

CARROLL MELBIN:
PIONEER LEADER OF THE FINNISH CO-OP AND
CONSUMERS COOPERATIVE OF BERKELEY

AN INTERVIEW CONDUCTED
BY THERESE PIPE
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I. FAMILY BACKGROUND AND EARLY YEARS

Family History and the Swedish Community in Minnesota

Pipe: [I am with] Carroll Melbin at his home in Napa, California, on 21 February 1988. I am conducting this interview for the Berkeley Historical Society regarding the history of the Co-op movement, in particular the history of the Consumers' Cooperative of Berkeley [CCB] and Mr. Melbin's involvement in it.

You were born 25 October 1900 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, is that right?

Melbin: That's correct.

Pipe: Can you describe the settlement you were born into?

Melbin: I think I was born right downtown on Hennepin Avenue. I have two cousins back there. One of them says that I was born where the Greyhound depot now is, another says that there's a funeral parlor where I was born. We left there when I was six months old, so I have very little recollection of the address.

Pipe: But your parents actually were Swedish immigrants, weren't they?

Melbin: Both of my parents were Swedish immigrants. They came from Sweden. One of them lived in Borås and the other lived in another smaller town called Herrljunga, which were about 30 miles apart in Sweden. Many Swedes arrived in Minneapolis. That seemed to be the point at which they came when they came from Sweden. They had two or three mission churches there, and they met in one of the large mission churches. That's how they happened to meet each other and got married.

Pipe: Tell me, was there any interaction between the Swedes in your community and the Finns in Duluth at all during the time your parents were there? Did they ever talk about this?

Melbin: No, they lived in Minneapolis. I know nothing about Duluth.

Pipe: I see. So the Finns never interacted with the Swedes from there, from what they....

Melbin: No—when I’m only six months old, I don’t know what was going on I’m sure.

Pipe: Where did your parents choose to move from Minnesota?

Melbin: Seattle, Washington. My father went into the grocery business there. He had quite a profitable business, pretty well grown, and my brother Waldo was born in Seattle and so was my sister Audrey. Then we moved to California to a farm between Stockton and Lodi called the Norse Colony. It was a recent settlement and there were a lot of Swedes there—Swedish farmers—and they started little churches in the various homes.

Family Move to California

Pipe: When did your parents decide to come to the Bay Area?

Melbin: They came to Oakland about 1911. We lived on the farm between Stockton and Lodi when the San Francisco earthquake occurred, and it was enough of a shock to be felt out there in the valley. The one thing I do remember as a kid is [that] we had a cow and the milk from the cow was put in a can so that the cream could rise, and the earthquake knocked the milk pan off the shelf—right on the floor and my mother [inaudible]....

Pipe: Were there any other things to remember about the earthquake?

Melbin: No, I don’t remember anything else. That’s the only event, but it seemed to be interesting that this was a strong enough shock to be felt way out in the valley.

Pipe: Amazing.

Melbin: Napa here, for example, had a lot of earthquake damage, and Santa Rosa had probably more than any city, percentage-wise, and yet that’s not mentioned.

Pipe: Is that so?

Melbin: The courthouse collapsed. The fact is, up to a few years ago, if you went up along the Redwood Highway, there was a big rift in the earth there, which has now been turned into a highway. [Inaudible].

Pipe: Interesting.

Melbin: They came to Oakland in about 1911 and my father taught at—he [was able to] start a store there because it was so profitable up there, but things have changed. Up there, they delivered groceries and they had a man go out and take the orders and so on. He continued in that business until 1970 or something. The time had passed—automobiles came in, people had a telephone, so they telephoned their orders in for anybody who wanted delivery. Then, of course, the big supermarkets came in, so people with automobiles drove down and that was it. So he just had a little mom and pop store for many years and that [inaudible].

II. 1936-1962: THE BIRTH AND HEYDAY OF THE BERKELEY CO-OP

Upton Sinclair and the Beginnings of the Bay Area Co-op Movement

Pipe: Tell me, was he [your father] ever interested in the concept of the Co-op, or did he ever get involved in it?

Melbin: Not as far as I know. I know he knew about it. But he was a radical, should I say, and I don't mean a liberal. I mean a radical in the sense that he was a person who wanted to [inaudible]. I was a liberal-minded person myself, looking for new things, and so when Upton Sinclair was running for governor—that's [when] a lot of people [got] involved in the liberal movement. [W]hen Upton Sinclair failed to get elected, a lot of people were looking for something else to do, so they started a co-op, which was supposed to [be] a big thing.

Pipe: That was in the 1930s.

Melbin: Well, I would say 1936 or so. I think that Upton Sinclair's campaign ended about 1936. I'm not sure.

Pipe: Tell me more about the involvement with the Co-op.

Melbin: Well, in the thirties, the Upton Sinclair group started a big co-op in Oakland, and th[ere] was a fellow named [Thane Clark] who was the head of the [Thane Clark thing], and I don't remember any of the others. A lot of big stores down there [unclear] after the big bang, and they were going to have bakeries and they were going to have all kinds of things—an outpost, something like that. They did not succeed. It was in the wrong place—downtown in Oakland—and people had to come from all over and make it sort of their Safeway in Oakland wherever they lived in their own community without [inaudible]. Quite a few people would drive down there looking for a place to park [inaudible]. Then they started a little buying club and [inaudible].

Co-op Takes Root: From Pacific Co-operative Services to the First Co-op Store

Pipe: Shall we continue from here, Mr. Melbin? You were discussing the early buying club in Oakland. Do you want to continue from there, please?

Melbin: Well, Roy Wilson, who was a Methodist minister of the Eighth Street Methodist church in Alameda, was the person who took order[s] and delivered the groceries to a vast—I don't say a vast number, but quite a number of people—and we'd phone the orders in to him, and then they'd deliver them. This was a once-a-week thing on Saturday.

It was out of that that we decided that we would start our own co-op, and the best thing we did was hire a manager. The manager we hired was Bob Neptune, who was a recent graduate from university. I don't know what university, but maybe Berkeley. He was interested in being in the co-op movement.

We first rented a small store on Shattuck Avenue near Dwight Way in Berkeley and later moved that to University Avenue on the north side, a little bit east of McGee Street. We were in there for two or three or four years probably and decided that we wanted to have our own

building. So, we bought property at University Avenue near Acton Street and put in our first store.

Pipe: What was that like?

Melbin: That store was about half the size of the present one and the architect was Bob Williams. I've forgotten who the builder was. That was the store we had during the war.

Pipe: When you say, "during the war," maybe we should back up a little bit because I understand that, at that time, when you say your own co-op, wasn't it called the Pacific Co-operative Services Incorporated? I believe you were incorporated on 8 January 1937. I believe that was when it all started as an incorporation. Does that ring a bell with you? People like [George Bertram] and [Tracey Clarke] and [Sidney Gillick Jr], I believe, worked with you on this, and you were among the group who got this incorporated. Does that ring a bell with you?

Melbin: I don't remember that Pacific Co-operative Services was ever incorporated. It may have been. If it was, fine, but I don't remember that. I don't believe that the Berkeley Co-op was incorporated as early '37; I believe it was about '38 or '39.

Pipe: You're right, I'm sorry. I made the wrong remark here. You were among the organizing directors, and the people I mentioned earlier, I believe, were working with you to organize this. Then, according to Bob Neptune's book, you were among the first board of the new Co-op and that was in 1939-40?

Melbin: Yeah.

Pipe: ...when you were the first president of that incorporated group. Is that correct?

Melbin: Yeah. I may have a copy of the bylaws upstairs, but I'm not going to go look for it now. I think you ought to get a hold of that, though, because it's important. It lists the original board of directors, it has the

article of incorporation in it, and it has the bylaws in it. It gives the date that the operation was approved by the state of California.

Pipe: Wonderful.

Melbin: So, there you have it—authentic. You don't have to look around in any other book.

Pipe: That's right, yeah. Do you recall whether there were differences of opinion about that first venture? I mean, getting it incorporated, or were people in accord about the philosophy and all of that?

Melbin: I think at that time, that was the era of goodwill when everybody was all enthusiastic for getting the Co-op going and we thought we had a good thing, and we did have a good thing because it went well.

The War Years: Rationing and Co-op Membership in the Army

Melbin: Of course, when the war came on, that involved a whole new deal. We were rationed and we had to use ration stamps. We opened a butcher counter in there and the first butcher we had insisted that we have sawdust back there. I guess we did. We were pretty short of money. We put in that butcher's shop, but there was a man named [Clarence Stone] who advanced that money as a loan to the Co-op, and so we were able to work out the butcher's shop.

Now...I'm not sure how the ration thing worked, but I think you got your stamps in the beginning, and then you got some more stamps if you turned in the equivalent number. Somewhere in there, they lost the ration stamps, and we were almost at the point of having to give up having a butcher's shop because we couldn't get approval for getting any more meat. So, we turned the others in. Somebody discovered that somebody had put these ration stamps in a bag and put the bag up in the rafters some place, and I don't know if anybody ever found them up there.

Pipe: What else happened during the war that you felt was significant to mention at this time?

Melbin: I know it was a very difficult time to get people to work at the Co-op, [with] men being gone and so on. Gene Mannila, who was manager of the Co-operative Union Service Station, went into the army, so he had to be replaced. Bob Neptune continued, and I don't know, he may not have been drafted or whatever it was, but he was there during the entire time. I don't remember who took Gene Mannila's place as service station manager. But, of course, gasoline was rationed too, and that was still a Co-operative Union operating as a separate operation.

The Finnish Connection: The Berkeley Co-operative Union

Pipe: Yes, I'd like you to elaborate a little about that. You mentioned Gene Mannila. I believe that was the Finnish component of the Co-op, the Berkeley Co-operative Union. Can you tell me a little bit about that? How it existed, if they had a board, and whether you had any involvement with them?

Melbin: We had no legal connection. They were a separate corporation. They were both—the Berkeley Co-op and the Co-operative Union—incorporated under the incorporation laws of the state of California. They had their own board, and they were all Finns except they voted me in after the [inaudible]. But then, some time in there, they bought the corner lot there and put the service station in there. The only thing they sold was the usual service station things. They sold tires and batteries and gasoline and oil and so on, and they also did service—they didn't do tune-up service—but they did grease jobs and so on—that sort of thing.

Pipe: Tauno Ahonen mentioned in his oral history interview that the Finns' control of the Board—because they spoke their own language—was something that went into transition. Do you recall that they spoke Finnish only at the meetings, and then gradually it changed?

Melbin: No.

Pipe: You don't remember that?

Melbin: Remember, the Co-op Union had a 100 percent Finn board for a couple of years. So I don't know what they spoke at that time. But I'm sure if they liked to speak Finnish, that's all they did. But when I got on the board, they spoke English, which they'd have to do because if they expected me to know what's going on....

Pipe: Was it Arvid Nelson who objected to the language barrier, or were you in on that at all?

Melbin: Well, they must have talked about that as Finns. I don't know why Arvid would object as he would be the guy you'd least expect to object because he spoke English quite fluently. I think he at one time was the editor of a small Finnish paper, and maybe he wanted to continue the Finnish language, I don't know.

Pipe: But when you actually hired—you were in on the hiring of Gene Mannila, weren't you, to the gas station?

Melbin: Yeah.

Pipe: Did you ask him whether he spoke Finnish? Was that something?

Melbin: He's remembered that all these years. He was a Finn and joined all these Finn groups. Apparently, in a moment of kidding or something, I asked him if he spoke Finn. Well, that was one of the things they expected because they were dealing with Finns.

Towards the Associated Berkeley Co-operatives: The 1947 Merger

Pipe: So you worked closely with Gene Mannila then?

Melbin: Well, as general manager. Of course, I worked closely with Bob Neptune [while he was general manager of Berkeley Co-operative] during the war before they [the Berkeley Co-operative and the Co-operative Union] were joined—but I didn't work closely with Gene until Bob Neptune went over and became the general manager of the

Associated Co-operatives. Along about which time, the two co-operatives were merged, and we hired Gene Mannila to become the general manager. I don't have the dates on any of that.

Pipe: That's not so important at the moment. I want to ask you about the merger. Were you in on any of the planning meetings or activities leading to the merger of the two groups?

Melbin: I think I was, yeah, but I don't remember, except [...] [that] it was generally agreed why we had some meetings, and there was a good feeling about it and we thought it was the thing to do. And I guess the Finns had decided that we were going to be a stable enough thing so that we would join together.

Pipe: Everybody agreed to that at the time.

Melbin: Well, I don't remember any disagreement. I don't think everybody ever agrees [on] everything.

Pipe: Weren't you also on the board of the Associated Co-ops?

Melbin: Yeah.

Pipe: What did you do on that board?

Melbin: Just a board member, so far as I know. I think I was on the Nominating Committee a couple of times.

Pipe: So then, you were active with the CCB [Consumers Co-op of Berkeley] as an officer through 1945 and again in 1947. Would you say that was around the time the merger occurred? Do you remember what kinds of developments occurred after that? Or in the early fifties?

Melbin: Well, during the war, we had two stores that we rented. We had the University Avenue store, which we owned. We opened another store on Ashby, near College Avenue, and we opened another store in the Colusa Circle. We had managers for them.

We had a heck of a time getting meat, even aside from that. We finally connected up with a fellow—the Solano Meat Company—who was

able to get meat out of Nevada, and so we were able to continue to supply meat. That's all I remember about that part.

Expansion and Boom Times after the War

Pipe: Apparently after the war, also, there was an enlarged food store at University at Sacramento. Does that ring a bell with you?

Melbin: No, I don't remember about it.

Pipe: An enlargement of the University Avenue food store in 1953.

Melbin: Yeah, we were a very profitable operation. Everything was ongoing at that time, so we expanded our store. I guess the property that was owned by the Co-operative Union on the corner in the merger became our property. So they moved the service station up to Sacramento, and they expanded the store into [the Co-operative Union's old building]. It's been that way ever since.

During those years after the merger, we—profitable is not the word you use in the Co-op, but anyway—we made money, and they had a distribution of patronage refunds. That went on until probably the early sixties.

Pipe: So, then, there was really expansion going on in the fifties...?

Melbin: Yeah.

Pipe: ...and again through the sixties.

Melbin: Yeah.

Pipe: So, now, you were pretty active with them from the late fifties through the early sixties.

Melbin: When was the Sidney thing taken over?

Pipe: That was in the early sixties?

Melbin: I was on the Board at that time.

Pipe: Yeah, we're going to get into that in a few minutes. I notice also that there was a Geary Road store in 1957, and of course I believe the Shattuck Avenue store—that was built not until 1959. So you came on board again I guess around the time they were breaking ground for that.

Melbin: Something, yeah.

Pipe: Did you work with people like Aaron Gordon, for instance?

Melbin: Yeah. I was on the Board when he was on the Board.

Pipe: Do you recall working with him?

Melbin: The reason we had the Geary store [was that] there was quite an active group there [Walnut Creek]. Boy, they were real active, and they'd come to our board meetings with numerous people. So, we were encouraged to put our second center out there. So we bought that property out there on Geary Road and built the big center. That was a profitable operation almost from the beginning.

An Anecdote about Waino Sojanin and the Development of the Shattuck Store

Melbin: Then, later, we built that store at Shattuck and University, which has been the bellwether of the Co-op ever since it was built, almost.

The guy who was the big promoter of that was [Waino Sojanin]. You ever hear of Waino?

Pipe: Yes, I've heard the name. A Finnish Co-op'er.

Melbin: Yeah. He could sell anybody anything.

Pipe: So, tell us more about Mr. Sojanin.

Melbin: Sojanin. Anyway, we used to play bridge with him, too, and he was also a university professor and he also wrote books. I looked at one and it's something I wouldn't read anyway because it's out of my field. Other guys would send books to him, and we were there one night and he said, "What should I do with this?" and I said, "I don't know." He

says, "I'll just tell him that I read it and thought it was a good book." I can see how you do that because heaven's sake!

Anyway, he went as an exchange professor to Italy and he was there on a Christmas period, and he said the apartment he was in was cold and had no heat [in] it, and he was sitting there shivering and here was his family back in the United States, and he says, "What in the world am I doing here?" So, he took the plane the next day and came home and never went back.

Then, another time, he was an exchange professor down at Monterey at the naval place down there. Somebody, some developer, was going to bulldoze the sand dunes down there and put buildings on it. So, he was very eloquently talking against it, and the first thing you know, he was chairman of the planning commission at Monterey. That's why I'm telling you, this guy—he was eloquent. He's at the University of Florida now, and I haven't heard from him for several years.

Pipe: So he was highly instrumental in the development of the Shattuck store.

Melbin: Well, that was his expertise: development. He was, I think, chairman of the committee that selected the site [of the Shattuck store]. They were convinced that that was a good one. So he used to point out that that was his thing. I'm sure he had a lot to do with it.

The Sid's Stores Acquisition

Pipe: I know you want to talk about the Sid's Stores. Now, I just want to give a little background here. It was in 1962 that the Co-op acquired the Sid's Store chain, and I have it on record that you were either an officer or a director on the Board between 1965 and '68, but it was during the time of the development thereof of the Sid's Stores. Maybe you had some other affiliation with the Board. Do you remember things that happened?

Melbin:

I was on the board of directors even though somebody said I wasn't. Because I know I voted on that. As I said earlier, I'm not sure whether it's a good thing or a bad thing. When we took over Sid's, they had the Telegraph Avenue store, they had one in Castro Valley, [and] they had one in Walnut Creek — those three. They were reasonably good stores. Then they had some odds and ends of things that we acquired. One was some kind of little thing down there—Solano Avenue and San Pablo and Berkeley—which we finally sold off. The Castro Valley store did pretty good for a while, but the Walnut Creek I don't think ever did very well because we already had the Geary Road out there. The problem with all of those stores was that we had long leases, generally, and so we were committed to paying that rent whether we were making money or not. When the lease ran out at Walnut Creek, we retired that one, and when the lease ran out at Castro Valley, we retired that one. But I was not on the board when those two events occurred.

The one that did turn out well, excellently well, is the Shattuck—I mean....

[Break in audio]

Pipe:

About the Sid's Stores, then, you were saying....

Melbin:

Well, the one that turned out well, of course, was Telegraph Avenue and we still have it. I think we tried to buy it two or three times, but I believe it belongs to some doctor who is happy to have a good lessee in there and he can raise the rent every once in a while, and so we're still there. But I think we're still making money. I don't know why we aren't making money now with the three stores. Those are the basic stores, and I feel that we should be able to get that onto a point where we will make money.

III. THE 1960S: POLITICS INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE CO-OP

The Co-op Divided: Differing Visions and Factionalism

Pipe: I want to talk to you a little more about the period of the sixties because I think you had a role to play during that time and it was a time of transition. Prior to your administration as president of the CCB board, there was George [Little], and he has talked about the Sid's Stores also in his interview, with favorable ideas on that.

He also mentioned that there were some differences of political ideologies during that time. I wondered if you experienced any of th[ese] changes, with people coming in with different philosophies about how the Co-op should be run. Do you remember any differences of opinion or how it might have influenced you or others who were members of the Co-op?

Melbin: Well, I'm a very narrow-minded person. When I belong to an organization and I think they're organizations that are organized for a particular purpose, [then] that's the purpose they ought to engage in. I was one of the founders of the American Civil Liberties Union [ACLU] in northern California. The American Civil Liberties Union has a particular function to perform, and that's what they ought to be working [on]. The Berkeley Co-op has a particular function to perform, and that's what *they* ought to be working on: namely, to provide goods and services for its members. In doing that, we should do it with fairness to all people concerned. We ought to be fair to the employees, we ought to provide good quality goods—the best that we can get—the prices ought to be fair, and the basic thing about the Co-op is that if there's money left over, we give it back to the people in proportion to what their purchases have been.

Now in the early sixties, we had some people come in whose philosophy was different than that: namely that they felt that the Co-op ought to do some things that helped save the world; namely that if

Chavez was having trouble getting his union underway, we ought to boycott grapes. If there were causes to be espoused, why, we ought to espouse them.

In fact, I think that is basically where the Co-op lost its momentum because that schism went on for ten or fifteen years, and in the process of that going on, while the goodwill and the good feeling went on in the Co-op, you had people taking sides. The process of taking sides—you don't have that feeling anymore. It not only affected the members—they stopped buying—but it affected the employees because if the board of directors can't show some unanimity, it went down to them—the bickering went down to them.

Not only did it go on in the board of directors, but it also went on in the Center Council—[the behavior of the] Center Council—and they'd have sides on the thing. I remember when I was president that there was a lot of bickering where I had to try to referee the thing. I remember Bob Treuhaft particularly—Treuhaft and Larry Duga and Bob Arnold. I'm not saying this against their character. If they want to do the things they want to do, let them do it, but I don't think it belongs in the Co-op. I never did feel that it belonged in the Co-op.

Once you break the bond of goodwill, it's a hard thing to get it back again. That's been, I think, the problem of the Berkeley Co-op ever since: that people realize that, while they had hope that people could come together and work as a community and as a team, they found that [that] was the way it was going. Since the bickering was going on and they could do just as well—Safeway was nearer their place or Lucky's or something. My wife said, "I go all the way down to the Co-op. Maybe the prices are about the same."

Pipe: So, you feel that that was a negative development at that time.

Melbin: That, in my opinion, was the thing that broke the Co-op.

Internal Politics during Melbin's Presidency

Pipe: Tell me more about the sixties in terms of your own presidency. You took over after George Little did—and that was in the year 1967—as president.

Melbin: Yeah.

Pipe: Does anything occur to you that you'd like to discuss, that happened during that time?

Melbin: When I was elected president, I was a sort of—not a majority president—[but] I was the best candidate both sides could find. So I remember, when I got on, that Bob Treuhaft was perpetually after me to do certain things. He wanted to be chairman of, I forget what committee it was, but some committee, and he wanted Bob Arnold to be chairman of the Employee Relations Committee, the union group. I appointed Dave Bortin from Walnut Creek instead of Bob Arnold, which may have been a mistake on my part, I don't know, but that was a perpetual thorn in the side of me. Then, I earned my presidency because they thought they were entitled to that. I think they had the majority on the board and I was just a swing vote.

Pipe: You were saying you chose someone else over [Bob] Arnold.

Melbin: Yeah.

Pipe: You say it might have been an improper choice, you mean because of the reaction that it created?

Melbin: I think if I were to do it again, I'd probably promote... [Bob] Arnold was a good representative of the employees, but I just didn't want to give them too much authority in the Co-op. But I think in that case I probably would have done the other thing.

Pipe: How good a job did Mr. Bortin do? Was he effective?

Melbin: He [w]as an attorney. He did quite well. He was one of the head people out of Walnut Creek who got the thing started. So I don't have any

problem about him having been chairman, but I think Bob Arnold might have had a little closer feel of the employees.

Bob Arnold and Political Boycotts at the Co-op

Pipe: Wasn't Affirmative Action one of the issues during the sixties that had to be faced?

Melbin: Yeah, that was quite active at that time. Maybe Bob Arnold having—he's married to a black wife. I think maybe he would have had more of a feeling on the employees. I don't remember anything else, except there was always the matter of whether we should boycott grapes or not or other things. My view on it [was], and still is, that we can still buy the grapes, but we put a notice to the effect that it's being boycotted by the Chavez group, which leaves it up to the members to decide whether they want to participate or whether they don't.

This group wanted to take the grapes off the shelves, and they wanted to take other things off the shelves. That's what made a lot of our members mad. We as a Co-op were deciding what were the kind of products that they could have. If they wanted Schilling's baking powder, and I'm not saying that was one of those being [boycotted], if we took it off the shelf, who are we to decide that? It's up to me to decide whether I buy Schilling even though they're having a strike. That was a bone of contention for many years and may still be.

I think that was the thing that killed off [the Co-op], and then, over the years, there was seesawing back and forth as to who would have the majority. Larry Duga was president one year. He's of that dissenting group and so was, what's her name....

Pipe: Linda Akulian?

Melbin: Linda Akulian, yeah. Linda Akulian, she wouldn't even talk to me. I was on the other side. Well, you can imagine if that was carried through the whole web and [unclear] of the Co-op, how that [unclear].

They lost a lot of people who were not going to be involved, and then that [unclear] scrapped.

Pipe: Do you remember when [Edna Haynes] was president?

Melbin: Yeah, but I was....

Pipe: You were gone by then.

Melbin: When was she president?

Pipe: 1977.

Melbin: Yeah, well I've been in Napa since almost 18 years now.

Pipe: But it was Robert Arnold who superseded you as president.

Melbin: Was it?

Pipe: Yes. He followed you. Now, do you remember that year and how things went? That was '68-'69.

Melbin: I think Robert Arnold was a reasonably moderate person, although he still had this philosophy of, "If Chavez isn't doing right, you don't provide grapes. You take them out of the store." We had a lot of stuff being boycotted at that time. I forget what they all are. Of course, beer went on for a long time.

Pipe: Beer?

Melbin: Coors Beer.

Pipe: Coors Beer, oh, yes. Can you tell us more about that?

Melbin: I don't know too much about it except that we didn't carry it. If the union said it was to be boycotted, we'd take it out.

I don't like to have things decided that way. If I want to buy Coors beer, I'll buy it. But you can tell me what they're doing that's bad, and then I can decide whether I agree with you and then not buy it myself.

Pipe: Well, tell me now, in light of all of this, there's positives and negatives that happen during your time with the Co-op. Oh, one other thing, were

you active on the Finance Management Committee at all? You mentioned that earlier.

Melbin: I'd been on that for many years. I don't know how many years.

Pipe: Is it true that you're still continuing with them today?

Melbin: I intend to not continue. I'm 87 years old and driving down into Berkeley—it's pretty dark down there. I'm not talking about black people. But going up to those side streets and so on—I don't particularly feel that I ought to be out, 40 miles from home, if something happens to the automobile at night. I did go up about three months ago.

Pipe: Did you?

Melbin: Yeah, but I don't think they really need me that bad.

Looking Back: Highlights of the Berkeley Co-op

Pipe: Tell me now, Mr. Melbin, what did you consider the strengths of the Berkeley Co-op during its development?

Melbin: I think the strength of the Co-op during its development was the goodwill and the sense of belonging and working together that made the Co-op a strong organization. I think that potential is still there. We have 90,000 members. If those 90,000 members would buy, heavens, we'd have one of the most profitable businesses around! Why they're not buying? I guess they no longer feel that the Co-op philosophy is important enough to them to do that.

Now, I don't know how many of those members [live in] Berkeley. Maybe I can see that it would be a little bit too much to expect people from Marin County and Walnut Creek and San Francisco to come in to make their purchases. If you have 40,000 people in Berkeley and they all bought, the three stores we have in Berkeley would be a very efficient operation. I would like to see that happen.

Pipe: How does the Berkeley Co-op uniquely fit into the Berkeley environment? How would you describe that?

Melbin: I think the Berkeley community, almost more than any I know in the country, is a liberal community, as evidenced by the kind of action the city council takes—by the kind of people that are elected to the city council. It's the type of men and women they elect to office like—who's your assemblyman there now?

Pipe: Is it Ron Dellums?

Melbin: Yeah, Ron Dellums. You couldn't get that fellow elected in many other places. He wouldn't be given a chance, but he has a chance in Berkeley. Interestingly, politically, since I'm such a narrow-minded guy, he represents me and my philosophy. He may not represent me in the Co-op because he'd think the Co-op could be doing something else. But I think when you get an organization set, it's got to function according to its tenets. That gives people a common denominator. Those common denominators are the things that I said. When you began to fool around with saving the world or boycotting things or whatever, then you get into trouble.

Pipe: Would you ever give up your membership in the Co-op? And what would lead you to do that?

Melbin: I cannot conceive of a condition in which I would give up my membership to the Co-op.

Pipe: For you, what were the most memorable events associated with the Berkeley Co-op? Do you remember a few in particular? Or do you think you've already expressed that?

Melbin: I think probably one of the events that I would think was important was when we decided that we were going to build our own store. I don't know what evening that was or where, but it was important. Here we had grown big enough and suddenly had enough money so we could go ahead and build our own center.

Pipe: Are you referring to the Shattuck Center?

Melbin: No, I'm talking about University Avenue.

Pipe: Way back.

Melbin: That was the beginning of the thing. Here we had this store we were renting on University Avenue there, and we had now decided: we have enough members and enough backing to build our own store—which we did, and it was the thing to do. It turned out to be a successful thing. The other thing—you mentioned Shattuck—is that. I think that was an eventful thing in my life and I still remember the day that they turned the first shovel. I think we had the mayor of Berkeley there. It was a rainy day, but we stood out there and I think the mayor turned the first shovel. I don't think I was president. I think somebody else was president.

Pipe: It was Aaron Gordon, I believe.

Melbin: Aaron Gordon, okay. Anyway, I was on the board, and whoever it was turned the first shovel.

Philosophical Rifts and the Decline of the Co-op

Pipe: You mentioned earlier what you felt led to the decline in the Co-op—the rift in ideology or philosophy. Do you feel that that was the main thing or the only thing that led to the decline? Or could there have been other factors?

Melbin: I think that was the main thing. I don't know whether there are other things or not. There may have been other things, I don't know. I just feel that this business of feeling that we had other things to do besides make the Co-op a success was the thing that broke it down. That's why I said I'm real narrow-minded about things.

Pipe: There are a couple of people who worked closely with you on the Co-op board, off and on, who may have shared your philosophy. How

would you describe the co-op philosophies, for instance, of Aaron Gordon or Margadent Hayakawa?

Melbin: I would say that Aaron Gordon and Marge shared my philosophy—namely that the Co-op business was to be conducted in accordance with the Co-operative principles and give pre-eminence to saying that the Co-op is a successful operation and [it should] perform the function for which the members were employing it: namely, to be a supplier of merchandise for them. That's the primary purpose of the Co-op—to be a good supplier of merchandise for its members.

IV. CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: THE IMPORTANCE OF THE CO-OP IN MELBIN'S LIFE, BERKELEY, AND BEYOND

Philosophy and the Role of Co-ops in the U.S. and Abroad

Pipe: There are a few philosophical questions I wanted to ask you, Mr. Melbin, in addition to the ones we've already explored. How would you evaluate the co-operatives abroad and their success in comparison to the United States co-operatives?

Melbin: Well, of course, you're talking about co-operatives that are in free countries. You have co-operatives in Russia that operate under governmental restraint, but I think the co-operatives in the Swedish countries and others that are free would operate pretty much the same as we do. I have a feeling, however, that the co-op movement in England, where the thing started—they function but I don't think they have the missionary outlook that I think a co-op should have. They're just an established business that's still in business. The ones in Sweden seem to have more of a co-operative idea of expanding and being more useful to the society as a whole.

Pipe: In general, do you believe that the national co-operative movements have had any consequences for the political systems of their countries?

Melbin: [Unclear] except in Sweden. In fact, that's the only one I know of. I'm not too knowledgeable about....

Pipe: Have you ever visited the co-ops in Sweden?

Melbin: No.

Pipe: Or gone abroad for co-op purposes?

Melbin: No.

Pipe: Let's see. I don't know if we've actually dwelt on this at all, but you have talked about the co-op philosophy. In your view, is it more than just a grocery store?

Melbin: Yeah. I think the Co-op ought to be able to provide all kinds of merchandise. At one time, we were in the automotive business. We were starting to be in the automotive business. In fact, we had an automobile repair shop in Berkeley, which had the same philosophy as the Co-op. I think that we ought to be able to expand backwards like they have in Sweden, where they have their own bakeries. They have their own manufactured tires and that sort of thing, and I see no reason why the Co-op, if you can get people to work together with a common philosophy, why we couldn't expand almost indefinitely.

As a matter of fact, I think if we could expand indefinitely, we would have a much better nation. Not on a dog-eat-dog basis, but you're trying to develop a method of most efficiently and economically providing people with the merchandise they're wanting.

[Aside discussion]

[Break in audio]

The Credit Union as a Co-op Success Story

Melbin: I think that the Credit Union is an example of something that is really important. The Credit Union is a co-operative, but it has made much better progress than the Co-ops. Of course, they're dedicated to one

thing. They deal with money, so you can't get involved in boycotting grapes and so on. You deal with money and that.

So, I think it's a little simpler thing, but there are millions of dollars and thousands of credit unions in the United States now. They're doing a good thing for other people. You put your money in, and if you need some money to borrow, you borrow from that. I'd like to see the Co-op do the same thing. If the members of the Berkeley Co-op would invest, on the average, \$200, you wouldn't have to borrow any money from anybody, and yet that's a nominal amount. This, to me, goes to show that they don't have the feeling of ownership or belonging to the Co-op. It was \$200 a while back that you needed to finance the thing, but if you had that, it would be an economically sound thing right now because you don't have to go out and borrow all this money.

Perspective on the Co-op Employee-Management Merger

Pipe: That brings me to the current situation. Were you in favor of this so-called hybrid that's resulted in the Co-op with the merger of the employees and the management?

Melbin: Yeah, I'm highly in favor of it.

Pipe: So that the employees have more ownership.

Melbin: Yeah. I think the employees now have enough of a vested interest to see that the survival of the Co-op will also involve survival of their jobs. I think during the last few years, during this divisiveness, not only did you have a divisiveness within the company, but the employees saw that, and they would say, "So what? All I've got here is a job. I'll do my job." But they didn't have any enthusiasm for the Co-op. I think, now, this [employee-management merger] may be philosophically a helpful thing as well.

I don't see that there's any great conflict of interest, usually, between whether you're an employee or whether you aren't. The only time it comes up is the matter of wages, and I would think that the employees

on the Board would vote pretty much the same as whether you're not an employee. I don't know how they're going to handle the wages because the wages are not negotiated between the Co-op and the unions. It's negotiated outside, over an industry-wide basis. I think that shouldn't be any big problem either.

Reflections on Life in the Early Twentieth Century

Pipe: Apart from the Co-op necessarily, but just I want to ask you a general question about the part of your life that you spent in Berkeley. What stands out to you?

Melbin: Are we being recorded?

Pipe: Yes, we are. Is there a problem?

Melbin: No, I don't have any problem. I just want to give it a little thought. The thing that stands out in my life, and I'm much older than most people around, is that I grew up in an era of goodwill. Before World War One, everything was fine. God was in his heaven and all was right with the world. We had gotten the Spaniards out of Spain and out of Cuba, and now the United States was ready to proceed on its Manifest Destiny. The buzzword at that time was "the inevitability of progress." But it was a happy time for me. There were no clouds, no nothing hanging over our heads.

Then a war started in Europe and I guess it didn't seem to be too important, but somehow the United States, with its missionary zeal to see that the world is kept on the right track, decided that they had to get involved some way. So Woodrow Wilson ran on a campaign of not involving us in war. Of course, that isn't what he did. He involved us in the World War soon after he was elected. I don't know, Lusitania was sunk or something and—no, that was the Second World War.

Anyway, that stands out in my life. And my life on the farm—I remember that with great... When we came to the city, I thought I was smarter than other kids because I could do things. I could hammer, I

could saw, I could put things together, I could repair things, and then I realized that, actually, I wasn't smarter, that I was one of these farm kids, and when you're out there, you have to deal with what you've got. You can't go to somebody else to do it. It took me a few years to discover that.

My high school days were pleasant, too, and I was quite active in church things, so I enjoyed that very much. I guess I was always....

[Part 2]

Pipe: Could you continue your thought there, Mr. Melbin?

Melbin: Well, I think so. I guess I've always been a sort of an activist, too, because when I was in high school, I was on the track team and on the football team and on the baseball team, and I was also on the student body. I was treasurer and secretary of the student body at the high school.

I went to work for the telephone company in 1922, and that was a kind of coincidence, too, because I belonged to the [unclear—Masonic society?] in Alameda, and one of the fellows who was working for the telephone company—who I didn't even know—had gone up to the Masonic employment office, and the telephone company had asked the Masonic employment office if they knew of any young man who wanted to work for the telephone company.

So it was a complete set of coincidences. I was living in Alameda, and they had a Masonic employment office in San Francisco, and some guy from the telephone company asked that Masonic employment office if they knew a young guy who wanted to work for them.

So I spent 45 years working for the telephone company. I enjoyed it. It was a good company. They had a good employment policy and so on.

The Significance of the Co-op in His Life in Berkeley

Pipe: But I think we're getting away from the question, which was: what stands out in your mind in your life in Berkeley? It could be the Co-op, whatever.

Melbin: The Co-op was....

Pipe: Was that the largest....

Melbin: The Co-op was probably the most important thing in my life in Berkeley.

Pipe: We never did dwell on another thing here, too, and do you want to elaborate a little more?

Melbin: I was going to say part of the thing we did—I was on the long-range Planning Committee for the Berkeley Co-op, and we had various things we were going to do on a consecutive basis. Eventually maybe get into having a hospital, way off about 20 years ahead. But the things we did start—and this was partly while I was on the Planning Committee of the Berkeley Co-op—we started the Funeral Society and I was part of the original group on that. We started the Twin Pines Federal Savings and Loan. That was while I was on the planning group. We started the medical group. All of those while I was on the planning group.

I'm not saying I'm the guy that suggested we do it. I'm merely saying it came out of the thinking of that group. Of course, the medical group was a pretty successful thing for quite a number of years, and then it was connected up to Kaiser. I don't know why they finally folded up, but for some reason they did.

Twin Pines was a highly successful savings and loan association for a long time. But when the financial things got tough, I was no longer on the board. That's why it failed. No, I don't know. A lot of savings and loans went under and apparently that was part of the problem too. I

don't know exactly what the problem was. Well, I can give you some ideas on that, but I'm not going to. I don't think it's appropriate.

Pipe: Well, we may wish to elaborate on them later and you'll have the opportunity to do that. One of the things I didn't ask you earlier was, what really got you involved in the co-op movement and in the Co-op to begin with? Was it an influencing force like the Upton Sinclair run for governor?

Melbin: Yes.

Pipe: Or was it something else?

Melbin: It seemed like a natural thing when I first heard about it, and I don't know where I first heard about it. I'd been a pacifist all my life and it just seemed natural when I first heard about it. The Co-op seemed natural, too. I don't know who or where it came [from]. I think it came up probably in the Methodist Church and under Roy Wilson, probably.

Pipe: Yes, as a matter of fact, Roy Wilson was interviewed by Professor Maccoby for this series, and I believe he mentions your name in his taped oral history.

Melbin: [Inaudible] where my name is mentioned. I can see [why there's the facts there] the way they are.

Pipe: Is there anything you want to add that we haven't dwelt on, as we wind up this interview today?

Melbin: No. I was going to say something—that, among the things we started, the medical thing is no longer in existence. Of course, Twin Pines was taken over by somebody else, but the Funeral Society is still continuing and doing an excellent job. So that's one of the things. The [Co-op] Credit Union is still functioning. I think they started independently of anything we did, though. I don't relate to that. I can't think of anything offhand.

Melbin's Role in the Founding of ACLU in Northern California

Pipe: I wanted to go back [to] something else you had mentioned earlier before we wind this up, and that is that you mentioned that you had been involved in the [American] Civil Liberties Union. Did you say you had founded—you were instrumental in founding the Civil Liberties Union in Northern California? Is that correct?

Melbin: Yeah.

Pipe: Can you tell me more about that?

Melbin: Well, I don't want to give the impression that I was a big wheel in the thing, but in 1933 about, there was a waterfront strike in San Francisco where one or two of the stevedores were killed, and as a result of that, the union called a general strike and there was a general strike over there. After the strike was over, there was a general feeling that a lot of employees were not being treated fairly. There was a national American Civil Liberties Union—and whether they had branches or not, I don't know—but there was a feeling we ought to start a branch of the American Civil Liberties Union here. So Austin Lewis, who was an attorney in Oakland, or he may have been in San Francisco, approached me about whether I would be willing to work with him on that, and I said “yes,” and that was it.

So we hired a fellow named E. L. Wirin to be our first attorney and set up an office in San Francisco. Wirin was that for a while until Ernest Besig came, and he was the office manager for many years. American Civil Liberties Union is a very narrow-minded organization just like I am, namely that their job is to see that people have the right to express their opinions under any and all circumstances, in any people. They've been in trouble at times by defending fascists and other people who feel they don't have a right to have their opinion.

Pipe: Were either Charles Erskine Scott Wood or Sara Bard Field involved with that?

Melbin: Yeah. Well, Sara Bard Field was. In fact...

[Aside discussion]

As I remember, Sara Bard Field was a reasonably wealthy person, and she underwrote quite a bit of the initial expense of getting the ACLU started. I'm not sure of that, but I think that's probably about the way it is.

Pipe: But she was also a political activist, I believe.

Melbin: Yeah. She had nothing to do with the Co-op whatsoever. Whether she was a member or not, I don't know.

Pipe: No, no. I'm not asking about the Co-op. I just meant the Civil Liberties Union. I believe she was part of that.

Melbin: Yeah, they started about 1933 as a result of that waterfront strike.

Pipe: Have you been active with the [American Civil Liberties] Union through the years?

Melbin: I've been a member. In fact, when I came up to Napa, we started a chapter up here.

Pipe: You did?

Melbin: It ran for a number of years. But then you have to have a motivator, and you have to have people who are interested in it. There is a Santa Rosa chapter and we're supposed to be part of it, but I think, with the American Civil Liberties Union, you have to have something that's going on that needs to be defended. Right now, I guess there's not much of that on a local level.

Pipe: Were you ever involved with Robert Arnold in some of his union activities? That was a separate union, wasn't it, that he was [inaudible]?

Melbin: Robert Arnold was a member of the clerical union or whatever it is. I've never been involved in unions. Even in the telephone company, I

was management, and so unions were people I dealt with. But I'm in favor of unions. I don't want to give the impression I'm not.

Concluding Thoughts on the State of the Berkeley Co-op

Pipe: Any other ideas that you wish to elaborate on that I haven't touched on today?

Melbin: I don't think so. Let me just say this. I feel that the new move that's been made on behalf of the Co-op is a very favorable move, and I hope it augurs the well-being of the Co-op into the future—that we will get things stabilized and going again. I feel right now you don't have these dissenting people in there. It seems to me they work pretty much as a unit. Once you break things up, why, it's hard to get them back again, and I think the last two or three years they've been working together, and I think maybe that will....

Pipe: More in accord.

Melbin: More in accord and you get the union employees feeling, "I've got a stake in this thing, so I'd better get in there and do my best." I feel the new manager is a good man, too. I think he's got his feet on the ground.

Pipe: Bruce Miller?

Melbin: No, he was the president.

Pipe: Oh, the new manager, yes.

Melbin: I've forgotten his name—[Geoff] something.

Pipe: [Geoff Voss]?

Melbin: Geoff Voss. Yeah, I think he understands the finances and economics of running a business, probably more so than, what's her name? The lady?

Pipe: Linda Akulian?

Melbin: No, not Linda. I can't think of her name right now. The last woman.

Pipe: Lynne MacDonald?

Melbin: Lynne MacDonald, yeah. I have nothing against Lynne. I think she's a fine person, and she was probably a very good person. She came in [during] a very difficult time, but I just feel that Geoff Voss is a stronger person in terms of the finance and economics of running a business.

Pipe: Thank you, Mr. Melbin. It's been such a pleasure to meet with you today, and I hope we can review the manuscript at a later time and come up with accord on the whole concept. Thank you very much.

Melbin: I'm glad you came. I'm glad we finally got together.

Pipe: There is one additional thing I believe you wanted to say, Mr. Melbin. Was it regarding the Savoury Store in Marin County?

Melbin: I was really going to say with reference to that, as the question came up, that the Berkeley Co-op at the time Savouries was opened was not making money. In fact, they were still on a losing streak. I don't think that's the time to experiment with things unless it is dead certain that they're going to be successful, and I think that the matter of opening the Savouries stores in Marin County was in that risky element—and it turned out to be so.

We ought to try to conserve what we have and improve what we have before we again go out looking for some other things, and [if we do that], we're not likely to get into trouble.

Pipe: Did you have an opinion also about the Mayfair expansion that occurred in the seventies? Or was that something....

Melbin: That was while I was not on the board, but I think that also was a mistake. The Sid's Store was, as I said, still iffy, but nevertheless, Sid's was a pretty good operation. We saved out of it the Telegraph Avenue store, and the minuses are probably on the side of not having taken over Sid's. But I think the minuses were total on the matter of

taking over Mayfair. We were on a roll of losing money at that time, and that was a bigger risk than Sid's. I don't think any one of the Mayfair stores paid their way. I don't know what the philosophy there was. Maybe it was: we're right at the edge of making a big expansion and can become a high success. But it didn't turn out.

Pipe: Thank you again, Mr. Melbin.

END OF TRANSCRIPT