

Martinez Oral History Project

Interview Date: May 10, 2020

Interview Location: Homeless Encampment, Amphitheater at Martinez Marina

Interviewer: Deborah Zamaria, Martinez Historical Society

Interviewee: Steven Kraig Merkel

Steven Kraig Merkel was born on November 11, 1955 in Oakland, California. He was the youngest of three children, born to Willie Mosell (Stuart) Merkel and Albert Merkel.

His sister, Linda, is the oldest and is about 4-5 years older than Steve. She currently lives in Texas. Steve is quite proud of her, as she was an airline stewardess for Pan Am for 37 years, starting when she was 18 years old. In her work, she travelled around the world more than 100 times and got autographs from many famous fellow travelers. She even had a lunch date with all of the Beatles.

His brother, Tom Merkel was born in 1953 and currently lives in Weed, California. He's a retired diesel mechanic who married his wife, Karen when they were both 18 years old. Immediately upon marrying, they both realized that neither one wanted to have children.

Steve doesn't have much information about his grandparents on either side except that his grandmother on his mother's side, Wilma, was from St. Louis, Missouri and his grandfather on his mother's side (Mr. Stuart) was from Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. Grandma was pure Blackfoot Native American and only 4'11", while grandpa was a white man and 6'6".

They met at some point in Oklahoma City and after a few outings together, while grandma was in church with her family, grandpa rode straight into the church on his horse, picked up grandma, threw her onto the back of his horse and rode out!

They married and had three children, a girl (Steve's aunt whose name he doesn't remember) and two boys.

Their son, who Steve knew as Uncle Wayne, eventually served in Korea for three tours of duty and then in Viet Nam as a Quartermaster in the Army. Steve reported that every time Uncle Wayne returned home on leave, his wife had a baby of a different nationality, but he remained married to her. Upon returning home for good, he started a business in Los Angeles with his partner, doing the same thing he had done in the service, getting dry goods and other supplies for restaurants. This business was quite successful and Uncle Wayne and his partner made quite a bit of money. However, after two years, he was found dead by his wife, at the age of 59, after several brain aneurysms simultaneously burst in his head.

Their other son, who Steve knew as Uncle Don, was a truck driver. While on a run, another man was driving while Uncle Don was sleeping in the back. The weather was bad and the driver had an accident, sliding down a snow-covered embankment. The accident left Steve's uncle crippled, with no feeling from the chest down, but the trucking company and insurance made him a wealthy man.

Steve's parents met while they were in the Navy. Steve's mom, Moselle, made tents for the army during WWII while she was living in Oakland. She met her husband, Steve's dad, Albert, in this way.

Steve's father, Albert Merkel was born in St. Louis Missouri, however his date of birth isn't known. He was a dive boat captain and dove frequently into the waters off of one of the Marshall Islands in the Pacific called Kwajalein. Initially, the Japanese owned this island, but during WWII in 1944, the United States Marines captured it.

During the Cold War, many nuclear tests were conducted on Kwajalein and it was in these waters, tainted with radioactive waste, that Albert Merkel dove. Steve stated that it was the fallout from these waters, as well as his heavy drinking, that prompted his father to eventually lose his grip on reality.

Al and Moselle married and initially lived in Oakland. They next moved to Albany, California where Steve's father, Al, owned a Mobile gas station. When Steve was five years old, he was pumping gas, cleaning windshields and "checking brake light fluid." His dad taught him this angle to play on unsuspecting customers. Steve got many tips for his work. He'd take the money across the street to his favorite "mom and pop" delicatessen in Albany and buy tamales for himself and his dad.

His father left home when Steve was five or six years old and mom moved the family to San Pablo, where they lived until Steve was in 3rd grade. They next moved to Walnut Creek and stayed there until the beginning of 5th grade, and finally moved to Martinez to 4320 Alhambra Way, a little house underneath the railroad trestle. Steve attended Montecito Elementary School, and then went to Martinez Junior High School for 7th and 8th grade.

There is a beautiful Blue Spruce tree that still stands in front of this house and Steve planted it when they moved in. It was decorated at Christmas. In addition, apparently John Muir had planted 29 Redwood trees on and around the property. Steve's mother, Moselle asked him to cut them down so they could use them for firewood, which they did.

Eventually he attended Alhambra High School (AHS), graduating in 1975. While at AHS, Steve played Defensive End on the football team and used the train trestle near his house as a jungle gym. He even made it into the local newspaper at one point, the Walnut Creek Times, with a story about the "Monkey of Martinez." Apparently the reporter saw Steve's antics from the freeway and came down and took a photo.

With the gymnastics on the trestle, his football training and his work at J&S Paper Company, Steve was quite strong with 16" biceps.

Steve loved both of his parents very much. He has great admiration for his mother who raised three children on her own. When her husband left her with three children to clothe and feed, she became a realtor and took care of her family. She eventually married a man named Clarence who essentially raised Steve and his siblings. Steve's father came back into the picture for a brief time and Moselle left Clarence for Al, but that was short lived as Al was having some mental health problems due to his drinking and exposure to nuclear waste.

Nevertheless, Steve always had a great connection with his dad, although he didn't see him very much. In particular, he remembers a trip he took with him to St. Louis, Missouri, to visit Steve's grandfather. Steve was about 16 years old at the time and they took turns driving, with Steve driving during the day and dad driving at night. The trip took three days, but the grandfather died while they were visiting. They decided to take two weeks to return to California, stopping along the way to places like the Grand Canyon and Las Vegas. This was a great memory.

Steve got a job at J & S Paper Company on Howe Road in Martinez, while still in high school and worked there for 47 years. This family-owned business still exists and Steve did a little bit of everything there over the years. The company would get the cores from rolls of newsprint from the Contra Costa Times and other news organizations. They would turn these cores into packing paper for different companies. He also drove a truck for this company to places like Arizona, Oregon and British Columbia, but when asked what his favorite part of the job was, without skipping a beat, he said, "pay day!"

When Steve was in the 9th grade at Alhambra High School, he went to the fruit packing shed on Alhambra Way where folks were packing pears. His best friend pulled up in a car and Irene Archinal, his future wife, was in the car. He said it was love at first sight. They dated all through high school and eventually got married when he was about 27 years old. They had a huge wedding at St. Catherine's church in Martinez with a reception at the Carpenter's Union Hall on Alhambra. Steve had the stones from her aunt's earrings made into a wedding ring for her.

Irene worked many places in Martinez doing clerical work but her longest stint was a dispatcher at the Martinez Police Department. She worked there for 20 years.

For the first four years of their marriage, they lived Ellinwood Lake Apartments in Concord. Next they moved to Bush Street in Martinez to the home of her adoptive parents. They had adopted her when the mother was 45 years old and the father was in his 50s. As soon as Irene turned 18 years old, the father left his wife and Irene. Needless to say, she had had a difficult childhood.

Steve and Irene had two children. Geoffrey George Merkel was born in Mt. Diablo Hospital in Concord and now lives in Texas with his wife and 10 year-old daughter. He is approximately 41 years old and also has another baby on the way.

Stephanie Irene Alvarado, their daughter, was born in Mt. Diablo Hospital as well. She currently lives in Pittsburg, California with her husband and two baby girls.

When Steve's and Irene's kids were little, every September 1st, he would take off work and the family would go north to Mary Smith's Camp Ground outside of Redding for an 18 day camping trip and to fish for salmon. Steve has always enjoyed cooking and while other campers might be having hot dogs or burgers, he would be making a whole smoked turkey for his family and others who would drop by. He also prepared salmon dinners that the whole family enjoyed

When he was about 28 years old, Steve had a Cadillac Club in Martinez for about five years. He had always been a car buff, learning his craft from his father. He learned how to "chop" and channel and weld to change these cars into something beautiful and creative. There were about 17 cars in this club and his favorite was his 1963 El Dorado. He even purchased a hearse from Connolly and Taylor Funeral Home on Alhambra Avenue in Martinez and chopped it down. He and his buddies would cruise Main in Walnut Creek with these cars.

In his 20s and 30s Steve also really enjoyed fishing and would go to the Martinez pier every chance he got. Although he mostly fished for Sturgeon (which were particularly plentiful in the straight between Christmas and New Years) he would also fish for Bass in May. Steve and three other friends each bought a freezer for their individual homes and they were always filled with fish

Eventually, after 18 years of marriage, his wife Irene decided to get together with Steve's best friend and their marriage broke up. This was a painful time for Steve.

Around 2008, Steve met Kathy Gomez. She was sleeping in her dad's trailer in Martinez and Steve was a friend of the dad, Donny Perkins. They married and lived in Laton for a bit, a small town of 1,500 located near Fresno, California. They decided to move to Fresno. However, on a trip that both of them took from Laton to Fresno to purchase a refrigerator, they had a terrible car accident. Another driver tried to cut them off and "t-boned" their car. Steve was severely injured with a fractured pelvis and transmission linkage through his foot. The doctors wanted to amputate his foot but he said no and he had to sign a waiver saying that he knew the risks. As a result, Steve has been in a wheel chair ever since and is in constant pain. Kathy broke her wrist.

Although he received \$100,000 from the insurance company, Kathy said that SSI told her that the money had to be spent all at once so they made several purchases and were broke in a short period of time.

Steve is currently homeless, living in a tent at a sanctioned location at the amphitheater in downtown Martinez. This interviewer admires him for his good sense of humor and his attitude. He doesn't complain about his current status or his significant pain and is working with officials to finalize his divorce from Kathy Gomez and retrieve his numerous tools and equipment from storage in Fresno.