

## Russian River Oral History Transcript

Pete and Luda Toutolmin are a Russian couple with fond memories of life and times on the Russian River. Pete was ninety years old when he told this story with his wife Luda. Pete first came to the Russian River when he was nine years old in 1924. Luda came to the United States in 1936. They met in San Francisco and married, and soon built a summer home on the river in 1955, they retired there in 1976.

Transcription of an oral history interview recorded for Sonoma County Museum's exhibition: Sonoma Confidential

Pete begins the story--We had family with a big chicken ranch off of Todd Road, and Walter and John lived there, they were about my age. We would visit them every year during the summer. At the beginning of our visits we would go swimming at Mirabel. In those times they had the big bands like Benny Goodman. It was great. There use to be a dance floor at Mirabel Park, right over the water. Guernwood had the grove. Monte Rio had another place. The place was jumpin'.

Well, eventually we wanted to get a place of our own, we wanted to, but we didn't have much money to get it with. Luda interjects: We use to rent at Hilton, where Mrs. Brown's Campground is now. Once you rented from her and she knew you were a steady customer, she didn't even wait for you to send in your deposit for the next year, she would just drop you a note and say, "Well, I put you down for the usual time." It was a big Redwood grove and you could let the kids loose in it because there was no driving there except if you had a cabin right there. So, it was absolutely safe. It had a beautiful, sandy beach with great swimming. But, friends of ours, Mike Glukin, had a place on Melody Avenue. Pete thought it would be nice if we got together, so we ended up building on Melody Avenue.

Other friends of ours have been at Vacation Beach for a long time and they say the Russian group started coming there and building places in the late 1920s and early '30s--because she remembers coming by train and then crossing over to the other side of the river. Pete tells us: We had a bunch of us that would meet at the Vacation Beach dam for the weekend; we would bring sleeping bags and our own food and we would cook it up. Sometimes I would be the first one to arrive and I'd gather up some firewood and clean the place up a little bit. We'd throw our bags out there, and nobody ever touched them. The Russian River on the weekends in the summer was overflowing with people, because they would come from San Francisco and the East Bay. The general attitudes of people have changed though. Back then there were no gangs, people just seem to get along. On Melody Avenue there were Russians, Italians, Swiss, Germans, it was wonderful.

Pete recalls how--it got progressively worse though with different people coming in and mistreating the river. The Russian River, as far as I remember and was told, this was the best Steelhead river in California! But now it's a mess. I was on it recently and I looked at the place where we use to fish a lot for Black Bass and it is absolutely unrecognizable. There was no protection of any kind for the fish, no river bank where there use to be fully grown foliage that would provide shade for the fish to get a little oxygen in the summer time when its hot and deep pools where they stayed. I don't see it; it's all gone. The gravel mining; and the dams didn't help either because they release stuff and it comes from the bottom and that's where all the sediments are, so as they release the water we get more and more sediment, the silt is coming down. I still have pictures where that guy, Parker, was illegally removing gravel from across Melody Avenue. If you remember Midway Deli, I drove up and I saw on the road truck after truck and the big guys with the buckets and there all going down the road and I'm wondering what the heck happened here. So, I go out there and I see bulldozers loading up all the gravel and he cleared that entire beach over there. So, I followed him and they went to Pocket Canyon and they said yes, they were buying it from him—but he had no permit! So, everyone started complaining and confronted him, they told us that they had a verbal agreement that it was OK. If you tried to do something with verbal consent today, you are not going to get very far. There was suppose to be a meeting at the Administration Building to discuss this problem, well, it never materialized. So, I went to find out and they said, "Oh, we figured we didn't want to spend the peoples' money, and we just dropped it." So, now the water from the Melody Avenue side is on the other side. Neighbor Christine Blem joins the conversation: "It's all beach, right up to the giant log that everyone use to jump off. The log is still there."

Pete tells us more: We retired there on the Russian River--we were from San Francisco, I was an auto mechanic. We built the place on Melody Avenue; I built it myself. We wanted a place there so badly we worked weekends. We got flooded four times, the first two times we had water in the house, but the place was only about four feet high. After that I decided to raise it and we got flooded two more times, but not in the house. But, February 16, 1986 was a real big storm and the water got very high, if a boat went by fast and made waves we probably got water in the house. We went at night and I was sitting in the bow of the boat with a flashlight and you could hear the propane tanks hissing because they were floating by then and you could smell it. Of course, a lot of buildings were under water, the sheds and everything, so we had to try and remember the location of everything so we wouldn't hit anything when we were going by in the boat. When we went back to the house in the morning, as we approached I looked for our mark, you always make a mark when you expect a flood, you establish a marker—this tree or this

branch or this building—I couldn't wait to see if it had reached inside, but it just missed by a few inches.

Luda remembers how it looked: at the beginning there were hop ranches, then the prune orchards, and after the apple orchards. I use to look out of my kitchen window and see Drake's apple orchard, which is no more. So, the changes are tremendous. We use to do a lot of water skiing in Healdsburg; there was a section near the old bridge about a mile long where you could go and come back. We belonged to club they had there, the Commodore. The reason we could ski was because Standard Oil owned property and they just had a gravel bank and PG&E was there too. There were five homes, and they all gave permission, they all had boats. So, for years, until Lake Sonoma was built, we skied at Healdsburg. There were people from all walks of life, locals and people from San Francisco and the Peninsula. One year Wilt Chamberlin of the San Francisco Warriors basketball team decided to take up skiing and he bought a boat. They had to cut the boat in half and add more because Chamberlin was so tall (7 feet). He had two black Great Danes that he took along. When people skied over toward the Standard Oil gravel bar, if you were watching you would lose sight of them until they finished the run and came around the other way—but you could see the head of Wilt Chamberlin, he was so tall! That skiing was another lovely part of the Russian River experience.