

Maya Miller
On LA and parents
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Kit: It works it's the radio shack special. I have a question. We are looking at these pictures of your parents taking these little road trip together, throughout your childhood, and most of the time without you, at least the ones in this album. And it seemed like they had fun to gether and liked to go out and do things together. And I was wondering if you got a sense of that as a child. Or if that was something you weren't privy to.

Maya: Yes I got a sense that they enjoyed each other, had fun together had jokes, had very much in common. And the trips are more of a question mark in my mind. They seem to have been taken during the Depression, 28, 29, 30, 32, 33, and I wonder if that was because of what my father's jobs were at that time. He took on being an independent appraiser. He and one other man in Texas were the two oil property appraisers in the country.

Kit: Two in the whole country?! How come there weren't a lot more?

Well because it was just starting up as a force you know.

And he could tell by the geology, the topography, that there was oil?

Uh huh, and the management or the corporations that were doing the production.

Kit: Oh, so he appraised the property and whether there might be oil there. where there might be oil.

Maya: Uh huh, and then he would also evaluate the management of the company.

Who was he doing that for?

Well he would sometimes do it for an estate, for instance that had oil property on it. Or he did it for the Metropolitan Insurance Company in the east, and the president there wanted him to give monthly reports on oil property, just whatever he wanted to say they were interested in. Whatever occurred to him as an important thing in the oil business. And (oh closing the door). I should stop eating my breakfast...

Kit: You can eat, I'll talk. It doesn't seem like those little tours they were doing were work related. But maybe he didn't mention that.

I don't think they were. Well and several of them were very short, 3 or 4 days. (sounds of eating) And one which took him east. There was one trip they took, and I don't know whether mother didn't mention the fact that they had a date for my father to give a lecture at MIT at his old alma mater, and I think that prompted their going East, part of an

eastern trip. But then they also turned it into a Roots, looking at those people like Andrew McClary.

Kit: So that might have been that Peacham, Vt trip they that we were looking at, and they went all over, to Baltimore, Boston, MIT. And then like on a day-to-day basis, did you see him every day? Or who was around when you were growing up? Would you come home from school...?

Had breakfast together, while he read the paper. But he also extracted from the paper and read aloud things that would be interesting to my mother or I guess that he thought she ought to hear.

Was he ever outraged by something?

He really liked to play the devil's advocate and take the position that you would not expect him to take. And that maybe wasn't his real position. But he did indeed follow the Republican line on Franklin Roosevelt. He called him that Yellow Dog in the White House.

(Maya and Kit laugh)

Kit: And was that supposed to mean coward?

Yes, uh-huh.

And did they think, this just occurred to me, did they think Roosevelt was a coward for not getting into the war sooner? Or was it just a slur?

I don't know.

And he read the LA Times.

Of course, and when we lived on the edge of Westlake Park, General Otis lived next door to us. And General Otis was the man who started the Los Angeles Times. And my grandmother, who was a very simple sweet direct person, used to invite him over for soup in the kitchen. But I'm sure they felt extra loyalty to the Los Angeles Times because of knowing him over soup.

So there was a cook?

Uh huh. Then I remember dinners also. They were sort of routine meals that began with a salad or fruit juice of some kind, and then went on to the main course. That was fairly conventional. But it was always sort of the same, the same procedure with dessert. And the little gong that we have here was played to announce that dinner was ready.

And did they take advantage of the fruit? Did you have fruit on the property?

Depends on what point we're at. I haven't gotten in my mind what year we moved out from Beverly Hills to Brentwood Heights.

Why did you move?

Well, I don't know why we moved. One reason was, I guess the reason was we inherited property. By father and his brother had bought this acreage in Brentwood Heights that was kind of a museum/nursery of Central American plants.

Kit: Wow!

And the man who had started it was interested in having a museum like that, an herbarium. And he couldn't sustain it so he sold it, and my father and his brothers bought it jointly. And then when my uncle died he left it to my father. And that must have been what prompted our moving out there.

So you basically moved to a Central American rainforest patch...

Well, mostly it had avocados, and then it had things like cheramoyas and loquats and cumquats and quinces. There were I think 12 acres and then I don't know when we came to sell it we sold it in chunks, like 6 acres. But kat any rate, if it were in that period of time we had lots of avocados. Acocados were very big – he had all sorts and varieties – haas. We used to have half an avocado to start dinner with and a little salad with lime juice.

Mmm, fresh picked? So you mentioned the ambassador's dinner.

Yes, it was part of a social series that I was just on the edge of, of course, but it included times when the Los Angeles Times set of people would be giving dinner parties and things. And every once in awhile, I guess when my mother couldn't find a babysitter, they brought me along and had to find a place for me to sit where I could reach the food. No, it wasn't exciting for me, it was more of a drag. But I don't remember having any strong emotions about it, but I do remember it.

It seems like they didn't go out a lot.

No I don't think they did. Although later on as we traveled we used to go to the opera a LOT, which sort of contributed to my lack of enthusiasm for opera. (laughs)

This is your father liked the opera.

Uh huh he really liked and appreciated music a lot, and I think it just skipped a generation with me. In later life he would listen to music every afternoon. The radio would have two hours of classical music. And he geared his days to lying down and listening to that.

But that was after he moved down to the beach. I don't know when he started that. He took up the cello when he was sort of retiring from very active oil work. He went to a teacher. He used to say he's going to Teacher today. And Teacher lived on Wilshire Blvd on the way to Los Angeles from Beverly Hills, it was when we lived in Beverly Hills that he took up the cello. He used to practice, sounded forlorn. (Kit laughs)

So you weren't particularly keen on the cello.

Well it didn't have the charm in its learning process.

But how long did you live in Brentwood Heights, until you went away to school?

I can't tell, you how long, a lot of it was the years I was going to school, so just vacations.

Later on, during the war after I was married, I lived with them while Dick was overseas. So I had kind of spotty..

And you still went to Berkeley Hall School?

No it was a day school, were just living in Beverly Hills

So you moved about the time you left for Principia?

The sequence was when we left. I don't know when we moved from BH to Brentwood. It seems to me that when I came back from school it was to Brentwood heights. So that school was 10th 11th 12th and then college.

And did you come home from school and your mother would be there.

Maya laughs I don't remember. That was when Conchita was around, you'll be glad to know. We would cut out endless pictures of movie stars we admired and played out in the field, made houses of weeds that were out there. And threw weeds at the boys.

It sounds very pretty.

It wasn't 'specially pretty, it was like a field. And one of the entertainments my mother and father had for after dinner was going through the houses that were being built. They were under construction and you would go walk through and figure out what room was what and criticize.

Were they all different? It wasn't tract housing?

Maya (laughs): No, it wasn't tract housing.

Was it considered then an exclusive place to live?

I don't think especially. It was a tract. It wasn't all developed. This central part of it was developed for the school, Berkley Hall.

But probly in those days people weren't as keen on living out in country. They wanted to be near the action?

I can't tell you where people wanted to live then.

Well, you talked also about how your father was funny and had lots of jokes, but he also had these moods and would shut down for periods of time.

Yes and I'm sure that influenced me. I wanted to marry somebody who had a good disposition. And Dick did. You know he wasn't moody.

So you scoped that out (laughs)

Well, I was conscious of it.

Yeah well, what did he do?

Well, he would just be silent and he would answer only minimally. Somebody ask a question and he answered with one word.

And did he seem angry?

That all added up to being, not angry in that he was berating you. But just the Silent Treatment. Which I didn't like at all.

And how did he get into that? Was it something set it off?

Who knows. I don't know.

It coulda been his own business...

Coulda been

But your mother was...

Always very even tempered, gentle, caring, thoughtful of others, very conscious of other people in a social situation. I do think I learned a great deal from her on that. She must have learned a lot as she was hostess, being a hostess for my Aunt and having to make her social way.

But after she married, she didn't work outside the home any more.

No, she didn't.

That was pretty much the norm then for her class?

And she was a step above the norm, because my father became successful and I guess had enough money to make it so that she not only didn't have to work herself, but she could hire somebody to work. Although we always had somebody working in the house as a cook, or...

Kit: ...laundry (laughs)

Maya:..(chuckles) Yes, laundry. And usually it was, always, somebody who lived in, who was a live-in person, had a little room. Not a situation I ever really cottoned to.

Well can we talk a little about the beach and the connection your family had down there with that? And how summers were?

Well the Riverside family, my Uncle Frank, who was the entrepreneur of the Mission Inn, and Aunt Alice, his sister, who was the manager of the Mission Inn, both had this property jointly somehow down at Laguna Beach. It was Arch Beach. And it was about 2 miles south of Laguna proper. And there were various members of the family who had various places they would go to in the summer. One of them was Uncle Frank's daughter Alice Hutchings had 3 children who were a little bit older than I. And Richardson had one son who had four boys about my age, one of whom was Frank Richardson, who was a professor here at the University of Nevada. And then there was sort of a cousin who was a principal of a big school in Los Angeles, Aunt Rose, and she had her little house. So there was a kind of a compound of maybe 5 houses. One of which was my uncle's which was very grand and right on the ocean. And Aunt Alice Richardson's where we stayed was also right over the ocean, in fact it cantilevered out. So you could look out the window and right over the waves.

Kit: So you could just look over and see the waves right there? Was it up on a hill?

Yes, yes. It was on a hill. And the colony in the summer used to take on its own traditional schedules. I don't know what we did in the morning, but late morning or so – sometimes in the morning and always in the afternoon we'd go down to the beach, and the mothers would settle in with their umbrellas and reading matter and chatting position. And we kids would play in the water and swim and make sandcastles and things. And then we would have our dinners. And we were charged with drying the dishes, something that was our chore. That was dinner in the evening.

Then after dinner we would very often congregate at one of the houses, either the Hutchings or Uncle Frank's for music. And somebody would play. Alice would play We the sheet music and we'd gather around and sing. And that was nice.

In the afternoons Uncle Frank had one little room that was just a little circle, a kind of a tower, it was just big enough for a table that was a domino. Over the door to the room was a domino tile – enlarged domino. And then he would play dominos there. The table was set up there. With somebody.

And was there a great view of the ocean from there?

Yes it was gorgeous. It looked down on what had been – there was a natural pond but it wasn't quite big enough, so they had cemented up a part of it, and it was fed by the high tide, the high tide would splash into it and refresh it every day. And that was the place that children learned to swim.

Wow, how fantastic! How big was it?

Yes it was a fun place. It was about 20 x 20 feet. It was scratchy and all on the base, it was a regular tide-pool pool and there were little crabs and things that lived in it as well.

So you spend the whole summer at the beach?

It seemed like the whole summer I don't know but probably wasn't. And my father would come on long weekends. But he would go into town and work. And then when he would come out it would be with great vats of fruit and vegetables and things. He loved to gather mussels when the mussels were in season and they had a lot of them on the tide-pools. It was a beautiful place with rocks and pools and places where the water would break, you know?

And did you go out tide-pooling?

Uh-huh, not much but a little bit.

Were you particularly close to any of your cousins?

No. I had this one cousin whose birthday was on the same day as mine, (*June 29*) and as Uncle Frank's, it was Uncle Frank's grandson. His was June 30 but we always celebrated the 3 of them together. I had therefore whatever sense of family there was was engendered by this and by these evenings together and the time on the beach together. But I was a happy time I think. And I wonder what the years were.

Well your mother probably enjoyed having a social life.

Yeah, I think so.

Was she alone a lot other than that? Or was she friendly with neighbors?

In Bev Hills I don't remember her being especially neighborly. She went to church. Most of her social life was probably at church. And then this Gladys Stroud, whose husband

was also an oil man. And then they would do dinners with other families from Berkley Hall. One of which was a relative of Harding – President Harding. And he was on his way to staying at their house when he died up in San Francisco. He was they thought maybe poisoned. Harding was their claim to fame. Or infame.

Do you know what happened to those houses in Laguna Beach?

No, be fun to explore that.

Kit laughs: Maybe we should take a little jaunt.

There was a picture in one of the little paintings that has Aunt Rose's house. It's hard for me to tell if it's Aunt Alice's where we were or the next door one. But I remember well there also was a little ritual when you had to leave the beach. Because very often there would be tar on the beach and you would have gotten it on your feet. So halfway up the stairs there was a little landing where they kept, I guess it was alcohol or kerosene and you would wipe your feet off and get the tar off before you went into the house.

Was there tar because of oil drilling off shore?

I don't think so much drilling as the boats out there.

Do you know anything about he buying of that piece of land?

No, nothing. It wasn't ours. I mean we had not relationship to it by the time it was sold. (they laugh)

Well that's really interesting. (wrapping up) Well that's a pretty good bunch of stuff!

(Later 5 min before the end of the tape, Maya starts talking again).

There's something significant. It has to do with the trips, the Sierra Club trips my father took me on. He had gone by himself in the summer. It was a woman who worked for the Union Oil Co that he would encounter when he was also working for the Shell and the Union. Shell and Union joined together. She went on these trips and she would talk about them. And so he went. And then the next year, when I was something like 10, took me for the month on a high trip, when there were about 100 and they had mules and you were allowed 30 pounds, including your sleeping bag.

The sleeping bag probably weighed 20 pounds!

I know the sleeping bags were so heavy. And you would have to roll them up every morning and stuff hem in a pack.

So where were you in the high Sierra?

We went in different places. One time we started from the Valley floor in Yosemite. And another time we started from the South from Sequoia. The night before at the campfire they would explain to you where we were going the next day and what the objective was. And we would hike, depending on the altitude rise and fall was, about 10 miles was sort of an average. Sometimes it would be 14, sometimes it would be 5. But those were very interesting times and were valuable to me because it introduced me to camping and sleeping on the ground and rustling out a place with enough evenness so that you didn't roll down the hill.

And did you have a tent you slept in?

No, no tent. There was a place for men and a place for women and a place for married people. Went with the women and then you would choose your place find a place that was naturally even and you would put your bag down on that, that claimed it.

And who did the cooking?

Oh, there was a cook, Dan Taché, who was Swiss, and who in the winter was the chef at the Ambassador Hotel, and he insisted that he be able to take off for these trips because he really loved the mountains. And he would let us help around the edges and taught us assorted things about cooking that were fun.

Gosh he cooked for a hundred people?

Uh huh, and they had little collapsible stoves that were made of metal of some kind.

So it wasn't over a fire?

No.

END of tape