

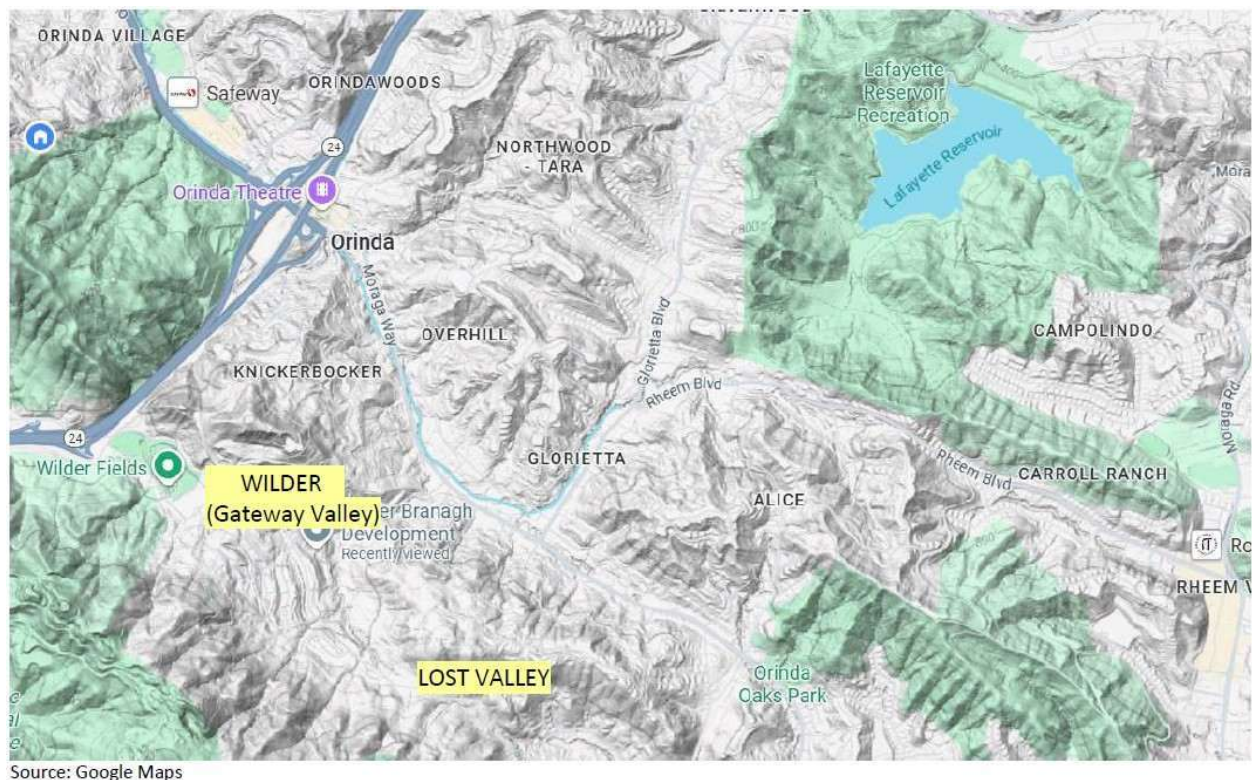
Oral History Interview: Lost Valley and Gateway Valley

Mimi Wilson and Reg Barrettⁱ

Interviewed by Vivian Ricci, Orinda Historical Society

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Background: Lost Valley and Gateway Valley are two adjacent natural areas in Orinda. Gateway Valley, which many now know primarily as Wilder due to the subdivision built there, was the subject of a decades-long grassroots movement to preserve open space. Beginning in the 1980s, local residents organized through Save Open Space Gateway Valley, and eventually working alongside the Golden Gate Audubon Society and Sierra Club fought development proposals. Their sustained activism resulted in a historic settlement that preserved over 1,300 acres as permanent open space - one of the most significant environmental victories in East Bay history.



Vivian Ricci: I'm Vivian Ricci, a volunteer with the Orinda Historical Society, and today we have Amelia "Mimi" Wilson and Reg Barrett with us. We're going to be talking about Lost Valley and Gateway Valley and their experiences with both places and also their history of living

in Orinda. So, I'll just kick it off with Mimi, if you could tell us a little bit about yourself and your experiences with Lost Valley and Gateway Valley and a little bit about your life here.

Mimi Wilson: I moved into Lost Valley in 1963, renting a house because I had two small children and the oldest one was ready to go to school. Del Rey School is down here. And what we discovered was not only was the house great, but the whole surrounding area was perfect for kids to play outside. It bordered all open space, cattle ranching just on the edge known as Gateway Valley, and that's how I got to be here.

Vivian: Okay, Reg.

Reg Barrett: Okay. I'm Reg Barrett and I moved here in 1950. My parents built the first house on Crestview Court and although I was only in third grade and started my school at Glorietta, the next year I was at Del Rey. So, I was in the first class at Del Rey and we hiked from Del Rey up the hill to Crestview Court every day with my two brothers. I guess we'll get into more detail, but we spent most of our time running all over these hills.

Vivian: That's great. Mimi, could you tell us a little bit about this "Growing Up in Lost Valley" collection that you're donating to the Historical Society?

Mimi: Well, the reason I got involved in Gateway Valley was because my kids and all the other kids in the valley enjoyed the open space. They used the valley as a playground. What we discovered when we got involved in trying to save the land was there were quite a few other people that we didn't know about that also considered it their playground.

So, several years ago, the kids of the '60s and '70s—my two daughters—every time they get together they talk about growing up in Lost Valley. So, I wrote to as many as I had addresses for and asked them to write a page about growing up in Lost Valley and I put them all together in a book. Some of the essays are quite lengthy. Some of them are four pages and some of them are a paragraph. So, I thought the Historical Society ought to have a record of these. So, I'm keeping this book for a while, but I have donated the pages to the Lost Valley. And really, they're the ones, that's why we saved Gateway Valley.

Vivian: That's wonderful. And thank you very much for your donation.

Mimi: You're welcome.

Vivian: And Reg, maybe if you could tell us a little bit about what made Lost Valley so fantastic to grow up in and to play in and also how that affected the direction your life has taken.

Reg: Well, it's amazing. Now, kids don't have an opportunity to do anything like what I had an opportunity to do. My brothers and I spent most of our time outdoors, as you can imagine, with three little Dennis the Menaces. My mother kicked us out at every opportunity. But those were the days when nobody locked their house. We were the only house up on the hill and we'd just go out and we'd cover as much country as we could cover, little kids. But can you imagine today a third or fourth grader carrying a shotgun around these hills? There's too many houses and too

many people looking out the window and they'd freak out. They'd see these kids shooting guns and everything over that kind of country. Anyway, I have all kinds of stories we could tell about how much trouble we got into, but it was a wonderful time and we basically took care of ourselves. I spent so much time all alone and today most parents would probably go crazy in Orinda thinking of their little kid wandering around Orinda with a gun.

Vivian: Yeah, I think they probably would.

Mimi: Yeah. The overriding theme in these stories from the Lost Valley kids growing up is freedom. Kid after kid wrote about the freedom to go out the door in the morning and roam all over, play with friends, get mad at friends, go say, "Okay, goodbye," and then go home, get something to eat, leave as long as they were home for dinner at dark. Every parent had a different call—a triangle, a bell, a whistle or whatnot. But they roamed all day. They came home from school, got cardboard, slid down the hills because we don't have any snow. But they had the freedom to do that. And that's what we parents and grandparents feel is missing in kids today. And that's why Gateway, where the Lost Valley kids used to go up and sleep overnight, you know, 100 feet in from the edge and think they were out in the wilderness. That doesn't happen anymore.

Vivian: No.

Mimi: No. But it was worth preserving it so the kids at least can roam on most of those acres.

Vivian: That's wonderful. How did your lives in Lost Valley affect your activities with the Gateway project?

Mimi: Yeah. Oh, because I'm sitting on the edge. As I say, it was everybody's playground. The adults all walked up there too. It wasn't just kids who went in. The first threat to Lost Valley, which is a dead-end street, so it's a contained community, was the bypass from Highway 24. Caltrans owned property along the west side of Gateway Valley and planned to put a bypass from the freeway in coming right down Lost Valley Drive. That was in the '70s. So obviously we got involved in that one. Caltrans ran out of money. But they still owned the property and it came back and this time they knew they couldn't get it through Lost Valley, but they were going to dump it off at Miramonte High School, which wasn't too popular. So we began to get involved knowing they were going to try and do something with Gateway Valley.

No developer locally would touch it because it's a wind tunnel and it's on the Hayward Fault and it has power poles and whatnot. But a developer came in after Ed Daly. Ed was the head of World Airways and he and his wife had some disagreements. So he moved the headquarters of World Airways out to Gateway Valley. He was in a trailer out there. And when he died, instead of willing the property to the Park District, his wife said, "No, I'm going to sell it." And she sold it to the first developer. And the first meeting was held at Del Rey School in 1988, and the developer came in with these grandiose plans and that's where it started. The next meeting was at this very table that we're sitting at.

Vivian: How did you feel when you saw those first plans? And Reg, too—your feelings when you first saw those plans.

Reg: Well, I'll have to admit I've been in favor of holding the population of Orinda at about 10,000, which is what it was when I first showed up. And it's about double that now, I guess. But I'm not happy about having more people in Orinda. And of course, we're up against that whole exercise again. They want to put high-rises and stack people up just like in Gaza.

Vivian: And your thoughts, Mimi?

Mimi: Well, the neighbors in Lost Valley and on the street that goes down to Del Rey School got together because we would be the most impacted. It's called NIMBYism, which sort of has a bad reputation, but who else? I mean, somebody in Sleepy Hollow's got their problems of what's going up. They're not going to initially come to help us. So, we started with two groups. As we began to see and get people more involved, my husband was on Parks and Rec and the Orinda Association. Reg, I don't know when you came on the Regional Parks Association, but I think that's where we met.

Reg: No, I met you because you kept asking me for money and I gave you about \$100 a year throughout a number of those years.

Mimi: You did. I appreciate it. We got started. Well, we began to see we had to spread out in all of Orinda and we had a young woman who was willing to put together a one-page newsletter and we called it the Golden Eagle because there was a nesting eagle right on the edge up there. It's still there last I heard.

Vivian: Wow.

Mimi: Not the same eagle obviously. So we began to distribute this newsletter and we began to have friends who distributed in their neighborhood. The upshot was we did a monthly newsletter for five to six years to close to 6,000 homes in the mailbox or on this side of the mailbox distributed by 125 people in their own neighborhood and that got the word out.

Vivian: That's amazing.

Mimi: And that's why when we had the referendum in one weekend, we gathered the signatures to qualify it because these 125 Golden Eagle deliverers all went out to the same people they put newsletters in their mailbox and said, "Sign the petition." A hundred people came back with 10, 15 signatures in one weekend.

Vivian: Perhaps you could tell us a little bit about the referendum, what caused the referendum, what it was about, what kicked the ball off and then how your group and the citizens of Orinda reacted.

Mimi: By this time, we were on the third developer, Pacific New Wave, which is headquartered in Japan somewhere. I presume Tokyo. And they had money, lots and lots of money in order to

get their development through. They were willing to spend their money, but the City Council approved a plan of 27 holes of golf, a hotel conference center in the quarry. I can't remember the exact number of houses, but it was close to 600. And the City Council thought, gee, that would be great to have that hotel there. And 27 holes of golf. Pacific New Wave thought they would fly people in from Japan to play golf besides local people. Brook Shields and Agassi were going to move in or something. I don't know. Great things.

So, we knew we were up against a tough fight, but Pacific New Wave was so over the top that we managed to qualify the referendum. Pacific New Wave sent everybody in Orinda a video of how wonderful it was going to be. But Orindans weren't fooled and Orindans generally appreciate the space that Orinda allows them and so it was overturned.

Vivian: So this was the City Council vote, the 3 to 2 vote to allow Pacific New Wave to move on with their development and then that's what was overturned by the referendum. And then with the grassroots movement and all of your organizing beforehand that put the people together and informed the community, the vote was overturned. How did you feel when that happened?

Mimi: We were absolutely delighted and by that time Golden Gate Audubon had joined us. So had Sierra Club and so the resources from there, both of their membership and financial, helped us too. And yes, we asked Reg for money and we asked everybody for money because there were costs, printing the paper and that sort of thing.

We knew that it wasn't over. I mean, that particular plan. We tried every which way to get somebody to buy it. By that time Pacific New Wave wanted \$23 million or something. So we knew we had to start over again when Farallon, which is a management company, came in to buy it. And they got the picture and were willing to sit down with three groups and fight through a plan that everybody could accept. And that's what we did for two years with lawyers and came up with what's known as the settlement agreement.

The settlement agreement said no golf course. It also said originally 225 homes, but if they bought mitigation land outside of Gateway, they could go up to 400 homes, which they have. They bought property which is now part of the Regional Park District. So, please go out and enjoy that new park off Pinehurst Road. And so that's how we finally got to a settlement agreement. The settlement agreement, if we promised not to sue or fight the development at the City Council, and they don't build the golf course and they go back on—or not go back but do certain mitigations plus extra land—the three groups would receive \$1 million.

So, the three groups signed the agreement, wrote up an agreement between the three of us about the million dollars and that million dollars is still invested, held by the three groups because the Gateway fight is not finished. There are 400 and some acres known as Indian Valley which is an extension of the Gateway Valley. That money is seed money for that. Indian Valley is a priority conservation land in ABAG (Association of Bay Area Governments). It's high on the master plan of East Bay MUD (Municipal Utilities District) to acquire. We do not yet have a willing seller. But so the Gateway fight to save open space land continues.

Vivian: You know with Indian Valley I think we have a local author that's written a book on sites in the East Bay and that area has some of those old grinding stones in there. So that's important to preserve. That's fascinating.

Reg: Now can I ask, maybe when did the red-legged frog show up?

Vivian: Oh yes, the environmental impact. Sorry about that.

Mimi: Right. I mean, this is a 30-plus-year-long story and it's very hard to go in order. It came up when because the Pacific New Wave development required both the Fish and Wildlife and—no, Fish and—yes, Wildlife, the state agency for Wildlife, California Fish and Wildlife and the State Water Board, no State—I don't know, I've let it—they came in somewhere in the Pacific New Wave era.

Vivian: Okay.

Reg: Well, I only participated really in two ways. One was sort of the politics and getting signatures and donating a little bit of money, but the other significant way I participated was I was involved with Friends of Orinda Creeks at that time and of course they were going to cover the creek in 80 feet of soil which didn't go over well with the Friends of Orinda Creeks. And also at that time I was looking at the quality of creek water in all the little tributaries of the creek. And it turned out, you know, just by accident, I collected a red-legged frog up there behind Orchard Nursery.

And that became known and then we had to have a meeting at Del Rey, I believe, or maybe it was maybe it was Miramonte, but anyway, the Army Corps of Engineers, you know, with all their uniforms and everything, and it was all very military. And so I had to testify that yes, I had this red-legged frog and I had a picture of it and so on. And then the consultants that the developers had hired I knew professionally and they were trying to knock me down. They were trying to tell me that, you know, I didn't know a red-legged frog from anything. And so we had a little bit of a go-around over the red-legged frogs. But eventually the Army Corps of Engineers agreed that yes, red-legged frogs were an issue and so they had to—part of the mitigation I think had to do with dealing with red-legged frogs. Anyway, that's my little story.

Mimi: There's also whip snake habitats.

Vivian: I was going to ask about the whip snakes.

Reg: I didn't find any whip snakes though.

Mimi: Well, whoever came out, Nicole Kozicki, who was Fish and Game at that time, she did a thorough, wonderful job and she found all kinds of things on the property which had been sitting there except with cows on it for all the years. Originally, it was settled by a Portuguese family.

Vivian: Oh, okay.

Mimi: Who also timbered, I think. Amelia Marshall's book on East Bay Hills, is a wonderful story about the whole property. It goes down now and includes Canyon.

Vivian: That's fascinating and I don't think we have a copy of that at the Historical Society. We'll have to look into that. So anyway, you mentioned and Reg mentioned the frogs and the whip snakes and Amelia has donated quite a bit of the documentation from this fight and I remember seeing in there some Army Corps of Engineers and some of these environmental studies which are actually on file now at the Orinda Historical Society for people that want to research in depth the fight for Gateway Valley. So that's one thing to note that Amelia has donated that to us.

So, okay, Reg, kind of digressing a little bit, but your path in life has moved a little bit from when you were little and catching maybe the red-legged frogs to when you were older and catching the red-legged frogs. What have you done that involves open space and wilderness and habitat since then?

Reg: I got interested in the outdoors early on and as you know as we've been talking about here and through high school I was more of a beer and girls and hot rod guy. And by the time I got to be a senior we took a field trip into Berkeley to the Museum of Vertebrate Zoology and a professor named Starker Leopold gave us a lecture about what a wildlife biologist, wildlife manager, wildlife ecologist, all that stuff, what they do. And I said, "Wow." You know, by that time, my dad had told me I really needed to wake up and decide what I was going to do in my life. And I said, "Wow, that's it. I'm going to be a wildlife biologist."

So, I asked Leopold, you know, where do I sign up? And he said, "Well, what's your high school grade point?" And I told him, he says, "Well, you go to Humboldt and if you ever get your act together, come back and see me."

Vivian: Oh, that's great.

Reg: So, I did and I did. So, I ended up getting a PhD under Leopold at Berkeley.

Vivian: Oh, that's amazing.

Reg: But it was a long road. Had to actually buckle down and work.

Vivian: Well, that's good.

Mimi: You know, Reg, he was instrumental in starting Regional Parks Association.

Vivian: Oh, I know, right?

Mimi: So what goes around comes around and Reg sits on the board of that.

Vivian: That's great. One thing I find fascinating about Orinda is the legacy of people passing the information on from generation to generation. I know we have nuclear physicists in our

neighborhood that have shared their knowledge with local kids and I know one of the kids has grown up to work at Los Alamos, and it's a son of one of our board members. One magical thing about Orinda is how people do pass the knowledge on and share.

So, we talked about golf courses and houses, and I don't know if we mentioned this yet, but wasn't something like 80% of the land originally designated to be in the Gateway Valley development left as open space as opposed to golf course or whatever it was originally intended to be?

Mimi: Well, it was always—originally all the developers from the first one came in with golf course plans. Golf was very big in those days. They should be very grateful that they haven't put a golf course in there because it's not so popular anymore. But no, that was part of the settlement agreement. Not the city's development agreement, but the three environmental organizations' settlement agreement. No golf course.

Vivian: Okay. And can you repeat for us again the three environmental agencies?

Mimi: Golden Gate Audubon, Sierra Club, and Save Open Space Gateway Valley, which was the local group.

Vivian: Great. Thank you so much. I'm looking at this and I had in my notes that your efforts had gone on for over two decades, but we were talking a few minutes ago about it actually being three decades. So, can you tell me a bit about keeping that momentum going? How you managed to do that for so long and then what's left to be done? Either one of you.

Mimi: So, how come you're still interested?

Reg: In my mind, you're Mimi the bulldog.

Mimi: Oh, I didn't mean that, Reg.

Reg: But you don't give up.

Vivian: You still give her the \$100.

Reg: That's still—

Mimi: No, but what keeps you interested?

Reg: What keeps me interested? Well, like I think I mentioned earlier, Orinda has too many people in it right now and the idea of trying to pile more on top of each other, you know, that's not going to happen.

Mimi: Orinda is unique in that it is relatively small. It has lived with the Gateway open space for always, even if there were cows on it and cowboys and people were sort of used to it. People in Orinda have all the regional parks right on the edge of Orinda. So they treasure open space. The

Golden Eagle alerted everybody in Orinda, whichever side they were on. So Orinda became very much—after five years of being aware of this and once you participate at all in something whether you deliver Eagles or go to a meeting or give a contribution, you're invested in it and you make new friends. And so all those combinations together have perpetuated the continued interest in the Gateway Valley.

And now that people—some people are aware that a group left over from that is trying to extend the open space into Indian Valley. So it's still going on.

Vivian: Fascinating. That's wonderful. Is there anything else that you'd like to cover? I think you answered most of the questions, if not all, that I initially had for you and now's the time.

Reg: I got lots of stories about what it's like to grow up with three Dennis the Menaces, but I don't know if we want to put that on tape or not.

Mimi: And I've got lots of stories about all the things that happened, good, bad, and indifferent. Yeah. About the Gateway Saga, and I'm glad the Historical Society is appreciating that. What we didn't mention was the friendships that developed out of working together for a common good. And how well I knew Orinda streets after that. Pat and I distributed packets of these newsletters to people. So once a month we drove every street in Orinda and learned to appreciate the variety even in Orinda and people who treasure an empty lot behind their house let alone open space. So there is a strong feeling in this town of working together for a common good.

Vivian: That's wonderful. Another one of those things that makes Orinda special. Well, personally and on behalf of the folks that I hope are listening to this, I want to thank the two of you for your efforts. A 30-year slog and what you've done. It's gorgeous when we get out and about in Orinda and it's something that we have to thank the two of you and your compatriots for. Hundreds of other

Mimi: Orindans could not have done without it. That's the important thing. I mean it takes a village to raise a child and it takes numerous villages to save 1,300 acres of open space.

Vivian: It's wonderful.

Reg: We are very lucky to live here in Orinda. I've been around the world and there's no place better than Orinda to live as far as I'm concerned. Got the right weather, the right everything. Yeah. You know we're very lucky to live here.

Vivian: You won't get an argument from me. Okay. Thank you very much, Mimi and Reg. I appreciate your time and your help with this.

Mimi & Reg: Okay. Thank you.

ⁱ Amelia "Mimi" Wilson:

Co-founder, Save Open Space (SOS) Gateway Valley

President, Regional Parks Association

William Penn Mott, Jr. Volunteer Award recipient (with Pete Wilson)

Reginald "Reg" H. Barrett:

Professor of Wildlife Management, UC Berkeley College of Natural Resources (1975-2014)

Treasurer, Regional Parks Association Board of Directors

California Interagency Wildlife Task Group representative (1980-2000)