

INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA HORTICULTURAL SOCIETY

ROBERT SMAUS ORAL INTERVIEWS on APRIL 15 and MAY 18, 2022

Kelly Comras, FASLA

(The following transcription of recorded oral interviews has been lightly edited, and with some additions for clarification)

[Begin April 16, 2022 Interview]

Kelly: This is Kelly Comras interviewing Bob Smaus on April 15th, 2022 at 10:00 am, by telephone. Bob, will you confirm that I am recording you with your permission?

Bob: Yes.

Kelly: Will you tell us where you were born and a little bit about your family?

Bob: I was born in Washington, D.C. at the end of World War II. My dad was stationed there working for NACA, the National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics, eventually, which would become NASA. I only lived in Washington for three months, then we came back to California where I grew up in a house my dad built in Los Altos, California. I had great parents; my dad was an engineer, eventually becoming an Aerospace Engineer, and my mom was a journalist. After she had me, she became a writer of columns and historical biographies. She graduated from Stanford and worked for United Press International.

Kelly: Where did your father work and where did your mother work for the United Press International?

Bob: UPI worked all over the place, but she primarily worked in Washington, D.C. when they were living there before having me. In fact, I think I sent you a copy of her press pass and police pass. My dad worked for Lockheed. It was top-secret work; I had no idea what he was doing. Eventually, I figured it out. He said he was working on weather satellites, but I figured by the timing of launches and things, they were actually spy satellites, the Agena program. That was kept silent. I did go see a launch once.

Kelly: Did your mother talk to you about being a journalist and give you the idea that it might be something you would want to do?

Bob: It was woven in and out of her life. Yes, she was a huge influence on me. My dad was a big influence because his dad was what they called a landscape engineer at the time. I knew my grandfather and got that from him and from my dad. He was super active in Boy Scouts. We were outdoor people, spent a lot of time backpacking in the Sierra and things like that. We would camp in Yosemite Valley during the summer, my dad would come up and join us on weekends, and we'd stay there for weeks on end. This was paradise. I got into the Junior Ranger Training. That was fun.

My mom's real interest was history. She influenced me a lot, taking me to antique shops, stashing me in museums while she worked. She even got me my first job at the New Hampshire Historical Society at age 13 working in their basement and organizing things. My

second job back in Los Altos was painting the inside of an antique store, for which I received an oak rolltop desk and a revolving bookcase as pay. I don't have the desk anymore but I do have the antique bookcase, and way too many other antiques and things. We lived in New Hampshire for two years, my golden years. We rented a 200-acre farm with a colonial barn and an early 19th Century house, with a stream and pond, even a very old family graveyard on the hill behind. We were there while my dad set up a satellite tracking station for Lockheed. Then we came back to California.

Kelly: What was your grandfather's name, where did he get training, and where did he practice as a landscape engineer?

Bob: He got his training first in Czechoslovakia, and then went to a college in Germany before immigrating to the US where he worked at Lyndhurst, which is now a National Historic Landmark with gardens open to the public. We were able to provide them with photos my grandfather took at the time o[they documented] the gardens. That's where he met my grandmother; she took care of the Gould kids and was from Germany, a Muller.

When they came to California, he first worked at the Speckles country estate up in Napa. Then worked for MacRorie-McLaren, which was the other McLaren, John McLaren's son. He did plans for them and he did work in the field and did an amazing amount of stuff. I didn't know him long enough to know exactly how much of this was him and how much was the company but he left a lot of blueprints and photos which I saved after he passed.

Eventually, he went into business for himself. I have a 1936 letterhead that says "Louis Smaus, Landscape Engineer, Designing, Landscape Construction, Maintenance".

Kelly: Do you still have his old papers?

Bob: I have some of them, but most of the plans and photographs, from his time at MacRorie-McLaren were all given to UC Berkeley's environmental archives. They were quite appreciative and very excited.

Kelly: Are you the one who facilitated that gift?

Bob: Yes, I'm the one who saved all this stuff because again, my mom drumming into my head the importance of history and keeping things, so yes, I had all this stuff after he passed.

Kelly: Around what year did you make that donation to Berkeley?

Bob: It was in 2005.

Kelly: You're saying that you have a grandfather that was a landscape engineer and practicing regularly, a mother who's a writer, a father who's a scientist and engineer.

Bob: And a very good photographer. That's where I learned photography.

Kelly: Do you remember when you first got a camera and started using it?

Bob: I probably had a camera when I was born. Dad probably put a Brownie in my crib.

Kelly: You have felt comfortable with photography your whole life then?

Bob: Yes.

Kelly: When did you realize that you both loved plants and loved writing?

Bob: Probably when I was at *Sunset*. It's an odd trajectory. First of all, I collected everything as a kid that had to do with the outdoors. Rocks, shells, bird nests, you name it, I collected it, I even had a little museum at one point. The only thing I had no interest in were garden plants. I discovered plants when I rented my first house from my employer at the time. They were using it as a warehouse but the city threatened to condemn it since it was in a residential zone. I was working as an art director doing paste-ups and simple stuff across the street at Fearon Publishers. It was on Park Blvd. in Palo Alto, only blocks away from where my mother grew up.

I planted quite a garden there. It started with me growing in the backyard native plants, one thing that I recognized from my days of backpacking and hiking, and then a big vegetable garden because that was all the rage back then. I filled the front yard mostly with annuals and a thick row of *Felicia amelloides*. Coincidentally, I saw a job offer at *Sunset* magazine. I took the job at *Sunset* and worked just a couple of months there before the Garden Editor, who lived nearby our house, drove by. That was Joe Williamson, and the next thing I know he was telling me I was working for the wrong department and please come to the garden department, so I did. That's where it all began.

Kelly: In about a year would that have been?

Bob: I went to work for *Sunset* in '69 as an art director. Transferred to the garden department in '70, then they wanted somebody to move to Los Angeles because we had zoned additions at that point. Absolutely nobody would volunteer because that's how northern Californians are about Southern California, but I said, "Hey, that's where Disneyland is right? I'll go." Off we went. They were so happy and excited that they let me go down there every weekend for almost a year house hunting until we finally find our house in the Pacific Palisades.

Kelly: Where did you live in the Palisades?

Bob: 545 Mount Holyoke.

Kelly: Is the house still there?

Bob: I don't think so, I haven't been back but last time I looked on Google Maps, because I periodically look at all my old houses, it seemed to have been a vacant lot, there's a lot of rubble. When we sold it, it was immediately mansionized. It was just a two-bedroom, one-bathroom house. We had remodeled it, had a gorgeous deck with beautiful views. I did the kitchen myself and turned it into an article for the Los Angeles Times *Home* magazine. When we sold it, they kept all that, and then they just added stuff on top, it was really hideous, it looked like something from *Miami Vice*. It recently sold again for something like \$3.5 million, and they demoed it from what I can see from the Google Photos, just rubble.

Kelly: Someone's going to build another house there?

Bob: Yes. I suspect it has to do with something about that hillside. We had to pump it full of concrete to stabilize it enough so I could work on the back, which was cockeyed, and replace this concrete patio which was sliding down the hill with the deck.

Kelly: When you said that “we” ended up fixing that house in Palo Alto, was this you with your mother and father?

Bob: No, that was me and my first wife.

Kelly: You fixed that house up and then stayed there for a while until you came to Los Angeles?

Bob: Yes. Here's the funny thing. After we left, it became the offices of one of the better landscape architects in Palo Alto.

Kelly: Who was that?

Bob: Jack W Buktenica.

Kelly: When you came to Los Angeles, but you were still in Palo Alto, had you started working on the gardening section when you were up there or did that not happen until you moved down to Los Angeles?

Bob: It was a little of both, I was doing both at the time. Bill Marken was the editor who I replaced here. His wife really wanted to get back to Northern California so up they went. Bill later became the editor of the whole magazine, but because they left in a hurry, I had to take over the garden guide which was just for Southern California. It was a cram course in how to garden but along the way, I learned how to garden in Southern California, quite different than northern.

Kelly: Yes. Especially the water.

Bob: Back then it was mostly the subtropical and Mediterranean climate, and then the water problems.

Kelly: You were writing right away then, articles about your gardening experiences?

Bob: About my gardening experiences? No, absolutely not. We never did that at *Sunset*, we didn't even get bylines. That didn't come until I was at the *LA Times* and even then I didn't do it for quite a while. I'll walk you through that transition. At some point, *Home Magazine* was ended and then *Los Angeles Times* magazine replaced it. At that point in time, I was working for that and there was a new Saturday View section, so I was doing a column for that and that's when it really became me talking about our garden and garden events and what you should be doing and what you could be doing.

Kelly: Going back a little bit, besides your parents and then this experience you had in fixing up the place in Palo Alto, are there any other events or people that helped point you towards horticulture?

Bob: Just being around my grandfather and at his place, we used to visit him all the time, and he had a really nice garden, not big, small. Packed with begonias because his best friend was the begonia and delphinium hybridizer over in Santa Cruz, Frank Reinhelt, who was also from Czechoslovakia. I was surrounded by flowers. He had a small greenhouse full of begonias that I spent a lot of time in. He did our garden in Los Altos, that I grew up with, in fact, he planted an oak tree when I was born and planted it in the front yard of the new house. It's still there, it's huge.

Kelly: What about in school when you were coming up through junior high and high school? Did you have any interest then in horticulture, or in writing, that you were experimenting with at the time?

Bob: No. I really disliked school. Eventually I got sent to prep school in St. Louis for my last two years of high school. There the one thing I excelled at was physics. I actually got the first A+++ ever given in my physics class.

Kelly: Why did you end up going to school the last two years of high school in St. Louis?

Bob: Oh, I think partially because the Los Altos schools, they were chaotic. There were a lot of new things coming in and they were having trouble with new math stuff. I think also partly because my mom needed me to go away for a while because I was very argumentative, apparently. I of course have no recollection of this at all. My wife does, I guess my mom told my wife these things. It was all these typical reasons people go to a prep school.

Kelly: You came back after you finished prep school and did you then enroll in any college?

Bob: I just went to the junior college, Foothill Junior College. In the meantime, I think I mentioned this to you once before, I had become a ski bum, and skiing was my life at that time. That's what I was mostly doing. I worked at Ski Haus in summer and in winter I was up in the Sierra skiing, mostly at Sugar Bowl, staying at the Clair Tappaan Lodge that the Sierra Club owned, and doing odd jobs there to pay my way. Once in summer I led a Sierra Club burro trip where I was in charge of the animal and cooking.

Kelly: How long after you finished high school did you start working at *Sunset*?

Bob: Let's see, because I had been a copy boy in Boston for a summer, I think my mom got me that job. That was in 1965. After, while still in college, I'd started working as a copy boy at the *Palo Alto Times* in '67, and then in '68 is when I got my first art direction job.

Kelly: What exactly is an art director?

Bob: An art director's all over the place. It's everything from doing paste-up and mechanicals, which I don't think they do anymore, but we would get printed copy back and have to position the photographs and type and do the covers, and work on covers and things like that. At *Sunset*, it was mostly paste-up but you designed the page. What it looks like and that came in quite handy later because at *Home* magazine, I really got to put that to use working with our art director at that time, Al Beck. We did some wonderful stuff.

Kelly: When you started working in the garden section, what was the field like in those days? Were you given an assignment or were you able to have ideas about what you wanted to write about?

Bob: We had to find our own stories. We had to do our own research and reconnoitering and find people to talk to. This was way before the web. Everything was phone calls and getting to know people. *Sunset* had already set up in Southern California a really wonderful group called the Southern California Garden Panel. Once a month the editor would come down and join me and all of these very notable people in the field and they would talk about ideas and stories, and would those ideas and stories work here or not. What can we do better or what needs explaining to gardeners? Great stuff. Wonderful people.

Kelly: Do you remember some of the names of the people you worked with on that panel?

Bob: Yes. Bill Aplin the photographer also a gardener. John Boething of Boething Treeland Nursery. Phillip Chandler of Santa Monica, the legendary guru of gardening on the west side. Francis Ching of the Los Angeles State and County Arboretum in Arcadia. Cliff Comstock manager at Monrovia Nursery Company. Jerry Davids of Davids & Royston bulb company. Morgan "Bill" Evans. LK Smith, Ken Smith, landscape architect out in Newberry Park, wrote several books on gardening. Great guy. I liked him. We got along great. Carl Zanger of Perry's Plants. They're not around anymore. I'm sure. That was the day of ground covers in SoCal.

Kelly: What an illustrious group of people.

Bob: Yes, well there's more. Warren Jones, who was a professor at the College of Agriculture in Arizona. Fred Lang, landscape architect in South Laguna. Ray Sodomka of Turk Hessellund Nursery up in Montecito. James Perry of Perry's Plants. George Scott of Burkard Nurseries in Pasadena. Lee Sharfamn of Armstrong & Sharfman in West LA. Fred Boutin at the Huntington Botanical Gardens. West Humphrey, the advisor of Ornamental Hort in Orange County. And Chris Rosmini, an amazing gardener and landscape designer..

Kelly: Did this group get together and come up with ideas for different articles and people to talk to and gardens to see?

Bob: Not just ideas. We had to run these stories by them from the Northern California writers who were doing things for the entire issue, the All Zones Stories as we called them, to make sure they made sense in Southern California and a lot of them didn't, but if they didn't then they didn't run them down there.

Kelly: They were running two different issues?

Bob: Four

Kelly: What were the four zones?

Bob: Northwest, Northern California, Southern California, and Desert.

Kelly: They came out simultaneously every month?

Bob: Yes. That was *Sunset's* calling card at that point in time, before it was reduced to the sad thing it is today.

Kelly: Did you work on all of them or just the Northern California or Southern California ones?

Bob: It wasn't that straightforward. I did specific things only for the Southern California edition, but I also did things based out Southern California that ran for at least all of California and sometimes the Northwest. Examples of that, a couple of my favorite stories back then, were a story on planting a big boxed coral tree in our new front yard, which only ran in the Southern California edition, of course. But then I also did a huge story on bananas for Northern and Southern California. That was really a fun story. One of my favorite stories of all time was on *ceanothus*. Again, it ran for all of California and a reduced version for the Pacific Northwest. That was a great story because I got to do so much research and in fact, in the process, I rediscovered a *ceanothus* that had fallen out of the trade called 'Concha'. It was so exciting to me because 'Concha' was actually garden size, whereas most *ceanothus* really aren't. Because *ceanothus* were not at all common at that point in time, I listed the nurseries that carried each kind, which is how I found ours. We planted three of them on our hill in the Palisades.

Kelly: Now of course it's well known in the trade and 'Concha' is easily available.

Bob: The lead photo for the story was a great big color picture of them under our deck, people couldn't help but notice three bright blue *ceanothus*.

Kelly: Is it fair to say that your story popularized Concha and *ceanothus* then

Bob: Oh, absolutely. I know that happened because a lot of people in the nursery trade saw it and picked up on it just because of the fact that it was small. Small for a *ceanothus*.

Kelly: Where on the scene at this point was the Theodore Payne Nursery?

Bob: They were there, but they were pretty small at that point in time. I spent a lot of time there because I liked it. I especially liked one of their closets. It was full of Payne's personal stuff, including all of his *eucalyptus* wood samples and catalogs from the furniture companies that made things out of *eucalyptus* here in California, plus nursery catalogues and packets from when he was on Los Feliz Boulevard. I have a nice collection of his catalogues and seed packets, starting back in 1927.

But, my favorite of all the wild flower-related stuff was what Richfield Oil Company did starting in the 1930's. They just did these wonderful Western wildflower guides and tour pamphlets, even packets of wildflower seeds.

Kelly: How did an energy company come to be doing that?

Bob: It was a promotional thing. You got them free with your gas fill-up, but they were really well done.

Kelly: When you were doing this research on *ceanothus*, you had a chance to see a huge evolution in the native plant industry. What can you tell us about that and the change that's occurred?

Bob: It was real popular back in the thirties. In California, a lot of wonderful books were written on California natives, another collection I donated to the Huntington. I used to go to used bookstores in every town I visited looking for garden books.

Anyway, that's a little off-topic here. I hate to take too much credit for popularizing *ceanothus* because so many others were involved, but I did publicize it, along with an endless series of articles on wildflowers and natives. I tried to grow what I wrote about.

Kelly: Did the public respond in a way where they were getting in touch with you and trying to get more information as these articles were coming out?

Bob: Well, once the web was involved, yes. Up until then, it was mostly me giving talks to garden groups or, once, at a mall; that was a disaster. Back then, talking to dedicated gardeners, I think garden clubs actually had real gardeners in them. That's where a lot of leads came from and that's where I got to spread the gospel.

If you opened your Sunday magazine, you were going to see something on that topic almost every week. It was being hammered home and I was not alone. There were a lot of people who were also on this. These things are like the simultaneous invention idea and it's really true. People all seem to come up with the same notions and ideas at the same time.

Kelly: You were teaching at UCLA in extension for a decade in the late '80s and to mid-'90s?

Bob: Yes that was fun. I loved it.

Kelly: Did you focus much on native plants there? or xeriscaping?

Bob: Mostly we just focused on getting the basics of gardening down. It led to some of my books.

Kelly: You've wrote *52 Weeks in the Garden*.

Bob: Also, *Planning and Planting the Garden*. This was a book I did while at the *Times*, but for Abrams, and then *52 Weeks in the Garden*, that grew out of this series of classes. Because I had to develop an outline for the classes, something you can give to the students, let them know what's going on, and fall back on when you're talking about it.

That was the theme, but the real kicker were the droughts. It started in the seventies. It's still going on, but they'd disappear for a few years and everybody would go back to their old ways. Then we'd get another drought and we had to write xeriscape stories.

Kelly: Is that when you started talking about taking lawns out and planting other things?

Bob: I started doing that pretty early. I was never much of a fan of lawns until our kids were of a certain age. Then I had to have at least one lawn but it was very small. It was in the

front yard because that's where all the neighborhood kids were but no, the kids had the front yard and I had the backyard.

Kelly: So you kept the lawn for just a while?

Bob: Yes. Just in the front yard.

Kelly: Then, as you were starting to write more about native plants, was that interweaving in with replacing the lawn?

Bob: Yes. It wasn't just natives, it was all drought-resistant plants. Namely things from other Mediterranean climates.

Kelly: Did you get a chance to travel to nurseries or meet other people who were working with native or drought-tolerant plants in other countries?

Bob: Only in Australia and New Zealand.

Kelly: You traveled there?

Bob: Yes, I spent a month in each. Photographer Glen Allison and I, we did special issues for *Home* magazine first on New Zealand and then on Australia. At that point in time, I was also writing about architecture. Please don't ask me how I ended up writing about architecture.

Kelly: That's exactly what I'm going to ask you. How did you end up writing about architecture?

Bob: Well, I'll explain that in a nutshell. I was working at *Sunset* and I had just had a big cover story and given a real nice write-up for the advertising department about how great the stuff was I was doing and how it was really pointing the direction for gardeners.

My fellow writer, Pete Jensen, down here in Southern California, he did travel. We were having lunch at Langer's and complaining about not getting enough color in *Sunset* because *Sunset* was still mostly black and white. I would get one big color photo for the garden guide. In the main section of the magazine, we'd have one or two garden stories that were in color. Even the big stories were often in black and white. Meanwhile, *Home* magazine at *The Times* had everything in color and I said, "How come we can't do that?"

Peter said, "Well maybe you need to go work at The Times?" I said, "I don't know about that." He said, "I'll bet you a pastrami sandwich that if you call *The Times* you will see they have something for you." So, a Langer's pastrami sandwich was on the line, I definitely called and got in touch with the editor, Carolyn Murray. She was so excited and relieved because their architecture and garden writer, Dan McMasters, was retiring and moving to the Pacific Northwest. She had no idea how to replace him.

So that was pretty easy. How wonderful. That's also how I ended up writing about architecture. Although I must say I've always had an interest in architecture and in buildings. Both my boys are builders and gardeners. I enjoyed it for a while, but after a while, it got to me, it was hard to visit and write about these incredible architectural masterpieces and then

come home to my little house in West LA. I had moved by then and we had three kids and needed the room.

I just eventually said I'm not going to write about architecture anymore and nobody complained, nobody seemed to miss it. We just did more and more gardens and they moved out onto the cover and became bigger stories, and gardening eclipsed architecture. Though we still did interiors, but that was Virginia Gray and Sunny Gibbs.

Kelly: This would have been in the 1980s?

Bob: Yes, I think so. Let me see. I went to, *The Times* in 1977. Yes, it was the '70s and '80s when *Home* magazine was so amazing. Then it became the *Los Angeles Times Magazine* in 1985.

Kelly: You were still covering gardens?

Bob: Yes, but in a much smaller way. We had a new publisher by then, our beloved Otis Chandler who was kicked upstairs by his family. He changed the paper, he turned *The Times* into a national newspaper. They replaced him with somebody from New York or Washington, DC or someplace, more of a business type. He wanted to emulate the *New York Times*, he didn't want to be a distinct Los Angeles publication. That's why we became the *Los Angeles Times Magazine*, like the *New York Times Magazine*. The emphasis switched from being the home section to a general interest section. As I remember, one of my favorite stories was in an issue with the Menendez brothers, the ones who murdered their Beverly Hills parents, on the cover.

We still did some interesting stories. Well, actually, that's where I wrote a story about my grandfather's garden because I could get away with it in the new format. I did, "The Natural Habitat," a big story on native plant gardens and rethinking the lawn. That was in October of '86. In, "The Shrinking Lawn," in October of '88, I was on a roll about getting rid of the lawn. Then I came back and said there Ought To Be a Lawn in 1990. That was just so you would add some places for kids to play on. Again, more with the suggestions on how to make it more Mediterranean in LA.

Kelly: Where you then maybe beginning to focus on the different types of grasses that could be used for a lawn that would be more drought tolerant?

Bob: Yes, we did some of that. I've actually done more of that when I was at *Sunset*. I didn't do much on lawns for the *Times* other than mostly to rethink them. That was when we had a really wonderful story about Nancy Goslee Power's garden and the James' garden.

Kelly: The one in Santa Monica?

Bob: Yes. We did things in 1993, I did Agatha Youngblood's amazing garden working with a Florence Yoch design in 1993. But I also did the, "Lawn Goodbye." We were bouncing around a bit, but always with attention to the climate.

Kelly: What about the climate?

Bob: The fact that we're Mediterranean but we also have the opportunity to grow so much stuff that's subtropical and in particular our trees. We did some really great tree stories on street trees based around the Olympics, which was in '84.

The idea was to plant more pretty trees for people to look at when they came to the Olympics, which had been done at the previous Olympics, which was 1932.

Kelly: Along with the xeriscaping and the drought-tolerant and natives, did you get involved in initiatives like limiting the use of leaf blowers?

Bob: Well, I did that in one column. They drove me nuts because I worked at home. We were pointing out just how nonsensical they were blowing stuff around rather than cleaning it up. The noise and the pollution, and the fact that lots of people still use stuff on their lawn that shouldn't have been blowing around the neighborhood or that kids should not be playing on.

Kelly: Going to it a slightly different topic. I noticed that you had the opportunity to meet with different celebrities and see their gardens over the years here in Los Angeles. You had mentioned Helen Mirren at one point.

Bob: Well, I actually tried so hard not to do that because I've almost never seen a celebrity's garden that's worth writing about. May be fun for people to stare at and daydream about, but there's not much to learn there. I went to a couple of ones but Helen Mirren was a different story. She was a fan. She was stuck in LA working on something and she considered my columns on gardening her one tie to a previous life in England. Anyway, she came to visit me. She had written me several letters, telling me how much she enjoyed it. Then she set up a visit. I don't remember the specifics but somebody was there to take a picture of the two of us, and it was not my wife because she takes terrible pictures. It must have been her publicist or someone along with her.

She was very nice. We enjoyed talking about gardening for a little bit. Then she got the tour of our garden. We had many people tour our garden; it was part of the class that I taught.

Kelly: Did you go to her garden?

Bob: No, she didn't have a garden. That was why she liked my column so much she was living in an apartment somewhere in LA I guess. She didn't have a garden at that point in time.

Kelly: You had some very well-known photographers that you work with, for instance, Bill Applin.

Bob: Oh, yes, I got to work with some of the best photographers. Starting at *Sunset*, there was Bill Applin and his dogs, Susie. I say dogs, because he had several dachshunds named Susie, who always accompanied us in the middle seat upfront. Richard Fish, Bill Ross. *Sunset's* own Norm Place, he's a really good photographer. He is now in Tennessee. In fact, I'm still in touch with almost all of my photographers who are still alive.

Later it was Glenn Allison, who did most of the architecture for me. Kathy Persoff was probably my favorite garden photographer. Bill Ross, I already mentioned Bill, he worked for me both *Sunset* and *The Times* and he lives nearby. Funny how all these things work out.

Kelly: What about Don Normark?

Bob: Don Normark did a couple of things for me, but he was the Pacific Northwest photographer. He did things up here (Northwest).

Kelly: Did you feel that the work that you had, I mean the background that you had in photography made the work with these photographers more collaborative?

Bob: Oh Yes, without a doubt. To the point of maybe being annoying sometimes. Although I just posted a picture on Facebook where one of my fellow *Sunset* people saw me carrying around a reflector card for the photographers and he said, "Yes, what writers got to do at *Sunset* was carry reflector cards."

Bob: We did, that was back when you always used reflector cards to highlight areas.

Kelly: Those were those mylar-like mirrors, to reflect the light?

Bob: Yes. They were more like tinfoil back then. I don't think we had mylar yet. We're talking '70s here. I actually got myself in trouble a couple of times because there were a couple of times when my editor at *Home* magazine was on vacation and I photographed the stories myself and then published them. She didn't like that.

Kelly: Why not?

Bob: Because we were supposed to work with professional photographers as opposed to being a jack-of-all-trades. Frankly, my photographs were fine but others could do much better.

Kelly: It sounds like you had a good eye.

Bob: Yes.

Kelly: You also did some video pieces for television, *The Victory Garden*?

Bob: Yes. I did that for a long time, from 1986 to 2001. *The Victory Garden* was from WGBH out of Boston for PBS. Very popular show but when they went to other areas—the real South, Georgia South and the West Coast, they would have guest hosts who would visit the gardens and interview the gardeners. Partly because we knew what the plants were and didn't have to ask the name of every single plant we looked at.

Kelly: Do you remember some of the gardens? Some that stand out in your mind that you visited?

Bob: Yes, we did a lot and they all were great gardens. I have a list somewhere and WGBH sent me copies of the shows I was in but I donated all the VHS tapes to the Huntington. I only kept a couple that I turned into DVDs. We did one of Isabelle Greene's garden designs:

The Carol Valentine garden was extremely imaginative. I liked it. It was like an aerial view of rice paddies, each level different from the others We had fun. Isabel was fun to be with.

Kelly: You did Carol McElwee's garden?

Bob: Yes.

Kelly: What was that like?

Bob: That was really pretty. I was a sucker for that one. I took my own pictures while we were shooting to keep a record of it.

Kelly: Of all of those that you did, what do you remember about the whole series? What kinds of people got to see it?

Bob: Well, it was public television, so a lot of people saw it all over the country. In fact, it got to be a problem because we would be visiting somewhere. Of course, I'd go into a nursery like in Ohio and somebody would say, "Hey, look, it's Bob Smaus." Of course, you wanted to look at plants, not talk about *The Victory Garden*.

Kelly: How long did you do *The Victory Garden* shows?

Bob: That's what I was trying to find here. It was a long time. See when the first one was in 1986 and the last one was in 2001.

Kelly: I remember you also had been involved in collecting antique garden tools. Can you tell me how you got interested in that?

Bob: Well, I might hark back to my mother. She dragged me to endless antique shops as a kid and I just started collecting stuff. I was really interested in old country store stuff because of the graphic quality of it. I'm talking like late 1800s. The colors and the graphics and the type faces, they were just fascinating, so I started collecting all this stuff. Eventually, I ended up with a whole country store collection, which I sold to architect Edward Carson Beall, who installed it in several restaurants, which I never got to see but I'm sure they had fun with it.

The next thing I collected as my wife and I went around to antique shops were garden tools. I eventually refined that to only garden tools that had a California connection. That really made the hunting a lot more fun. Everything from sprinklers that were patented in Pasadena to insecticidal dust blowers that were made out of wood in San Jose. One of my favorites, solid forged hedge shears, was made by the Arcturus Forge in Los Angeles. Most uncomfortable things to use I've ever seen, because there was no cushion, every clang went straight to your elbows.

Anyway, I just one day decided, "Yes, I've got quite a collection here." I gave a talk or two on it. The fun things you could actually learn from these old pieces of California that would apply to your garden and in the process of doing that, the Southern California Historical Society asked if I could do an exhibit at the historical Lummi House in the Arroyo, in Pasadena.

Bob: Anyway, then we set it up and it was fun. From there, the Decorative Arts Center in San Juan Capistrano asked me to do it for them, so I set it up again down there. Then when we were going to move up here (Northwest), I donated the whole thing to the Huntington and they had it in a special room for a little bit. I'm sure it's long gone because that was quite a few years ago. That was a lot of fun, a lot of stuff I did was fun. It was technically work, but it was fun.

Kelly: It sounds like this was a pretty big collection.

Bob: Yes, it was pretty big. I seem to recall one of the articles publicizing it said there were 119 pieces. It sounds like a lot, but that's probably about right.

Kelly: What are some other things you remember that you collected that related to California?

Bob: Well, I've mentioned the books already. I had a whole library of California gardening books, going back to oh, lord, a really long time ago, the early 1800s for some of them. In fact, one of the things that got me started in that is that one of the things I got from my grandfather was a signed first edition leather-bound book by John McLaren, called *Gardening in California*.

Kelly: Is that one of the books that got donated to Huntington?

Bob: No, I'm looking at it right now, I'm not that generous. [laughs]

Kelly: You've managed to hang on to a pretty substantial part of your collection?

Bob: Yes. Well, it makes no sense when I'm moving to the Northwest to be hanging onto all this California stuff. I've kept a little of it, but just enough to look through once in a while. On favorite subjects like oak trees, wildflowers, and California flora, history of western trees, ceanothus - I still have one shelf full.

Kelly: What about fruit and avocado and other edible plants for the garden. Did you have much of an interest in those?

Bob: Yes, of course. That's one of the main things we wrote about. That was something everybody was interested in, whether they actually did or not, they loved the thought of having their own vegetables and fruit trees, and again for *Home* magazine, we did some wonderful stuff.

Kelly: What do you remember as being some of the standout features you did on edibles?

Bob: Well, probably my favorite was a cover we did on vegetables way back in '79, and it had a great planting chart inside, which we actually did even better a number of years later when we made a planting chart that you could cut out and rearrange the way you would want to in your own garden, you grew on graph paper. On both of those, the thing that was more exciting than even the photography, was that we worked with some incredible artists.

Jesse Chizu Baer did astounding drawings for *Home*, quite a few of which I still have. Kathy Pavia did some great stuff. Susan Ragsdale did some really imaginative things and she did my favorite *Home* magazine cover, which are vegetable seed packets that she drew. I'm looking at it right now, I actually framed this one. Really, really, really talented people.

Fun, because we could do things you couldn't do with photography. A planting chart, for instance, to make it interesting, instead of just a bunch of words in chart form, this was something you could frame and hang on a wall. Just so much more imagination. We did some really fun stories like, let me think of a couple here. I did many stories on my favorite South African and other Mediterranean climate bulbs but then we had Kathy Pavia illustrate them all for a big autumn issue.

Kelly: These were bulbs that you would have discovered in your travels?

Bob: No, these are bulbs that have been growing at home.

Kelly: What are your five favorite bulbs for growing at home these days?

Bob: At home here? In the Pacific Northwest?

Kelly: No, no, I'm sorry. I meant in Los Angeles.

Bob: I haven't been home in Southern California now for what? 15 years? I liked all of the South African bulbs, including some of the really rare ones, because, UC-Irvine had quite a collection put together by Harold Koopowitz. He had everything imaginable. Of course, I managed to do a story or two on that and come home with few bulbs, so, yes, I had a lot of bulbs.

Kelly: That's one of the perks of the business?

Bob: Yes, definitely was.

Kelly: Bob, when did you become a member of the Southern California Horticultural Society?

Bob: Almost right from the start of moving down there in the '70s, probably in '71.

Kelly: What was the organization like in the beginning?

Bob: Well we met in Hollywood, West Hollywood. Pretty much the same way it was when I left it. We had a plant table, plant forum where you would bring in things from your garden and then everyone would stand up and talk about them, and we had people giving talks, and we had snacks, and then we got home really late. Eventually, got moved to Griffith Park. Don't even know where it is nowadays. Lost track.

Kelly: You came in touch with a lot of landscape architects. Do you recall Ruth Shellhorn?

Bob: No. She's actually before my time, I'm pretty sure.

Kelly: She got an award from the horticultural society in 1987 I think, something like that.

Bob: Really?

Kelly: Yes.

Bob: She was still alive?

Kelly: Yes. She didn't die until 2006.

Bob: Really? Wow.

Kelly: Yes.

Bob: No, we never crossed paths.

Kelly: Did you cross paths with other landscape architects over the years that you recall?

Bob: Yes, but, again, our emphasis was on something that was achievable. Most landscape architects have to work on grander projects that are not particularly achievable, where somebody else does it all.

Kelly: What about the UC campuses? They had people at UCLA working on research - avocados and you had a lot of citrus work going on down at UC Riverside. Did you interact with the people doing research in those areas on the plants themselves?

Bob: Oh yes, definitely. I mean, that was one of our main sources. Again, I began before the web, when I was doing all of this and we actually had a rule at the *Times* not to use secondhand information, and never use unsubstantiated information from the web, once that was around. We had a similar rule even at *Sunset*. Everything had to be first person. You could not go on the web and research something, you could not in *Sunset* days, open a book and read about something, and then tell people that's how it works. You had to find an actual person who had actually done it or an actual garden that you could show people how it's done.

That makes it very different from what you see today, everything is so web-based and so much misinformation is repeated around and around and nobody goes back to the source and says, "Does this really work?"

Farm advisors, that's what they were called back then, were really important. They had lots of information, and so were the nurseries, especially the wholesale nurseries who had lots of experience with something.

Kelly: Do you remember camellias from Nuccio's nurseries?

Bob: Very well. I knew Tom quite well.

Kelly: Did you do any special articles about the camellias they were growing there?

Bob: Oh yes. Several gorgeous articles.

Kelly: What were some of your favorite camellias that they came up with?

Bob: Oh Lord. I have no idea. Long time ago. Ask me about my favorite rhododendrons, I can list 101 that we have in our garden. That's eclipsed what we had. Up here there's one camellia that the deer don't eat. That's an x *williamsii* cross which is what does best up here, named 'Donation'. Now another camellia that actually was a Nuccio Brothers' camellia was eaten by the deer. It's sitting in a pot hoping it'll recover but I doubt it.

Kelly: Have you ever been over to the Virginia Robinson Gardens?

Bob: Oh yes. We did a *Victory Garden* there.

Kelly: Oh you did? I know that they had a lot of Nuccio camellias there. I don't know that they're still there now. Do you remember a man named Art Schroeder at UCLA?

Bob: Yes.

Kelly: He was working on avocados.

Bob: I don't remember in what context. I know that we talked about something at some point in time the name is definitely familiar.

Kelly: What about UC Riverside? Were there any people that you stayed in touch with there?

Bob: Yes. When they were building the new garden, the South African garden we reported on that a couple of times. Mostly it would've been people with UC extension in Orange County that I talked with. That's probably where I knew most of my landscape architects that I actually did stories on, like Fred Lang, because they were also plantspersons. In LA it was people like Bob Fletcher, E.R. Kelly?, Ralph Cornell, Morgan Evans, Pamela Burton. We did probably did half of Chris Rosmini's gardens because they were so plant based. Of course Nancy Goslee Power, we did her remarkable garden.

Kelly: You put a lot of these people on the map.

Bob: I didn't but the publication certainly did, and the photography, which then was Kathy Persoff. She did everything on big 4x5 color transparencies. It's pretty hard to beat that.

Kelly: What has happened to her collection of photographs.

Bob: I don't know. Kathy sold her house and she lives in a condo now. We still communicate but I was recently asking myself that same question as where is everything? I have a couple of her photos she took of our garden and I thought there's hundreds of others somewhere. I'll ask, we're Facebook friends. I do know that Bill Aplin's photos went to the County Arboretum. Bill Ross still has his photos. Although most of Bill's photos went into Craig Arness's company that he was part of. They were one of the first, what do you call them? People you can call to get a photograph.

Kelly: Oh the stock photos.

Bob: Yes. Stock photos. Glen Allison also did stock photos. Kathy probably has done stock photos too but I've never actually asked her. We mostly talk about hydrangeas and antiques.

Kelly: Bob we've been talking for about an hour and a half. I want to listen to our conversation and come up with some more questions for you and then be in touch so we could set up a follow-up. If that would be okay with you.

Bob: Okay. Sounds good.

Kelly: Thank you so much. This has been a fascinating conversation.

[End April 16, 2022 Interview]

[Begin May 18, 2022 Interview]

Kelly: This is a more general question, but I was wondering if you could talk a little bit about how you see gardening having changed over the years since you began writing about gardens.

Bob: It's changed a lot. I used to make the offhand comment that when I first went to Southern California, there was nothing but lawns and junipers. While that's a great exaggeration, hey, it might not have been such an exaggeration in the San Fernando Valley. And maybe still not an exaggeration. A couple of days ago in the LA Times there was an aerial photo of a newish subdivision and it was lawns as far as the eye could see, so that aesthetic still exists.

Among gardeners and people with any interest in something other than in day-to-day life, it's just gotten more and more, for lack of a better word, scientific. There are actually reasons for things to be done now, starting with reasons like the need for less or no pesticides. *Sunset* went to great efforts to get DDT banned for a scientific reason, not just because it was bad, but because it was making eagle eggs too brittle.

That was one of the first movements that I saw begin, and it came out of the environmental movement of the late '60s and early '70s where organic and gardening became a well-known word, other than from the *Organic Gardening* magazine from Rodale Press, and people actually started thinking about what they were doing and that slowly worked its way into diversity. People started trying more things.

The next big thing were indoor plants which seem to be coming full circle, coming back into popularity. Not in my house, but other people seem to have discovered indoor plants again. Vegetable gardening, I guess that actually came about the same time as indoor plants. If you had any room outside, you started a vegetable garden.

Kelly: What about processes in the garden like composting, for instance?

Bob: That was all part of the organic gardening movement of trying to find something better to use in the garden. Actually, one of my very first *Sunset* stories was on gathering up organic leftovers from all over the state. It was hilarious because I borrowed my mom and dad's huge suitcases that they use for their travels. I got in my car and drove all over the place, up and down the state, finding things like grape pomace, apple pomace, rice hulls and various kinds of manures.

Then we had them all tested at a soil lab to find out if they were actually any good as a fertilizer or a soil improver. Some were and some weren't. Of course, we also learned real quickly that steer manure was actually bad for the garden. Not even good, because it was so high in salt contents from the feed lots.

I also remember doing a funny story on Christmas gifts for organic gardens. We gathered all this stuff up and brought it into the *Sunset* studio where we did this gigantic photo on a spread about all these gifts. I was carrying a goose in a crate for snail control and as I passed my boss, Joe Williamson, it grabbed a hunk of his thinning hair and yanked it out! I was sure I'd get fired!

Kelly: You went up and down the state collecting different composting materials and you were putting them in bags, in these suitcases of your parents, and you brought them back and you discovered that the steer manure wasn't such a great composter, but what sorts of materials did you come to discover were excellent in the garden?

Bob: Oh, dairy manure was fine. That was a good soil improver and all the pomaces, they were virtual fertilizers. Rice hulls were used mostly for bulking up mixes to speed up drainage. They'd take forever to decompose. I think all of these are more available on Northern California. Dairy manure and mushroom compost were the best soil conditioners.

The point of the thing is that these were things that were otherwise going to go to waste. They were literally organic leftovers. They were something that could possibly be used in the garden.

Kelly: It wasn't just composting. It was recycling.

Bob: Yes.

Kelly: Do you recall what were some of your favorite composts after all of these experiments? What conclusions did you draw?

Bob: Oh, I concluded that my homemade compost was the best.

Kelly: Let's go on to changes that you might have seen or trends that might have occurred in tree planting techniques. What did you see over time occurring in changes?

Bob: That happened in several different stages. It's still going on. It was almost all done by the University of California. I think I mentioned last time what we called farm advisors back then, which are now horticultural advisors or some other names, they were the ones to point out the changes that were going on in UC research.

Initially, they were done for Caltrans, these were actual studies to find out what would be the most efficient way to plant the freeways. Out of that came all these valuable lessons and what a hole should look like for a tree starting with how it should be wider at the bottom so roots could spread out.

But tree staking, that was a major change, one that still hasn't seemed to have completely caught on. I still see trees horribly staked by contractors and even governments mostly, but also homeowners. One of my neighbors was proudly showing me a new tree he had just staked. [I said, "You got to take that off, it's too tight on the trunk. It won't learn how to stiffen up. It'll be flexible for the rest of its life." That was a big breakthrough. The idea of using two stakes, about a foot apart on either side of the sapling and tying it at a height where it would start to bend over by itself. Let the top keep moving in the breeze and use flexible ties so that the whole trunk could move in a breeze. That's a really major change. I saw a huge change in Los Angeles of trees that would be blown down in Santa Anas because of the poor staking, and ones that had been staked properly were standing proud and tall.

Kelly: It really made a difference in the longevity of the trees?

Bob: Oh, yes.

Among other changes was the new, or renewed, interest in first perennials and then native plants. Both of which were quite popular before WWII.

Kelly: I wanted to talk with you a little bit about your teaching at UCLA. Can you tell us a little bit about what course or courses you taught?

Bob: I taught only one course, and it was Planning and Planting the Garden. It was part design, part plant choices and techniques. We had a nice outline for it, probably still have one somewhere here.

Kelly: That would be interesting to see that. What years did you teach the course?

Bob: Let's see, 1986 to 1995. Wow, a long time.

Kelly: That's a long time. Did you teach these courses on campus or were there field trips?

Bob: They were both. They were mostly on campus, and then we would do one field trip, usually to my garden until the class got too big. Last time when I taught and when I decided it was time to retire, they had to rent one of the huge physics halls on campus, because there were so many people coming to it. At that point, it really wasn't fun anymore for me or the students. Too impersonal.

Kelly: Was this more of a how-to garden class or theoretical?

Bob: It was what they now call DIY. We did some fun things, like charting shadows in your garden. That was one of their homework assignments. They were to look at where the shadows were at say 8:00 AM, noon, and 3:00 PM, and find out where the really sunny spots were and where the real shady spots were so that you wouldn't end up surprised by planting something only to find out that it wasn't good in the shade and needed full sun or vice-versa.

Kelly: What other sorts of homework assignments were there?

Bob: We actually made models. To learn a little bit more about your trade, I took the extension classes for a year and a half on landscape architecture. Had some really good teachers whose names I've forgotten, unfortunately.

Kelly: Do you remember what kinds of classes? Did you take a plant material class?

Bob: No, I didn't bother with that. That I already knew. They were mostly design classes and construction classes, emphasis on the design end. In the process, I learned about how to make models out of foam core. I had my students make models of their gardens out of foam core using whatever they wanted to represent the trees and the shrubs and things. They were so fanciful. They were really fun. Somewhere, I think I actually took pictures of a bunch of them because they were just so wild.

Kelly: The students were able to see their gardens in a kind of a capsule and figure out how to--

Bob: In 3D. It was fun because I told them, "Look, I want you to be able to hold this up to your eye and look out your kitchen window at your garden, or walk-in visually to your front door. Is it a pleasant walk, does it smell good? Is it shady, sunny?" There were very valuable lessons to learn from it.

Kelly: It sounds like a great class.

Bob: It was fun. The whole class was fun. By the way, an awful lot of students have gone on to do something professionally. I used to run into them all the time. Actually, I did run into one up here, one of them is a gardener at Heronswood Botanical Gardens near me.

Kelly: Now, who is that?

Bob: I forget her name. I'm terrible with names. I think I warned you about that.

Kelly: During that period, were you discussing issues such as drought tolerance and sustainability or did that--

Bob: Oh, absolutely, right from the start. In fact, that was one of the things I wanted to point out is that way back in my *Sunset* times, we were already doing that. One of my favorite stories I wrote was on Roland Ross. He had a garden that he hadn't watered for

decades in Pasadena and it was quite lovely and big. We did a really good story on that, listing all his plants.

Kelly: How was he able to grow a garden with no water at all?

Bob: Just by choosing his plants. I mean, obviously, he must have watered them when they were young, but at this point in time, there was no watering going on. That was way back in 1977. I never got off that train because it just became very apparent that California, even before climate change, California was growing into areas where watering was not logical, at least the kind of watering that a lawn required. Even on that front, we were always following what was changing, the new grasses that would need less water or less mowing. Even if you were going to have a lawn, we would suggest something thrifty.

The state developed tougher grasses that needed less water and often less mowing. Originally it was hybrid Bermudas, then tall fescue came along. I recall it was even hard getting people off of bluegrass in the beginning!

Kelly: What about grasses like Kikuyu? Someone had mentioned once that they were very drought-tolerant. Do you know that grass, kikuyu?

Bob: I know it all too well. It was in my front yard, in the Palisades, horrible grass.

Kelly: You didn't like it?

Bob: There are hybrid versions of it, but I walked away from that grass thing a long time ago. I don't know whatever became of kikuyu but it certainly was drought tolerant. It would come up on our dry hillside. I gather there are new ones that stood more upright and you could actually mow. Otherwise, it was just big fat creeping rhizomes as I recall.

Kelly: I see. In the end, if you were to be putting into Southern California a so-called lawn today, what would you be putting in?

Bob: I have no idea what that would be. Right now, it's so serious I wouldn't put in a lawn. Which was another thing that used to drive me nuts, the newspapers with the exception of what I was writing in *The Times* would always start talking about what you could do to your garden to save water. They'd start talking about it in spring because everybody wants to go gardening in spring. Absolute worst time to tear up a yard and replant it, then have to water it all summer. Be better to just let the lawn die and then do it in the fall.

Kelly: Oh, okay. I wanted to talk with you about new plant introductions. Can you talk a little bit about what role you played in promoting new plant introductions?

Bob: We constantly mentioned them, usually in various guides. At *Sunset* it was the regional garden guides, which were a collection of short pieces, and then I did a Garden Jobs at the *Times*. It was easy to work in new plant introductions in those columns. Then in the articles we did on roses and camellias, two perennially popular stories and were the two story themes that I inherited from Dan McMasters at *Home Magazine*, and everybody insisted we keep doing them. I was constantly trying to find new and different angles, to keep it from

just getting horribly boring. Of course, we were always delighted to find a new rose or camellia.

Actually, the last rose story I did on roses was going up to the old Sacramento cemetery, where there were all these vintage California roses growing there. They'd been planted by people at gravesites and on fences. It was like an old rose collectors' haven. In fact, it was Fred Boutin, a Hort member who moved up to the Gold Country, that told me about his favorite old rose haunt. He walked me through it.

Kelly: How did you reconcile camellias and roses with the new trend towards sustainable and drought-tolerant plantings?

Bob: I don't know. That's a good question. They're both out of the question for me now because the deer eat them

Kelly: Oh, that too, yes.

Bob: What are you going to do in Southern California? I really don't know. I think that if you're allowed to water once a week, and you abandon things like your lawn-- we always used to say that close to the house, near the doors, near the windows, that's where you want to put things that need water.

Kelly: Why is that?

Bob: You're getting your maximum advantage from them being close to the house. That being said, I remember one rose story I did, was about this huge estate that had its own rose gardens that were just so well done, I couldn't help but really liking it and we made it a big story. There's always a place for a little daydreaming.

Kelly: Yes. When you were working at *Sunset*, you had mentioned that a lot of your co-workers inspired you in your own gardening. You'd mentioned your copy editor, Linda Estrin.

Bob: Oh, no, now we're jumping to *The Times*. At *Sunset*, there were only really two, and they had nothing to do with-- well, yes, Dick Dunmire certainly had something to do with what I was growing. Dick just loved rare plants, and he had an absolute photographic memory so he knew the names of all of them. He was a big influence on me and my interest in plants, but Joe Williamson, the editor, essentially taught me how to write *Sunset* style, which I never really gave up on. How can I put this?

You want to get original first sources so that you're not just copying something from a book, which was probably copied from another book, and it was copied from still another book. You wanted to talk to people who'd actually done things. That was part of the *Sunset* mantra, or the Joe Williamson mantra. Actually, he used to give talks on how to write for *Sunset* for the other staff members, and he really liked plain English. He didn't like it getting too fancy and wordy. I think I mentioned somewhere that it was like, he wanted you to be the guy next door talking to the reader, not some authority up on a pedestal, which I still think it's the biggest problem in garden writing today.

People are too preachy. It's more important to get the people to relate to what you're talking to or talking about. I've always tried to do that, just like the *Playboy* bunnies were supposed to be the girl next door, we were supposed to be the gardener next door.

Kelly: You had Joe Williamson at *Sunset*, do you recall any other people at *Sunset* who were influential at work?

Bob: It's just Dick Dunmire, those two. Remember, I wasn't at *Sunset* for very long. I was down there. They sent me down south and I was down there for 10 years on my own, essentially, but now we get to the *LA Times* where I was there a lot longer. All sorts of people got interested in gardening by working with me.

Kelly: Linda Estrin, your copy editor?

Bob: Linda is still a good friend. Linda Estrin got so excited by all this, she edited both of my books, my last two books, and she was my editor at the *LA Times Magazine*, not *Home Magazine*, but the one that came after it, that she just kept getting more and more interested in gardening. Now she's actually a practicing garden designer, doing drought-resistant gardens in the Moorpark area.

Then my last editor in the real estate section, Dick Barnes, he just had a little house in Long Beach, grew a couple of tomatoes. That was his favorite thing, but he ended up getting himself a really remarkable cottage garden, once again, because I guess reading too many garden stories gets to you after a while.

Dick has wandered away a bit and now he's into beekeeping. That's his passion. You know what happens is when you have a small garden, at some point, you're done. You can add a little something here, prune something there, but the adventure is pretty much out of it. That's why we wanted a bigger garden and moved up here where we have 10 acres. It's funny because when we had smaller gardens, we changed them all the time. Our house in West Los Angeles had at least five distinct gardens, each almost completely different, with the exception of one *tabebuia*, the first thing we planted and it's still there. You can see it on Google Maps. It's very big and very purple.

Kelly: What kind of other gardens did you have in that garden?

Bob: Let's go all the way back. The first garden in Palo Alto was that rental I fixed up and it was mostly a vegetable garden and then a flower garden in front and a little section around an old brick patio in back of California natives, ferns and *sisyrinchiums* and things like that. Then we moved south to the Palisades. The back hill was too steep for anything fun other than native plants. Although the soil was terrible for native plants, I got them established.

I sent you that picture of the ceanothus 'Concha', since we'd been talking about that. That's where I first tried one of Dave Verity's monkey flowers that he was crossing and hybridizing at UCLA. I saw them at a plant sale at Hort Institute and then went and saw his plantings of them and brought some home. How'd I do that? They had plant sales back then, Hort Institute did. I bought some at a plant sale and put them on the hillside and they did great. That was my first thing with Dave Verity and that became a story eventually on all of his work with hybrid monkeyflowers.

Anyway, in that same garden in the front yard was a giant coral tree that we brought in, boxed. Cost a fortune but we wanted to fill this big, blank front yard, the one with all the kikuyu lawn. It took us a long time to get rid of it, too. Then behind the fence portion of it, we had our little subtropical garden where there was a *Cassia leptophylla* behind the fence and a little yellow *tabebuia* outside it. Inside the patio was filed with bananas and gingers and staghorn ferns and orchids and all of that. A little subtropical Zone 24 paradise.

Then when we moved to West Los Angeles, we had three kids by now. Had to be lawn for a while. I started in with little strips of ornamentals and planted that *tabebuia* in the back. I actually have a picture of it after it was planted. It looks so forlorn. It's just this stick that I got from the LA County Arboretum. It's surrounded by concrete and grass, which dramatically changed over the years. First thing I did is the garden had been split in half by a little fence that made little sense so we removed it. I did eventually put in a lawn, a fescue lawn. No irrigation, it was just growing out there. We watered everything with hose-end sprinklers.

Anyway, we originally had a fruit orchard in the back. We had a Shanghai peach. That was the best peach ever but really a mess to eat because you got soaking wet eating it. Then I started doing perennials along the sides. *Delphiniums*, *alstroemerias*, mixed in with New Zealand shrubs. Out front, it was still lawn for the kids. When the kids were old enough, I took over the front yard too and we fenced it to keep the neighborhood dogs out and covered it with blackberries for the neighborhood kids. We put raised bed vegetable gardens out there in one half and the other half were drought-tolerant shrubs and perennials, manzanitas, some ceanothus.

Kelly: You had quite a lot.

Bob: There was a lot of stuff there. One thing I can always say about my gardens is there's a lot of stuff in them. They are really full.

Kelly: You felt like you were experimenting a lot?

Bob: Yes. We were talking about the new plants. I didn't want to write about a new plant until I had actually grown it, at least for a couple of years because there were some huge mistakes. *Pittosporum Wheeler's Dwarf*, which Monrovia pitched as this little, tiny shrub, actually got huge. That's almost as big as the regular tobira. That made me cautious about recommending things without actually knowing what they're doing or knowing where I could go to see them doing something.

Other things like perennials, there's no big deal if it's a mistake, other than the money you pay to buy it. We tried all sorts of different salvias. We grew so many South African bulbs out there that it was absolutely gorgeous in spring. We had two eucalyptus out there that I grew from seed that I brought back from an Australian botanic garden, of a lovely reddish barked short eucalyptus, but since I got the seed out of a botanic garden, it had crossed with other things. They weren't quite as dwarf as I was hoping, but they were still on the small side. We trained an old Noisette rose named 'Crepuscule' up one.

Kelly: You had mentioned some other people at the *LA Times* like your art director, one of the art directors who's now on the board at Descanso Gardens. Who's that?

Bob: Yes. That was a real surprise to me. That happened after we moved up here. I don't know where that came from. He was my fishing buddy. We went fishing practically every weekend.

Kelly: You said you learned something from him or he inspired something?

Bob: I think John D'Angona only knew about Descanso because we were friends. I'm just assuming that, because it was such a surprise to me. John was not a gardener. He did not like gardens and he did not like street trees and he hated liquidambar. His street trees were liquidambar. He had the guts to go cut his down. I don't know how he got away with that, but he was so tired of the seed pods, the little mines that they drop everywhere, that he finally went and cut his down. How, from there, he came to be on the board of directors in Descanso, I don't know. I like to think it was because of his hanging out with me. Maybe not.

Kelly: What about photographers that you worked with?

Bob: Kathy Persoff, my main garden photographer, didn't have a garden but she got to know Chris Rosmini and had Chris do a beautiful garden for her in the valley.

Kelly: I think you mentioned a man named Bill Ross?

Bob: Yes. Bill lives not far from me now, on Bainbridge. He was a freelance photographer. Worked with me at first at *Sunset* since he was in Southern California. Then when I went to *The Times*, I worked with him for a while, but he was really the best in black and white photography. Did beautiful stuff. For my really glamorous garden shots at *Times*, mostly I worked with Kathy Persoff. Then there was Glen Allison. He did our architecture photography and went with me to New Zealand and then Australia. He's now a fine arts photographer and we are still in touch.

Kelly: You mentioned some of the Hort Society members that you were particularly impressed with. Chris Rosmini, Bill Paylen.

Bob: Bill Paylen. That was strictly a Hort Society thing. I didn't know who Bill was until I was talking to him at a meeting and realized he had an amazing garden. He had four big sycamores in his back yard that were *covered* with bromeliads, with more terrestrial kinds planted underneath. Bill Aplin got an astounding photo that ran full page in *Sunset*.

Kelly: What about Sam Ayers? You had mentioned that he had brought in a lot of subtropical trees.

Bob: Dr. Ayers got that whole subtropical thing going as I remember, though it was early on in my Southern California time. As I recall, he personally went and collected subtropical trees then trialed them. He'd worked with the county arboretum and the Hort Institute and the arboretum and Los Angeles Beautiful eventually published a booklet on flowering trees for LA, which had quite an influence on me. (It was followed by booklets on flowering shrubs, vines and groundcovers and finally one on natives, all eventually combined into a book called "Color For the Landscape", which still is on my bookshelf, that's how influential it was.)

Then there was Dave Verity, a botanist at UCLA, who inspired me to do all sorts of stories, he did some great things. I loved what he was doing. There was that whole drought and fire resistant garden that they planted up on the hill behind UCLA. He wasn't the only one involved in that, but it was he that walked me through it for a story in *Sunset*. We did a big story on that with all the different kinds of plants that could live up there with minimum or no watering. Mostly low things because of fire, which was another story that I kept having to return to. Fire became an issue after the Bel Air Fire, which my predecessor at *Sunset*, Bill Markin, did a big story on. Anyway, later on, Dave was growing all these amazing plants. I already mentioned the monkey flowers but he was also growing all of these Mediterranean climate wildflowers, from Australia and South Africa mostly.

Although, most I recall were from South Africa, just because it had such a wealth of wildflowers that were very low water use. I don't think he watered them at all. He had lots and lots and lots of them in these experimental beds. I suggested after we photographed them, "Hey, why don't we gather the seed and wait till fall to run the story and offer the seed to readers?" Members from the Hort Society collected seed along with Dave, brought it over to my house, and we sat around the dining room table sorting and packing it. I had printed up a little label for some packets we put the seeds in, then I did a story with photos of his trial gardens, in the fall, and readers could write in for the packets. Or did we just offer them to Hort members. I forget.

There were some amazing flowers in there. I noticed in Annie's Annuals latest catalog that several of them have now made their way into the trade, mostly ones from South Africa, but I recognized a bunch of them in there.

Kelly: Were they some of the monkeyflowers?

Bob: No, no, they were the annual wildflowers from the test beds that you just planted and walked away from and left until summer, when they died.

Kelly: What else do you recall about working with Dave Verity?

Bob: He was always out front with things where it would be appropriate for Southern California. As far as water use goes, as far as fire safety plants. He was one of the main people in the Society and was one of the main people to bring things in for the plant tables. That, by the way, when we talked about Sam Ayers, he also used to bring in flowering branches from his trees

Kelly: Can you talk about what you might recall about Bill Evans?

Bob: Just that he knew everything there was to know about trees.

Kelly: He did?

Bob: Yes, he was just an endless fountain of wisdom, and of course, all this work at their nursery and at Disneyland, which he was most proud of on the Jungle Cruise, which I took with him once, told me all about everything involved in making it.

Bob: He was a big promoter of unusual trees, and of course, when they started the Disneyland stuff in Florida, his focus changed. He used to talk to me about those there, but I'm afraid I blanked out on most of them. I didn't quite see the relevance.

Kelly: Where we left off, we were talking about Dave Verity. You had just finished telling me something about how you guys had set up all of those seed packets and then handed them out to people. How many of these were there?

Bob: Oh, I don't think there were that many, maybe 100, maybe less. It was at 100. I did have to buy the packets in hundreds. This was 1977, and there weren't that many people who were really interested in drought-resistant stuff yet.

Kelly: I recall your mention of Boyd Walker and his succulent garden. What do you remember about it.

Bob: That was fun. It made a stunning spread in the Times' magazine. That came out of the Hort thing. I don't know if he was a member or not. I think maybe he was a member, but somebody who was a member told me about his garden and it was great because here we were in the middle of winter and what am I going to write about? Went over there and this garden looks like it's the middle of the summer. It's all succulents, but he planted them as a traditional perennial border, only of succulents. It was really attractive and he knew what he was doing. He and his wife, they really knew succulents.

Kelly: Is that what they did for a living? Were they nursery people or,?

Bob: No, I don't think so, but he did propagate them because, oh yes, because they would show up at the Hort plant sale. This is really foggy. All this stuff was so long ago.

Kelly: Yes. I think it's hard to dredge some of this up sometimes.

Bob: That's why I did this list I sent to you before we talked. I went back through all the tear sheets on these stories and flipped through them looking for things that would have any significance and wrote them down before I totally forget them.

[End May 18, 2022 Interview]