



Transcript of Video Interview with Sylvia McLaughlin, recorded April 2008.

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Sylvia McLaughlin Interview April 25, 2008

Janet Bridgers (JB): We're here on April 28, 2008, with Sylvia McLaughlin, at her home in Berkeley. And Sylvia, you're going to tell us how you became involved in what became Save the Bay. So starting at the beginning, how did you know Kay Kerr and Esther Gulick?

SM: We all had university affiliation. Kay's husband was chancellor and later president of the university, and Esther's husband was a professor of economics. Esther knew Kay and I knew Kay and then I became acquainted with Esther, so that's how the three of us were together.

JB: Did you also have an affiliation with the university?

SM: Well, I was a member of committees of one sort or another.

JB: So in January 1961, the three of you called a meeting with regard to the bay?

SM: Yes, it was either in January, or sometime in December. Anyway, this was up at Esther's house, because the three of us had gotten together before that and decided something should be done. So the first thing we did was to call a meeting of all...they were known then as conservationists. The word "environmental" "environmentalism" wasn't in use at the time.

So this was Dave Brower from the Sierra Club and John DeWitt from Save the Redwoods League and so on...and Mary Jeffers from the Audubon Society. And they all agreed that something should be done. We told them what the situation was. And they agreed that something should be done to save the bay and a new organization should be started. They filed out and it was just us.

JB: You showed us this poster over here and said that the City of Berkeley had plans to fill 2,000 acres...

SM: The reason we became involved were two-fold, and these diagrams describe the reason. One was that the City of Berkeley had this plan to fill almost 2,000 acres of open water, to essentially double the size of the City of Berkeley. And the other was this article that came out in the Oakland Tribune with a diagram showing... and this was the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and they had done this study that showed that almost 70 percent of the bay was shallow enough to be filled, that is, economically, of course. And this diagram showed what it would have looked like had that occurred. But we were really very concerned by this prospect.

And then we also realized that there were many other cities, developers, airports, ports that also had very massive bay fill plans. And so we figured the only way to really address this situation was to have state-wide legislation.

JB: So how did that transpire? In the article from last year's Earth Day, this great article by Harold Gillam, said the organizations did give you their mailing lists.

SM: Well, we had our own Christmas card lists, and so on. And then we asked all our friends to send their lists. And a lot of the other conservation organizations also gave us lists. So we just wrote a very simple, one-page letter asking our friends, and friends of friends, to join this new organization. The fee would be \$1, and we also included this diagram. And I think people were shocked to know that this could happen. And for some reason, they took the bay for granted and thought that there was no danger of it's being filled, as this showed. So we essentially did a big education, had a big education program going in various different ways. We had films, we went out and gave talks, and so forth.

JB: That was part of your specialization, right, giving the talks?

SM: No. That was part of a learning experience.

JB: And Kay...

SM: She did most of the writing.

JB: She did?

SM: And Esther was the glue that kept us together. She was very methodical and kept the books, and things like that.

JB: And you enlisted the support of scientist on the impact on fisheries?

SM: Yes, we enlisted the support of people that were well-versed in business and economics and natural wildlife and birds and fish, because the bay is a very complex organism and there are many different values and people that are involved and so on. And we also always talked with the various different agencies that were involved, and the cities, counties, so on. So, as I started to say, I think the most important thing that we achieved was the establishment of the regulatory agency, the Bay Conservation and Development Commission, commonly known as BCDC.

JB: That was a long process though.

SM: Yes. Well, we enlisted the help of Senator McAteer. First it was a study commission, 1965, and then in those days, the legislature only met every other year. And so then in 1967, they recommended...well, in 1965, they recommended there be established this organization, this regulatory organization, which it was in 1967. And then in 1969 was made a permanent state agency by the state legislature. And that was quite a very hard fought battle, because all the developers—would-be developers—naturally didn't want to have this regulatory agency.

JB: And so that provided an income stream also for BCDC, to fund it, it's work? Did the legislation create funding?

SM: Oh yes, I guess so.

JB: And Joe Bodovitz became your executive director?

SM: And he had lead the study commission as well. He and Mel Lane, and then Mel Lane was asked to be the president of this new organization, BCDC, and Joe was the executive director. They worked very well as a team and they later moved on to the Coastal Commission.

JB: And this was very important because this was the first time that an agency had been charged with slowing or opposing development?

SM: Couldn't say slowing or opposing...it was really regulating proposed developments. There were several things that were required by the would-be developers. They had to provide public access. There had to be...BCDC's jurisdiction was 100 ft. inland and there were various other regulatory things that the would-be developers had to abide by. And so... and they would have come before the commission. And then the commission wanted some changes made, they would have to make changes and so on to their plans. So it has worked very well.

JB: So when I remember hearing about the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake, the great damage...

SM: The [unintelligible] bridge...

JB: The great damage that occurred in that, or one of the areas of great damage was down in the Marina, because it was all fill, right?

SM: Well, the same thing happened in Alaska when they had the earthquake there. I forget the term now...

JB: Liquifaction?

SM: Yes, thank you? The same thing occurs when it was just on filled land. And the same thing is happening now with the university stadium was built on filled land. It was at the mouth of Strawberry Creek. And that's another battle that we're waging right now, because there's a lawsuit right now about whether or not the stadium should be built there, and rebuilt essentially. And also whether or not this proposed athletic center should be built right next to it. But it also has to do with being built on fill.

JB: Those earthquakes don't happen very often, but when they do, they sure...

SM: That's right. The stadium is...well the Hayward Fault goes right through the center of the stadium, and some of us think it would be rather irresponsible to rebuild it right there when the Hayward Fault is supposed to be the one that will go off next, we've been told "any time within

the next 30 years.” Well, the geologists have been saying this for quite a few years, so it can happen any time.

JB: How has it happened that there’s now more acres of bay than there was before? It is just the action of the water that erodes the shoreline?

SM: No, this is because of BCDC’s requirements. And...then to a certain extent, some of the former areas that were intended to be filled, the barriers were knocked down and so the water could come in. That happened a lot in the south bay, so that’s how a lot of the acreage has been increased of the open water. There are still a lot of problems with the bay, and there always will be. As my colleague, Kay Kerr, has said, “the bay is never saved. It’s always a process of being saved, and the process changes over time, according to what the needs are.”

One of the big problems, now, of course...maybe you were going to ask me this...the various toxics that come into the bay from all sort of sources, and...then there’s still proposed developments have to be dealt with.

But I think that one thing that has occurred over time is that the business and corporate world has become aware that it’s to their advantage to have a bay that’s clean and attractive. It brings people here, and people like to live in a house with a view of the bay and so on. It increases the value of the real estate. So essentially, even the Bay Planning Coalition, which is representing the maritime industry, they’ve become quite environmentally oriented. They also realize that it’s to their advantage to have esthetic...it’s an esthetic advantage to have a clean and workable bay and not have it be filled in.

JB: There are times, in another part of the country, when the bay becomes very big news, and that happened very recently with the oil spill in the bay, when the tanker hit the bridge?

SM: Oh yes!

JB: And there’s really a response worldwide with regard to that. But tell me what your feelings were and how you think they responded and what should be done to improve...

SM: Well, I wasn’t too close to the issue, though it was really very damaging to the bay, of course, and there are a lot of arguments about whether the response was the way it should have been and so on. I think it was kind of a wake-up call that how things should be addressed. And I think another plus that’s happened all over the country is that formerly all the bay fronts, lake fronts, river fronts were regarded as sort of a place to dump garbage, sort of the back door to the cities. Now the cities that front on these bay fronts, lake fronts, river fronts, ocean fronts realize that they are an asset and so they want to preserve them and to have them be as attractive as possible. So that has been a movement that has happened all across the country in the last quite a few years. So it’s just a change of attitude.

JB: And I read, too, that Save the Bay has become part of a larger nationwide estuary preservation movement.

SM: Oh yes, and David Lewis, who's just celebrated his 10-year anniversary of being our executive director, "our" being the Save the Bay. He goes to meetings of that organization. I think there's an advantage to discuss things of mutual interest, because I think ours is the largest estuary on the West Coast, but there are other estuaries in the country and they all have similar problems. So it's an opportunity to not only discuss them, but to be able to inform the legislators about what should be done.

JB: I love hearing stories that stand out in your mind...moments that were particularly wonderful, or terrible or funny.

SM: I think the most memorable one is Esther and I were sitting in the gallery in Sacramento at the meeting of the Assembly where it was being decided whether they should go for the "Save the Bay" bill, as it was called. It was very close. The bill won by one vote. And we were very fortunate to have some very good people in the legislature at that time. Howard Wave (sp?) from Fresno and Peter Behr from Marin County too. And likewise with regard to the State Lands Commission and the Attorney General's office. There were some very good people there who really had the welfare of the bay at heart and were very helpful in...both in the legislation and the decisions that were made regarding bay-fill plans.

The state entered the lawsuit at Berkeley against Santa Fe and then...Santa Fe Land Development Company, sort of an offshoot of the Santa Fe Railroad, which owned pretty much the east shore, so they claimed. And then also, there was another big lawsuit that the state entered called the West Bay Community Associates. That was in the south bay. That was made up of David Rockefeller, and some of this associates, Crocker Land Company, that owned San Bernardino Mountain, and Ideal Cement that owned some of the land underneath the water for the shells. And an investment company, Les Arthur. So we entered these lawsuits as "friend of the court," representing the bay.

In all these instances, both these instances, the State Attorney General's office prevailed and I think that was because the just outstanding people they had as attorneys.

JB: You were talking about that moment when you were in the gallery and you won by one point. Were you just kind of shaking?

SM: Oh yes, we were holding hands. I mean we'd been up to Sacramento so many times, going to hearings, getting people up there on buses and so on that it meant a lot to us. And the legislation was so important. And Reagan was governor then and he signed the bill.

There were three bills and at first he supported the weakest bill, then the next one and finally he was supporting our bill. So that was very nice. I was there when he signed it. And that was pretty exciting, too.

JB: You talked...there was a story in this article about Kay Kerr's use of the word "environment." Could you tell that story?

SM: I don't know what he's talking about.

JB: (reading from....) The first person I heard use the word “environment” in the sense we know it was Kerr. John W. Gardner, a former cabinet officer and later founder of the reform group Common Cause had made a speech at UC Berkeley’s Wheeler Hall on problems confronting the nation. Kerr, who had known him socially, charged up to him afterward and said, “why didn’t you talk about the environment.” He was obviously taken by surprise and could only mumble.

Were you familiar with her using that word, “the environment?”

SM: Oh yes, of course. And as I say, ours was largely an educational endeavor. And sometimes it was people like John Gardner and sometimes it was school children. We just tried every which way to make people aware of the bay and the threats to the bay. I guess the word “environment” covers all those things. And of course, now it’s used in all sorts of ways. You have all different kinds of environments.

JB: Something that Bill Kortum said last night, that Janet Adams became involved. Did you know her?

SM: Oh yes. She and Claire Dedrick had this group. I think it was...I don’t quite remember the name of it. It’s in one of those papers I gave you to read. They were sort of a p.r. group and they helped a lot when we were trying to get the legislation passed. We all worked together. In fact, there was a sort of an umbrella group called “The Alliance to Save the Bay.” And it included all the other organizations like the Sierra Club, the Audubon and so forth.

JB: And then did that alliance become part of the Prop. 20 effort, the initiative in 1970?

SM: Oh, I don’t know. Sometimes these groups form for a need and then they kind of disappear.

JB: Tell us what you remember about what images or situations come to mind when you think of David Brower. Did you know him very well?

SM: Oh yes. I knew him. He used to have these Sunday breakfasts up at his house and he’d be busy making waffles. I think he really liked to have young people around and have them get to know each other and that was sort of the way he did it. And he’d come and talk. It was all extremely informal. But he was one of the major forces on environmental issues at the time. He and Ed Wayburn and Amy Myer. They were all very very important at that time. I mean they went to Washington and they spoke to all the people who were decision makers and so on. Dave was a wonderful speaker. He had a great facility with language and with one-liners. Nobody has come anywhere close to having the skills that he did, giving talks and so on. He could get people really energized, stirred-up. I was very glad that I was able to know him.

JB: Are there any other people who stand out in terms of the early circles... Well, tell me about your friends, Kay and Esther. Tell me about their personalities.

SM: Well, we all were individual. Each individual is different, but we all had this one common cause and we all worked together for that. We tried to put any differences aside and just worked on that.

You asked regarding other people...Bill Mott was very effective. He was our president and then he was asked to be head of the parks—State Parks. And also Norm Livermore, “Ike” Livermore, who was head of the Resources Agency. He was very helpful. And this was under Reagan. So we were very fortunate to have those individuals in those particular offices at that time. So much, when you’re trying to achieve something like that, so much depends on the individuals that you deal with. We were very fortunate, as I say, in having some really very helpful, wonderful people that we were working with.

JB: What this article by Gillam (sp?) describes is “this is the first time that a grassroots endeavor changed the course of what they called ‘progress.’”

SM: Well, Harold Gilliam says that we started this whole environmental movement. Maybe that’s a little bit too strong. But it was a grassroots movement, very much so. We just started here in Berkeley. We turned the Berkeley City Council around. They decided they weren’t going to have this enormous fill and they were going to have most of it for parks and recreations. And it was at that time that I also became very interested in the shoreline parks. That’s what I’m working on is to achieve more shoreline parks, because we felt that people needed shoreline parks for recreation and it was much better to have views of the bay through a park, rather than have buildings on the edge of the bay.

JB: Tell us more about that. What areas specifically are you working on? Where do things stand right now?

SM: All the shorelines, all around the bay. The cities were very concerned about having shoreline parks and that was something that Save the Bay tried to help promote. So it was...it did become...although we started in Berkeley, it became, very soon, the BCDC legislation became a bay area movement. And then, I think, we had other people from other areas of the country come and ask us how we’d become organized and so on. So they would go back to their part of the country and do something similar.

So essentially Save the Bay became a model of a grassroots organization.

JB: And certainly BCDC became a model for the Coastal Commission.

SM: Absolutely, BCDC was the first regulatory agency for the coastal area and so they, too, served as a model for other organizations all across the country.

JB: If you were to offer unsolicited advice to people becoming involved in environmental issues, what would you say to them?

SM: Be passionate about the issue, be persistent, be determined. I think that’s what we all had at that time, and still do. And I think now...over time organizations change, and I think that’s good.

Save the Bay now, that BCDC is taking care of the bay fill and public access issues, they are doing a lot in the way of education and there are many groups that go out on... Save the Bay takes canoes... the Canoes and Sloughs program. They take teenagers and teachers and so on to teach them about the bay and have a hands-on experience with the bay. And then also there are many groups now that are restoring the marshes, restoring the wetlands, restoring the creeks and this is almost another movement for the restoration of the bay and it involves many more people. And I think it's felt if people are involved in that way, particularly if they're young people now, they will be the voters of tomorrow and they will be the stewards for the maintenance of the bay.

JB: I think that's a great concern generally that we no longer have a world where you can let your kids roam around unsupervised, and climb hills, and ride bikes and go to the beach all by themselves. So this is a great thing that this movement is doing is getting them out into nature.

SM: Oh yes, I should say. The kids always seem to enjoy it and it's very constructive work. And they do this in all parts of the bay. There's a big group down in Palo Alto. And Bear (sp?) barrier (sp?) Island and complete the refuge south [unclear]. A lot of these refuges have expanded and people have become aware of the importance of wildlife and natural areas and want to see them preserved and expanded. So this is a real... natural national resource and I think people are aware of its importance and want to preserve it now.

JB: How many members are in Save the Bay now?

SM: I don't know. You'll have to ask David Lewis.

JB: Maybe when we come back, we'll interview him.

SM: Well, we had membership in the thousands, from all over the country, because Save the Bay, the San Francisco Bay meant something to them, such as does Lake Tahoe and some places that people have never been to or seen. It was just important that they become involved in its preservation. So I think that's one of the aspects of our organization, too. We get lists of people from all over the country. For example, we have a lot of people from the New York area, and probably many of them have never seen San Francisco Bay, probably, and never would. But they thought it was important to preserve.

So there are a number of places that people feel strongly about that probably would never get to, but just want to be sure that they're there for those that can come see them and enjoy them.

JB: It came probably 20 years later, but do you know about the Heal the Bay movement in Los Angeles, Santa Monica Bay.

SM: Oh yes. I'm good friend with Dorothy Green.

JB: I've interviewed her several times and she's wonderful, too.

SM: Oh, I should say.

JB: But she talked about people having a relationship with water in general, or a body of water.

SM: Maybe you saw the article in Vanity Fair. We were...it was a double page. It was in last spring, maybe April, and Dorothy and I were in that picture. We were called the eco warriors. But there, too, they had a little bit about what each person had done. There were about seven of us, I think. Again, some came from different parts of California, well, like Dorothy Green. But she's done a wonderful job, and still working at it.

JB: She's expanded to larger watershed issues.

SM: That's what we're trying to educate people about, too, trying to save Strawberry Canyon. That's a watershed. Strawberry Creek goes into the bay. It's all connected, so we've learned. And the bay is connected to so many other things, too. Such a complex body of water. And so I think this is all part of the learning experience.

JB: How have they managed to prevent a lot of trash from getting into the bay from stormwater runoff? Do they have collection points for, you know, all the Styrofoam cups...do they treat storm runoff?

SM: I think there are several groups that are working on that now. There's Citizens for a Better Community, I think it's called. And various other groups are now a bit more scientific than Save the Bay and they're working on the problems of toxic waste going into the bay, because it's been a big problem always, but I think even now more so, because we have more people. It's likely we'll have an even larger population around here in the future. So this is very important for everybody to try to keep their all their waste from going into the bay in whatever way might be possible. You just have to think about it a little.

Now water is becoming THE big issue. And people are going to have to figure out how to use less water, because we won't be having as much water for all these various different uses.

JB: It's going to come as a shock to some people. "I can't stand in the shower for a half hour?"

SM: Oh no.

JB: If you can think of anything you'd like to mention? What's been the most fun for you?

SM: Oh, I enjoy it all.

JB: You enjoy it all.

SM: And I think I've particularly enjoyed knowing the various other people that are involved in this. I still see Kay Kerr. She's now 96. She doesn't go out, but she likes to talk about what's going on. She's very sharp still. And it's also very encouraging to see so many young people that are interested in environmental issues. And the fact that they are becoming part of the political scene is very, very important. We vote for candidates who are pro-environment and I think that has made a big difference and I think that's going to continue.

Well, I look out on the bay. I feel very fortunate to have a view of the bay and I'm just so grateful that everything turned out the way we had hoped. We had this vision, which was quite different from the reality of what was happening. So that's what we were working toward, and it's just really very gratifying to see that it actually did happen. And there's the bay and we can look at it and enjoy it. It serves many purposes and one of the chief things about it is it uplifts our spirits, it's just a pleasure to see and people enjoy it. So that's very very important.

It's been a pleasure to talking with you.

JB: So you encourage people to dream big dreams?

SM: Ah yes! Absolutely! I think that's the only way that you can achieve what you want to accomplish is to think big, as they say.

[end of interview]
43 min.