

Tauno Arvi Ahonen

A FINNISH PIONEER OF THE CONSUMERS COOPERATIVE OF BERKELEY
(Consumers Cooperative of Berkeley Oral History Collection)

An Interview Conducted by
Professor Herbert Maccoby
of the
University of Maine at Orono

Berkeley

1979

Transcribed by
Oral History Committee
of the
Berkeley Historical Society
Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association

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INTRODUCTION

During the summer of 1979, Professor of Sociology Herbert Maccoby from the University of Maine in Orono, conducted some exploratory taped interviews with a few Consumers' Cooperative of Berkeley (CCB) pioneers. These interviews were done in connection with his research on the CCB, the largest segment of California consumer cooperative activity and the largest cooperative of its kind in the United States. The interviews focused on sociological and ideological aspects of the consumers' cooperative movement in general, and on the CCB in particular. The pioneers included Tauno Ahonen, Mr. and Mrs. Harold Bush, Mr. and Mrs. Tracy Clark, Eugene Mannila, Mrs. Arvid Nelson (now deceased), Robert Neptune, Catherine Nollenberger, and Rev. Roy E. Wilson.

In the spring of 1981, a grant from the Friends of the Berkeley Public Library made it possible for the Berkeley Historical Society to transcribe oral history tapes that relate to Berkeley history. The Historical Society's Oral History Committee, with the permission of the interviewer and the CCB, decided to review and transcribe several of the CCB tapes. Three have been selected for transcription because of more complete and diversified information on the CCB: Tauno Ahonen, Eugene Mannila, and Catherine Nollenberger. Of these, two pioneers (Ahonen and Mannila) are part of the important Finnish contingent that contributed so much to CCB's founding and leadership. A chronology of important CCB events compiled by Robert Neptune can be found at the front of each transcribed interview.

In addition to the transcripts for the CCB Oral History Collection, supplementary materials are appended here: newspaper articles, photographs, subject indexes of the tapes that were not transcribed, and a copy of a master's thesis on the life of Finnish Co-op activist Arvid Nelson by his son, Allan Nelson. Mechanical difficulties in taping Robert Neptune's interview made it impossible to transcribe. However, Mr. Neptune will provide us with a condensed written version of the tape and bring the information up to date on current CCB activities. His manuscript is in process and will be appended.

Volunteer help was essential for completion of these transcripts. Irene Heller assisted on typing, Beth Wilson on indexing and editing, Patricia Pope on subject indexing, Cleo Stoker and Kathy DeVries on proofreading. Elaine Dorfman, Willa Baum and Karen Jorgensen-Esmaili helped on the fine points of pulling together an oral history transcript. Anne Dorst was invaluable as the liaison for the CCB.

Future plans for this collection include more interviews with additional pioneers and leaders of the Consumers' Cooperative of Berkeley.

Therese Pipe
Oral History Committee of the
Berkeley Historical Society
Berkeley Architectural Heritage Association

February, 1983

Chronology of Major Events in the History of the
Consumers Cooperative of Berkeley, Inc.

- 936 Establishing of a depot for delivery service of Pacific Cooperative Services in Alameda. The depot was in the basement of the Methodist minister's home (Rev. Roy Wilson). Bob Neptune was the manager.
- 937 Delivery service moved to Berkeley, operating from a small store front at 2489 Shattuck Avenue.
- 938 Store moved from Shattuck Avenue to 1715 University Avenue. Operations continued to provide a telephone order and delivery service, along with the maintenance of regular store hours. Bob March became the second employee.
- Service station opened by the Berkeley Cooperative Union, a cooperative which was organized by the Finnish community and separate from the grocery cooperative, at Bancroft Way and San Pablo.
- 939 Service station moved to corner of Acton and University Avenues to new facility built for the co-op. Eugene Mannila was an early manager of the Berkeley Cooperative Union.
- 940 New food store built on property adjacent to the cooperative service station at 1414 University Avenue. Consumers Cooperative of Berkeley was incorporated to own the real property and the assets of the Berkeley store of Pacific Cooperative Services which were transferred to CCB. Employees became unionized.
- 941 Berkeley Cooperative Union opened hardware store at 1432 University Avenue.
- 942 Branch food store opened on Ashby Avenue near College. Delivery service was discontinued because of wartime restrictions on use of automotive equipment.
- 943 Branch food store opened at Colusa Circle to provide additional facility in different part of Berkeley because of discontinuing of delivery service.
- 946 Branch stores on Ashby and Colusa Circle closed as war ended and all activities were consolidated again at 1414 University Avenue.
- 1947 On January 1, after two years of discussion, the Berkeley Cooperative Union and the Consumers Cooperative of Berkeley were merged, with CCB as the surviving corporation. A new board was elected representing members from both cooperatives. The new organization was then operating a service station, food store, and hardware store. Membership was just over 1400 and sales were just over \$300,000 per year. Eugene Mannila became the manager.
- 1948 Major remodeling of store at 1414 University Avenue provided much larger shopping facilities.
- 1949 Education director employed for the first time.
- 1952 Service station moved to corner of Sacramento and University Avenue. The food store was again remodeled, with the enlarged store covering the area formerly occupied by the old service station.
- 1955 New hardware store built at 1432 University Avenue; the old store was torn down.

- 1956 Property purchased and new store built for second major center at 1510 Geary Road, Walnut Creek. Service station and credit union office constructed at same site.
- 1959 Property purchased on Cedar, Shattuck, and Henry Streets, old houses removed, and new shopping center facilities constructed at 1550 Shattuck Avenue. Facilities included food store, book store, pharmacy, credit union. Book store and pharmacy later moved.
- 1962 Assets of Sids Store chain purchased, with five stores included: 3000 Telegraph Avenue; 3667 Castro Valley Boulevard, Castro Valley; 1295 South Main Street, Walnut Creek; 1484 University Avenue, and 1491 Shattuck Avenue. The Shattuck Avenue store was closed in 1965. The Castro Valley and South Main, Walnut Creek, stores were closed in 1981. The University Avenue store was remodeled and converted to a natural foods store in 1971.
- 1963 Property was purchased and a new shopping center constructed at 1751 East-shore Blvd., El Cerrito. Facilities included food store, bakery, pharmacy, service station, credit union, clothing store (later replaced by bottle shop).
- 1964 Garage opened at 1516 Shattuck Avenue. Moved to 1535 University Avenue in 1968 and closed in 1978.
- 1967 Store facility at 1607 Shattuck Ave. purchased and remodeled for hardware-variety store and pharmacy. Hardware store moved from 1432 University Ave.
- Property purchased and shopping center constructed at 71 Tamal Vista Blvd., Corte Madera. Facilities included food store, natural foods store, bottle shop, credit union.
- Pharmacy added to University Avenue center.
- 1969 Pharmacy added to Telegraph Ave. center. Book store added to Telegraph Ave. center; it was later closed and the space incorporated into the food store.
- 1971 Major remodel and expansion of the Shattuck Avenue food store.
- 1972 Wilderness store added to Corte Madera center (closed in 1974).
- 1973 Wilderness store added to hardware-variety store and to Walnut Creek store. The South Main, Walnut Creek, unit closed in 1974.
- 1974 Garden shop opened in El Cerrito center (later leased out).
- Lease acquired on store at 3660 Broadway, in the MacArthur-Broadway shopping center. Store was operated until 1981.
- Lease acquired on store at 434 E. 18th Street, Oakland. It was operated until 1979.
- 1975 Lease acquired on store in Northpoint Shopping Center, 350 Bay Street, San Francisco, including food store, bottle shop. Later, natural foods facilities were incorporated into store.
- 1976 Major remodeling of University Avenue center to enlarge facilities again.
- 1979 Addition of bottle shop to Shattuck Avenue facilities.
- 1980 Remodel of Telegraph Avenue center to expand pharmacy and add natural foods department.

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Tauno Arvi Ahonen
and wife, Mrs. Irja Alice Ahonen

(Photo taken at their 50th
Wedding Anniversary, 1976 --
Berkeley, California)

Interview with Tauno Ahonen
Date of Interview: August 6, 1979
Interviewer: Herbert Maccoby
Transcriber: Helen Harvey

I = Interviewer
N = Narrator

THE FINNS ABROAD

- I: I'd like to begin by asking you how you came to be involved in cooperatives--not necessarily the Berkeley Consumers Cooperative, which I'll ask you about more later--but even more broadly. I know you were probably involved in the BCU before the CCB and--how did you become interested in the cooperative movement?
- N: Well, my father in the old country was one of the organizers of the first co-op in Finland, so I am born and raised cooperatively all my life. And then my first job, I worked for a cooperative, at that time it was the second-largest co-op in Finland. And all the co-ops in town, they joined together and formed a co-op.
- I: What year was this?
- N: This was before the first World War. I'd say that it was either--it's kind of hazy to me, 'cause after all I was a young fellow then. But the first co-op was Finlayson factories over there; their workers organized their co-op. And at the same time there was another Pellavatehdas (Flax-linen mill) / there, they organized their co-op. And then another one--just about the same time

all of them. They organized three co-ops in Tampere. I'm guessing now; I'd say about 1913-1914 they formed one regional co-op.

I: At this time, was Finland still part of Czarist Russia? And your father, you say, was an organizer, going back into the 19th century.

N: No; it was just about turn of the century, about 1900-- the first co-op was organized in Finland, my home town Tampere. [I see.] And they have a monument over there for that first co-op; it's in a park over there right now. [Oh, very nice.] The co-operators always go and take a look at it.

I: How did your father become involved in the co-operatives?

N: Well, he was a Progressive Social Democrat and I really don't know the particulars about it; but he was very much interested in something like that and the working-class movement, although he himself was not a working man. He had a little furniture factory there and he worked as a foreman. As far as I can remember, he never was nothing but a foreman or a general manager of some firm over there. Finally he had his own firm over there.

I: Well, that's interesting, particularly because, as you mentioned, in England, Britain, Europe in general, the co-operative movement was largely a working-class movement.

N: Well, that's besides the farmers.

I: Besides the farmers, right.

N: It was a working-class movement in Finland also; you can't get away from that.

I: Of course, he as a foreman was sort of part administrator on one hand and on the other hand he was also a worker.

N: Well, he was a progressive in his thinking; but see, here something happened in Finland that has not happened here, actually because we haven't had too many co-ops out here. But the farmers had their own co-ops and the cities had their own co-ops, the working men in the cities, they have their own co-ops. And they finally split into two different groups. Because like Elanto Co-op in Helsinki, they had-- Let's say that they had 50,000 members and some co-op out there on the farm maybe had 100 members or something like that. And they organized their wholesale houses. And then these farmer co-ops, they wanted as much to say as the 50,000 members. So they finally-- They called themselves "Progressive Co-ops." They formed their own wholesale complex and that's known as O.T.K. and S.O.K. Nowadays they work together in many ways, but they still are separate organizations. But they have factories that produce for each place. I just found out that, in the whole of Finland I understand, there's only one match factory and the co-ops have it. Both of them used to have one,

but they decided one is enough. And they're making, I guess, matches for the whole of Finland.

I: When your father organized the first co-operative in your home town, he wasn't working, a paid employee? He did this on his own as a volunteer [Yeah] and he continued his job?

N: Don't misunderstand: He wasn't alone [Yes]. He was one of many.

I: How important was the co-op in your family as you grew up? Was that something important in your life? Did your father talk about it a great deal?

N: My father was--as long as I can remember, he was always either a member of the Board of Directors or what we call Executive Council, which was-- Actually, Hallintoneuvosto was what we called it in Finnish; and it was the highest organization, I mean the highest--

I: Governing body?

N: Governing body. And then the Board of Directors usually was a little different than over here. Board of Directors usually had the manager and the assistant manager and maybe one or two from the Hallintoneuvosto.

I: Yes; I understand. Was this something which took up a great deal of his time?

N: No; they had their meetings maybe twice a month.

I: Did he talk about the co-operative at home very much? For example, around the dinner table?

- N: Well, our whole life--it was kind of natural for us. I can't remember if he ever really talked about it, but it was so natural for us that we were a part of the co-op community; that's all there is to it.
- I: Okay. Now you said your first job--this was when you were about 18 years of age?
- N: Yeah, when the War started. By the way my father's picture is over there [Um-hmm]; that's my inheritance.
- I: Oh, yes; I see, um-hmm.
- N: And when the War started and with that rationing and all that, he was very active in trying to-- like they bought a farm, for instance, so they could get fresh food for their restaurants and stuff like that. But anyway, when I finished school, summer time Father got me a job at the Co-op over there as an errand boy. My first job. And I was there during the summer time and then I went back to Lyseo/ ^(Highschool), a famous high school over here. And then the Civil War started in 1918. My father was killed because he had a Social Democratic Party membership card in his pocket; he was put against a wall and shot.
- I: By Czarists? The "Whites" or by whom?
- N: The "Whites," yeah. Well, anyway, that's history now, but Civil War's always that way. Anyway, as a matter of fact, -- Tampere was surrounded by "Whites," the "Reds" were inside. My father was in Hallintoneuvosto

meeting in the co-op. And the "Whites" took our house where we were living and a few blocks away, the co-op office was over there; and Father was stranded in the co-op office. It took him 2-3 days before he finally got home; and as soon as he got home, the White Army captain with 25 fellows came and took him away for questioning and that's the last I've seen. But anyway, the last thing he was doing, he was in the co-op meeting, taking care of the co-op affairs at that time. Well, of course, my father died, I had to leave the school. Everything was tied up over there; my mother got sick and all that, so I went back to work at co-op. There's no question that they needed men anyway, and I started to work over there in the warehouse and that's when they promoted me to do a little next step up over there. Finally, when I was 20 years of age, I came to this country.

I: You came here before Finland was a separate country?

N: No. The Civil War started at the time when Finland got their independence. But there is a question-- Some people call it "war of liberation," [Yes] but it actually isn't that. And history will show it later on, when we can understand it. It was just a regular Civil War, maybe not the same scale as the American Civil War, but it was a Civil War. You can't get away from that, "Reds" and "Whites."

- I: In other words, there were those in Finland who wanted to remain a part of the Soviet Union?
- N: No. [No?] Nobody wanted--They wanted to be independent.
- I: Both the "Reds" and the "Whites"?
- N: Yeah; they wanted to be independent. It isn't that.
- I: That's why I thought you said it was a civil war; I thought you meant that within, among the Finnish people, there was a difference [Yeah] as to what they wanted to happen?
- N: Well, it was the same thing that happens now. In Cuba for instance, the left-wing socialists got hold of the country. Well, over there it was the farmers against the industrial South. That's the way it--
- I: Um-hmm; that's what happened. And in effect the farmers were the victors?
- N: Yeah, because the Germans came over there. Germany sent an army over there and they helped them. I don't know what would have happened if the Germans didn't come over. But the Germans wanted to get a submarine base and ice-free port in the Finnish Petsamo. Finland had an ice-free port over there and they wanted to get that for their submarine base.
- I: What happened to the co-operatives during this period in Finland?
- N: Nothing really happened. They continued to serve the best they could.

- I: Once the Czarists had gone, the co-ops were able to continue? [Yeah] In fact, it was only because your father was a Social Democrat, not because he was a co-operator--?
- N: No. It had nothing to do with it, because see, it was the "White" army, they-- The big help for them was the co-ops that was handling their goods, selling their goods, and all that.
- I: When you're talking about the "White" army, are you talking about the Czarist army? [No.] You're talking about the "White" army in Finland. [In Finland, yeah.] Because they talk about the "Whites" and "Reds" in the Soviet Union, too.
- N: Yeah, but I'm talking about the Finland--
- I: Ah, and it was the captain of the "Whites" who took your father away? [Yeah] It wasn't the Russians.
- N: No. Russia--there was some slackers in the country yet, or maybe some army companies yet, but not too many. But if they were caught, the "Whites"--Like they have a story, I don't know if it's true or not-- Back in Tampere , they had a few hundred Russians they caught and they shot them right away.
- I: Um-hmm; I see now why you say it was a civil war rather than a war of liberation. See, I thought you were talking about kicking the Russians out. [No, the Russians are out.] Okay; that takes care of that.

- I: Well, when you came to the United States, where did you come? Came directly to California?
- N: No; it was Canada. I was supposed to go to Germany. The co-op wanted to send me out there to work over there for a year or two in Germany to get a little more-- because German co-ops were more advanced at that time. But the Reich mark had-- In order to get a cup of coffee, you had to have a suitcase full of Reich marks. So they wouldn't give me a visa. Well, I got 2 years' extension from my army duty and I had a passport. A 20-year-old kid, well hell, nothing could keep me up there. So Canada was the only place you could get without a visa, so I came over there for about 6 weeks and then I worked myself from Niagara Falls over there. Gave one black boy \$5 and he took me over Niagara Falls one night. There was three other fellows in the same boat; we came that way in this country. I was here 18 years here without--
- I: An entry permit?
- N: Yeah, without legal entry. So finally in 1941 they passed a law that anybody that's been here, '24 or earlier, they can apply for legal entry. So I was first one. But I really had an idea to go back to Finland in 2 years, but I met my wife, so that changed my mind.
- I: In the United States, how did you become involved in the cooperatives here?

THE FINNS IN BERKELEY

N: Well, I have always been interested in community work, let's say. Like Social Democratic Party, I was interested in that because like over in this country, they're Democrats because their fathers were Democrats, something like that. Well, I was very much busy in the Youth Movement in Finland besides my work. Well, I come over here, I continued out here; and we had a Socialist Party local here too, but--It's at a hall here-- [Finnish Hall?]- on 10th Street. [Yes.] The Communists got hold of it, so Social Democrats got out; and it split the Socialists Party at that time, after the Russian Revolution. [Yes] Well, I don't quote that, but we had a purely Finnish organization here. We called it United Finnish/^{Kaleva}Brothers and Sisters; it's a fraternal organization which is women and men. They used to have a women's organization and men's organization but they finally threw in together. Well, I joined that and got very active in that. Then they kicked us out, the Communists were all over here. And they wouldn't rent-- [The hall to you?]- the meeting hall.

I: They got control of it?

N: Yeah. [Okay] They kicked all the other organizations out. And we were not political. The brotherhood's nonpolitical, but they kicked us out and said that we were traitors of the working class or whatever that translated to.

Well, anyway, at that time in Berkeley there was no meeting halls available. But I already got--I was the elected president when they kicked us out; I was elected president before they kicked me out, I took the first of the year. Our lease at that hall expired just at New Year's so we didn't have no place to meet at West Berkeley. The closest one we had, on Haste Street, there was a hall available at that time. So I went to talk to one of the owners of this brand new building. Remember, this was 1930. It was just the/ ^{bottom of the} Depression. I went to talk to the owner-- It's on San Pablo; they built that building over there and every store was empty, they hadn't been able to rent it at all. So I went and said to them, "How about getting two of those stores out there?" So we paid \$10 a month, \$20 for two stores out there. He said okay, within the week if he could rent it to somebody else, we would vacate within a week; that's the agreement. So we were there for a year and while we were there we built this hall over here on Chestnut Street. We built that practically with voluntary labor. It only cost us \$18,000 including the lot.

I: I guess the one I know is on Chestnut Street; I didn't know the one on 10th Street. Is that still there on 10th Street?

N: Yeah; it's 10th Street. I understand that's where they

print that People's Forum. The Finnish organization sold it to somebody that gave it to People's Forum. Some of their organizations still meet downstairs. But we built this over here; and in 1934 the Communist Party tried to take over the co-op movement in Wisconsin and Minnesota and Michigan and kind of split that in political lines out there. But anyway our progressives or non-Communists got control of it and George Halonen was one of the fellows that used to be in our Educational Department.

I: Who was that?

N: George Halonen.

I: Is he related to the attorney in Berkeley, San Francisco?

N: No. It sounds like-- [It sounds alike but it's not the same?] It's an Irish name. [Okay] But this is Finnish; these were Finnish co-ops. And Halonen came over here on a speaking tour and over here at the San Pablo store he was saying "Why don't we give you help if you get started down here?" So we talked about it a few years and finally around a year or two later the Brotherhood appointed five men to see what kind of co-op to start.

Arvid
 Nelson was one of them and I was
 the other one and Laukkanen / the third one, I can't re-
 member. But anyway, Jack / Krantz was probably one. There
 was five of us anyway; and we sat to figure out what
 kind of co-op we could get started. First we wanted to

start a bakery. And we never thought of a grocery store at that time. A bakery was the thing that we thought that we could probably get the Finnish bread over here, dark rye bread. But anyway, there was a Finnish bakery over here. Leino was the owner of it. And we looked at something else. We weren't really--We didn't know what we were up to. But finally the service station came in. We figured out that a service station we can get in easier than anything else. And we knew that Mansonen had a service station over here on Bancroft and San Pablo. He was getting old so he wanted to get rid of it. He said "You give me \$1000 and I'll turn it over," so we did. We bought it for \$1000.

I: How many people were there involved? You say \$1000; how many people put together the \$1000?

N: Well, I guess 100 people.

I: 100 people, \$10 each.

N: We didn't want any more money except \$10. We have had a little experience on co-ops anyway from the Middle West and from Astoria, Oregon where they didn't succeed out there. You had to have more people, not with a lot of money, but more a multitude of people [Small money.] who would make it better; that's the idea we had. Anyway, we had that \$1000 and we paid it off and opened it up. We paid first few years, we paid dividends, although

nobody ever took the dividends out, they left it in. After being there for a year or so, we decided that we got to have a better place, our own place. We wanted to own our own place. So this place where the Co-op is on University Avenue, the corner at--

I: Acton and University?

N: Acton and University. That was available for \$4000.

I: The lot?

N: The lot. So we figured it out that it takes \$7000 to build that service station up there and \$4000 for the lot. So we needed \$11,000--no, we only needed \$7000, if I remember right. We already had enough money needed for the lot there. So we went to these Finnish fellows up there and talked to a couple of guys and they said, "Oh no; I haven't got money; it's all tied up," and this and that. So we couldn't get it. So Toivo Kankkonen and I, we went around that. We figured out that, well, let's get somebody that's known among the Finns; and we happened to think of Waino Kemp , the superintendent over here on a big construction firm, McDonald and Nelson. He was known to be kind of a frugal fellow, but everybody thought that he was a pretty good guy , that he wouldn't put his money into anything that wasn't safe.

I: He was a Finn?

N: Right; he was a Finn. So we went to see Waino up there

and said that we needed \$7000, how about it? "Oh, sure," he said. "I know it's gonna be safe over there. If it's on a building--we can give you \$1000, we'll give you a mortgage on it." So he put down \$1000 and we collected the next \$6000 without any trouble that same night. We said that "Waino Kemp, he gave us \$1000; how about you?" No trouble. Even those fellows that had their money tied up! (laughter)

I: That's interesting. And they had a mortgage now on the building?

N: They had the mortgage, but we paid that back I think within a year or two; that was all paid back. That's how we--

I: That's how it began. Now were most, or almost all of the people Finnish?

N: Yes. The Board of Directors, everybody was Finnish. Carroll Melbin was the first non-Finn that was elected. But here is the way that most of these Finnish organizations like that-- They kept them Finnish; they talked Finnish in meetings and all that, and that always kept Americans out of there. So that was one of our first big fights that we had in our meeting. We decided that we were going to conduct our meetings in English. Except Arvid Nelson, who was born in Mendocino County, was the one who wanted us to talk Finnish. (He was marvelous with the Finnish language.) All those fellows that were in that original committee, the last one of them passed away, Laukkanen, last year. And I'm the only one left.

I: Very interesting.

Nelson

N: But / lost on that; and I think that's the thing that saved us, because the Finnish organization wouldn't have a chance to grow.

I: Well, I know that you eventually in 1947 joined together with the CCB. [That's right.] Had you been a member of the CCB during this period before you two joined together?

N: Most of our active members, they were. I was, for instance, --when Pacific Co-operative Services, when Berkeley was part of them, I was one of them. Carroll Marsh, Melbin and me and Mrs. Vivian^{Marsh} were the three of them. Bob Neptune was manager of the store.

See, actually that store--it wasn't really a store that Bob Neptune had over here on Shattuck Avenue; there was nothing in there to sell. It was a buying co-op. But the first time I took--one friend of ours tried to sell her the idea to join the co-op out there and buy everything from the co-op and was very much interested was Mrs. Niska. I took her to this Shattuck Avenue store over there and she bought everything there was in the store.

I: That's very interesting. Well, I understand now how you got into the co-op; it was part of your life in

Finland and it was a natural thing to continue this here, particularly when the group of you wanted to do something about it. What did it mean to you? Why was the co-operative an important thing?

N: I don't know why. It's really, I think--still think that it's one of the ways of trying to control the quality of the things that they sell us. Of course, it hasn't worked that way all the time, but if we could ever get big enough that we could control some of the production like they do in the Scandinavian countries-- They have some examples over there that the control of the quality is in the hands of the co-operatives on certain things, but not big enough yet. In Sweden and Finland I'd say. I think that the statistics--although you don't want statistics-- [That's fine.]--But the statistics show that maybe one-third of the consumers' goods are sold through co-operatives.

I: I saw something a few years ago--10 years ago--that gave figures on Finland, it was 41% as I remember of retail business was part of a co-op. [Yeah]

N: That's what my idea was, that we could get a big enough store so that we could kind of say "No, that's not good enough stuff for us." But if I really want to tell you the truth, I have to make my own living the other way. I have never been paid co-operator in this country, although I got paid for my job as a grocery clerk in

old country. But over here, besides my own business, this was my recreation. [Sure] And I took it that way. We never got any pay for it. That, for instance, is where the American co-ops differ from the European co-ops. When you're elected on the Board, for instance, in Finland or in Sweden, you get paid for those meetings. You don't do that here.

I: I didn't know that you were paid in Finland?

N: Oh, yes, they pay. Not an opportunity to get rich, but they do cover the expenses and stuff. So if you get paid a little, you can demand more too.

I: Um-hmm. Well, you're talking about quality. Are there other things besides quality of goods and groceries that you were interested in, that you saw coming out of the co-op?

N: If you think that you could sell me onto co-operatives and change the capitalistic world, it'll never work.

I: But did you ever feel that way?

N: I won't be very interested.

I: Oh, you wouldn't. Okay. People talk--one reads about something called the "co-operative commonwealth," where people wanted ^{to} see a world in which co-operatives did almost all the business in the country. Not in this country--all countries. England, Scandinavia and so on. Some people believed in that; and some people saw or would prefer Socialism, where-- And in many countries

the co-operative movement was really a part of the Socialist movement' and I think you know that in Finland today the co-operative movement is split in two, with one identified with the Socialists and one with the non-Socialists.

N: Yeah, in Finland.

I: Finland, right. So what kind of thinking--did you have any thoughts about that?

N: I wanted to keep co-ops out of politics; and what I mean, "keep out of politics," if you talk about Co-operative Commonwealth, for instance, then you get into politics. Maybe in the ideal Utopia it will work, but it will not work where human beings are of different opinions how this should be done and how that should be done; and that's why the co-ops should be kept out of this political philosophy. And you should try to help yourself like God helps those that help themselves.

I: Is this how you've always thought?

N: That's always been my--

I: You never thought in terms of broader idealistic or philosophical--as far as the co-ops?

N: I just don't feel that it would work.

I: Um-hmm. How big-- Well, even if you didn't feel that it would work, do you think of it as something that you would like to see?

N: Oh, yeah; I'm a Socialist and a Social Democrat in the

Finnish sense of the word. And even that has changed. When I first joined the Socialist Party in Finland, that has changed, the idea over there, because even the Communists now they are trying to live within the capitalistic framework [Yeah]. And they try to work-- I'd say the Finnish Communist Party is what probably at present time what Conservative Wing called Socialist Party was when I was a young kid. 'Cause they tried to get as much away from the individual profit-making as possible; and I don't see where it has made much progress -- much in my lifetime except that we accept Socialists. To be a Socialist now is not a dirty word. Or even a Communist. Over here in this country Communist is still a dirty word; but my brother is a pretty well-known Communist in Finland. He is general manager of the Communist press over there that prints the main Communist paper in Finland, and when you're talking about that firm over there, they have about 300. When he took over, he told me, "When I took over the firm, we had 305 employees." Now he says "I got about 225; with new machinery and all that, it don't take so many." But they do a lot of work for the Russians; they print all kinds. So they are part of that--They're English, they print Russian-- I could say they print Chinese, but I'm not sure.

I: They distribute this all over the world then?

- N: Yeah. Of course they print them for the Russians and the Russians distribute them.
- I: Uh-huh; I see what you mean. He runs the printing plant.
- N: He's the general manager, right.
- I: I see. That's very interesting.
- N: Yeah. But they do all kinds of real fancy work for the Russians. The Russians I guess are not-- Maybe they're too busy to keep up with that or something.
- I: They don't do as well.
- N: For instance, they have been printing big signs that come over there--the Olympic Games, they have the order to print them in Finland in their print shop.
- I: Well, if-- you say that, for example, Socialism in the United States isn't a practical thing as far as you can see. But if it could be, if it would work, would you like to see the profit system completely done away with, either with government ownership or with co-operative ownership in some way?
- N: Yeah; that would be an ideal situation. But the co-ops should not be the ones to be a battleground for different political views like we have had it over here.
- [Yes] Because we haven't got money to fight for the betterment and put our own organization in jeopardy over here. But that's exactly what has happened. I want to point this, since you pointed it out here on

the tape there, that the co-op at present time, if the Finnish influence wasn't there in the beginning, we wouldn't have co-ops in here any more. Because we built the co-op slowly; we bought all the properties when we put this store out here. We bought that property; it was ours. When we put the Shattuck Avenue store, we bought the property; it was all ours. [Yes] Same way in Walnut Creek and every place--

I: El Cerrito? Marin?

N: El Cerrito, Marin, and all that. We owned those things.

I: Yes.

N: All right. Now for these 10 years that we have had-- that our New Left over here has been damaging our standing up here--We would be out of business if it wasn't for that. Like now we need some money now, all we have to do is to sell some of those properties. I don't like the idea, but we have to do it. And we don't have to worry about going under. [Sure] And if it wasn't for that conservative Finnish--I really don't like to call it conservative, but that progressive idea that we had at that time, that, like the Scots-- We had a speaker here from Scotland once. This was years ago, when we were just beginning. It was one of our wholesale meetings, if I remember right. And he said this, that "Don't be in a hurry; you got all the time in the world. When God created this world, he didn't say a

word about hurry. And that's the way the co-op should be built." And that's what he said. And that's my philosophy, has always been that. We want to be on ground that is solid foundation. And Bob Neptune and me, we had different ideas about that. Bob Neptune was in a hurry to build up; he thought that we could build up a real co-op over here, successful co-op by expansion. Not to tie capital down into properties. Even Dr. Gordon was of the same opinion. We always had--Dr. Gordon and I, we always had a fight over that. I couldn't call it a fight, but--

I: Differences--

N: Differences of opinion in the Board meetings. But I think that the nicest compliment that I ever received was when--After I retired, we went to Finland and stayed there 14 months and Dr. Gordon visited me out there and he said one day "We have had our differences of opinion; but I tell you that you were right on that holding that property."

I: Oh, very good.

N: He said, "I give you credit for that." [Sure.] And I think that that's one thing--it's not only my opinion but others' too, like George Yasukoshi [Yes.]. I always remember that, that's one thing that we can-- Maybe Bob Neptune don't like it, but that's the way it is. After the fire--the warehouse burned; were you over here then?

I: Oh, I came in 1956, it must've been before that.

PROPERTY OWNERSHIP AND EXPANSION OF CO-OPS; POLITICAL DIFFERENCES

N: Well, anyway, we had a warehouse over here on the rented quarters out on Anthony Street out in Berkeley, and it burned down. So at that time we were looking at what was our wholesale operation. And I was on the Board of the wholesale at the time. So Bob Neptune comes with the idea to move to Oakland and rent space over there. So we asked him, "Bob, have you ever figured out what it would be to own the property ourselves?" Mutual Service was here already then.

I: Oh; that was a case that happened after-- It must've happened later, because I can remember when we went out to Richmond. So that must've been after '56.

N: Well, that's this story. [Yeah] Bob Neptune came to the Board and suggested that we sign a lease in Oakland for our wholesale. Well, we asked him what our occupancy costs would be to own the place. He didn't have it figured out, so we postponed action on signing the lease until he'd figured out what it would be to buy property out here, where we are at now. [Richmond.] And when he came back, he'd figured out how much: And he'd cut the occupancy costs almost in half.

I: Oh, my oh my!

N: And that's how we got in there; and Mutual Service financed us.

- I: Oh, very good. That must've happened--'cause I--we came in 1956 and we were members of the Co-op; and I remember when the move was made out there, so I may've been here when the fire occurred, but I don't remember it.
- N: Well, it was a couple years after the fire that--
- I: You moved out there? [Um-hmm] Well, that was very wise.
- N: Yeah; it certainly is, because that's valuable property now. [Well, yes--] And I don't know, maybe Bob Neptune has changed his mind about it now; I don't know. But he was always-- There were others too, that "we should not tie our capital into--" But we don't get capital without tying it into something.
- I: Um-hmm. Well, I remember when I became a member, the only stores were on University and Walnut Creek. And then we began talking about building a store on Shattuck Avenue; and there was always a drive to raise money through additional shares. And by the time you had to pay the money for it, there was almost enough money in shares to pay off the building. Am I right? Was it about like that?
- N: Well, almost. [Almost.] It worked out anyway that people invested more money that way, because they saw-- They wouldn't invest in shares alone. They'd buy one share, maybe \$100 worth, but we had lots of people that

would put thousands of dollars in there if they'd see something a little harder than promises.

I: Yes; that's right. Well, the same is true of the El Cerrito store, the same thing, kind of arrangements worked out.

N: Yeah; I was President of the Board when we built that Walnut Creek Geary Road--

I: Well, that was before my time. But I remember you were Director and you were very active.

N: Well, I was for 20 years, since I was on the Board.

I: What happened to the group who threw you out of the Finnish Hall? Did they ever become involved in the co-operative movement at all?

N: Oh, yes. But they, for instance, never bought a share in the Co-op as an organization; they never did.

I: But individuals became involved?

N: Oh, yeah. We had--

I: Nurmela, who else?

N: Oiva Nurmela has never been liked enough; the Finns just don't like him enough to-- [Yes] But we had Ilvesta that was active in there and Leino, they're on the Board. And Fred Forsman.

I: So a number of them did. And did they change their other views at the same time [No] or did they remain-- They still remained the Communists that they had been?

N: Well, I'm not saying that they were Communists--

I: Well, Left--they still remained Left?

N: Well, they went with the Leftist group; but when our Socialist Party split over here, they stayed with--

I: The old group?

N: --the majority.

I: Well, that would be the Communist group?

N: Well, I wouldn't call it that.

I: You wouldn't call it that, all right. Whatever they call it. I'm not interested in passing judgment--

N: Yeah.

I: --I'm just interested in the extent to which they accepted the co-op and as a means of trying to accomplish something of what they wanted. Because obviously they wanted--the co-operative is an anti-private capitalistic organization.

N: Yeah.

I: And I thought therefore they might get involved with it.

N: But see, we-- When we organized our co-op here, as far as the Finns go, we tried to get the church people, we tried to get the Leftists, we tried to get the Rightists, we tried to get everybody.

I: Right.

N: See, and that's why we were very careful to keep the politics out. [Yes] We wouldn't stand for that. But these-- Our New Left and after Savio's freedom--

I: Freedom of speech--

N: Freedom of speech and all that, then that kind of ruined that as far as we are concerned. [Yes] And I tell you that-- I have no figures on it, but I've been so surprised lately when I've been trying to do a little "Come on, and vote; I suggest you vote for these candidates": "I'm not a member any more." They quit. They don't want this politics like that. So I don't think there's too many Finns members any more. They buy; a lot of them buy, but they took their money out.

I: Um-hmm; well, this may sound like a foolish question to ask you, but I'm going to ask it anyhow. Under what conditions would you drop your membership in the Co-op? Can you imagine anything that might happen that would cause you to be so unhappy you would drop your membership?

N: No, I don't think I could every drop.

I: Even if the New Left, for example, got a majority and--?

N: No. I'd probably get a little more active against it! [laughter] But I--what I have in the little money I have, I think, we have as a family now, I'm not sure, we might have \$500. So I don't care to. It doesn't matter to me that much that I would ever withdraw from there.

I: You wouldn't take your money out?

N: No. But if things went wrong again, I'd probably get a little more active. [Yes] Right now I'm not active

except buying. There's two of us and we bought \$3600 worth of stuff at the Co-op last year.

I: Oh, very good!

N: So that's what I said, when they asked me when they opened this store on University Avenue and I made a little speech over there; and I said "If every one of you would buy as much as we buy, we wouldn't have no problem." Oh, yes; there's no question about that.

I: Well, that answers that question there. How much of your life--I know you're not as active as you have been, but how much of your life is involved with other people who also belong to the co-operative? For example, when you see friends and so on, are they mostly co-operative members also?

N: No.

I: Not any more?

FAMILY INVOLVEMENT WITH CO-OPS

N: Not any more. It used to be. Well, here's a story that I can tell you. We had a place in Twain Harte and the kids--we were watching the kids play Indians and whatever they played over there. Anyway, my son was taken a prisoner over there and then he was gonna be shot over there, the kids were playing and we were watching. And the other kids asked him, "What's your last words now, before you're shot?" "BUY CO-OP." [laughter] We were laughing like hell.

I: This your grandson or your son?

- N: Son. [Oh] "Buy Co-op."
- I: That's wonderful. So your children have become active in the Co-op too?
- N: Oh, yeah. But of course, Ron lives now in LA--he used to live in Berkeley. And our daughter lives in Santa Rosa; she was interested in that Co-op there. [Yes] And I was so surprised--now they live in Santa Rosa, but we took her with us to Finland when we went to Europe this time and she wrote a personal check over there and it was a Co-op Credit Union check, cashed it out there. They could cash it out there. [All right] I was surprised; I said "Have you moved your checking account?" "Well, they pay interest on it, so I moved it." So they still are members.
- I: Let me ask you one other question and then I think I probably will have covered about everything that I would like to talk with you immediately. In terms of trying to make the co-operative a more successful organization, more effective and so on, would you consider-- And some people might suggest this. I'm just throwing it out to you to get a reaction from you. How would you feel about, if one were to change the principle of one person/one vote? And instead one made arrangements that if you bought a certain amount, a couple of thousand dollars, you could have an extra vote? What would you think of something like that?

N: No. I wouldn't go for it.

I: All right. Why?

N: I want one member/one vote; and I stick to that. But I wouldn't mind--like we--originally we had--Like we have a membership, both of us. [Yes] And we kept two votes in the family. [Yes] Actually, now if we get my son and daughter, we get four votes [Yes] in the family. But they change it to family members, which is all right with me; I don't care for that.

I: Has it been changed to family membership?

N: It is a family membership. They don't sell you and your wife a membership any more, unless they don't know it.

I: Oh. Uh-huh. We actually have a family membership, but I was curious; we just did it because we didn't think of doing anything else.

N: Yeah; well, they changed it later on, but originally we had like a man and a wife and they both had a membership but-- Of course we always felt this way, that a woman should be part of it; and if you don't, the woman probably would let it go then.

The women are a very important part over there, [Yes] especially in co-op. Like we had, during the War, every time when she was getting disgusted at times when we bought some food and "Did you buy that at the Co-op?" The Co-op was 6 blocks away from where you

lived and there was a private store within 2 blocks, where you could get some butter from underneath the counter which the Co-op did not do. [Sure] And it was kind of tough to be a co-operator.

I: Yes; well, that's very interesting. Well, I think I've asked you all the questions that I wanted to ask you and I very much appreciate your talking with me. You've told me--I know something about the Finnish co-ops, but I did not know some of the things you were talking about and the "Reds" and "Whites" in Finland were a very interesting account.

N: Well, as far as the co-ops, the "Reds" and the "Whites" they had just as many co-ops. The only thing was that the "Whites" had their co-ops, they were small farmers--

I: They were farmers' co-ops.

(wholesale house)

N: Nowadays they have like S.O.K. /and they changed that way of doing business out there. The S.O.K., for instance, has these big department stores [Yes], like Tapiola, where we lived when we were there. Now my sister lives in Tapiola which is the garden community near Helsinki; they are just building a great big S.O.K. department store where they have a market--

(END OF TAPE, SIDE II.)

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