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BOB BENSON

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Oral History Transcript of Bob Benson

Interviewer: Clark Grant

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Transcribed: March 2020, by Adrian Kien

Bob Benson: My name is June. What's yours? So what, beginning?

Clark Grant: Well, let's go back over where you started talking about your grandparents.

Benson: Oh, Ok. So my father's family is all from Sweden and they immigrated. His parents immigrated together and he was born in New York Harbor. So he was a citizen when they were not. Important family detail there. My mother's mother was born in Massachusetts on a farm and so were her sisters. And they died on that farm, dairy farm. So they were born here. It was their parents who immigrated. And my grandfather was Irish. And I don't know whether his parents were here or weren't or whatever. And my grandmother got in big trouble for marrying a Catholic. So her family wouldn't speak to her. But they got over that. That's all I know. Oh, my sister, of course, being Mormon knows where every Benson and Carlson ever in the world lives now. So she went on a pilgrimage to Sweden. I just can't imagine someone showing up at my door. "Hi. You don't know me, but..." Please, go away. Anyway. So she knows back beyond that. But I don't know it. Okay. I'm sure I could find it out if I was willing to go through it, but I'm not.

Grant: You were talking about before we got interrupted your grandfather's polio.

Benson: Oh, yes. So my grandfather was a cabinet maker. He was self-employed and he got polio when my father was 16. And so my father took over his cabinet making business because he really had no choice. He had a younger brother and two sisters and his mother and his father. So he took over the cabinet business, which is kind of neat in a way because he wanted to be a professional golfer and apparently was very good. Our family owns many trophies.

Grant: This is your father?

Benson: Yes. But he gave it up to go into the cabinet making business, which eventually became a building business. And he was very successful. And I always thought, even as a kid when I didn't know much. Of course, I always knew a great deal. But anyway, he kept my grandfather working and I thought that was neat. My grandfather was paralyzed on his right side, his arm, and he limped. And so he couldn't really do much. But my father didn't let him be a vegetable. He consulted him, took him to all the jobs to bid, whatever it is. And my grandfather, I remember, would be in the basement, painting screens and storm windows. We're from New York. So it's cold. And I remember that he would put his right hand on the screen to hold it and paint with his left hand. But he did something.

He contributed to the business. And I thought that was really neat. Anyway, so my father turned it into a building business and he was a successful builder and a fire chief. Thank you. And we had the first fire chief car ride in New York. Anyway. And there you are. You know, I'm sure he

was hoping for a football player who would take over the business and instead he got a showgirl. But life goes on.

Grant: Can you elaborate on that?

Benson: I mean, like, what's a showgirl?

Grant: Yeah.

Benson: Well, you know, I mean, he's an ordinary straight middle class guy. And I'm sure he wanted an ordinary, straight, middle class guy. And he got...Am I being controversial? And he got a queen. What my youth, my flaming youth. Anyway. Well, it can't have been easy?

You know, I mean, really and truly, he always stood with me, though. I thought that was neat because not a lot of people would or could or were able to, whichever it is. But, you know, he retired to Florida with all his friends from Rye, New York, and they're all talking about their sons doing this, their sons doing that. And his contribution would be my son is doing a drag show in Fresno, California. I mean, I don't think that's quite where you want to go. But he went there.

Grant: Rye, New York.

Benson: Yes. And where is that? It's 45 minutes from Broadway. Thank you, George M. Cohan. It's a suburb of New York. It's 45 minutes from Broadway. It's in Westchester County. It was. It is a very affluent place. It was a very affluent place. A lot of New York theater people had lived there, as well as the Rockefeller's and the DuPont's. And all these people had to estates. And it was, my sister agrees, it was a wonderful place to grow up if you had to grow up. It had a high school that looks like a college. When people drove through, they all thought it was a college, WPA project. Praise the Lord.

We had the most fabulous stage with an orchestra pit. Yes. We were so lucky. I mean, we went to student operas. Yes. At the Met. Not at city hall. And you know, to have the washer woman sing in the lead. But it's a real opera and it's at the Met. And it was a matinee. But I saw Aida and La Boheme. And three, I can't remember the other one. And I saw Snowfall. I was so excited about that. Anyway, it was a wonderful place to grow up. We were we were probably the lowest down the food chain who could afford to live in Rye. Because my father owned the business. His workmen could not afford to live in Rye.

We had no black people on the south part of Rye, which is where I was, which wasn't good. It's just where I was. We had two schools, grade schools. And ours had no black people, and needless to say, no Mexicans, nothing like that. We had Italians, praise the Lord. Anyway, I had a terrible crush on George Lucio. But that's neither here nor there.

So then when we went to junior high and high school, we were in the same place. So when we went there, there were two black girls who. And they were the daughter of the postmaster who could afford to live in Rye. And I forgot what Lillian's father did, but anyway. And we never saw black people, we knew about them, but we never saw them. And it's one of the things I think is a flaw in the education we received (although, we received a fabulous education) is they kind of taught us everything was okay. You know, we had a civil war. It all got fixed. And now

everybody's equal and it's all divine. And that's how we thought it was. But we didn't have any. There were no black people in Rye to not be divine. I mean, you know. And Connie and Lillian and I were best friends right away because I was a fag and they were black. And what more do you need? But they never taught us to hate black people, which I think is neat. We never learned to hate anybody. Really. And that was, I think, it maybe was by omission. Maybe because there weren't any, nobody thought to tell you shouldn't like him. I don't know.

Lots of Jewish people. All my friends were Jewish. Nobody ever said, don't go to those people or whatever it is. And again, it was a blessing because they were theater or TV or radio or recording people or authors or producers or whatever. And that's where we learned by accident about the red list. What's the name of that list? The Communists. McCarthy thing. The Red List? No. Some list. Whatever list. The Blacklist, I guess. Anyway. We didn't fully understand it, but my friend Deborah Ehrenberg, her parents were both writers in New York and her father was blacklisted, but her mother wrote under a pen name. So she was blacklisted under her real name, but not under her pen name. So she could still write children's books under her pen name. But all of these people were having financial troubles because they couldn't work. Peter Sterling's parents couldn't work.

They were both in radio. They lived in a part of Rye, which was called Red Hill because of the communist thing, because they all lived there and they had terribly modern houses. They were just fabulous from the 50s. It was a road that went up a hill. And all the houses were modern because it was a new thing. And Deborah Ehrenberg's father, Deborah Stoller's father, whose name was Ezra Stoller and he was then and still is a famous industrial and architectural photographer. And his photographs are everywhere, in the DWA terminal and all these things. They had a to-die-for house. But he could work because they didn't get into blacklisting photographers. So he, I mean, it was sad times, but they were all Jewish. I got to eat matzo balls and all this stuff.

It was lucky that we grew up where we did. We just were. It was a great education. And Rye, the people in Rye, they had some guts. We had a Latin teacher. Imagine that. And her name was Miss Gnat. Thank you. And someone started the thing that she was a communist. And the school board said she's staying and she stayed. And they didn't get rid of her. And it was a neat time. It was exciting. And it had a curtain on the stage that I pulled endlessly. Can you imagine that? When I got there, that was first thing I wanted to do. And I went to the theater guy, Mr. Cock, and I said, "Could I pull the curtain?" And he said, "Oh, poor disturbed thing. Yes." And so I did for about two hours. I pulled the curtain fast and slow. And I was in heaven right there, baby. Just show me Radio City Music Hall and that contour a curtain and I'm happy.

Grant: Did you feel that the communist threat was something real or did you know it was?

Benson: No. It was...Well, we had that bomb shelter stuff, but. I think my father actually...It was all a fortune for all of us because my father did work for the DuPont's or whoever they are. So it was...He had men that were paid to put up and take down storm windows and screens. That's what they did. And he built us a house. I think half to scale of the big house for one of those families, for the kids to play in. Which was quite fabulous. It had working toilets and sinks and it was a real house, only it was half the size of the big house. So there was a lot of wealth there to

hire people to do things. And so he was good at what he did. But it was a good place to be doing it.

Grant: But there was no substance, really. You knew it was a political stunt, I guess, McCarthyism? I mean, obviously it affected people's lives in a real way.

Benson: Well, it did. We didn't fully get it. But I always remember, being a girl for detail, that Debra Ehrenberg. So those modern houses, most of them had linoleum, asphalt, tile floors, squares, and a square was missing. And I always noticed that as a kid, I thought, why don't they fix that? I mean, you know, it was like right there in the middle. And I realize now they couldn't afford to fix it. That's why they didn't fix it. But I don't know. We didn't. Our high school did Finian's Rainbow, a musical. And it's about...In our high school, it was about sharecroppers. And they are trying to get their own farms or whatever it all is, you know. And so our music teacher, who was wonderful people, anyway, he took us to Long Island to see another high school's production of Finian's Rainbow. And in Long Island, it was about black people and white people. And we thought they rewrote it. They didn't rewrite it. We rewrote it. But we still didn't. We thought it was because there were more black people on Long Island so it worked out better for casting it. We didn't get the bad parts of it. I guess we were stupid. I don't know.

Grant: Insulated, maybe.

Benson: Insulated. Yeah, for sure. Insulated. I mean, I don't know, though, babe. I can't figure out where all this comes from. You know, I went to Northwestern, so I went from Rye to Chicago, so to speak. It was Evanston, but. I don't know, though, there wasn't. Oh, I do. My fraternity pledged an Asian that made the cover of Life magazine. Thank you. Sherman Wu. Sherman Wu. There was a folk song called Sherman Wu's Blues, and they de-pledged him because the Alumni, whatever they are, all got pissed off because they pledged an Asian. So they de-pledged him. So that made the cover of Life magazine.

But we didn't. I don't know. We just...we weren't like on a thing of hating people or why people hate people or whatever it is. It was naive is what it was. Privileged. Whatever you just said. Like that. I never thought not to be friends with black people. I never thought not to be friends with Mexicans or Jews or whatever the hell it is. I didn't care.

I cared about being gay. You know. I would have thought twice about bringing home a hysterical queen over a black person. I would have brought the black person home with much less pressure. But that's probably personal.

Grant: Well, I'm curious if you're willing to get into that a bit. And I'm curious how your parents took it when you first told them.

Benson: They said, "Oy." No. My mother died when I was 17. So she was kind of not there. It's quite fabulous. Anyway. They always knew. You know, I remember back. They knew. We used to go to Lake George every summer and stayed at the Trout Pavilion, the oldest hotel on Lake George, which has since burned, which is too bad. But anyway, George Washington did sleep there. Thank you. He really did. Anyway, there was a kid whose name was Douglas. And on good days I can remember his last name, but I can't remember now. I had the hot pants for him, something fierce. And, you know, I was only ten years old, not much. So anyway, we had

decided to go to his room. I'm not sure he knew why we were going, but I knew why we were going. And we went in his room. The hotel was rooms, doubles, or singles, or whatever, and bathrooms down the hall. It was like a 200-year-old building.

So anyway, he had his own room. He came with his mother. And so we were in his room and we weren't in there five minutes. "Bang, bang" on the door was my mother. She'd watched us and she knew what I was up to. She was going to stop it. And, you know, she said, "Why don't you come downstairs and do whatever it all is." But I realize now that she knew and she was crazed. One time I overheard discussion of sending me to military school. Oh, Mary, that would have been so pretty for the military school, but anyway. They didn't do it. And, you know, they said things like it would toughen me up, or whatever. I was upstairs. Not supposed to be listening, but I listened.

So I was at Northwestern and I was in my wanting-to-be-straight mode because it would be so much simpler. And I was pinned. I pledged a fraternity. Yes. And they, I think they did think it through. A friend said they did, I don't know. But anyway, I was gonna be a BQOC, Big Queen on Campus. And I was rush chairman, social chairman and steward of my fraternity. And it was my sophomore year and I was a pin to this girl whose father was a professor. Oh, Mary. Anyway. And every time we passed a hotel, she said she wanted to check in. And I thought, Oh, dear God, I can't do that. So. I all of a sudden thought to myself that it wasn't fair because I was wasting her time and screwing up her life.

Although, I mean, a girl has to know when you're doing her hair and making her dresses that something's not right. I guess I don't know, but she looked fabulous. Anyway, so I broke up with her. And I was, you know, kind of on the pier waiting. And I thought, this is not good. So I went to student health. So they said, I need to have my head shrunk, badly. So I called my father and told him that's what they said. And would he pay for it? He did. And I figured he knew why he was paying for it. You know what I mean? Anyway, I went to a wonderful head shrinker in Chicago. Uncle Nate. And he was really, really, I was lucky because there are some that aren't so wonderful. But anyway, took me a while. Finally, I said, I've decided I don't want to be straight anymore. I just wanna know what I am and why I am. And so a star was born.

Anyway. It was maybe a year that I went to Uncle Nate. My father came to visit me and I had a boyfriend at the time and my boyfriend's mother thought her livelihood was going to leave. So she called my father and told him I was a fag. I'm sure he already knew. But nonetheless, it was kind of a rude way to find out. And it was touch and go for a while. But we got over it. And, you know, he always treated me fairly. And, you know, whatever. There's a limit to what you can talk about because...we're out of grandchildren here.

Although, my sister certainly. Thirty-one great grandchildren. Thirty-one. Where are these people going to live? I don't understand this. I asked her once. I said, "Do Mormons have a plan?" You know, are they going to colonize Mars? I mean, honestly, wouldn't you think they did? They don't. She said, they don't. Where are these people going? I don't understand. There's like 3500 kids a day dying in the world. Let's have some more. I'm sure this egg will go further. I mean, whatever. I've got off the subject home.

Grant: That's quite all right. Yeah, well, so you said you eventually ended up in Fresno?

Benson: Oh, honey, we ended up everywhere.

Grant: Okay. Yeah. Well, I'm curious how what came next after Chicago. What did you study there?

Benson: Stage Design. What else would I study there? I had a professor. We were young. And also it's before that machine thing and all that. So my professor was gay and married, but I thought if you were married, you were straight. It didn't occur to me you could be both. And his wife was the costume professor, and he was the stage design professor. And he'd say things like, I had a friend that we used to call Prissy after *Gone with The Wind*, anyway, and Prissy was on a ladder doing something. And Dr. Gallop went by and said, "You certainly have a well-hung drape." And we thought, that's odd, but we still didn't figure it out, anyway.

So I left Northwestern after my boyfriend's mother told my father that I was a fag and everything and went to Denver where the Gallop's had retired. And they'd gone there to open an antique store and to work as designers for Denver costume. And so I went there and I stayed upstairs in their house in return for watching the antique store in the afternoon. And I worked at the design center, which was terribly modern furniture, in the mornings. And it was owned by an architect and the point of it was to furnish his buildings, but that's neither here nor there. So I learned all about mid-century shit firsthand - whoops- and also junk firsthand. The Gallops had a Hadley chest. This is very important. There's only like three Hadley chests in the world from early American Massachusetts, whatever it is.

They had one. And things went not well with Dr. Gallop. I didn't pick up on it. I'm so stupid sometimes. So a friend of mine that I'd met in Denver was going to San Francisco, open your Golden Gate. And so she said, I mean he said, if I would drive, he'd pay the expenses because you don't want to go by himself. And that he would pay one month, one month of rent and stuff in San Francisco and expenses for such things as cigarettes. Couldn't do without that. And for one month when we got there. So I said, what the hell have I got to lose? Because my belongings are sitting in the snow behind Dr. Gallop's house. So I went.

So we got to Salt Lake City and this guy who was Dutch, he was Dutch and his name was Menzo, or something like that. But I called him Memso because I couldn't pronounce his name. So anyway, we check into a motel, separate rooms. Thank you. And he has all this fucking luggage that I'm schlepping up to this motel room. So we're gonna go for dinner and so I go knock on the door and there she is in full drag. She's a transvestite. Oh, good. Could you have mentioned before I got in this car, Mary. So anyway. And, you know, I'm young and whatever. I'm just terrified that we were gonna be arrested because...But I think the secret was she looked so bad that no one would have thought she was in drag.

I mean, she had like human hair wigs that hadn't been done in 20 years, like, oh dear. Anyway, but she had me. She was an author. I never saw write anything, but she had a typewriter and she bought clothes for My Magdems or whatever it is and do-da, do-da. So anyway, we get to San Francisco after some very awkward pauses for gas. I will tell you that. "Get in the car, Memso. We're going!" In these Midwestern towns we'd pull in like "Mmmm." It was a standard shift car I couldn't drive. So when we pulled into those spaces, I had to go backwards. Not pretty, but anyway, we made it. It wasn't good on the hills.

So we got to San Francisco. We stayed in the Hotel Doyle on Van Ness. It passed for white. It was all right. Anyway, it was an old like a motel/hotel thing that was made into weekly or monthly rentals or something. So we stayed there.

Grant: Any idea what year this was?

Benson: Yeah. '59, maybe. '60. 1959. Not 1859. Anyway. So. We were there. And I was going, trying to find a job, and there was a queen that lived in San Francisco that we'd heard of in Denver. Believe me, you would've heard of her. Anyway. So we looked her up. Her name was Phoebe St. Clair. And she was secretary at the National Council on Crime and Delinquency. Having just gotten to San Francisco after serving five years for bad checks in Texas. Go, girl! See the blessing of not having an Internet. I mean, truly, truly. Right. So anyway, she was sweet. Wonderful queen. Anyway, so we were friends.

And I'm going to Union Square reading the want ads, because you didn't have to pay for a paper because people left them. And so I'm reading the want ads and going through all that grief you go through when you're a kid. You know, when you're young, showing up at those places where they're going to make you sell encyclopedias and thinking it's a real job. Anyway. So I met this really good looking guy. I don't know why. Anyway, so it turns out he's with the circus. Sounds like someone wrote this, doesn't it? Anyway, he or the carnival or something and. Right. So I don't know how it came up, but I told Mademoiselle...Oh. And I was underage so I couldn't go to the bars with her and she wanted an escort. She lived in drag. I mean she had like a wig with hair curlers in it to go to the market in and all this stuff. She was a real. A real. Transvestite, cross-dresser. Yeah, I mess those terms up sometimes.

So I told her I met this guy, so she said, ask him if he'll take her out to the bars. He was a nice looking man. A little Anthony Quinn, but nice looking man. So anyway, I asked him, he said, sure. So I arranged this date. He shows up. He looked really nice, a suit and tie, all that stuff. And Memso artistically slipped him the fifty-dollar bill to take her out. Like that. And that was the beginning of a fabulous romance right there. I mean, I was cupid, so I wasn't paying much attention.

Things were going along. I didn't have any money, but whatever. I mean, I was in San Francisco. It was the 60s. Everything was divine. So I got home one day and Memso said, Well, this is the end of the month. I'm leaving with whatever his name was. I forgot. And so you're going to need to find a place to go because you can't stay here, but you can have the cleaning deposit, which was 15 dollars. If you clean it. So I go buy me some comic cleanser, whatever it all is, with my few pennies. I clean it. I call the management and while I'm calling them, I'm having a cigarette sitting there. So when they came, they said it was fine, except the ashtrays were dirty and they wouldn't give me the deposit back. So I have Zippo. And I was never John Travolta looking or whatever it was. So I wasn't going to make it hanging out at Union Square waiting.

So I called old Phoebe St. Clair and I told her, Girl, I've got nowhere to live. "Oh, come on." She said, "Move in." So I did. And then she hired me to file at the National Council on Crime and Delinquency. And so one day a week, I went. So I had income to help pay the rent where she was living do-da. So one day a week I went and filed and we decided they were running out of filing. So another day, a week I went and unfiled. So consequently, unfiled on Thursday and filed

on Tuesday. It worked very well for some period of time. So anyway, Vera and I. Oh. So anyway, she was, Phoebe St. Claire, she was absolutely fabulous. Funny, funny, funny queen. And we had great times together. We truly did. So she decided we should move to a more suitable location.

So we moved to the avenues in San Francisco. Ninth Avenue and we saw an ad for a conservatory. We thought, how perfect. Right. So we went and it was Victorian, late Victorian house. There was a first floor that was rented by stewardesses. We were divine friends. And the second floor was rented eventually by us and a Japanese girl who had like a studio in the front. We had the back and it was called a conservatory, because Max, the old, I think Russian man who owned the building had a tenant who was an opera singer and she wanted a conservatory. So Max built her a conservatory. So we're thinking there might be a little of that going on, but I don't know. Anyway, it was glass. It was the most wonderful. It was like this, you know, like sort of straight wall, a roof, glass. The roof was glass; the walls were glass. Everything was glass except the supports. It was truly fabulous. You could see the Golden Gate Bridge. It was all that way.

So anyway, Vera and I moved in with the understanding that we were going to have to rent out to more people to afford the \$900 a month, baby. So there were two like bedrooms, but they weren't really bedrooms. I don't think you could have made it work as a rental these days, but they had shoji screens off the hall and they had twin beds. So Vera and I were not sleeping together, trust me. So we decided we needed to rent two more rooms. Two beds. The other two beds. So anyway, we decided to do that. And somehow or another, I met Jerry Sharkey, who was a piano bar entertainer at Goldman's Gay 90's in the artsy fartsy part nightclub, part of San Francisco, North Beach, North Beach. So anyway, he came to a party we had. We had the most fabulous parties. And he brought Mark and it was love at first sight. I thought, I'm going to marry that man. So anyway, Mark rented the other bed. And Vera tried. I said, "No, girl, he's coming in my bedroom. Not yours." She ended up with Rima Bird Girl. That's another whole story.

Anyway, so that was when the movie Auntie Mame came out. Oh, and the book Auntie Mame had been out and then the movie came out, whatever, whatever. So somehow I became Mame Dennis and she became Vera Charles and she's been Vera ever since. Name never stuck to me, but Vera stuck to her.

So I got a job as a florist on 9th and Clement Street at Pinelli's Flowerland. It's still Pinelli's Flowerland. The sign is still there. Anyway, Pinelli was an Italian man. His name was Fior. His mother knew he was going to be a florist because Fior is flower. Anyway, he and his mother emigrated from Italy and his mother lived upstairs over the store. By the time I got there, Pinelli was in his 60s probably. And he had a manager named Audrey. And I went in to buy flowers for some divine event we were having. And I said, I need carnations, but they can be number twos. They don't have to be number ones because of what I'm doing with them. "Number two" means crooked stems. She said, "Are you a florist?" I wasn't, but I said, yes. Because my next door neighbor's kid growing up had a [inaudible].

I'm sure I drove the poor things nuts. I used to go and help, and I'm sure I was just this hysterical six-year-old queen running around in there, but anyway. So I said, yes, I was a florist, even though I wasn't a florist. And she said, we need one. And so they hired me. And being a quick

learn, I did everything one step behind Pinelli. So I learned how to do it. Standing behind him. And so anyway, I forgot where we were going here. It was a good time.

Mark and I were in the beginning of a romance. It was good times in San Francisco. It was before Stonewall. And before the riots in San Francisco. It was...There were bad times. You know, whenever somebody was running for mayor, they'd raid the gay bars. They would have undercover cops that would come in and they'd, you know, sit at the bar, talk and then they'd put their arm around someone's shoulder. And if the other person put their arm around their shoulder, they raided it because it was illegal for men to touch. And so they raided it for being a bawdy house. And then they arrested everyone in it for frequenting a bawdy house. And then they started printing the whole name of everybody who was there in the newspaper. And that got to be a big problem because of the passing for white girls.

I sometimes think it would be neat if young gay people would know how those times were. And there were bad, certainly these kind of things, I mean, it didn't matter to me, what a florist is gonna get hysterical about this? But if you were on Montgomery Street working in an office, it mattered. But there was the other side of it, which was like going into a speakeasy in the 20's probably. There was a bar on Montgomery Street called the Black Cat, which is a famous, famous gay bar. There was this mad queen named Jose. And Jose did operas at the Black Cat every Sunday. She did them on the bar and she had a pianist and she would sing all the parts with various drag outfits. Doo-da Doo-dah. It was really...she became the Empress of San Francisco and she hung around forever and ever. But she was one of the beginning things. The Stonewall riots were on where the Black Cat was, the San Francisco version. And Jose was in there, fighting.

And then there was a gay bar. There was a famous madam in San Francisco. I think people today don't know about all this, which is too bad. Sally Stanford, she was quite divine. Anyway, they were always raiding her whorehouses and closing her up. And finally, the County Board of Direct, whatever it is, said she couldn't own property in San Francisco anymore. So she had a wonderful house that had been built by Stanford White for Anna Held. And it had a round tile fountain, whatever you wanna call it, in the middle of this glass roofed conservatory thing in the middle where Anna Held supposedly took her famous milk baths that kept her skin so gorgeous. This is true. And so anyway, Sally owned it. So she had her nephew. How do I remember these things? She had her nephew, Glen England, run it.

And it was a gay bar. It was a house. You went upstairs to get into it. It was a Stanford White house, so it was, you know, gorgeous house. But it was a little world that if you didn't know, you didn't know. You were really missing out on some really fabulous stuff because you didn't know. There was a piano bar entertainer named Gladys and Gladys had appeared in the Blackbirds of 19, whatever it was with Josephine Baker. Thank you. And Gladys was to-die-for. She was so wonderful. Wonderful. She had gained a bit of weight since the Blackbird days. And so she always entered the bar in a cape, and then her piano was in the corner.

So the dashboard, the keyboard was in the corner. The piano faced out. And this was because when Gladys took off her cape, there were large panel of spandex up the back of all of her dresses because they no longer fit. Anyway, she was wonderful. We just loved her. But who knew? You didn't. If you weren't in, you didn't have to be gay, but you had to be in that circle,

whatever it is, to know these people. Otherwise, you didn't know them. You kind of missed that thing, that kind of a sense of special, now when you can go on that machine and say whatever you want to say. It's not the same anymore. Anyway. Good and bad. Now, where am I going here? I've forgotten.

Grant: I was curious if you could elaborate more on the word "bawdy." And that was the legal definition?

Benson: Yes. "Bawdy." It meant sinful or, you know, raunchy or dirty or whatever. And it was "frequenting a bawdy house". B-A-W-D-Y.

Grant: And so homosexuality was overtly criminalized even in San Francisco.

Benson: Oh yeah. Oh yes. Oh yeah. Oh, definitely. I was arrested myself being a pioneer. But it was so bizarre. They were long days at Pinelli Flowerland from 7:00 a.m. to 7:00 p.m., six days a week. Thank you. And there was no overtime and shit and whatever it all is. I got two hours off for lunch from 1:00 to 2:00. And so I was going to lunch. I went to Golden Gate Park. And she should have never done that. And I was cruising the Arboretum, I think, is what it's called. It's kind of like the Crystal Paris Palace in London. It's a beautiful thing. Anyway, there was a bathroom next to it. Men and women and then like a storeroom in between for like lawn cutting stuff or whatever it is. So anyway. And I was cruising.

That's what I was there for. But there was nobody cute. Well, when I got there, there was a blow job in progress. So I left because I don't want to be rude. And so I left and I waited outside, sat on the hill, you know, as you do and whatever. I had a smoke. So I was there probably an hour. And so finally, I had actually had to go the bathroom. It was empty. There was no one in there because I was watching people come and go. So I go in and this guy comes and stands next to me in a suit and he's cruising me. But I'm not cruising him because he's not my type. When all of a sudden, the police burst in the door. They put the handcuffs on. Peed all down my lovely bell bottom pants. And they took us to jail.

So now we hadn't touched each other. Now he might have been looking. I wasn't looking because I didn't want him to think I was looking. So I don't know. But anyway, so it turns out they were inside that little storage room and they were looking through the vents into the two bathrooms. And so they saw us. And so our attorney said, hired by the Vanishing Society, thank you, our attorney said it was because he had a suit on, that they figured they could get the money, the bail or the fine out of us. I don't know if that's true or not.

So anyway, they took us to the jail in Richmond. Thank you. There was a very cute cop there. But that's neither here nor there. So then they took us downtown and that's kind of scary. I have to, I have to say that. So meanwhile, when I get one phone call, you know, so I call Vera Charles. Of course, who else do I call? At the National Council on Crime and Delinquency. So anyways, I said, "Vera, I'm in jail. So you gotta get me out of here." So Vera does two things. She calls the Manasheen Society to get us an attorney and she calls Pinelli's. And Vera, who has not told the truth about what time it is in her entire life, tells Pinelli I've been arrested in the bathroom in Golden Gate Park. Girl! And you couldn't think of anything else? What is it?

So anyway, we got out of jail. The Madasheen thing bailed us out. So they wanted a test case for the Supreme Court of entrapment and they wanted us to be it. But the guy that I was arrested with was a realtor. So they charged us with felony and misdemeanor charges. If we pled guilty to the misdemeanor, they dropped the felony. But if we contested it and took it to court, if they found us guilty, he'd lose his real estate license. And he was petrified. And what do I care? I mean, I don't want the guy to lose his real estate license. So we pled guilty to the misdemeanor and they dropped the felony. So the attorney for Madashine society says, "And you don't need to worry about it because it's always a \$50 fine and six months' probation." So it will be over in a hurry - doo-da, doo-da. So we go to court. It's all full of queens.

Must be Queens Day at court. So anyway, before this guy starts and the Madashine society lawyer says, "Oooo, it's a new judge." So the judge gets up there and he makes this long speech, which ends up with "I do not intend to see San Francisco turned into a Parisian paradise for pansies." I only hope he lived long enough. That's all I hope. Up yours, baby. But anyway. So we got a \$500 fine and six years' probation. Thank you. So for six years, every month, I had to go down there. You could pay it off. I don't remember how much a month I had to pay. But anyway, I paid it off and all that stuff. But I do, I always think when I would first see the gay pride parades on Market Street and everything, I thought, "I hope you're watching this you mother fucker, because you are losing this battle!" Anyway.

So I still stayed working at Pinelli's. And we had fabulous parties with flowers every Saturday night which were returned on Sunday morning. Thank you. Anyway. So Mark and I decided to move in together. And we went on a trip to Yosemite. Oh, see those old days, they're gone and it's kind of sad. Camp Curry was a place of cabins with like communal bathrooms. And Camp Curry was known to be the gay part of Yosemite. And the bathrooms were, I mean, like a Parisian paradise for pansies. There were nothing but gay people. God help you if you were straight and legitimately had to take a crap, because you couldn't get in there, honey. I mean, there were holes between all the walls. It was. It was. I mean, I think straight people should have had antennas to tell them, go somewhere else, girl. But anyway.

So on the way up, we stopped at a thrift store and they had soda chairs, Bentwood soda chairs, and they were a dollar each. And Mark and I both thought it was just fabulous and we knew we could sell them for five. So we bought them and we took them back to San Francisco after an eventful weekend in Camp Curry. And we took them to the flea market in San Jose and we sold them for five dollars. And that was it. We'd been in the junk business ever since. I tell you what. We've been together ever since. 56 years, something. Anyway, and been in the junk business the whole time.

So we left San Francisco. Why did we leave San Francisco? Oh, he left me. That was so really tasteless on his part. But anyway, not being a girl to be left behind, honey. I just followed. We went to Sacramento then to...he went to Reno. I stayed in Sacramento where I bartended a gay bar which allowed dancing. And no one. Nowhere. You know, gay people today don't know. Two men could not dance. It was illegal. Thank you. And truckloads of queens actually came from San Francisco and Los Angeles to Sacramento for the weekend to dance at the Log Cabin because you could dance. And when we knew everybody in there and we had someone at the door, you could touch dance. You couldn't touch dance. No, no, no. So and if we saw someone coming that we didn't know, we signaled the bartender and he flipped the jukebox. The song

changed and everyone knew they had to stop touching because the whole place would go to jail. So anyway, I was there maybe for a year.

Where did we go?

Oh, I don't know where we went from there. Oh, to Fresno, where we owned our gay bar called The Girl of the Golden West. Thank you.

Grant: You owned it?

Benson: Yeah, I'd seen that offering, you know. So the girl, the Girl of the Golden West, who, of course, was me, but. And we were there for a while. We did okay. Nothing great. I don't know why we moved to Palm Springs. Dear God, we've been everywhere.

Grant: That's quite a move.

Benson: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. And Palm Springs was flawless back then. It was those days, those Hollywood gays. There were such great stores and great people and a lot of gay people, but not that way it is now with those prissy old queen things. Not like that. There was a bar on the south side of Palm Springs, right near Cathedral City. Oil Can Harry's. I don't remember why it was Oil Can Harries, but it was quite flawless. And so we were in the junk business there. Like going to the swap meets in L.A. Whatever it all was. And then we moved to Santa Cruz and then we moved to Aptos, then Watsonville, then Moss Landing. These are all right there. And then Monterrey. And then Nebraska, where else would you go?

We lived in a little town in Nebraska. It was quite fabulous. We had an auction business. We bought the entire building and contents of whatever it is for \$5000. Thank you. And it was a town of 39 people. And when we got there, now, imagine, this is two queens in a Cadillac, an old Cadillac limousine with two poodles.

And we notice we're getting invited to all these houses for dinner where there are single girls. So finally, we've figured out...Oh... So we figured out we better be sure they understand because they're going to think we tried to take advantage of them when we weren't. So if it wasn't clear enough, we made it clear that we were gay. That was fine. No one gave a shit. Mark was the town marshal and I was on the zoning board. Thank you. But you know, bring us some business and some money and you're welcome. Thank you. And then oh, then we went. Where did we go? Well, back to Palm Springs, back to Fresno and back to Palm Springs. And here.

Grant: That's what I'm curious about. Why Butte and how?

Benson: Oh, yes. I was doing a wedding for...I was lucky all the time. We were lucky. I had good customers. Well, I'm good at what I do, but. You know how they say Jews are cheap? I worked for Jews all the time, they paid me what I asked. They paid me on time. Thank you. Good night. They never whined about it. Then, they say Armenians are cheap. I worked for Armenians. They never did anything like that to me. I don't know how this all starts. You know, I really don't. But, anyway, neither here nor there. So I had a customer, I ended up with about five good customers and that's basically all I did. And I did all their weddings, their kids' weddings. So they were having a wedding at Flathead Lake. So they left the house there and we

went up in September for the viewing of the place and to get everything lined up for the June wedding. So we went to Kalispell to interview caterers. So I'm talking to these caterers in Kalispell and I said what great buildings they had. And she said, "Well, if you like the buildings here, you'll love the buildings in Butte."

And I thought, "Where the fuck is Butte?" Because we came straight out from Palm Springs. You know, whatever that road is through the Salmon Valley and up to Flathead Lake. So I consulted a map. I saw where Butte was. I thought, well, we could go over to Butte and back over to Missoula and down. So we did.

Grant: And when would this have been?

Benson: 15 years ago. And we did love the buildings of Butte. That was Sven, the guy that was going to come up here that worked for me. So when we got back, I said to Mark, you could come up in the spring when we go up to actually do the wedding and we'll go through Butte and see what you think? Because we didn't like Palm Springs anymore. The charm, the blush was off that rose. It's just full of pompous queens. That's neither here nor there. Anyway, they're all fabulous and I'm happy for them. The one thing that was neat about it because of all that has happened. You could go into a gay bar like in Palm Springs and there's two old queens sitting there with white hair and they're sitting in a booth and they're holding hands. And, you know, they've never been able to hold hands in their whole lives. And I think that's really neat. But nonetheless, anyway.

So we came up here in the spring and we came over to Butte and he, too, loved the buildings. So we find a house or a building. We like to see this one. And its realtor is Alana LaRock. And then we find a store for rent and its realtor is Alana LaRock. And I thought, dear God, we have found two places we like. And they're both repped by what sounds like an ex-stripper. I'm all excited. So we called Alana and we made appointments to see it. And we bought it. We didn't rent the store, though, because...I do remember why. Anyway. And here we are. Packed up all our cares and woe, came up in the fall. The day of Halloween night. And it was snowing and I thought, "Oh." And here we are.

Grant: When you say junk, the junk business. Can you elaborate on that?

Benson: All this crap you see.

Grant: Maybe describe where we're sitting.

Benson: Oh, well, have you ever been to a bordello? No. Here's the thing. What it is is secondhand stuff. And you have to realize when this was the 60s. So the 60s, the stuff was still there. You know, if you look at old Hollywood movies, say, from the 40s or even the 50s. The things that are used in the sets, they could just walk out the front door of the studios to a junk store and buy it because it was only 20 years old or 40 years old, it wasn't a hundred years old and nobody wanted it because we want to be modern. There's a wonderful movie called Mystery Street with Elsa Lanchester, not Lancaster. Must get that right or Elsa will be pissed. Anyway, the set. She's a landlady. Ricardo Montalban, he's a detective. And he's like 12 years old. And he's really good. He does a really, of course, adorable, but he's really good. He does a great job. But Elsa Lanchester is the landlady of this apartment building and her apartment is this place. It

is to die for. There's nothing in it that isn't fabulous. It's just full of stuff. So when we got to San Francisco, and we were together, we saw some people taking stuff out of an empty house. So we went up there and we said, "What do you do?" They said, "You just take what you want." So I thought, well, this is divine. Of course, the good stuff by then was gone, but we found borderline shit that we wouldn't want today. But we were all happy about it. We took it to San Jose, sold it the next Sunday. This is it, honey.

So we started doing architectural salvage. We rented a store in Hayes Valley, which is hotter than a crotch now, but wasn't then. And we rented a store and I ran the store. Mark went out and got the stuff. So in the beginning, we would like go to city hall, see the permits to tear down buildings, go there. And in the beginning, you just took it. But then that was not pretty. So we would contact the demolition people and ask them and buy it and pay them and get it. Well, we got fabulous stuff. Some time I'll show you the pictures. We did the Alene House, which was a daughter of the Speckles Sugar Mansion type people, and they tore it down to build some hateful church, I forgot what it is.

Well, you know, it was probably fabulous, but anyway. There were these wrought iron, cast iron doors with windows in them that hinge. So the butler could open the window and talk to you, but the bars were still there. There were balustrades and columns. There was a stained glass dome over the center thing. But we couldn't get that because it was more than we were equipped to handle. And it wasn't worth the wrecker's time to do it. But there were columns on the front, three stories high with capitals as big as this table right here. And they knocked them down, but they gave us time to get them out before they took it away. We got two of them, which we sold to a wonderful guy in Santa Monica.

So anyway, he was getting the architectural stuff and another stuff, whatever it may be. And I was running the store. And those were kind of the glory days of a lot of all of it. Barbra Streisand was appearing at The Purple Onion. And one-time business was deadly. So next to her was Herb. Herb the Czar of Junk, who actually was called Bena the Czarina of Junk. But anyway, there were two of us together. So it sort of made sense for somebody to go there, you know. Otherwise, we were way off the beaten track back then.

So we were in the car about to drive away. And I look, I said, "I think that's Barbra Streisand." Mark says, "No." I said, "Yeah, I think it is." So ever the tasteful girl, I go up and unlock the door. I said, "We just got back from the bank." Like we'd be at the bank voluntarily, honey. So anyway, it was Barbra Streisand and she bought a whole bunch of stuff from us. And then when she left, the engagement she came and bought going away presents for all the people at the Purple Onion. And that was really neat. And then she was on the cover of Look magazine in a dress, in the same fabric as the sofa, in the same fabric as the wallpaper. Thank you.

And there was a spread on her inside in vintage and antique negligees and stuff. And in the fine print, it said antique negligee from Stone Benson, San Francisco, California. Not one living soul saw that, but me. But I saw it. And for a while she said if we got stuff that would fit her, send it to this wonderful New York address: "Barbara Streisand, such and such, 3rd Avenue whatever. If not home, deliver to deli below." Thank you. So anyway. And she bought stuff from us. And if she didn't buy, she'd send it back.

And there was a drag show, long running, quote, female impersonators Finoccio's in North Beach. It was a tourist trap thing. Bus loads, everything. So there were two old queens that did an act, two old bags from Oakland. And they were funny. The best that I always remember is they came out without their teeth started talking. It was live. And so anyway, they came shopping one day. And we had gotten. This lady came. A friend of ours taught us from San Jose flea market days, when someone comes to sell you something always say you will look at it because you don't know what they've got.

So this wonderful larger, old lady on a cane with a cast came and asked us if we bought old clothes. And the instinct is to say no, but I said yes because I remember what Auntie Marion taught us. So Mark went and she had been vaudeville entertainer. She broke her leg rehearsing for her return to the stage, bless her little heart, and she was selling her old costumes because they no longer fit. Honey, she could have worn three of them at one time, and they wouldn't have fit. She was like a size 2 when she was in vaudeville. And a size 200 at this point. Anyway, we got the most fabulous beaded dresses and fur coats and feather fans and shoes. Fabulous. Barbra Streisand bought a bunch of it. The two old bags from Oakland, the littler one could fit into some of it. So they bought some of it. And I wish I had just one of those things.

I forgot where we're going here. Where are we going? Oh, the poor old thing.

Grant: I had asked you to define junk.

Benson: Oh, yes. So we've been doing it ever since.

Grant: Yeah, sounds like a fun business.

Benson: It has been. We've had really wonderful times. We've we sold things to Dianne Feinstein, when she was mayor of San Francisco. And Barbra Streisand and whoever all these people are. We also sold things to Jane Doe, whoever she may be. But it is when, we started it, there was a street in San Francisco called...damn, it will come to me at some point. It was where all the thrift stores were. Not thrift-charity, junk stores, secondhand stores. Which was French for antique stores, only not upscale chichi antique stores, but they had great stuff. There was one called Bizon's. From Bizon's we learned a lot. First of all, it's a Jewish thing that you never miss the first sale of the week. So if you go to Bizon's on a Monday morning, you're going to make a deal because you're not going to miss the first sale of the week. Secondly, we found out he did not read or write English and he would sit in front of his store reading the newspaper and sometimes it was upside down.

Grant: Wow.

Benson: But his friends would all tell him so he turned it around, but he couldn't write a check or anything. His daughter, I think, wrote checks. Anyway, from Bizon we learned you always make the first sale of the week. And he used to run ads in the phone book like 12 ads, all different. And he would clean your basement out for reasonable charge or clean your attic out for a reasonable charge. Buy your used appliance whatever it all is. But they paid him to clean their attics out and he was getting fabulous stuff out of their attics. But that's life. I mean, they paid somebody to do it. No one thought of a garage sale or anything like that. So you either had stuff you knew was

good enough to sell to a gallery or something or you paid someone to clean your attic out. And there was great, great stuff everywhere.

And we learned, I forgot from who, the antique business is one of the few investments that you can buy that will never lose its value. They should have lived a little longer, because, honey, it done lost its value. It's over and real over for the middle tier. I think the top tier stays wherever it is, goes up and down a little bit. But the whole middle tier art, glass and pottery, it's all over. I mean, real over.

Grant: What happened?

Benson: Well, HDTV happened, number one. Number two, everyone wants to be like everybody else. But I think the big thing is like, I don't know, do you know what depression glass is? It's colored glass from the 30s, 40s, 50s, a little bit.

Grant: Is that it there?

Benson: No, I don't have anything that crass. It was given away at carnivals. It was in breakfast cereal. You get a dish and a cup or whatever it is. It was pretty stuff for poor people. I don't think even middle class people, maybe lower middle class people. But there were enormous quantities of it. And it's fun. It's a lot of fun. I don't know. I have some depression something somewhere. Anyway, so there were patterns. So people began to collect the color green, pink, peach, blue, clear in the pattern, flower basket, whatever it all is. But the point is that you could go to a thrift store and you could buy a depression glass covered butter dish, which would be a unique item, and you could buy it for a dollar because they didn't know what it was. It finally got to the point where if you went to a thrift store and there was a depression glass butter dish, it was and 350 dollars. Well, who's buying that?

I mean, first of all, Jackie O. is not collecting depression glass. And secondly, she's not shopping at thrift stores. So, you know, so I think it became very difficult to become a collector because in the beginning, you could buy for a quarter, for a dime, for a dollar, for five dollars. And then all of a sudden it was 25 dollars for a plate. And I think young people couldn't afford it. And Jackie O didn't want it. So it priced itself out of the business. And the same with pottery, you could find a Roseville vase at a thrift store for a dollar. Now it's 50 dollars.

And I think it priced itself out of existence, number one. And number two times changed. HDTV. We want to all have the same shit. If it isn't granite, we don't want it. So it changed. If you go like on eBay now and I was just looking up. Like that's Haviland Limoge right there, that white china with the gold edge. There's a name for the edge, but I can't remember what it is. Back in the day, there was a shop near us in California that specialized in Haviland Limoge china. The minute you got it, you took it to Lilian and she paid you a fair price and she sold it for a fair markup and people bought it. I just, for the hell of it, because I already know it's dead, but for the hell of it, I went on eBay and looked. And if you know how to look on eBay, you look for completed sales, right. And because anybody can put anything on eBay for any price, it has nothing to do with what it's worth. If you look at completed sales, you see what sold, what didn't, and you find out what someone's going to pay for it. There were 25 Haviland and Company cups

and saucers per page of sold items. One sold out of 25 and some of them were five dollars. It's just D-E-A-D, dead.

Now maybe those old people that said they never lose their value were talking about 18th century furniture, in which case that's probably to a point, true. But if you watch like Antiques Roadshow and they have the before and after ones and something sold that was valued at \$6000, is now valued at \$3000. And I'll give them a dollar if they find anyone to buy it at 3, it's over. And I don't know. I think it's going to have a hard time coming back because there isn't going to be any beginning. You know, nowhere. I mean, Mark and I couldn't have started in the business if soda chairs were \$65 each. They were a dollar. And I think that it's over.

And also people, I don't know, shabby chic, and bless that lady's heart on Montana Street in Los Angeles. Asher, Ashcroft something. Can't remember right now. She made a fortune and praise the Lord. She should have a fortune. But when she started, it was distressed, furniture, usable. I mean, usable condition. But paint chipped and this and that. Always painted, waxed. Old crystal chandeliers with a few things not right. And overstuffed furniture, upholstered in white canvas or white duck or white linen. And she made a fortune.

But it also was something that anybody could do. So pretty soon there were a whole section like Mexican upholstery shops and they were cheap and good. Well, pretty soon you don't have to find an old sofa. You can make a new sofa, put a slip cover over it. And it's shabby chic. And pretty soon they started painting furniture that wasn't painted and sanding it. So pretty soon anybody could do it. And once anybody can do it. There is a shabby chic booth in every mall in America, if not five. You know, and it just became tired. I don't know how you describe this, but anyway it's without description, without whatever that word is, it's all just stuff we like.

Grant: But you were in business in Butte?

Benson: Yes. For a year.

Grant: A year?

Benson: Yes. I have pictures of the store. It wasn't bad. It was sparse because Sven was supposed to come. He was going to have, you know, like fabric samples and be able to order new furniture and all that. He was going to do the interior decorating thing. And he was from Germany had an accent. The ladies loved that. And he worked it. And. But he didn't want to come. I don't remember why. Probably found a husband somewhere else, I don't know. But anyway, he didn't come. And we don't want...I do not want to sit in a retail store again. You're a prisoner right in there, honey. I like the sales.

I like cashiering the sales because it's three hours. I think I've ended someone at the last one. She said, "What time do you close?" And I said, "1:00. We don't mean 1:01." I think she was pissed when she left. But anyway, it's fun, because, you know, I mean, when we're busy maybe three times a month. If we're not busy, none a month. And we have nice customers. I'm sure there are people who can't handle me so they don't come. And life goes on. It's a good thing about getting old, honey, you don't give a shit.

Grant: I'm curious what it was that first appealed to you about Butte. Was it strictly the architecture?

Benson: Yes. Well, and the opportunity, which I didn't realize wasn't never going to opportune itself. This was the days of they're gonna have legalized gambling in Montana.

Grant: Oh, right. Destination.

Benson: Yes. Yes. And so the whole like excitement here was that, you know, MGM Grand was going to buy the town and make casinos everywhere. And it was all going to be divine. And I could see the potential with the buildings and so many of them empty. But that didn't come to pass. But I think every 10 or 15 years there's something going to happen in Butte. And it revs it back up again. But you need the, you know, the Preservation League of Newport to make this work. And we're not going to have one because we're not Newport. You know, I mean, I applaud everyone who tries to do anything, and I really do. I'm happy with them. But, you know, unless somebody is willing to buy these buildings and use them, it's never going to happen. They're going to die someday. Have you ever been to the upstairs of gamers?

Grant: I never have.

Benson: Oh, honey, you've got to get him to take you up there. It's to die for. It's like time stood still and they closed the place up in 1935. You can still see the hookers hanging over the railing. I mean it's so wonderful. And if somebody could just come and not make it look like HDTV. You know, let it be what it is. I'm sure tons of people would pay whatever it is to go look at it. There's so many places like that, and they just . . . That's why I'm glad you did the second floor of the Carpenters Hall to keep the building alive.

This is true everywhere. I don't think it's just true here. In Fresno, it was the same. The downtown was wonderful. Dying. Dead. The historical society, which was run by a wonderful woman who gave me a book on Nancy Lancaster, changed my life. Thank you. Anyway, Zee was her first name. Zee something. Anyway, she went to Texas. But they had a wonderful home at the Kearney Mansion. It's a famous Fresno person, whatever it is. They wanted to make a historical society headquarters. And build a new building.

Kind of like new buildings that have been built here for preserving old things. Anyway, it was the mistake. She was a smart lady, but that was a mistake because there were so many people that wanted to know why are you not buying one of these empty buildings that's falling down and there isn't a real defense for that. You just got kind of hope, your gut, you know, you're Trump's PR man and keep moving anyway. They never did build it because she wanted to build a new one and. Not everyone. There was a lot of fight back against not using the old buildings. And I always thought, like for historical society, it'd be so wonderful, like, you know, where that Hennessy market was, the next building down.

To be the historical society building and to pick a decade every year and do the first floor windows like stores from the decade. It would be wonderful. People would come look at it. It would be fabulous. You know, whatever, my friends said, "Well you have to preserve..." Bullshit. The Louvre can do it. The Met can do it. Victoria and Albert could do it. You could do

it. You just don't want to. And that's the trouble. Nobody wants enough to do this. It could be done.

So you need the historic society of Newport to buy it, fix it and push it, you know. And you're not going to get that.

Grant: Why not?

Benson: Because it's not Newport. There's no ocean crashing out there. There's a pit over there. This is really neat. We're at the doctor's yesterday and this nurse who's smart as a whip. I'm telling you what, I didn't realize it, but it's really impressive how many smart people there are. Just take a listen, a minute to listen to them. And we were talking about a doctor. And I said I'm glad he's still here. He's a heart doctor, Dr. Nandalur, and he's from India or somewhere. I don't know. Whatever.

Grant: I've met him.

Benson: Yeah. Isn't he? He's so smart. It hurts. I mean, really. You know Madeleine Albright who was secretary of state? He's like her. You could just sit there. They'd ask her a question. You could watch her little brain going. And the same with him. He's so smart. So I was saying, she said something. "Yeah, well, for now" or something. Why is he going to leave? "It's hard to keep doctors here." And I said, why? And she said, their wives have nowhere to shop. And I thought son of a bitch. I'm not stupid, but I never thought of that. And she is absolutely right. If you and your girlfriends want to go out some afternoon for a divine, there's nowhere to go. Nowhere. So they don't wanna live here.

Now, I'm not a fan of shopping as a way of life, but that's neither here nor there. It's the facts. It's the way it is. Watch QVC and smarten up. Well, it's true, baby. It's amazing. I love to watch salesman because I'm not one. All my life I've loved to watch them because I don't have anything in me for what that takes. I can tell you the truth about something. And I can tell you. Well, my idea of the truth. I can tell you why I think it's wonderful. But I don't have any instinct for saying what you want to hear. So if that's not what you want to hear, I'm fucked. So anyway, I watch QVC and this girl is on there. I love to watch them. And she's talking about some makeup or another. No, some item of clothing.

And it's always how much it would cost if you go to Lorde and Taylor, or whatever it is. "Oh, I was at the mall having my shots." Having your shots? So she's talking about Botox, of course. I mean, you know, whatever. And it's like that's a thing to say. I was at the mall getting my shots. Well, you know, at least go to the institute [inaudible]. You're going to the mall to get your shot? But that's a prestige thing to do. Well, if you're a lady in Butte, you and me go into the mall to get your shots or anything. Yeah. Or anything. I mean, really, it's just, you know, and it's. As long as that's true. It's true.

Grant: Do you feel isolated in Butte?

Benson: No, I don't. But then I don't know. I never went. I'm often amazed at how successful I've been doing visual things for a crowd that I think I never really understood. I knew what it was supposed to look like, what it was supposed to be, but I never really understood why

anybody went there. Do you know what I mean? We used to do a store called Kris Kringle. And it was in the Garden Village in Fresno, which was the shopping center on the correct side of Shaw. North of Shaw. Must be north of Shaw. South of Shaw. Don't go there without a gun. It started out actually near the center, it was in a house. They opened in September and they did Halloween, Thanksgiving and Christmas. Then they closed in February. And each room was a theme. So eventually the center got bigger. Needed the house property that it was on because it was the farmhouse of the farm where the center had been built. So they opened a store and we did their displays and they were flawless. If I do say so myself. I have pictures of those as well. Not many, but some. But, you know, I realize I never, I understood the women basically who bought there. But I didn't understand why they went.

You know, I realized that I don't know how. I was lucky that I was successful without understanding. I knew that they wanted to have a fabulous Christmas tree, but they called me. So why did they go to Kris Kringle? And they went to go shopping? Because the Garden Village had it all. A really good French bakery, not patisserie. Thank you. And you could get your little coffee and your espresso and your this and your that. And then there was a grocery store, strictly for white people. It was Christensen's. The guy who owned Christensen's, who was straight, was smart. He had really cute guys for the box boys and they wore shorts. The minute the sun shown in April, they got the shorts and the ladies loved to look at the guys in the shorts. And it was really wonderful. They'd pull their Mercedes up in front of it and everything, you know, and then there'd be this "Attention! Attention! Will the owner of the silver Rolls Royce. You've left your light on" like that was an accident. And then you hear "click, click, click, click" and those heels would be going to the front to show who owned it.

I don't know. I mean, I liked to look at the guys in the shorts, too, but I would've called in the order and they delivered. I never did get that thing. And now it's just a huge thing because it's not just upper middle class and higher. It's everybody. So everybody wants to go to the Garden Village and they all want to have espresso at La Patisserie and get shorts-guys and groceries.

I don't know. I don't like it. I liked it better when there were. I know it's not right, or politically correct. I liked it better when there were people with money and people without. Because now it's mediocre. Everyone's got enough money. Not everyone. Many people. But in the old days. My father's customers. Now, my mother aspired to have a certain kind of, we built a new house, a certain looking house, which was probably middle class. It never occurred to her that she was going to have a house like the Butterworth's or whatever it is. Never. She'd like to look at it, but it never occurred to her she was gonna get it. But now people see half-assed Butterworth houses and think they're gonna get it and they get it. Wayfair.com. It ships flat. Mary, it'll be fine.

I think I've outlived my usefulness. I think this may be true. But, you know, praise the...When I was a little kid, there was a lady in Rye who had a great deal of money and her house was located at the intersection of two streets like this. The Matthew's estate. And she was one of my father's customers and she had greenhouses. That's 's'. Greenhouses. And Mrs. Matthew, she changed her name a lot because she always got new husbands. Mrs. Matthews entered the New York Garden show. And Mr. Jack, who was a friend of my father's, ran the greenhouses. He was her head gardener, head gardener. And so I would go and help Mr. Jack. Again, I'm sure I was the biggest pain in the ass in the world. But I just loved it. And one day they send a message down from the main house that Mrs. Mathews wanted to see me. Why? So I go to the back door.

"Oh, no, you can't come to the back door. You must go to the front." So that's like 10 hours later, I get to the front door. Right? And there's a footman who opens the door and there's a maid who takes me to the second floor and Mrs. Matthew's maid comes out and takes me in her room. And it was the most fabulous room, I still remember. Peach silk everywhere. And apple green. Peach and apple green. One of the colors of what's her name's houses on a home. Polly Adler's whorehouse in New York Beach in apple green. But anyway.

And there she is, laid up in this canopy bed with all this lace and satin shit and a tray with a flower and the newspaper and all that shit. I forgot what she called me up there for. But anyway, I got to see that, my own self. I didn't have to watch a movie. There it was. Well, where's that now? Kim Kardashian? I don't think so. Oh, that girl. She was on TV yesterday, that face doesn't move. I mean, honestly, it's like Madam Tussaud's. Really, have you seen her?

Grant: I try not to.

Benson: She really looks stunning. But the face doesn't move. I don't know how it's done. But anyway.

Grant: She's had many shots at the mall.

Benson: I'm sure, babe. God help us. But anyway. That's all gone now. Well, no, I mean, I don't know. Probably a few other queens got called to her room. I don't know. But that's not something the average person went and did. But if I hadn't been there, I couldn't have done it. Of course if I hadn't been in Rye, I couldn't have done it. But still, they were time's gone by. Well, whatever. No one wants to hear about time's gone by. You know, it's like, I don't know, see those little figures right there. Those little elf-looking things? They're display figures from the 50s, from jewelry stores. How do I know? Because as a little child, I went and looked. They had them in the jewelry store in Rye, New York. Probably other stores used them. But basically, they were for jewelry stores.

There's no displays anymore. There are no display companies anymore. There's no display show anymore because there's no money. You know, everybody selling everything for 100 percent less than they paid for it. So who's paying the display girls? In San Francisco, Gump's on big holidays like Columbus Day, which is a big holiday in San Francisco because there's a lot of Italian people in San Francisco, Gump's closed the Sunday before Columbus Day. And 40,000 queens descended on the place, honestly. And they all had little green smocks that said Gump's. A lot of them were part time, obviously, because you couldn't. But nonetheless, they changed all the windows and all displays on every floor to reflect Columbus Day. And everybody came the next day and lined up to go in and look. There is none of that. That's not happening. It's over.

The display shows in San Francisco, well they were in L.A. and San Francisco, wherever they were, but the things that they did. There was a building that they used for trade shows, whatever it had been, an old something factory or other. And it was those days of redoing. And when you went in, there were stairs that went up to a second floor level. It was all glass walls. You know, from the big windows. And up there was a stage. And on the stage were these mannequins doing like comedia-del-arte-type stuff. Right. Venice, whatever. So when you went up there and you walked around in the back, it was mannequins, but...The stuff stopped here and in the back they

were present day human beings dressed in these costumes on the front. It was wonderful, but that had to cost. I don't know. Thousand, whatever it is, dollars. No one's doing that. Can you see that big white Queen Elizabeth bust against this wall up in front?

Grant: Yeah.

Benson: OK. She's from a flagship store. Thank you. Neiman Marcus, the Dallas store. She's from a display thing they did, which involved all these busts. She cost thirty-five hundred dollars. What store is buying a thirty-five hundred dollar bust for a two week display? There's no money because everything's a dollar less than it costs. And then Nordstrom's wonders, why isn't it working? It's not working, girl, because you're trying to be Wal-Mart and nobody can do it better than they can. So you better try to be Tiffany's because whatever. And there is some market, I think, but I don't know. I don't. I don't understand. I have outlived my usefulness. Fortunately, I don't give a shit. But nonetheless, these are facts. Zena Best took a picture of Queen Elizabeth over there.

I did two houses for a customer in Oklahoma City. Oklahoma City really was quite fabulous because in the 30s, 40s and 50s, there was a lot of money there. And so the houses were ultra. One house had all of this weird furniture. God, it was flawless. There were wonderful stores there, antique stores. And so there was one clearly owned by a queen who was too far over the top for words. Queen Elizabeth was in there and I knew what she was because from the display magazines I'd read. I saw the thing that whoever I said they were did. Neiman. Yes. And so I knew what it was. And it was painted, I think, black. I'm not sure. It was \$900. So Mark and I don't buy a lot of \$900 stuff. And I wanted it so bad. I did. So finally we blew it and we bought \$900 right there. But no one cares. No one knows. No one. It doesn't matter to anybody. Anyway. I painted her white and put her in the window on St. Patrick's Day, and I put a shamrock on her lips and a spot.

Well, I'm sure 90 percent of people here went, oh, what is she doing? But it was a wonderful window. And Zena Best took a picture of it and put it on the front of Butte Weekly, I think. And not one person said, I saw that. Anyway. It's a thing that, you know, isn't of value anymore.

Grant: Values have changed.

Benson: Yeah. So Dolce and Gabbana did a show. You could watch it on YouTube. It really is quite flawless. In that temple in Greece. And there's a show on getting ready for the show. It's 2019. So it's right now that the temple floor is sacred. You can't walk on it or something. So they had to build a wood floor on top of the floor. And when you see what they built. They built the floor, they built the whole front for the spectators, for the runway, for the models, whatever it all is. It's a wonderful venue. It must have a hundred dresses. I think 35 would have been fine. But that's neither here nor there. I don't get what that's all about either. But so anyway. The clothes are wonderful.

All the models are in sandals. Greek. And it's the only time, one of the few times only I've seen that it worked. It really works fine. And they're in these incredible dresses with the most fabulous fabrics. I mean, oh, Mary, I don't know where this came from. And, oh, jewelry, the jewelry is to die for. They've got gold laurel wreaths in their hair that looks like gold, gild leaf, whatever it is.

There's a thing they're doing of architectural fragments in their hair which I don't know whatever it is. I'm not sure it even works for the fashion show. Never mind real life, obviously. But I don't think that matters. The clothes are wearable. I mean, you know, you're not going to have a nine-million-dollar gold thread beaded, whatever it is. But you can make a knockoff in Hong Kong, right? In between the riots. But anyway, the clothes are wearable and with flat shoes. I mean, it's I'm hoping it means something because the shit that's around these days. Zena Best gives us her recycled New Yorkers.

And so on the back is an ad for Nordstrom with two models. And honest to God, I tell you what, if you saw that without a name, you would swear that these two girls went to a thrift shop in Seattle and bought this shit and put it together without any taste. I mean. Mary, why do you think people are going to come to you to buy this when they can go to TJ Max and buy the same fucking stuff. You've got to get it together here, girl. I'm hoping it will make a change that somehow does something because it's deadly the way it is. It really is. I mean, honestly, if you look at that T.J. Max ad, that's what they look like. So why would you go to Nordstrom for this? Do you know who Diana Vreeland is? Oh, you have to look up Diana. She's quite to die for. Sadly, people don't know who she is anymore.

She was the editor of Vogue for Twiggy Times. Whatever that was. Twiggy. You don't know who Twiggy is? Oh, my God. That skinny model from England. Well, Streisand, early Streisand and Twiggy, whatever. Richard Avedon? You know him? Photographer, to-die-for photographer. He's the one that took the picture of the model with the boa constrictor. Famous. And he did Dovima with the elephants, which is, I love elephants. And, you know, it's funny how you are. I never noticed the chains on their feet. Now I know they're there and I don't like it anymore. But obviously they're there otherwise old Dovima would be a rug. But she's standing with these elephants. They're so gorgeous and she's so gorgeous. That's a fabulous famous picture. Anyway.

This whole thing. Diana Vreeland, she was the editor of, I think, Harper's Bazaar before that. Then she was the editor of Vogue. She started the costume institute at the Met. Truman Capote once said that before she got to the Met, only five people a year went to that dusty basement. And today, it's the lead attraction at the museum. Vreeland was quite fabulous. If you've got five minutes, which I'm sure you don't, because I'm sure you're busy, but watch some clip on that YouTube thing. It doesn't matter. She's just. There's a tour of the 18th century woman exhibit when it opened.

There's a video of getting it ready whenever, whatever you call that. Marissa Barron is the narrator, God bless her. Vreeland is there for the setting up of the final thing, whatever it is. And so the lady that's doing the sewing...Mrs. Vreeland will address the hair. There wasn't hair. It was, oh, she invented this thing where you put pantyhose on the top of a mannequin and you pull it tight to the top in the back. So the faces covered with this stretchy thing. So the face doesn't matter because it isn't face. It's just a white mannequin. Then you stuck something up there which sometimes might be hair, never probably real hair. But anyway, a hat or a feather. And Mrs. Vreeland. Well, we'll take care of that. Oh, the cameraman's going in for a close up. And old Vreeland in the middle. "Please don't stand there." That girl! Bless your heart.

Anyway, she was quite, quite fabulous. There are none of these people. Who is the editor of Vogue now? Oh, that Anna Wintour thing, can't handle her. But anyway, no one knows any of

this. There's no Eve Saint Laurent. But. You know, I mean, that Mondrian dress, well there were several of them, but who's thinking of that? Nobody. And it's sad. But, you know, the minute that dress hits [inaudible] it's over. You know? So there you go. It's life. It's the cycle of life.

Grant: What is that?

John Galliano that had a few drinks and did this huge anti-Jewish thing. And that was the end to her. How can you be a queen and be anti-Jewish? I don't get it. How could you be anti-anything? But I mean. I mean, grow-up. Do you know who's paying you? I mean. And that's it. They fired her. She was done. But I can't handle really feeling that way. Not only being stupid enough to or drunk enough to say it, but to think it. I don't have it in me.

Grant: What will happen here when you guys have to move? In a five-year period?

Benson: If only one knew. Well, this will go. That's for sure. Oh, what's going to happen to us? And this shit, these lovely collector's items? Well, I don't know, babe. Oh well, I don't know. We might go to Great Falls because we have a friend there. And, you know, I don't know, maybe it. I don't think it's going to be. I mean, I'm 80. I don't think it's going to be 10 years. Might be a little bit. The landlord buyer is very nice. Said we could stay as long as we want. Blah, blah, blah. It's written in. We can stay five but he says you could do. But I don't know. It's terrible, but the big thing that's making me nervous about going into old fart housing is that you can't do anything to the room. Honey, I can't handle that.

I'm already thinking of ways to get around it. But, you know, I figure we can build screens and then attach the screens because they'll be folding up and leaving. But they might come in to say, no, you can't do that anyway. I don't know and I don't like the idea of that. Otherwise. I don't know. It's hard. I always thought, like, it's these things I miss. Like in Palm Springs with 9000 old queens with money. Why isn't there an old farts' retirement home? I mean, really, why isn't there? I don't. I guess they all have, all, most, have enough money to go to an upscale retirement home that won't care that they're gay or something, I don't know, but like, why isn't there like this screen actors home? Why isn't there a home for old fags?

When we were in Palm Springs, so we go to a moving sale and it's on the outskirts of town in what probably had been a motel. Now, I don't mean Bates. I mean like a nice motel. And it's been made into rentals, but it's clean and it's middle class. OK, there's this queen there. So, Mark is looking and it didn't... There was just like used stuff. So I'm talking to her and I said, so where are you going? I'm going back to whatever it is. Indiana. I said, Well, how come? Well, they don't want me here. I can't make any friends. No one invites me anywhere. Blah, blah, blah. I know exactly what he's talking about because the powers that be, whatever it is, if there is a party, they look out the window to see what car you drove up in. And if that doesn't work, they ask you where you live.

And the minute they've got that, they've got the picture and you're either in or you're out and you couldn't make any friends because you're just a lower middle class working girl. Well, retired working girl. And I felt so bad. But I guess that's life. No matter what you do, where you are. I don't know. It's Tough Times at Ridgemont High.

My nieces. I mean, all my nieces are nice to be around. But I have a couple of nieces that I think genuinely like us. But. You're gonna show up in the hills of Oakland? Here's your two gay uncles. Oh, you know.

Grant: You know, of all the years and all the different places you've lived in and traveled, I'm curious what, if any, uniqueness you see here in this place where you've ended up now?

Benson: Oh, because it's free.

I remember when we first met Alana and we're discussing buying the building. I said, "Alana, I got to ask you because, you know, it's a working class community, or was a working class community. What's it like for gay people?" "Oh, honey, it won't matter at all. No one will care." And I thought, well, that's nice. That's your opinion, you know? But yeah, it's really true. No one does give a shit, I don't think. I don't know. I mean, there must be someone who says, you know, let's burn that old queen's house down. They don't say it to me. Let's put it that way.

Grant: And that fact you think is unique about Butte?

Benson: No, no. But I think it's fabulous. There's no one on the road. You can look for miles and miles and miles. The architecture is wonderful. There still are things to find here, not necessarily in Butte, but in this area. You dread that it becomes Bozeman. I don't know if it will or it won't.

Grant: Why is that? Why would you dread that?

Benson: It's just like Palm Springs.

Grant: Bozeman is?

Benson: Yes. It's just. Well, it doesn't have the queens. Well, it must have some. But, you know, I don't know what that is. I don't know that Home Depot.

Grant: Yeah, homogenization?

Benson: Yes. I mean, I'm all in favor of Home Depot. But. It's all Home Depot. It's all Wayfair. It's all HDTV. Homogenization. It's a nice word for it. I don't think it's quite accurate, but it's life. "I was at the mall getting my shots." What is that? I mean, back in the day, no one would admit that. They would go to a gifted plastic surgeon in Beverly Hills and nobody would know about it. Now it's a badge of courage. "I've got my [shots]." And the thing is, I don't know how old the woman is. Let's say she's 35. Nice looking woman. Whatever it is. Thirty-five. You getting these fucking shots for 50 more years, girl? And I am a believer that the piper always has to be paid. I think there's going to be a price to be paid for this at some point and then your face is going to look like flypaper. What are you going to do?

Grant: Do you think there is a societal price?

Benson: Well, look at Trump. Now, I'm telling you what, and I really am smart in a way. But anyway, whatever that way is, I don't know yet, but because I'm not rich. But anyway, I really believe that 90 percent of the people that voted for him knew he was a crook. They knew he was

a con man. They knew he was a schmuck. But he was going to vote for abortion banning and he was going to put justices in the Supreme Court and he was going to appoint judges and he was going to hate blacks or dislike black people, et cetera, and so forth. So they voted for him because they're scared shitless that the country's not going to be middle class and white anymore. Christian, middle class and white, whatever Christian means, God help us. And I do believe that. I don't think for a minute they thought he was any kind of a decent guy, even. They knew he was a schmuck.

And I think it is. Oh, there's a new book. I can't think of the name now, but I'll send you the name of it. I sent for the book, but I'm so ignorant of current things. It says digital versions. So I bought it. But I don't know. What does that mean? I'm gonna get a cd or something, I don't know. But anyway, we'll find out. But it's about, mainly about, a town called Miama. Have you heard of Miama, Texas? Okay. He went and moved there because he wanted to know the people.

Grant: The author did?

Benson: Yes, and he's written a book about the death of elitism or something. He was on PBS. I'm a believer in PBS. And so I bought the book but I haven't got it yet. But he says the same thing. They knew he was a crook. They knew he was a racist. That's why they voted for him, because they're scared shitless that this country is not going to be predominantly white, Christian people. And I would say, girls, get the map, see the map, the world map. See, right here is Europe and America and all the rest is brown. So you're not going to win this fight. I mean, you know, you're not going to win this fight. And. Whatever.

Grant: Yeah. I'm not quite sure what drives white supremacy.

Benson: They're frightened. No question about it. They're frightened. And I don't think they're overly bright, but that's neither here nor there. It's like. I'm still talking. How unusual! It's like Mexicans. We've been around. He was raised. The family next to him was Mexican and he never learned to hate Mexicans. And blacks on the other side in California. Yeah. He never learned to hate them. I think like in Rye, I think maybe I didn't learn because, honestly, I think my parents didn't think of it. Because I think they probably were bigoted. I can't imagine they weren't. But they never taught us. My sister either.

He had always Mexican people around. I had him as soon as I got to where there were some. But I can't imagine just hating them because they're Mexican. I don't. And a lot of them are Christian, right? They go to Catholic Church, whatever it is. Praise the Lord, they don't send their kids alone. But the thing is that. I don't know. I don't. Who cares? But people do.

Grant: I'm curious in the ways in which maybe Butte can be viewed as a petri dish, you know, for the rest of the nation. I think the decline of industry here pertains to the decline in American supremacy globally. For me it's fascinating to live in a kind of hollowed out shell of a city. And I don't know. Is there any appeal there for you?

Benson: I don't know that we think of it that way. But a lot of the way we react to what's around us is junk, because I don't know why it. It's like I'm sure a whole kind of lots of people could go to the second floor of Gamers and think, well, let's see, we can paint it white. It's just so flawless.

It's like. It's almost gray. The whole thing is like a black and white movie up there. You kind of don't want to screw it up. A look back. Not a time capsule today, but today looking back undisturbed and I think that appeals to us a lot. We do estate sales. We did twelve last year. So that's a lot when you're 200 years old. But you go for long stretches without them. But that's the times. People our age are dying and they've died off more than half, I'm sure. So there's less and less stuff, less and less whatever. And then the kids have changed.

When we started doing estate sales. We started in Palm Springs. And people actually would call you from New York, send you the keys, you'd go to the house, you'd clean it out, send them back and they'd sell it. They never even went to the house. They didn't have any idea what was there. They didn't care. They needed money from selling the house.

Today, generally speaking, dealers don't need the money, so there's no pressure to sell the house. And so they're in there forever and going through this crap. And then they're so afraid that they're going to sell a dollar item for 95 cents. And thank you, Antiques Roadshow and eBay. The fact is you can't sell it at all anyway, so it doesn't matter, Mary. But they don't want to know that. They don't know it. They don't want to hear it. It's oversimplification, but we like finding the stuff, you know. A whole lot of what we have is stuff we just were excited to find. You know, it's right there. That's Alana LaRock's. Yes, Alana LaRock, legendary ex-stripper and realtor. That is her dynasty outfit from a cocktail party in the 90s. We sold a whole bunch of stuff for her and that was in it and we bought it. I don't think most people give a shit. Do you know what I mean? But it's so of its time. It's so Joan Collins. You know that. Oh, you can't see it. There's a little ballet costume from the 50s when Alana was in ballet school. Little silver stars down the front.

I don't think a lot of people care about all this. And I don't know why we do or maybe because we were in the places back when it was almost breathable. You know, he would do the work of the demolition, but I would go to the places, too, before, after work, whatever it is. And we did a house in San Francisco, a Victorian gothic. I wish we took pictures. We didn't take a lot of pictures.

The hall when you went in was all gothic doorway things. And there were naked ladies like this holding up the part above the door jams. And all up the Gothic thing were snails carved out of wood crawling up. It was so to die for. We sold that stuff like hotcakes. But anyway. It was finding it. I don't know what that is. Deranged. You certainly weren't the first person in there because somebody lived there. But. It was the way it had been 50 years ago and was about not to be because it was being torn down and... Oh, if we had kept the shit. But my God, the storage bill we'd have. We had such fabulous stuff.

There was a guy in San Jose, California, that we sold to. Jay Jones. He was on the highway and he bought architectural salvage. Mark went down there once a week with a load of shit for Jay and he kept us alive.

Mark: We sold marble fireplaces for like \$125 a dozen.

Grant: A dozen!

Benson: That was in the days of the Western addition in San Francisco. That's the one thing about being young. We didn't get that it wasn't going to go on forever. We totally didn't get that.

Never occurred to us. And they did the Western addition in San Francisco, which was this large bunch of blocks. And it was in the 60s when they had that legislation for redeveloping the city, inner-city thing, whatever it is. And they tore down whole blocks. And for instance, a Victorian building with two doors would have four apartments - one on the first floor, one of the second floor. In every apartment, there would be three marble fireplaces. So you got 12 marble fireplaces out of one building. There'd be a marble sink. At least one, in every one.

There'd be all these wonderful Victorian gas, light fixtures. Whatever it all is. Stained glass windows. Iron fencing, whatever it is. And we didn't get that it wasn't going to go on forever. We just didn't get it. We sold marble fireplaces. Fifteen dollars each or ten dollars a dozen. Now, the girls on McCallister Street were selling them for a \$150 and we thought they were stupid. Not quick on the uptake, I'm afraid. But we used to take a load to Jay Jones every week. He kept us alive.

Mark: We used to sell fireplace mantles that had the over mantle with the columns and the mirrors and all that for ten bucks a piece. And I'd take 10 or 20 of them down to Jay.

Benson: But it was a whole different mindset. I think somehow, too, you also thought this was progress.

Grant: Right. That's how it was presented.

Benson: They were just starting to fix up the buildings in San Francisco. I'm sure there were pioneer people, but. Okay. Do you know who Tony Duquette is? Such an education you haven't got. He was a designer. He designed for the films, but she was a mad queen. And, you know, not maybe mainstream enough for a lot of those things. He was quite famous and he did a lot with salvage and he had a house in San Francisco in Khao Hollow, which was a part of San Francisco. And we would drive by the house. We didn't know who it was back then because we didn't know who he was. It was a Victorian house.

There's pictures of it in one of the books on him. And there's a sofa chair and an arm chair in there. Upholstered. Looks like black horse hair. It may be original. I don't know. Anyway, he and Vincent Minnelli, you've heard of him. Director, Gigi, blah, blah, blah. My Fair Lady. No, that was sort of George Cukor. Gigi and all kinds of wonderful movies, including Cabin in the Sky. You know, Ethel Waters? I can't believe you're on radio. Anyway. Ethel Waters was a fabulous black entertainer. Never. Well, she was on TV as a maid in a sitcom. What was the name of that sitcom in the 50s? I can't think, anyway. But, originally, she tried out at the Apollo amateur night dancers? So she was a large girl. And not pretty.

So they took a look at her and said, you better sing because you're not going to be able to dance. So she sang because she won. And she was a wonderful singer, wonderful singer. She sang "Miss Otis Regrets", you know, "Miss Otis Regrets". I can't stop saying this. Noel Coward. Cole Porter. It's one of the wonderful songs he wrote. And I always thought the best recording of it was Ella Fitzgerald. You know, Ella Fitzgerald.

Ok, so but I just found on that machine, Ethel Waters. To die for, anyway. Where was it I was going with Ethel Waters?

Grant: Tony?

Benson: Tony Duquette. I forgot how it all started. Anyway, so there's a picture of this house in San Francisco with this three-piece suite. Oh, Vincent Minnelli, that's what did it. He directed a Cabin in the Sky, which is flawless, black and white, all black musical. The only one MGM ever made. And his first directing job, too. Anyway, what an encyclopedia, anyway. Tony Duquette, Vincent Minnelli and I don't know who mad queens are all touring the gold country and they go to watch that gold place. Virginia City. They go to Virginia City. It's an empty, vacant, broken down house. They go in. They get the three-piece set. Put it in the car and go home. That's where it came from. We could do that. We could drive down the street and do that. We'd go to Barry S, that was the name of the swap meet in San Jose. And this guy drives in a pickup truck with a three piece Victorian suite in the back, fifteen dollars. OK, we'll buy that. We upholstered it orange velvet for a Halloween event. We had good times. Where am I going? I don't know either.

Grant: Well, I'm curious if you can comment on demolition and Butte.

Benson: It's just...What are we going to do here?

Mark: I used to drive a truck. If I had known then what I know now. I used to drive through here and they were buying these houses, stripping them out and then just leaving. That's what happened to a lot of the buildings here. People would buy the building, strip it, and then move away.

Benson: But you can't, unless you get the Historic Preservation League. You're not going to be able to do anything. You know, there have been important historic officials here. They buy buildings, great buildings, and do nothing. It just sits there, falls down. What did you fucking buy it for? Well, I guess it was going to fall down anyway so what difference does it make? But I mean, it's hard to argue why you shouldn't demolish the building because what's going to happen to it if you don't?

Mark: And it costs so much money to restore them.

Benson: There are so many little gem places here, but you've got nobody with money because that's what it takes. There was some old queen. The house is south of the high school, about a block on, a corner. And Mike and Cheryl did the estate sale and whoever he was, traveled the world, whatever it is. He had the most flawless things. The pictures of it were so to die for. And, you know, so they had an estate sale. They shouldn't have done that. They did. So then people bought what they wanted. Somebody bought the house now. It will never be back. You can't put that back. So when it's gone, it's gone. But I don't guess anyone cares.

On the next street over, we did a sale a year ago, maybe two years ago, on the south side of the street. The house has recently been painted, praise the Lord. I don't know what they all were in there. The guy bought it in the 50s. He was a professor or something, I think at Tech. They bought it in the 50s. And apparently it was furnished because the mother who was having Alzheimer's said the dining room set and this and that were there when they bought the house. And the square grand piano. Anyway, they obviously added things to the house and at some point in the 60s or 70s, whenever it was, somebody got a let's upholster the wall bug, which they did nicely in one room but kind of went downhill after that. The place had nine barrister

bookcases in it. Nine. Praise the Lord. Because that's the one thing left that sells. We had a round oak table. We sold it the last day for a hundred dollars. The last day.

Mark: And years ago we would have gotten \$400.

Benson: And it would have gone immediately. Anyway, they added this sunroom to the back and everything. Well, even when the shit was gone out of it, it was still a wonderful house. But unless someone gets it, who does it right, it'll be another shit remodeled house. I mean. But does anyone care?

Mark: They don't restore the houses; they redo them.

Benson: Yeah, HDTV. Yeah, it is. I mean, the nicest people in the world. HDTV.

Grant: Nice people have done a lot of terrible things.

Benson: You know, it is like a bed and breakfast. I had a customer once in the good old days who had one hundred million billion dollars, anyway. It was very important to him because he came from nothing that no one ever think he had used furniture or anything like that. But he liked antiques. So he bought that brand new shit that's dipped in lacquer from the top of bars. What do you call that stuff?

Grant: Polyurethane?

Benson: Yes. But it looked, I mean, it was old style and very nicely made, but shiny as can be and brand new because he couldn't handle having anything anyone might think was used. Could not do it. Nice man.

But it's the times that. See, there's a mirrored screen right behind you there. Golden vein mirror. We got that in Oklahoma City. So we find it in the bottom of this secondhand store place. So we're thrilled. How much? Seventy-five dollars or something. Anyway, we're thrilled. No one cares, you know, but we're thrilled because it was there, which means it came from one of those houses out, you know?

Grant: One of the oil mansions.

Benson: Yes. Yes. And is it better that somebody who doesn't get it, buys it and takes care of it, than nobody buys it? Or nobody takes care of it? I don't know.

But it's like they're cutting down trees. What the fuck are you cutting down the trees for? OK, it's big. So what? You got insurance, let it fall. You know, that place down there that rents rooms to students. It's been painted everything. She's made an effort to cut these huge trees down the front of it. It looks naked sitting there. I don't know. I don't know the answer to it because I don't see it. If you do invest money here, what's the point? I mean, unless you're putting a call center into the old Pennies, which thank you for doing that. But.

You know, like whatever that is supposed to be built by Sparky's there, some place. For training people.

Grant: Praxis.

Benson: Can't you put it in one of those other buildings? I mean, but see, there'd have to be an incentive. There'd have to be a, you know, a grant or whatever it is for restoring the building because they're not going to do it otherwise. It's not going to happen. And we're not.

Mark: They don't restore anything anymore. They redo it, but they're not restored.

Grant: Right. Was there anything else you'd like to add?

Benson: Well, how much time do you have? I think I should shut up now. I've done quite enough damage.

Grant: I really appreciate your time today. It has been fascinating.

Benson: The Metals Bank. It's like an ad for Home Depot. Please, God. Could they at least match?

Grant: I'll have to send you some pictures. So you can critique the work that I've been doing.

Benson: Really? No, I saw a picture. Oh, by the way, if you need globes, you know, for those fixtures? There's a place called BP lamp supply. In the old days when wholesale mattered, which doesn't anymore. You had to have a number and all that shit to buy from them. I'm sure, though, like everybody else, they'll sell to anybody. But if you need a number, you can use mine. It doesn't matter. They won't give you prices, if you don't have the number. We might have to buy it. But anyway, they have all those globes, replacement globes and they really are. I don't know who's buying all this stuff, but they really are an extraordinary resource. They have a lot of beaded lampshade shit, but.

Grant: We're gonna need some for the third floor. We ended up finding one. We're only missing one on the second floor. But the third floor, we need 15 of them.

Benson: Well, when we all move around, I'll show you. But this is a catalog for lamp shades. They have a huge range of stuff. I'll send you the number so you can look on the machine.

Grant: OK, thanks.

Benson: We can buy it, if you have to do it that way. But I don't think they care anymore. No one else does. But they might.

Grant: Well, thank you for this.

Benson: Well, thank you.

Grant: Really a fascinating glimpse here.

[END OF RECORDING]