



Transcript of Video Interview with Martha Clyde, recorded May 2010.

This interview is part of Earth Alert's Heroes of the Coast video archive, featuring interviews with leading California coastal activists, past and present California Coastal Commissioners and Coastal Commission staff. For more information, visit www.earthalert.org.

The interview with Martha Clyde was recorded for the documentary *Stories of the Spill*.

Janet Bridgers (JB): Your name and how you describe yourself, what we would say, "your occupation."

MC: Martha Clyde, and I'm retired. Well, I guess I wouldn't say retired. I'm a widow. Well, let's see, what more can you say. I'm interested... I used to be an artist, but I'm no longer active in the art world, but I was very, so I consider that one of my accomplishments, being in art shows all over the country. Now I just mostly, well, one of the volunteer jobs I do here is tell people they have packages, because they say, "oh, I didn't expect a package," so they never look and so that's one of my volunteer hours. We had to write our hours that we volunteer in this facility. This is a retirement place. And so we all have to volunteer as different things.

JB: So looking back to 1969, how old were and what were you doing at the time?

MC: Well, I was born in '17.

JB: 52?

MC: Whatever that is.

JB: So in 1969...

MC: In 1969, I was 52, and what else did you ask me?

JB: Well, you were married to George Clyde.

MC: Yes, I was married to George Clyde, and he was on the board of supervisors, Santa Barbara board of supervisors, so he had to cope with the oil spill.

JB: Can you say that again, in one whole sentence? In 1969, I was 52 and I was married to..

MC: In 1969, I was 52 and I was married to George Clyde who was on the board of supervisors and was there when he had to cope with the oil spill problems.

JB: Do you remember where you were and how you first became aware that the spill was happening.

MC: Yes. We lived at Miramar Beach and right on the beach. Well, there was a lawn, so let me think. How did I know? All I know is that when it did happen, the beach was covered with oil

and everything was covered was oil, and the smell was so terrible at our house that I think we moved. I'm not sure if we moved out for a while, because the smell of the oil was so strong coming into our house and, of course, saw all the dead birds on the beach.

And then they hired jailers from the county jail to come to try and rake up... First they put straw down to absorb the oil, and then they hired the jailers with their yellow uniforms and raked up the straw and put it in...they put it in some sort of containers to take away to the dump. So that was a big job.

And then we went down to the harbor and saw all the boats were covered with tar and all the breakwater boulders, and it was just so sad. And the smell of that oil was so terrible. And it really stopped the waves in front of our house because the oil was so thick that waves couldn't form and break.

And the birds! Oh, that was so sad seeing all the birds covered with oil! Now what else?

JB: So tell me how you felt.

MC: Oh just sick! Just sick about it! It was just the most terrible, terrible event to see and we were right there seeing it every day and night and where the people up above that weren't on the beach weren't as aware, weren't as affected by it. It was just a news story for them. But at the beach it was just terrible.

JB: And you told me that someone important came to visit. Tell us the story about President Nixon coming to visit.

MC: Oh yes. President Nixon came, but that was not right away. We were upset that he and the Congress weren't as upset about it as we felt they should have been. And so, finally Nixon came. I think George may have talked to him, or called and said somebody's got to come out here and see this, because we're going to have to get help...money for clean-up and all from Congress. And so Nixon finally came and went down to West Beach and I have the picture there in the *News Press*. And my husband was in the picture, too, and several other people who were important in local politics. And then he went back and my husband went back to Washington to testify about how much help we needed from the government for the clean-up and the cost of it. And also, that was when the environmental group GOO was formed. Well, I'm not sure when GOO was formed, but I had friends who were very active and started to, when they went back to Washington, to get them to realize that we had to do something about the oil derricks to stop them from spilling.

JB: Were you involved in any of the clean-up activities or with the birds or anything?

MC: No. That was just impossible. I don't know how they did that. I don't remember now. Out at the zoo they had a cleanup place. I mean they do clean birds and things there, and there's another group that does that, too. But I'm not sure. I wasn't involved in that.

JB: And then, in the months to the years after that, were you involved, or was your husband involved in any of the activism that developed in Santa Barbara?

MC: I can't remember. I don't think he was as much involved as Lois Sidenberg and Bud Bottoms. They went out on a boat to try and keep them from drilling more and she was very active. And nobody wanted to deal with her. She was such a troublemaker. But I think George had to deal with all the other county issue when he was supervisor. And I would go with him to all the meetings in Carpenteria and all around his district. And they had a lot...now they send a helper out. They don't go in person, the supervisors, the way they used to in those days. He didn't have an assistant the way they do now, so he would go himself. And he enjoyed going to the different communities and meeting with them.

JB: In the years that were close by, there was an effort statewide to pass a proposition, called Prop. 20, to create the Coastal Act. Do you remember that campaign?

MC: No, I don't remember. Some of my memory isn't too good anymore. I'm sure I knew about it then.

JB: But from what you remember, how long did it take for things to come back kind of to normal?

MC: Oh, in May, it would stop, and then it would come back again. Oh, it was a long, long time, at least a year that the beach would have different stages of it coming in again. See, it was out there, and then it would come in again, and then it would go out and we wouldn't have it for a while. And it took a long time.

JB: And you described how it was, what happened with your feet.

MC: Oh yes! Originally, they said, "oh, there's always been oil on the beach...tar." I said, "yes, but it was just shiny blobs that you could walk on the beach and avoid them." Then after they put the dispersant in, they were tiny little pieces and you couldn't see them really to avoid them. You couldn't walk on the beach without getting all over your shoes, so we all had kerosene to clean off our shoes if we walked on the beach, they would always be covered with tar, with this new, tiny little pieces on the beach and they were all over, so you couldn't avoid them, whereas the original tar you could avoid. It wasn't all continuous. It was just in spots.

JB: How long did that last?

MC: I think it's almost still true. You don't find the original blobs of tar anymore on the beach and if there is anything, it's those little pieces still and that comes from...there's an oil well out on the coast, up the coast, by UCSB, and they're talking about putting more now. And so it's still, there's still spills now and then and they say, "oh well, they don't last long and don't worry about them." But it's still an iffy proposition to put an oil well that won't have some spill or effect.

JB: How would you say the 1969 Santa Barbara oil spill affected your life?

MC: Oh, greatly, greatly! It was just a day in history that we'll always remember that spill because of...well, the President of the United States coming out. It was just a day in history that people would interview us about it and it was just a major event in our lives.

JB: Did it change the way you think about the environment?

MC: Oh yes! That started the environmental movement. Before that, there wasn't any. It started the environmental movement. Let's see. I knew the people. I think it was Lois Sidenberg that started it and they were very much involved with Keep Oil Out. And they started that environmental...[sic] that really started it and there was the Environmental...what's it called? Council, Environmental, they're still active and it grew to...Hillary Howser was one of them and she's involved with cleaning the creeks now, keeping the creeks clean. Well, the whole environmental movement started after that. There wasn't any interest before that.

JB: Do you feel like you're part of the movement?

MC: Well, I wasn't politically going to the groups and things. No, I wouldn't say that. I was just interested and backed them and gave money to them.

JB: What, in your opinion, today are the greatest threats to the California coastline?

MC: Well, the surge I was so worried about, the earthquake surge, and that, if it really comes to Santa Barbara, that's one thing I really worry about is an earthquake. We've had very bad earthquakes. It was 1903 was it? There was a terrible earthquake here. And the surge could come all the way for several miles up to the bird refuge and inward, because all that's been built up in the lower side of Santa Barbara was a slough once and they filled it and built buildings on it, but it really is a great big lake, almost going up to the high school, quite a ways up. So a big surge and earthquake would really go all the way halfway through the town. So that really worries me. Earthquake—all the time I worry about earthquake and what I'll do. I've planned in here to go under the table and in my bedroom, there's nowhere to go, I'm just going to cover my head with blankets and let 'er roll.

JB: What advice do you have for young people with regard to the environment and with regard to the coast...protecting the coast. Let me rephrase it. What advice do you have for young people in this area with regard to keeping Santa Barbara as beautiful as it has been?

MC: Well, you elect city councilmen that are interested in it. That's been very important, and on the board of supervisors, too, people who are interested in that. And sometimes they aren't.

JB: That's a really important statement, so could you say that again. "It's important for young people to know that they need to elect..."

MC: It's important for young people to realize that they must elect people in different political roles that are interested in the environment.

JB: I'm going to have you say it once more.

Toby Younis (TY): It's important for young people to elect public officials that care as much about the coast as they do.

MC: It's important for young people to elect public officials that care as much about the coast as they do.

JB: If you were asked to head up a blue ribbon commission....

MC: I'm no longer interested, because I'm too old to get.

JB: But we're playing pretend. We'll pretend you're 50 years old again, and the time machine went backwards and they appointed you to the county commission, instead of your husband, what would you do?

MC: No, I always lead from second place. I never was good at that sort of thing. That's why I married my husband. He was so good at those things, taking active roles.

TY: What we're going to do now is we're going to switch up some things and we're going to give your husband a voice.

TY: Martha, tell me your name and what your relationship to George was.

MC: My name was Martha Knight and then I married George Clyde and he was my husband.

TY: Thinking back to 1969, what was George doing at the time?

MC: He was on the board of supervisors. He'd been elected in '64 to the board of supervisors, which he was very pleased to do.

TY: Tell me about the day that you walked out of your house, looked out at your beach and saw it covered with oil. How did that make you feel?

MC: Oh, of course, it was just terrible, just terrible! But even worse was the smell. Oh, it was so terrible! And I just thought, and saw the dead birds, and the whole thing and I thought this is just beyond comprehension. What can we do?

TY: And when George came home that night, what did he tell you about what he thought about all of this?

MC: Well, the same thing. He thought, "oh, this is terrible. We'll have to do something about it. I'll have to see if I can get the President interested in this problem."

TY: In the days immediately after the spill, he was probably pretty busy. What kinds of things was he doing?

MC: Oh dear, let's see. Oh, I just don't know. Just whatever the board, making resolutions, and getting help to come down and clean the beach. They had to get the prisoners to come. And he was involved in seeing who could help clean up and what they could do about all of the dead birds. He was involved in getting somebody that could do that sort of thing.

TY: He was a public official, so it was very difficult for him to be active, in the sense of an environmental activist, but being a public official, he had a lot of power and responsibility to change things. How did he feel about environmental change as a public official?

MC: Well, he felt that it was very important and that a lot of other politicians were not, and did not, because their money was in with the oil companies. They were sympathetic to the oil companies and what they were going to lose in this. And they didn't want anything to be law against building more platforms.

TY: What made him think about bringing President Nixon to the area?

MC: Because that would emphasize that it was a national problem and that they needed help and political help of the government to make laws about the environment.

TY: Did George ever tell you how he felt about the visit from President Nixon?

MC: Oh, I'm sure he did. I'm sure he was very pleased that he could come and emphasize and the picture was on the news and in the paper of Nixon on the beach and with George.

TY: How did President Nixon's visit change the situation?

MC: Well, when he went back he was more aware of laws that must be passed and to emphasize that, George went back to Washington to speak about how important it was to regulate the platforms and, hopefully, not have any more built. And there weren't for many years.

TY: What year did George pass?

MC: It was '96.

TY: He sounds to me like a very practical man, a very smart man.

MC: Well, he got Alzheimer's in his older age, so that was sort of sad.

TY: And I want to give him some voice here, because he's important to this project, and so you have to speak for him, and you have to take all your collective knowledge of him, so when I ask you if George was addressing a class of high school students and he asked them to think about some of the more important things they could do to protect the environment, to protect the coast, what would he say to those high school students?

MC: Just to be...he would tell the young high school students to be aware of the environment—the whole environment—because it's so important in our lives.

TY: Say George was alive and he was helping in all the ways imaginable, and he had the opportunity to meet with President Obama, and he could tell President Obama the most important thing that you could do for us in terms of the environment would be what? What would he tell President Obama to do for us?

MC: Oh dear. I have to think about that.

TY: What was important to George about the environment?

MC: Well, the oil...I think that the oil spill down in New Orleans certainly we felt was going to change all the national rules on oil spill and...was Obama president then?

TY: Yes.

MC: And he didn't go down fast enough to please people, so the next time for the floods, he went right away down to New Orleans to look at that and see it because he realized he'd been a little slow with the oil spill.

TY: So what advice do you think George would give President Obama?

MC: Just be aware of the environment and act on it as soon as you can. I thought you were going to ask me about being a black president, having just watched last night the march to Atlanta on TV.

TY: I try to do my best to ignore that he's a black president and just say he's a good president. Is there anything else? We good?

JB: We're good.

TY: Thank you. That was very nicely done. We loved what you did with that. It's going to look very good.

MC: My memory isn't very good.

TY: You know your memory is good enough that this will be a significant part of the documentary.

[end of interview]

