



Nicasio Historical Society Newsletter

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Letter from the President

Two Events in 2021

On a beautiful sunny October day just outside Sue and Stan Loar's barn, twenty or so guests assembled to hear Dewey Livingston elucidate the history of the idyllic little valley that eventually became the location of the

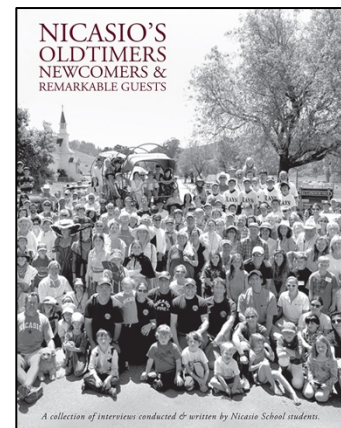


Nicasio Reservoir. With maps of this area from both before and after the creation of the dam hung on the barn's exterior, Dewey first spoke of the Coast Miwok who hunted and fished this valley for centuries, and then of its final occupants, the six ranchers, who eventually were forced out of business due to the dam's construction.

Accompanied by octogenarian Joe Tognalda Jr. who grew up and worked on his family's ranch, guests then walked down onto the dry reservoir floor to explore the locations and remains of the Tognalda Ranch's various buildings, orchard and garden, which, like on five other ranches, were demolished, burned and finally inundated by the eventual flooding of the valley. After the walk, guests and NHS directors returned to the Loar barn where they enjoyed refreshments and conversation. This first event in over two years due to COVID was a resounding success and appreciated by all attendees!



Our second event was a Book Release Party at Druid's Hall on December 4, 2021 for my new book, *Nicasio's Oldtimers, Newcomers and Remarkable Guests*. Articles in both the *Pt. Reyes Light* and the *Pacific Sun* that praised the new book boosted sales to well over 100 copies in the first three months.



Interview with David Dinsmore follows on p. 2

Interview of David Dinsmore
Conducted on February 24, 2021
By Elaine Doss & Amy Morse
Outdoors at Rancho Nicasio's

ED: Do you know what year your grandparents bought their home in Nicasio?

DD: I believe it was 1941. I'm not sure it was before—presumably before Pearl Harbor.

ED: Right, which was December.

DD: Yeah, yeah.

ED: And basically, I have a lot of questions here about your grandpa. Where and when he was born and raised? And I know you said Milan, Missouri.

DD: Milan, Missouri. Or he pronounced it Myland.

ED: Myland, okay.

DD: So that's probably the local pronunciation versus the way we would say it.

ED: Like Cairo, they say Cayro in the Midwest. So, the date was 1901?

DD: 1901, yeah. Let me see if I can get on Ancestry because I don't have that stuff memorized.

He had a younger sister Kathleen.

ED: By the way, congratulations on your marriage.

DD: Yeah, I finally met somebody that is as crazy as me, I guess. [laughs] All right, let me see. Go to tree, that's what I want.

ED: Was your grandfather in the service at all or no?

DD: No. He served on a ship as a baker or something. It was a sailing ship. It was similar to the Balclutha. I don't know if it was the Balclutha or what the name of the ship was, but it was along those lines with an iron hull but sails.

ED: Is that where he got his earring? I remember your grandpa.

DD: He may have had it when he was younger, but he got it when I was in high school. I remember being like, really?

[laughs] I didn't get it. I still don't have any extra holes in my head. So, I don't know if you really want to know much about his family tree because I don't know that it's germane.

ED: That's okay.

DD: This is what I've got on him, born on March 4th, 1902. Milan, Sullivan County, Missouri. So, he would have been 120 this year.

Well, I was born in the last century, in the middle of the last century, 1963 and sometimes when I stop and think about it, it's like okay, you go back a hundred

years it would have been the middle of the Civil War and now it's the Roaring 20s heading into the Depression. Think about that.

So, my grandfather did not serve in the military as far as I know. World War I he would have been what? Fifteen when it started. And it was over by 1919, right?

ED: I think it's 1914 to 1918.

DD: So, Edna Shellins was his wife. She was born in New York, New York. July 30th, 1898.



She passed in 1978. I didn't give you Grandpa's death date.

[He died in Marin in November 1984.]

ED: Shellins, s-h-e-l-l-i-n-s?

DD: Yes, that was her birth name. Her father passed away. Her mother remarried to a gentleman named Erton and so I guess she wore that name for many years. She died in May of 1978.

ED: Tell me a little bit about when Grandpa left the plow and started hopping freight trains.

DD: Well, this is the story he told me. Now, he was a storyteller, so you've got to take everything with a grain of salt. You don't know if he's embellishing or if he's telling somebody else's story like it's his own, but he was a storyteller. And so we were talking and he says, "You know, when I was out plowing the fields, looking at the wrong end of the mules and here comes the train and, you know, as far as I know them fucking mules are still hitched to the fence." [laughs]

And then he told me stories about riding the rails and how he almost got killed one time because he tripped as he grabbed for the rail on the boxcar. There's usually a ladder on the side and I guess the technique was to run alongside of it, grab it, pull yourself up, get your feet on the bottom rung and then climb up. But he tripped just as he grabbed the rail. He says, "If I hadn't of kept my grip, I wouldn't be here, I would have been under them wheels."

ED: Wow. So that would have been what year? Is that already during the Depression? No, it's earlier right?

DD: It's before the Depression. I'm thinking since he was born in 1902 let's just say he stayed there until 1920 and I don't really know when he left because I don't recall him ever giving me a date or if he did, I don't

remember. So, let's say he was somewhere between sixteen and eighteen. So, between 1918 and 1920. Long before the Depression. And I was under the impression that he went up to Alaska to the Gold Rush, but I didn't understand that there was a difference in dates. To me as a kid that was all kind of lumped together.

ED: Right. So that would have been after the Gold Rush, which was in the 1890s, right?

DD: Yes, the 1890s is when they had the Yukon Gold Rush. That may have been why he went there, but the rush per se was already over. He might have been able to work on some of the mining dredges and stuff that still operated well into the 1930s.

ED: Do you know what year he went to Alaska or how old he was when he did that or what came before?

DD: I don't really have much. What I have is just bits and pieces. I have a picture of him in Sacramento with a label on the back that says Sacramento, 1924. It shows him standing in a suit. He always liked to dress up. So, I don't know if that's before Alaska or after. Well no, I'm pretty sure it's before he went to Alaska because his name change happened after he returned. All I have is theories on why he changed his name from Jerald Bernard Robinson to David Dinsmore.

I tried to look for like a news clipping or newspapers and any mention. I couldn't find anything. It doesn't mean it doesn't exist, but I couldn't find anything.

ED: Under David Dinsmore?

DD: Under David or Jerald Bernard

ED: Either one.

DD: Up in Alaska, specifically in Alaska. See, if there was some sort of badness happened and he was hiding from that and they knew who he was, you would think it would be in the newspapers.

ED: Also, if he had an address and was in a phone book. I mean that comes up, right, when you do Ancestry searches?

[The US City Directories, 1822-1995 show him living in San Francisco on various streets through 1944.]

DD: I found him in San Francisco with Edna in 1930 before my dad was born.

[His occupation was listed as Barber.]

The last time I looked, the 1940 census wasn't public because they have a time period in which they keep it confidential. I guess the assumption is they don't want to give out information on people still alive.

ED: Right, right.

DD: And the last time I looked; I didn't have access to the 1940 census.

ED: Where was your dad born?

DD: San Francisco.

As well as my mom. My mom's family had property at Forest Knolls which is still in the family.

ED: Where?

DD: Three parcels on Barranca Road all right adjacent to each other up on a hillside.

ED: Nice. And is that something she bought on her own? I mean she broke up with your dad, right? They divorced at a certain point?

DD: I don't know that there was ever a marriage certificate involved. [laughs]

ED: So, then no divorce either.

DD: Yeah. That was my grandparent's property, and my mom was living there her final years because it was already pretty much in her name. Well, not solely in her name. Her siblings and her owned it, so she lived there.

ED: Got you.

DD: For a few years. Now it's all owned by one uncle who is still alive and the rest of us are all cousins.

AM: So, it was her parents that owned the property in Forest Knolls not Dinsmore?

DD: Correct. I'm just trying to illustrate that both sides of my family have connections to West Marin. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised if they didn't meet right here at the Rancho. I know they met in a bar. I just can't remember specifically what bar. What attracted my mom to my dad was he was reading a book.

ED: In a bar?

DD: In a bar, yeah. I think she liked the fact that he was reading.

ED: What was your mom's name?

DD: Canice. Brigid, Maiden name Reilly.

ED: Sounds like Irish names, right?

DD: Well, Canice was—my mom's story is there was a sister Canice that my grandmother had been impacted by in some way and so she had already named one daughter Maureen and the other daughter Kathleen and the other daughter Jane, which are all Irish names of course. And for whatever reason she threw out Canice. My [maternal] grandmother had an interesting story. Her and her husband, my grandfather who died long before I was born, probably ten years before I was born, were running guns for the IRA during the Civil War in the 1920s.

AM: Your mother's parents, okay.

DD: So. there was all kinds of craziness going on in history. I know that's kind of off topic but it just popped into my head. Grandpa rode the rails for a minute, told me about it all coming to an abrupt end when he almost fell.

ED: Did you say how long? It sounded like you said for a minute.

DD: I said for a minute because I don't really know. I wish I knew more, but I didn't ask those questions as a kid. He was telling me stuff and I was only listening halfway like all kids.

AM: So, we know David Dinsmore came to Nicasio in 1941. That's when he bought the house.

DD: 1941. I know he was in Sacramento in 1924. I know he went on a sailing ship but I'm not sure of the timing and my understanding is he got off the sailing ship in Alaska. So, he went to China, then went to Alaska and he got off. I have pictures of him, pictures from what looks like a logging camp. So, I think he might have been involved in some sort of logging camp and since he was cooking on the ship maybe he was the cook at the camp, I don't know.

ED: Was he a good cook?

DD: I don't really remember him cooking anything.

AM: When he moved to Nicasio in 1941 do you know what his occupation was?

DD: I know what he did when he was in the city. He worked at the docks as a stevedore. For somebody who was five foot six and probably weighed 140 pounds soaking wet, that's pretty impressive because it's usually a big man's job.

ED: And then when he was here in Nicasio did he have an occupation?

DD: Well, he ran a barbershop in Novato on Grant Avenue.

AM: Really?

DD: It still exists. I don't know who owns it but there's a barbershop there.

AM: Yeah, my husband gets his hair cut on Grant Avenue. [laughs]

DD: He actually had a bedroom set up in the back and I think if he spent too much time at De Borba's that he could just kind of crash out and not worry.

ED: Was that a bar, De Borba's?

AM: It's still there.

DD: Well, it probably was called something else then. So, he specialized in men's hair and hairpieces. In fact, he wore a hairpiece for years. He developed an allergy to the adhesive that holds it on \and that's when I found out he had very little hair on top. I was a teenager when that happened but then I was like oh man, I'm going to lose all my hair. My mom said don't worry about it, hairlines come from the mom's side.

AM: Usually they say whatever your mother's father looked like is what you're going to look like.

DD: Then in that case I dodged a bullet. I had premature gray but I'm not bald.

ED: I came across in the registers of Nicasio School that go back to 1902 and up as far as 1950. I saw William Dinsmore there.

DD: Yes. I think from 1941 on until graduation. Then he went to San Rafael High. I don't think he graduated high school.

ED: When your grandparents bought the Nicasio house, how old was your dad?

DD: He was eight years old. He was born in 1933, plus eighteen that would be 1951. It was right in the beginning of the Korean War.

AM: Now, did he ever talk about Nicasio School? Any memories?

DD: He did tell me about how in the old days he would take his .22 to school, put it in a coat closet and then after school go hunt rabbits.

AM: That was not unheard of.



Nicasio School Group 1946-1947

1st row: Phyllis Rogers, Mary Ann Papina, Margie Longhofer, Earl Watkins, Clifford Johns, Joe Tognalda, Arcie Huntsman

2nd row: Rich Gallagher, Alec Dougan, Elaine Rogers, Jonell Huntsman, Irene Johns, Joe Dentoni, Gerald Longhofer, Louise Rogers, Anita Farley.

3rd row: John Gugeli, **William Dinsmore**, Roger Longhofer, Virginia Vierra, Rita Farley, Lucy Hammond, Teacher Donelda Hendrickson.

DD: Especially in those days because that's how you put food on the table.

AM: Boyd Stewart said the same thing. They would go at lunchtime down behind the creek with their guns and shoot rabbits at lunchtime and then come back in and put their guns in the coat closet.

ED: I know that during World War II a Nicasio School teacher said that student Johnny Moreda brought his rifle to school, and she said, "Oh Johnny, at lunchtime I want you to teach me how to use it." Everybody was into learning to defend themselves from the Japanese. They're coming to get us, right? And Boyd told me that at Tam High School they had the seniors take marksmanship and gun safety and upon graduation they gave each boy a gun.

DD: It used to be part of the curriculum in physical ed to basically at the bare minimum you learned firearm safety. I really dislike the current political culture of where guns are evil and not to be touched for any reason whatsoever. But the problem with that is you get kids who have no idea, none.

ED: Right. And then it is a crazy world.

DD: It's not getting any safer and to take the means for a good person to defend themselves away only makes it easier for the bad people to take advantage because the good people are the ones following the law. The bad people don't care.

ED: Right. But good people can get guns.

DD: They can if they're willing to jump through the hoops and then with HR127 on the docket that is to me the Constitution makes it untenable. And then HR1 is another one that is very, very problematic. They want to federalize all elections. The problem with that is that takes the power away from the States and there was a reason why the States had the power.

AM: Back to William. Any memories during his school years? Did he hunt?

DD: Not that I recall. I know they would set snares. In fact, I just threw away some of them that were in the rafters of the garage because I'm never going to use them and they really weren't like anything that any collector would want. They were just bamboo poles with wires at the end.

AM: Did you know who he was friends with or what families he hung out with?

DD: Well, Richard Lake and him were tight.

ED: The Lakes were owners of the Rancho.

DD: Were they?

ED: I believe so. Not for a long time but for a few years.

DD: Him and Richard Lake were inseparable. I heard that him and Willie didn't exactly see eye-to-eye. I heard a story that they got into a fight. I don't know what that was about. I have no clue and I don't even know if it's true, but that's what I'd heard.

ED: I think Willie would have been older, is that true?

DD: Probably. I don't know what year Willie was born.

ED: I know Duane Irving told me some stories that involve your dad because he was in the same class.

DD: Okay, well then maybe he would remember who he ran around with.

ED: Well, he's not around anymore either.

DD: I just ran into Mark the other day at Safeway.

AM: Where's he living, Petaluma?

DD: He's renting a room in Petaluma and I guess Matt is living on the streets still. That's unfortunate.

AM: It is.

DD: Matt has been on that path for a while.

ED: Right. It could be the fetal environment.

DD: It could be.

ED: And what was your dad's occupation?

DD: He had several.

ED: So, the cutting hair was your grandfather?

DD: That was my grandpa. My grandpa was a barber and he was involved in the Barber's Union somehow even though he owned the shop or maybe that was when he stepped away from the Union when he became a shop owner, I don't know. I know he was involved in the Union when he was part of the stevedores and one of my mom's theories was one of the reasons why he left San Francisco was because of his involvement with the dockworker strikes in the 1930s and he needed to go somewhere else.

I guess there was hard feelings. So that could mean he might have been a union buster which seems unlikely considering he was involved in the Barber's Union later on. So that doesn't quite track. I think more likely he was on the union side.

ED: So that was a stevedore strike?

DD: Yeah, there was a dockworker strike in the 1930s. I don't know a whole lot about it. I've always meant to go down there's a museum down there in San Francisco that focuses on the dockworkers and the shipping industry. The Maritime Museum. I've wanted to go down there and check it out, see if there's any reference to him. But I've never actually made it happen.

ED: He certainly had a lot of different trades. I mean cook.

DD: He started out as a farmer.

ED: Hairstylist, farmer. He left the mules hitched to the fence. [laughs]

DD: I'm guessing he didn't care for the farming part of it. They're always having something that needed to be done, the no-day-off lifestyle is not for everyone.

He did like planting his garden right here in Nicasio because that was one of the things we did when I was a teenager and I had finally started driving. I would come out and help him with his garden. He built a huge deer fence.

- - to be continued



The Dinsmore Nicasio Home