All the rock stars are moving to Mill Valley, you guys should move over there too!” That friend’s name was Bill Steele. Bill and his friend Larry Cragg were members of a band called Rose, started by brothers Les and Tony Cardoza. The band members and Bill’s wife Lindy had moved into the notorious Argentina House in the West Marin town of Lagunitas, whose former residents were the hugely successful band Big Brother and the Holding Company and their iconic singer, Janis Joplin. Bill was planning to

open a music store with a drug-dealing friend of his to accommodate the migration of musicians leaving San Francisco for a quieter and more natural existence. Marin County offered just such a respite.

Moving to Mill Valley wasn't a difficult decision for Randy and David. They were tired of living in Berkeley and a brief foray across the Richmond-San Rafael Bridge into Marin County convinced them that Marin County was indeed a Shangri-la. Clearly, if they didn't open a Marin music store, someone else would. In a moment that could be perceived as divine intervention, a location suddenly became available at 34 Sunnyside Avenue, not far from where the Mill Valley Depot Plaza is today and next to Antique Telephonie, an odd salon filled with old phones whose suave owner specialized in hair care for older ladies.

When David and Randy asked Bill if he'd like to manage the new Mill Valley location, he jumped at the chance, but a traumatic motorcycle accident near San Geronimo Golf Course derailed his plans, putting him in a body cast for six months with several more months of extended care.

Bill's misfortune turned into a golden opportunity for Larry Cragg, who had a knack for fixing guitars and was flat broke. In a mutually beneficial arrangement, Larry took over for Bill for the duration of Bill's recovery, while adding yet another service to Prune Music's expanding repertoire.

Larry recalls, "Bill asked if I could watch the store for him for 10 dollars a day and I was so poor that I said hey yeah, 10 dollars a day was better than no dollars a day! I liked fixing guitars. I'd always done it for my friends, never thought I'd charge them for it. I had been fixing guitars since I was 14, learned how to straighten necks with a truss rod and do intonation from the guy in the back, the little old German guitar repair guy in the back of the store where I was taking guitar and banjo lessons. That was my only instruction. And so I started working on my own guitars and my friend's guitars but this was back in '64-'65. It changed my life completely; it started a whole new path for me.

"When the store moved to 10 Locust, they said, 'Okay, you're our guitar repair man!' And so instantly I'm working for the Grateful Dead, Big Brother, Quicksilver, Country Joe, Jefferson Airplane! I mean I was working for all of them, immediately! And here I'm 21! But I was good at it and I loved doing it and still do!"

The move to 10 Locust in 1970 ushered Prune Music into its golden era. Bill, a drummer, added a drum department, and with David as the rock in the middle of the operation and starbursts of creativity going out in all directions, the store evolved into something much more than just a music store. While the Sunnyside location had been low-key, the new location swiftly became a destination for Bay Area musicians and traveling bands. It was a place where you might find Carlos Santana jamming with Michael Bloomfield. For 18 dollars, Larry could fix your guitar, and for seven dollars Randy could fix your amp. Additionally, the store stocked good-quality used gear carefully



Bill Steele (left) and Larry Cragg in late 1969, when they were members of The Buzzards rock band. Courtesy of Larry Cragg.

1971 ad for Prune Music in the Marin County phone book. Courtesy of the Lucretia Little History Room, Mill Valley Public Library.

restored by Randy and Larry. They purchased Les Paul guitars in poor condition in Fresno, restored them and resold them. Such services weren't just affordable; they were essential to the ever-expanding Bay Area music scene.

Equally essential was the cozy culture of music that thrived within the confines of the small store. Prune Music became the watering hole, the neighborhood barbershop, a sanctuary where creativity, conversation, storytelling, artistic expression, performance, and community connection found its center. The steady stream of high-caliber customers was indeed astonishing: musicians such as Carlos Santana, Dan Hicks, Marty Balin and Jefferson Airplane, Eric Clapton, The Pointer Sisters, David Crosby, Maria Muldaur, Bonnie Raitt, The Sons of Champlin, Quicksilver Messenger Service, The Rowan Brothers (Chris, Lorin, and Peter), Bob Weir, Austin de Lone, Jack O'Hara, Jessie Barish, Steve Miller, Mike Bloomfield, Nick Gravenites, Pete Sears, John Cipollina, and Mill Valley's very own Charlie Deal, inventor of the toilet-seat guitar, a store regular who relied on Larry to help him with his instruments. Many of Prune Music's customers were daily visitors.

The back room was the beating heart of the store, an exclusive inner space where "recreational activities" could be safely shielded from the public eye and where famous people were unseen and thus undisturbed.

According to Bill, "the back room was infamous, let's face it ... everybody knew about the back room. Well, not everybody, the people that should have known about the back room, knew about the back room!" To which Randy adds, "and the ones that didn't know could smell it from the front!"

Small as the store was, people gathered and often lingered,

and spontaneous jam sessions were to be expected. This often maddened Larry, who as a guitar repairman was ultrasensitive to a single off-note. Several times a day he would bleat into the cacophony of instruments, "STOP! TUNE UP!"

Prune Music was the first venue to host guitar shows. Further, the public was invited to sell privately owned guitars, a generous gesture on the part of the store. What started as a small store event eventually morphed into an industry all its own, and today guitar shows are held annually at the Marin County Civic Center and other venues nationwide.

The store also hosted live musical events. With such limited space, attendees often poured into the street. It helped that Prune Music was located next to the notorious Brothers Tavern, which opened at 6 a.m. and closed at 2 a.m., so the party could move next door after the store closed for the day.

Prune Music set the gold standard for what a music store could be and was greatly respected by other music stores. Never a financial success, the store greatly enriched the lives of those who loved it. And it was gratifying for its founders to watch young customers grow into accomplished musicians, many of whom credit Prune Music for setting them on their path.

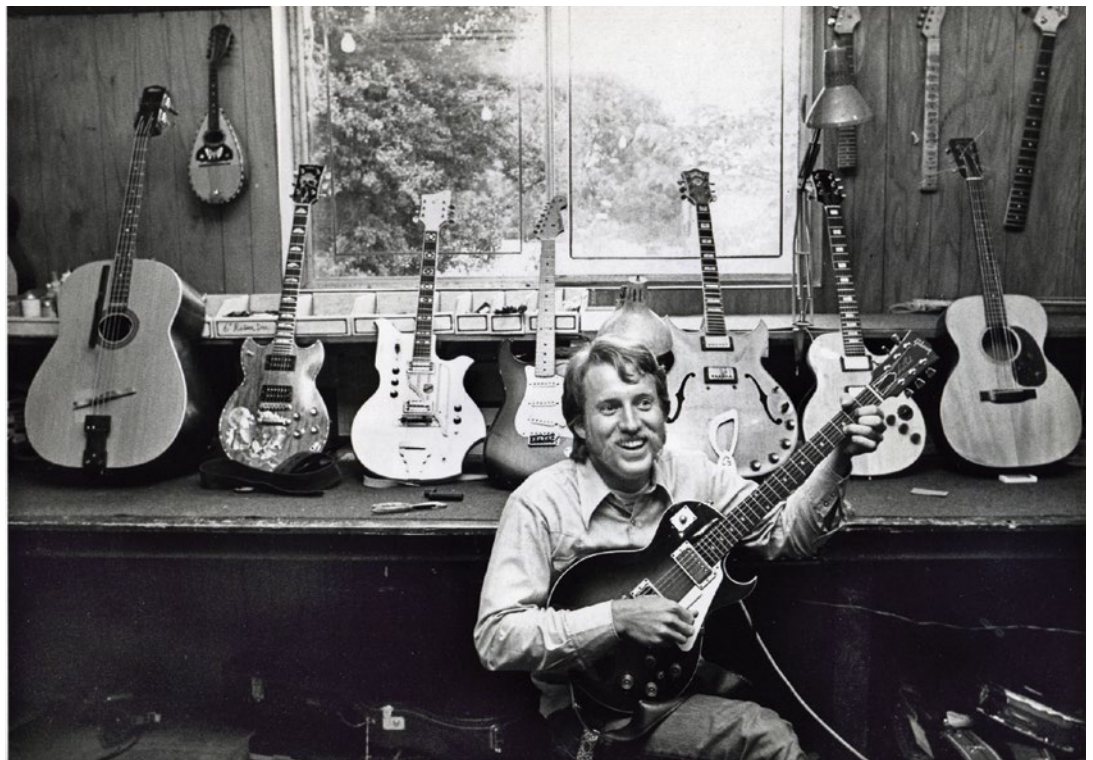
Prune Music would ultimately become the first of many endeavors for David, Randall, Bill, and Larry; the genesis for all that followed was their iconic little store on Locust Avenue where the fusion of friendship, music, and nature created a harmony all its own.

Debra Schwartz, owner of Tam Hiking Tours, served seven years on the Mill Valley Historical Society board. She directs the Oral History Program, a collaboration between the Historical Society and the Mill Valley Public Library, and hosts the First Wednesday Speaker Series.

This page: Larry Cragg, early 1980s. Courtesy of Larry Cragg.

Opposite, left: Randy Smith working on an amplifier, early 1970s. Courtesy of Randall C. Smith.

David Kessner, 1970s. Courtesy of David Kessner.



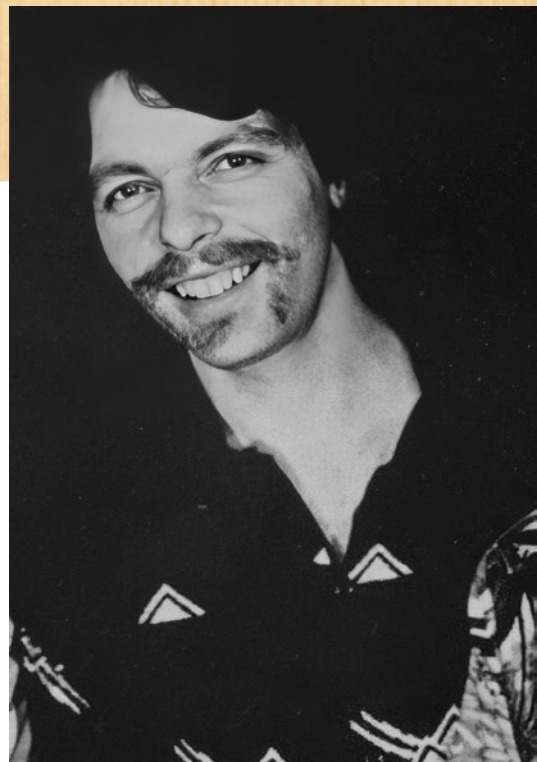
POST-PRUNE

David Kessner left Prune Music around 1972 and bought the Church recording studio in San Anselmo with Bill Steele. They sold it in 1979. David has a home studio in Novato, is married to Kate, and has three daughters and two granddaughters.

As **Randall Smith** faded from the day-to-day at Prune Music, he augmented his paltry income by rebuilding Mercedes-Benz engines and jacking up old country houses to subsidize his real ambition, to build amplifiers. His first paying customer was Patrick Burke, who later inherited Randy's ownership in Prune Music. A weird project for musician Lee Michaels (then living in Mill Valley) led Randy to discover and invent "high-gain," which revolutionized guitar amplification and had a huge impact on rock music itself. Carlos Santana's trademark "singing sustain" was produced by those earliest Boogie amplifiers and helped bring Boogie tone to the world. After nearly 50 years and 20 patents, Mesa/Boogie was acquired by the great American guitar company Gibson in 2000. Randy stayed on as chief designer. Still hand-wired in Petaluma, California, Mesa/Boogie products are recognized worldwide as an industry leader.

Larry Cragg worked as Prune's guitar repairman from the fall of 1969 until the store closed in 1985. From 1972 to 2007 he worked for Neil Young at his ranch in Half Moon Bay, touring with the band as Neil's guitar and amp tech. He still serves as Young's guitar repairman. The baritone sax player in Neil Young & the Bluenotes, Larry served as a multi-instrumentalist on many tours playing banjo, keys, baritone and alto sax, pedal steel, and guitar. In the '80s and '90s Larry also toured with Nils Lofgren as his guitar and amp tech, as well as band musician. Today Larry works at his guitar repair shop in San Anselmo and is owner of Vintage Instrument Rental.

Bill Steele left Prune around 1979, when he sold the store to Larry Cragg and Patrick Burke. Bill then transitioned to the Automatt recording studio in San Francisco under the leadership of David Rubinson. Together, David and Bill worked with Francis Ford Coppola on *Apocalypse Now* and with CBS artists such as Sarah Vaughn, Joni Mitchell, Bonnie Raitt, and Tennessee Ernie Ford. In 1983, Bill joined Cagwin & Dorward as an equipment operator and foreman. Bill later founded Land Art, a general engineering contracting firm, building parks and playgrounds, restoring creeks, and creating animal habitat in urban areas. He cofounded a conservation nonprofit working in South America in 2005 and is a recent member on the Board of Directors of West Marin Community Services.



Love, Innovation, and Discipline



The Covey School of Tam Valley

BY **LISSA MCKEE**

a small private school was established at the west end of Tamalpais Valley after the Second World War in 1948. It survived for nearly 30 years due to the skill and determination of its founder and headmistress, Lucille Covey, her husband John, her son Colin, and a small troop of dedicated teachers. In an era of postwar overcrowded public schools, the Covey School earned a reputation for assisting children with adjustment issues and learning disabilities. Classes were small, hours long. Students could arrive as early as 7 a.m. and stay long past 3 p.m., supervised by Mrs. Covey herself. What made the Covey School special was its dedication to “individual attention and love,” its homey setting, and its experiential approach to learning.

The school was located on a deep parcel of more than half an acre that extended to the banks of Coyote Creek. The Coveys resided on the property in a small bungalow at the rear of the parcel among bay trees that lined the creek. Classes were held in a war-surplus Quonset hut, although in pleasant weather teachers might instruct small groups of students outside near pear, apple, and other fruit trees that flourished on the land. Blackberry bushes grew on one side of the property. Blooming wisteria grew at the front entrance.

Lucille Covey’s upbringing appears to have prepared her to be adventurous. Her parents had met in Jamaica before moving to South America, where her Scottish father worked as a mining engineer. Lucille was born in Arequipa, Peru, and lived in South America until the age of 18. She is remembered by her daughter-in-law Carroll Covey as being “very Latin in temperament and culturally, since she was raised there.”

After coming to California, Lucille took some teacher training courses at San Jose State College but never received a degree. She married John Covey, a native of England, and in December 1937 they purchased lot 18, block 1 of subdivision 3 in Tamalpais Valley. When the United States entered World War II, Lucille volunteered for the Women’s Ambulance and Transport Corps, for which she was commissioned lieutenant in April 1942. The following month she was part of a Tamalpais Valley community group that registered 68 men for the draft. That same year, she helped raise funds for an ambulance for the community. She also participated in activities of the Tamalpais Valley Improvement Club.

Opposite: Teachers and students of the Covey School, circa 1949. School cofounder Bertha Traber Karoly stands at top center with other teachers, including Colin Covey at her left and Colin’s first wife Alma by his side. Student Gerard McBride is second from left in the front row. The others in the photo are not identified. Courtesy of Gerard McBride.

Right: Lucille and John Covey, circa 1920-25. Courtesy of Carroll Covey.

The community of Mill Valley has always been committed to fostering educational institutions. The Tamalpais Land and Water Company’s 1890 land auction sold 200 acres of parcels that would become the town, and the first school was organized in a summer cottage. By 1891, the townspeople had approved a tax to build the Mill Valley Grammar School, also called Summit School. As the town grew, other public schools were constructed: Homestead in 1908, Tamalpais Park (later Park School) in 1909, and Old Mill in 1921.

Several private schools were also established in the early period. They included Lowan Hill School for Girls, which operated around 1905; Miss Anna Hartmann’s Private School at 15 Elma Street in the 1920s; and La Atalaya, also called Miss

Classes were held in a war-surplus Quonset hut, although in pleasant weather teachers might instruct small groups of students outside near pear, apple, and other fruit trees that flourished on the land.



Flaggs after the director, located at 293 Molino Avenue in the 1920s. The most prominent of them was Blythedale School, founded in 1916 by Sybil Nye, who served as the Mill Valley Public Library's second librarian from 1917 to 1939. Born in England and having spent some 13 years in Africa, Nye was also the principal of the school, which was located on Blithedale Avenue near Oakdale. Besides curriculum that included music and French, similar to other private schools, Blythedale advertised "special care for delicate and backwards children." As early as 1941, Lucille Covey directed plays at the Blythedale School. It operated until 1955, a few years before Nye's death.

Lucille's experience at the Blythedale School may have inspired her to start her own school. In the summer of 1946 she and cofounder Bertha Traber Karoly opened a nursery school with 10 children at 540 Marin Avenue. That fall, 26 children were enrolled. Initially called the Happy Camp School, it accepted children ages 4 ½ to 14. Faculty included Mrs. Covey's son Colin and artist Russell Hartley, a costume designer for the San Francisco Ballet. John Covey was the facilities and landscape manager. Renamed the Covey Private School in 1948, it was largely housed in the 24-by-24-foot Quonset hut and built an early reputation on experiential learning.

Ten to 12 students attended the school in the summer for special coaching. Kindergarten through 3rd grade children were taught in the Quonset hut; 4th and 5th grade students were taught in a small building by Coyote Creek. The Covey residence housed cots for nap time, and three matching station wagons transported children to and from school. Records have not been located that provide exact tuition figures, but in the first years tuition was around \$50 a month, and by the early 1970s it had increased to \$100.

Covey's position was that children who had not mastered reading by the 3rd or 4th grade had been confused by the way they were taught.

fifty-three students were enrolled at the Covey School by 1955 and 600 children had attended over its history. The teaching staff that year consisted of Patsy Kelly, Myrtle Black, Ruth Watson, and Evelyn "Sis" Tamburini, who had started out as a young Covey School driver ferrying students. San Francisco State College student Edward Habeeb supervised the playground activity. Its reputation as a school that could turn troubled children into good students had grown.

An article in the *Independent Journal* (April 7, 1955), "Covey School Helps a Boy in Need—and Educates 600" told the story of a youngster who had become "intractable" in public school



This wartime Quonset hut was converted for school use by Lucille Covey. In 1982, six years after the Covey School closed, schoolteacher Wende Kumara came looking for a school to buy. Peering through the windows, she was charmed by "the cutest classroom." Photo by Abby Wasserman.



The original jungle gym from the Covey School is still in use at present-day Kumara School. Photo by Abby Wasserman.

after his father fell ill with polio. The father, Paul C. Overmire, told a reporter:

I was called into conference and told that he had to have individual attention, and the public school system simply did not have the facilities. So fell the blow. And there I was, not fully recovered from polio—weak, tired, discouraged—and now I was heartsick with anxiety. The suggestion was made that I try the Covey School. Now the results have been so far in excess of the fondest expectations that it would be impossible for me to express ... the progress that has been made. He is rapidly completing his regular [public school] fourth grade work, and he is doing it in a manner that would bring distinct credit to any child, regardless of his history.

The Covey School continued to provide an option to the public-school system, which did not have the latitude to suit all students. Still, the school district worked to respond to

suburban growth in Mill Valley and the increased numbers of school-aged children. Tamalpais Elementary School opened in 1952, and in 1956, Edna Maguire School opened for 7th and 8th graders. In 1957, Marin Terrace School opened in the southeast corner of Homestead Valley.

By the mid-1950s, Covey School's reputation was such that Lucille Covey's perspective was sought on a local controversy over educational methods of reading. It was prompted by Rudolf Flesch's book *Why Johnny Can't Read—And What You Can Do About It*, published in 1955. It was a critique of the whole-word method, by which a child memorizes a core of words based on their appearance rather than first building on the individual sounds of letters, or phonics. The whole-word method had been the dominant method for teaching reading since the 1930s. At a meeting in September of that year, Mill Valley school administrators, responding to criticism from parents, said that the curriculum was already overloaded as a result of pressure

Memories of Lucille and John Covey

By Carroll Covey

Lucille left South America when she was 18 and studied in France. Later she and her mother lived in Hawaii, where Lucille's first job was librarian at the Honolulu Library. She talked about walking on a little footpath to Waikiki Beach and riding a surfboard on the shoulders of Duke Kahanamoku.

John and Lucille met in San Francisco through mutual friends. Colin was their only child. Lucille was always sad because John didn't want her speaking Spanish to Colin, so she didn't. At the time, there was prejudice against immigrants and against Spanish speakers.

I thought the Covey School was a very sweet school. The kids always seemed enthusiastic. Lucille was loving, but when they were running around she quietly gave them The Look and they would immediately stop what they were doing—The Look was enough back then. I think it was the first school that had daycare after school. Women were working then. I think that was a big drawing point for the school.

John had come from England to a ranch in Auburn that his father was managing for a Chinese family in San Francisco. His father, a vet, had done a lot of work with animals. Lucille and John were known for having good dogs. They always had cats, and all the cats were called Kittypuss. They could come inside during the day but not at night.

John did all the landscaping at the school. There were fruit trees and a tulip tree. He had to build a 12-foot fence around one very beautiful rosebush so the deer wouldn't eat the roses. There were lots of quail. John would feed them and then at the end of the season he'd shoot them. Quail is good tasting, but it was a little horrifying—he would feed them and they would get to trust him and then he'd kill them. It's called "ground sluicing."

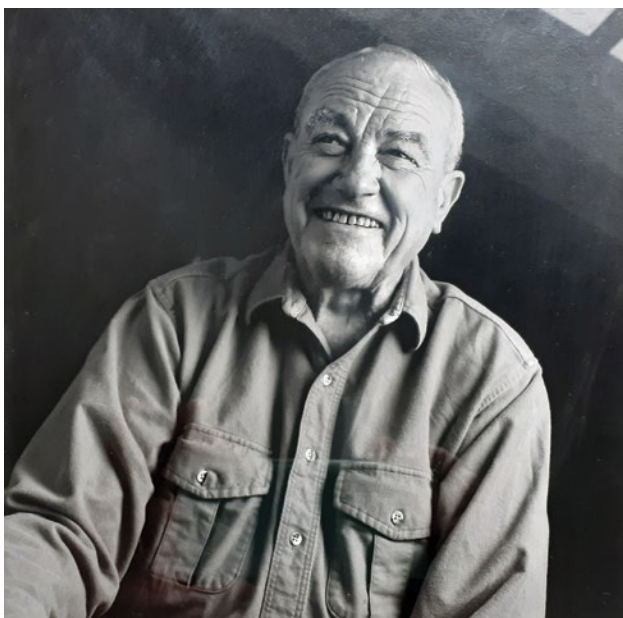


John and Lucille Covey, undated. Courtesy of Carroll Covey.

John was a gentle man though quite the carouser. He only went to 8th grade, but he wrote beautiful letters to Colin, and he was very mechanical; during the Depression he made a living fixing adding machines. Here's a story about John: One winter night he was driving up to the family's cabin in northern California. A car had spun out and John got out to help. Because his leg was extended into the road, a car ran over his foot. He was then in his early 60s. Before that, he was a great hunter and fisherman, but afterward he limped, so they didn't go up to the cabin much after that, or travel together.

Lucille and Evelyn "Sis" Tamburini went around the world on a ship, and Colin and I took Lucille to Mexico. It was fun to take her because she could speak Spanish. We didn't get to Arequipa with her; that was our one regret. Colin would have liked to take her to where she was born. Lucille loved the school and took her responsibility to the children very seriously. That is what kept her going after John retired.

Carroll Covey taught in the San Francisco public schools for many years. She met her husband Colin when they both taught at Mission High.



Colin Covey, 1995. Colin taught at the Covey School for a few years before moving on to teach in public schools in Marin and San Francisco. Courtesy of Carroll Covey.

Mentoring created a family-style learning environment that was a fundamental tenet of the school's philosophy.

Chris Dufur of Hayward was enrolled for 4th and 5th grades at the Covey School from 1970 to 1972 after having had difficulty reading in public school. He remembers the benefits of sitting in a group where the older children helped the younger ones. Mentoring created a family-style learning environment that was a fundamental tenet of the school's philosophy. Dufur's teacher, Mrs. McClanahan, worked in a team with another teacher, and Mrs. Covey would assist with multiplication tables and teach all the states and their capitals. Dufur recalls:

You had to recite them on a blank map on the wall, the outline of each state. We studied history. She was very passionate; "history is story" was her point There would be four or five kids in history class, and she'd pull us out—teach about Ponce de León, Columbus, Sir Francis Drake, Aztecs and other indigenous people. ... Mrs. Covey had her house in the back side of the property; we ate our lunch there. The boys would have to sit out in front of her window so she could monitor us. Girls and boys were separated for lunch, the rules were "be civil and not carry on and watch our manners." Often we had history classes in her living room, and our poetry too. If my mother arrived when classes finished at 2:30 or 3:00, Mrs. Covey would tell her to come back at around five, that I still had studying to do.

Mrs. Covey in her 70s was tough, but she would hug you and give you a kiss on the face in a minute if you were doing well. She didn't go crazy for corporal punishment but if you missed an answer you'd get a slap on the hand, a show of disapproval.

Families were required to provide school supplies: this many binders, #2 pencils, colored pencils, hole protectors for punched holes, erasers, paper (blank and lined and tracing paper to trace out every country). Instead of looking through a book, you're busy tracing South America or Brazil. They didn't have music or art. We had a French teacher come in if you wanted to pay extra for it, \$5 tuition.

Lucille Covey would have liked her son Colin to take over the school when she retired, but after a few years teaching at Covey he had received his California state teaching credential, and he left for the better pay and reasonable hours of the public school system. He taught in Novato for two years and spent the rest of his career in San Francisco middle and high schools; he was Teacher of the Year at George Washington High and

groups and that teaching methods should be developed after adequate research.

The following month the opinions of Lucille Covey, Sybil Nye, the former head of Blythedale School, and Principal Betty Grimm of Homestead School were reported in the *Mill Valley Record*. Nye, a critic of the word-picture method, was a proponent of the phonics teaching method. Grimm advocated an approach based on the individual needs of the child that utilized phonics, sight reading, and "kinesthetic," meaning writing the word as it is spoken. Covey's position was that children who had not mastered reading by the 3rd or 4th grade had been confused by the way they were taught. She attributed large public-school classes as part of the problem, whereas Covey School classes were composed of 15 students. In the following decades the educational profession continued to debate the issue, as reading experts conducted studies and government panels weighed in on the issue, generally affirming the importance of various phonics methods.

Based on local newspaper reports, the reading methods controversy was a rare event when both public and private school educators were engaged in public debate, which gives modern readers some broader context for the Covey School's position in the community. The school continued to be successful in the 1960s, when it maintained a fleet of five white Nash Rambler station wagons for shuttling the students back and forth to school. A building with two more classrooms and a bathroom were constructed. "Sis" Tamburini became Lucille Covey's chief assistant. As women entered the workforce in larger numbers, Covey School's after-school care was likely an innovative draw. However, the demands of the Covey School were never-ending—workdays could last until 10 at night.

is remembered for inspiring countless students with his rare qualities as a mentor and as a human being. Following his death in 1998 a former student, Vincent Flynn, wrote, “He incited our minds to break free from convention and think for ourselves. He inflamed our spirits to spurn complacency and live in a constant state of hunger.” His mother’s passionate approach to education had surely influenced her son.

Following Lucille’s retirement in the early 1970s, the school accepted kindergarten through 5th grade students. Advertisements indicate that it was open from 7 a.m. to 7 p.m. The school evidently operated into 1975 and closed in June 1976, when Lucille Covey died. A Covey School Facebook group has been formed that connects those who remember their time at the school.

In 1982, Wende Kumara, a San Francisco teacher, came across the 540 Marin Avenue property and felt that she had discovered a place full of magic. “I went by myself with my two-year old and newborn baby. I walked into the school facility and there was a set of swings there, and they held the history of the school. The swings were there when the Coveys came, and the swing set is

still there. How many children have swung on that set! I walked over to the Quonset hut and looked through the window—it was the cutest classroom. I sat on the swing set and said to my daughters, “This is our new school.”

Kumara opened her preschool in 1983, serving children from ages two to six, based on the principles of “loving kindness, compassion for all, and mindfulness.” Today, although seven highly rated public schools serve Mill Valley, Kumara School, one of numerous private schools operating in the community, demonstrates the continued devotion of those building alternatives to mainstream education. The Tamalpais Valley neighborhood has changed with larger houses and taller fences, but 540 Marin has been a school for more than 70 years, and, as Wende Kumara says, is still “very free and open, and full of spirit.”

Lissa McKee’s last article for *Review* (2022) was “The Hongos: Mill Valley’s First Grocers.” A Tam Valley resident since 1988, she loves researching Mill Valley’s fascinating history.



A Covey School Legacy

By Wende Kumara

My first five years, people would come visit my school, saying, “I went here!” I liked hearing the stories about the drinking fountain by the bathroom: “I drank out of that fountain.” I heard that Mrs. Covey was a very strict person. Students would say, “She’d take me out back and” I didn’t like to hear about that. Mrs. Covey had this incredible job to do, taking kids that didn’t fit into the box of the public schools. Having a group of children is all about classroom management. When you walk into a school and think a teacher’s being mean, you don’t know what has happened earlier in the day. Sometimes you have to be strict. “The ruler” was a big thing people talked about.

If you bring a group of people together there will always be the perfect student, and someone will be the class clown. Ninety percent of kids with problems came to my school and did great. Those kids were suffering from too much discipline, and so they did bad things. They showed up at my school and there was more looseness. The kids were fine before; they were just in the wrong place. If the kid had a problem and the parents agreed to work with the school, that changed things for the better.

My son Skye Knutson is the school’s facilities manager and his wife Rosario Knutson is the director of the school. Kumara School was already going when I had my son at home in the cottage the Coveys had. Several years later, a visitor came and as we walked around she said, “This room is where Mrs. Covey died.” That was the room where my son was born! I have to say I always felt, and have inside of me, the legacy Mrs. Covey left.

Wende Kumara is the founder and former director of the Kumara School.

Covey School’s original swing set, still in use by preschoolers at the Kumara School. Photo by Abby Wasserman.



BY **ABBY WASSERMAN**

The Play's the Thing

CURTAIN THEATRE COMES OF AGE

Walking through Old Mill Park on a summer day in 2000, a little girl and her father came across a group of actors rehearsing on the small stage in the redwoods. Shakespeare's *As You Like It* opened a few days later, and the child returned wearing a costume and sat mesmerized. She couldn't have understood all the words—Shakespeare's language is not the language of today—but the spectacle held her riveted. The comedy is about two Dukes, brothers, one good and one bad. The bad one has exiled his brother to the forest where the action takes place. There's a cross-dressing heroine, a lovesick young couple, a jester, some rustics, faithful retainers, sword fights, lively music, and a dance to cap it off. The child came back for the second performance, and the third, and stayed through them all. Afterwards she went backstage under the trees and met the cast and crew, and that, her father remembers, was as enthralling as the play itself.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

The idea to stage Shakespeare in Old Mill Park was John Leonard's. What better way to celebrate Mill Valley's Centennial on Memorial Day weekend than with one of the Bard's funniest, most endearing plays? John is a former city council member and mayor. He has been involved in countless community boards and committees, many of them in the arts. "I thought of the play as counterculture, because the plot counterposes a noble court exiled to the forest with wicked rulers in the city," John said recently. "It would be centennial counterculture in a humorous mode, and we would be in a forest." His first thought was to get Steve Coleman to design the set.

Steve Coleman is a Mill Valley local, born in Switzerland but raised here. He's the resident designer at 142 Throckmorton

Theatre, responsible for its ornate music box-like interior and the small performance rooms in front. Known for his inventiveness and whimsy, his gifts are limitless and the presence of his sets sheer brilliance. Recipient of a Milley Award in 2002, Steve has designed sets over the course of his career for Marin Theatre Company and other Bay Area theaters, and before turning to set design he was an actor in San Francisco. Steve knows his stuff and his feeling for our hometown park verges on the worshipful. He had participated in pop-up readings of Shakespeare in the park before: "There would be a birthday party or celebration, and we'd go over to the park and read and have some wine. We would go at dusk, take paper lanterns with candles in them. It was a fun little adventure. The park's amphitheater was very lightly used in those days—during the Fall Arts Festival for music, never for theater. I agreed to design a set if John could put the rest of it together."

They went to see Ann Brebner, who with her husband John Brebner produced Shakespeare outdoors at the Marin Art and Garden Center from 1961 to 1967—this developed into the Marin Shakespeare Festival that now performs on the Dominican University campus.

"We asked, 'How do you go about doing this?'" John recalled, "and dear old Ann, never one to mince words, said, 'There's no way you can do this.' I felt that I had clearly let the idea get ahead of the practicalities of producing a play, and knew we had unaddressed needs, obviously a director who could magic-up a cast, because we were already approaching Memorial Day. Steve suggested getting in touch with Abby Wasserman, who has a theater background, and she suggested her oldest friend Mikel Clifford, who was fortunately available at that point."

"Abby phoned me and described John's vision," Mikel said. "I was enchanted. I was raised in Mill Valley but by 1999 lived in Berkeley. I'd acted in *As You Like It* several times with Berkeley productions and once in Minneapolis. Playing Shakespeare outdoors in Mill Valley's comfortable redwoods was very close to heaven for this Shakespeare nut."

Simone Koga and Jeff Garrett in Curtain Theatre's 2010 production of *As You Like It*, directed by Michele Delattre. Photo by Russell Johnson.

Mikel Schwartzkopf Clifford, a graduate of Tam High, class of 1957, lives and breathes theater. As a young girl she staged fairy tales like *Hansel and Gretel* and *Beauty and the Beast* with chums on neighbors' front porches. Her first official acting role was Princess Maybloom in a production of *Prince Fairyfoot* (Abby played Robin Goodfellow) mounted on the Park School stage by Joan Washington. Mikel earned her BA in art and history from UCLA and her master's degree in theater at San Francisco State. In the 1960s Mikel and Michael Leibert cofounded Berkeley Repertory Company and produced and acted in plays for the Rep's early years. In the early '70s Mikel almost single-handedly created the Berkeley Shakespeare Festival, which performed plays including weighty ones like *Pericles* and *Timon of Athens* at John Hinkel Park. The endeavor eventually moved from the chilly north Berkeley park to the warmer climes of Orinda and became Cal Shakes—California Shakespeare Theatre. By that time Mikel was working on a doctorate at Stanford. Eager for a new project, she signed on to direct *As You Like It* and stayed to direct Curtain Theatre's next five productions.

FORMING A COMPANY

The nonprofit company needed a name, which Mikel provided from research into theaters during Shakespeare's time. The Curtain—so-named because it was built against a curtain wall—was a theater in London's northern outskirts, producing plays between 1577 and 1624. "I like the notion of the fourth wall between actor and audience, which in proscenium theaters traditionally manifests as a physical curtain," Mikel said. "Interesting to note that in all of the outdoor playing areas I ever employed, none had a curtain! In Shakespeare's time, sets were minimal. Theater companies were migrant workers, traveling from one place to another. Sets needed to be easily and quickly portable."

Curtain Theatre began with a nucleus of four—John, Steve, Abby, and Mikel—and rapidly grew into a company. Mikel, who loves nothing better than to do a play with friends, invited Michele Delattre and her husband Don Clark to participate. Michele was performing with Shakespeare at Stinson, but not long after, that company went under. John Leonard surmises



Core company members in Old Mill Park, 2000-2001. Clockwise from top left: Chloe Bronzan and Bruce Bronzan; Steve Coleman; Michele Delattre; Abby Wasserman and John Leonard; and director Mikel Clifford and her daughter Maeve. Courtesy of Chloe Bronzan and Abby Wasserman.

Cast and crew of *The Taming of the Shrew*, 2015, directed by Carl Jordan. Courtesy of Curtain Theatre.



that was largely because they performed in the summer when tourists crowd Stinson Beach and parking is hard to find.

Don and Michele were captivated by the idea of performing Shakespeare in Mill Valley, and 23 years later they have continued their involvement, with Michele acting, directing, producing, and playing the English concertina in the company band. Don is a journalist—formerly on staff at the *Wall Street Journal*—and a musician and singer. He had never acted before, but he was soon to make his stage debut.

Mikel Clifford's first task was to edit the play. Cutting Shakespeare may seem like heresy, but it's often done. "With Shakespeare, there is poetry that must be included, even if it is more convoluted, or flowery or indirect than we in the 21st century might expect," she explained. "If I'm considering the venue, I weigh how well things can be heard, the circumstances of the audience, the weather, and time. If the point of the speech is wit, then you edit for humor. If the point is the transference of information, I edit the extraneous and go to the information. I cut if there is a theme that has gone on for a time that might become tedious for the audience. In Old Mill Park they're sitting on logs and wooden chairs. They don't want to be thinking about their comfort, they want to think about whatever's happening in front of them. That is what should engage them."

Notwithstanding Ann Brebner's warning, *As You Like It* came together in four months. Through open auditions and callbacks, a cast was assembled. John, Abby, and Don took minor roles while Michele was double-cast as the bad brother, Duke Frederick (Fredericka in this production), and Phoebe the Shepherdess, and Chloe Bronzan, just out of college, was cast as the ingenue Celia. "Celia was one of my first big roles in the

Bay Area. It was scary, but Mikel was wonderful. She creates a structure but also lets actors make their own choices—she's collaborative and respects the actor's process. Sometimes it's great to get specific direction, but having worked with directors who micromanage, it was nice to have the space to find stuff and see what came out of our interactions."

When Chloe's father Bruce Bronzan dropped by the park to see her rehearse, he was asked to take the part of Duke Senior, the good brother in the play. For several years Bruce was a member of the California State Assembly and had previous experience acting in amateur productions. He was an important contributor to the company in the early years, playing Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 2001 and Prospero in the 2002 production of *The Tempest* opposite Chloe's Miranda. "He was a prince among men, no exaggeration," Mikel Clifford said of Bruce. "He was wonderful, tactful, generous, patient—all the things you want in a human being." Bruce died on his 73rd birthday in 2020. In a nostalgic tribute to her father, in May of this year Chloe will play a female Prospero in *The Tempest* with Falcon's Eye Theater in Placerville. "I am in my father's shoes saying the words to my Miranda that he said to me. My father would like it."

Rounding out that first cast, half of whom came from Berkeley, were Jeanette Harrison, Patrick Jones, Reeve Howard, Robert Lundy-Paine, Duncan Maddux, Kenneth Hayes, Latania Lewis, Linda Sklov, Michele Brake, and Mikel's daughter Maeve, 11, who in a Saltimbique costume walked across the stage at break with a sign saying INTERMISSION.

Performing outdoors held its challenges for the actors. There's no changing room to get into costume, no green room to



From left: Patricia Rudd, Victoria Siegel, and Heather Cherry in *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, 2011, directed by Michele Delattre. Photo by Russell Johnson.

relax, no visual screening beyond what Steve Coleman provided with scenery, greenery, and an occasional hanging tapestry (which could get whipped wildly by the wind). Backstage at Old Mill Park is within view of anyone walking by the creek or along Cascade Drive. The temperature can change suddenly and it can get windy and cold; the company has on occasion brought blankets for the audience to use.

Chloe cited the difficulties of getting into costume and makeup “in the middle of a dusty park with people walking by or hanging out at the picnic tables backstage. One day I forgot to bring my own little mirror and someone told me my makeup was a mess that day. That was the beauty and the challenge of the park. You are at the mercy of things around you and the prep was tough. The place also changed some of the acting choices—you had to be loud, so if you were trying to do something nuanced it was hard. Mikel was always in the back yelling ‘Volume!’ I learned a lot from her about her direction style.”

LAUNCHING INTO THE LIGHT

Ann Brebner might not have been thinking of finances when she warned off John and Steve, but money did turn out to be an obstacle facing the company during their first 15 years. Nevertheless, the audiences, even the modest ones for *As You Like It*, were enthusiastic and the group was having so much fun that they were determined to keep going after 2000. For that to happen, they needed the permission from the City of Mill Valley to use the park free of charge, both for rehearsals

and performances. John handled these negotiations. He had a feeling, in those early days of forming the theater group, of bringing something to light that deserved to be brought to light and a venue that deserved to be used.

“There were all these serendipitous elements, especially that we had Steve. My initial thought was to have one performance, but Mikel insisted we should expand to three, and we gave up the idea of performing on Memorial Day weekend. With a longer timeline we could do a better job of casting and organizing.”

The group settled on Labor Day weekend. Performances would be free to the public on a first-come, first-served basis. “That led eventually to incorporation as a nonprofit as Curtain Theatre,” John said. “We decided we needed that in order to be a proper vehicle, not some scrappy group of people who wanted to do something; it was important to have nonprofit status as a theater group. We had to make the case that this was a cultural benefit to the community at large to be able to present live Shakespeare without charging. Now it’s being carried on. Don and Michele have been steadfast participants throughout.”

The goal of the creative team in the earliest years, Michele said, was the aesthetic of the theater, “jelling, doing the plays as written, trusting the language, not going too far away from that. People were coming to the park with kids and dogs. We put the focus on making the story and language accessible. How can you do this for people who’ve never seen Shakespeare? This is a great place to start and I think we do a really good job. Many people in the company have a lot of experience doing Shakespeare.

They appreciate the chance to relax into the play, see how the story can be made to live with an audience in this intimate amphitheater.

“We have to remember that we’re in a place that is very beautiful and we need to keep a sense of beauty and not let the natural beauty be overshadowed. That extends into the whole take of the play. We don’t do the heavy-duty tragedies out there—it’s just not smart—it would be hard for people to focus on something like *King Lear*. We do the comedies and romances. Those plays are festive and emphasize community coming together, and that fits the park and the audience experience of being in the park together.”

THE MUSIC MAKERS

Because of Michele and Don, music has been a crucial part of every Curtain Theatre production. Shakespeare included songs in many of his plays, but relatively few are preserved, so new music had to be found.

“Mikel had ideas from previous productions using typically Renaissance-era music,” Michele said, “but after two or three years we were using what Don and I play, which is what is called ‘traditional’—it’s English, French, and Italian dance music, an oral tradition, some of it quite old, some written in the last 50 years, but it’s written in dance patterns and can suggest periods without being specific. Eventually you need someone who is writing music for you; you need transitions between scenes, music to introduce the play, to get people to sit down, and you add songs to move from one action to another. When I was doing some Berkeley productions I saw this fiddle player, Hal Hughes, who is able to back up scenes on his own with music, and he understood how to perform and work with a play.”

“We do almost all original music now because of Hal, who has composed more than 1,000 fiddle tunes,” Don added. “We pick from his preexisting library then I start composing songs

and tunes for each new production. I’m just starting the process for *Romeo and Juliet*, our 2023 production. It’s a challenge to put my melody and words into Shakespeare.”

CLIMBING OVER OBSTACLES

It’s hard to imagine more than two decades and 25 productions in, but Curtain Theatre’s future hung by a thread for many years. Some of the Cascade and Throckmorton area neighbors were opposed. “They were used to having the amphitheater in the park, but a live audience marching into their theater was uncomfortable for them,” Mikel said. “We had to lobby the neighbors.” By now, Mill Valleyans anticipate the annual nine performances of the Curtain Theatre, and people passing the park during rehearsals often stop to watch and listen. When a petition with 10 signatures circulated against Curtain Theatre performing in the park, a counter-petition for its continuation garnered 1,000 signatures.

Curtain’s creative team always hoped to establish free summer Shakespeare as an ongoing tradition. That goal was sporadically hindered by the City of Mill Valley seeking to rent the park and amphitheater. Mikel recalled in the early years that weddings or conferences would be scheduled during Curtain’s designated times to use the stage. “We sometimes learned of these conflicts at the last minute, being ordered to somehow move chairs out of sight, or told we had to either get rid of the set for an event, or that strangers would be using our set for their wedding.”

“Things changed frequently and suddenly in the early years,” Michele said. “We were flying by the seat of our pants. There was a certain amount of charm in that, but that time was definitely rough-and-ready. Because we started as a play for the Centennial and did only one weekend, for a long time Parks and Rec fought us every year. They would call me in the morning and say, ‘You’ve got to take the set down today,’ and we had no storage. That was partly because we were not being recognized



The band in 2013 for *King Stag* by Carlo Gozzi, one of three non-Shakespeare plays produced by Curtain Theatre, directed by Doyle Ott. Band members from left: Don Clark, Michele Delattre, Alice Montgomery, Hal Hughes, and Miriam Attia. Photo by Russell Johnson.

professionally. Mill Valley was changing and not as interested in having something artsy in the park. The town told Parks and Recreation that they had to support themselves. Weddings in Old Mill Park were their bread and butter.”

After directing six productions, Mikel moved to Minneapolis in 2004, and for many years Don Clark and Michele Delattre handled these sticky negotiations. Steve Beecroft, a local actor, director, choreographer, and singer, joined the company in 2009 and has since taken on relations with the city departments. Except for 2020, the first year of the pandemic when the stage in Old Mill Park was dark, people anticipate an annual Mill Valley Shakespeare. Their expectations are raised, and the city appears to be convinced that Curtain Theatre is worthwhile.

PLAYING DRESS-UP

Costumes have an uncanny ability to sweep actors and audience into different times and places. Some actors don’t assume their character until fully dressed. In rehearsals, actors will wear long skirts, or capes, or swords—the props and equipment they must get used to in order to appear natural onstage. Actors are chameleons in costumes.

Mikel points out that in Shakespeare’s time sets were minimal—actors were constantly traveling—so acting companies “aimed for flagrant theatricality through costumes, often owned by the actor who wore them. He became identified with that part and that costume. Creating, mending, and caring for costumes were essential for that actor to perpetuate characters audiences came to know, love, and demand to see.

“In the early years of Curtain Theatre we rented most of the costumes. At that time Contra Costa Junior College had a wonderful theater department. Their costumes were for rent, and rent them I did. I also rented from Berkeley High—they had a great costumer for years—and from a junior college in Napa. I used some costumes of my own that I’d accumulated over the years.”

Each year, the costumes in Curtain productions grow more and more beautiful, but excellence comes at a cost. “It’s hard to borrow costumes now,” Michele says. “ACT [American Conservatory Theater] doesn’t do costume rental, Hayward has shut down too as a rental shop. This year and last year we rented from Ashland [Shakespeare Festival]. Jody Branham has become our costumer. Jody has a master’s in costume from San Francisco State and she fit right into the Curtain family. Costuming is the hardest job to do, in my opinion. I hope she decides she’s going to stay.”

PASSING THE HAT

Curtain Theatre has never charged admission; the company prides itself on the fact that anyone can attend, drop in or out, without making reservations, without paying. “Audiences in Old Mill Park seem more free-spirited than people who buy tickets for a play in advance,” Mikel observed, “because in the park, a number of people already in downtown Mill Valley notice that a play is going to happen and decide just then to attend. It’s a different mindset. A play must prove itself for the paying, scheduled audiences—‘I paid my money, now convince me.’

They’re not as lighthearted as those who drop in. Audiences at Curtain productions may drop out easily too—not that they do, as a rule.”

It was Bruce Bronzan, in 2001, who spoke up for passing the hat at the end of the show. John Leonard felt it inappropriate, but he was outnumbered. “Actors have passed the hat since the beginning of theater, particularly with outdoor performances,” Mikel pointed out. “It is a way to give the actors some money.” “I had not understood the economics,” John admitted. “Cast members, many from the East Bay, had to spend money for gas, bridge tolls, so this incurred a cost for them and we wanted to reimburse their costs. They were doing it out of love. And so in our second year I became reconciled to passing the hat.”

At the end of each performance, actors cheerfully pass among the audience with baskets. For the first 15 years the donations were modest but they have become generous. It’s a soft sell; no one feels obligated to donate, but many do. This way the company raises enough to give a small stipend to the actors and have money left over for other costs. More financial help is provided by supporters, and grants from organizations like the Outdoor Art Club give the company a huge boost. This August Mill Valley Market will feature Curtain Theatre as its Nonprofit of the Month. The City of Mill Valley provides the park for free—a generous act—and once the stage set is in place, no one asks to take it down.

Jamin Jollo (left) and GreyWolf in *Two Gentleman of Verona*, 2022. Photo by Russell Johnson.



A BRIGHT FUTURE

In recent years the company has benefited greatly by the participation of Steve Beecroft, who directed *Henry IV Part I* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, and is directing this year's *Romeo and Juliet*. Steve happened upon tryouts in 2009 while walking through the park, and ended up with a leading role in the play that year, an original musical by Vicki Siegel, *Hot Night in Ephesus*, one of only three non-Shakespeare plays Curtain has mounted. As a volunteer, Steve coordinates with Parks and Rec, raises money, produces, and personally deposits 500 flyers in mailboxes. Company member Nic Meredith is company treasurer, runs front of house and is "the voice of reason." Michele Delattre is artistic director and Don Clark is music director. Mill Valley web designer Greg Wilker has remastered the company's online presence (curtaintheatre.org) and Steve Coleman continues to design the sets. The 2023 set, based on a town square in Verona, where *Romeo and Juliet* takes place, will be built with the help of professional carpenters. The production will be placed in the Renaissance time period.

Steve Beecroft discussed his approach to the play, which will open on August 12. "In most productions they let Romeo and Juliet be the entirety. I want to create the environment in which they live that makes their coming together so remarkable. I'm thinking of a hurricane—they're in the eye, but they're bumping up against it. They're trying to cross barricades. And there are a lot more interrelationships to explore in the play than are usually tried."

When asked what he considered to be the most important fact about Curtain Theatre, John Leonard reflected, "It's that coming from a humble and fortuitous beginning, it managed to establish itself. These folks kept coming over from Berkeley to participate in productions and the community supported them. There's this Berkeley-Mill Valley connection for me personally because of my exposure to Shakespeare at John Hinkel Park, then Mikel and Michele and Don being East Bay-based. A lovely, serendipitous crossover between the two communities."

"We were so lucky that Mikel came first, because her experience was critical to shaping the notion of what Shakespeare was supposed to be like, the value of enunciation, the clarity in terms of choreography of movement. All of these things don't just happen by themselves; they have to be elicited. Michele has similarly been very hands-on when she's directed. I like to have women directors because they get at the experiential arc that is involved in one of Shakespeare's plots, what characters go through. The people in *As You Like It* are not the same at the end of the play as at the beginning."

"The comedies, as opposed to the history plays, feature reconciliation as a theme at the end. Somebody or somebodies are creating a problem and the plot revolves around how that is going to be solved, and the community schism is taken care of in that resolution." John, who has worked in many ways to enhance community in his hometown, may have created his most lasting legacy in Curtain Theatre.

Don Clark largely attributes the success of the company's 23-year staying power to Steve Coleman. "His vision of the



Miko Sloper as Caliban and Julia Todhunter as Sprite in Mikel Clifford's 2002 production of *The Tempest*. Julia, an artist, wrote recently of her experiences with Curtain Theatre: "It felt like magic, and I've always sought to keep that kind of magic a dominant force in my life, in all the ways in which it can take shape." Courtesy of Andrew Todhunter.

park and what it can be are central. He would articulate every year that we were in a park and the play needed to reflect the place and the park, and he made sure the set didn't cover up too many redwoods. The Curtain is outdoors and intimate at the same time. You can get away without having mics, and people can really focus even though there are cars and people within hearing and sight."

Michele Delattre summed up what has made her return year after year to take part in productions: "It's really a magical space. It's this home—over the decades it's become a home for actors who come back year after year. There's an element of adult summer camp. We all have this real love of getting together. The emotional life of these plays is new to the younger actors, but they really start to understand by doing it."

"My favorite thing is to watch the children who come. They sit in the front and you think they're going to last 10 minutes and go off to play in the park—but they're so rapt. We watch how they are drawn into this live story that has sword fights and dancing and great costumes and bigger than life characters. They're sold. I think it will change their lives. It's very moving to watch."

That brings us back to the three-year-old child in 2000 who came to three performances of *As You Like It* dressed in costume. The next year Mikel gave her the part of the Indian Child in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. For her costume, a sari store on University Avenue in Berkeley made a miniature turban to size. The following year she had three small parts in *The Tempest*—a Wave in the shipwreck scene, a Harpy, and a Sprite. Her name is Julia Todhunter. She is 26 years old now, a 2019 graduate of Reed College, and the music of Shakespeare's poetry still rings in her ears.

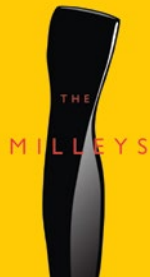
This article weaves interviews with John Leonard, Mikel Clifford, Steve Coleman, Michele Delattre, Don Clark, Chloe Bronzan, and Steve Beecroft with the author's own recollections. Thanks to Andrew Todhunter, who provided details about his daughter's experience with Curtain Theatre.

2019 Milley Awardees from left: Phil Pastuhov, Karen Benke, Lorin Rowan, Bob Burton and Robert Holmes.



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Dick O'Hanlon (right) installing his sculpture outside the Mill Valley Library in 1967. Photo by Pirkle Jones.



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