

Interview with Erma Kolb, widow of Elvin Elmer "Buster" Kolb, Wednesday, November 20, 1991 at 221 El Camino Real, #96, Oceanside, California 92054. Interviewer: Kristi S. Hawthorne, Oceanside Historical Society

Kristi: Let's start out by telling me your full name.

Erma: My name is Erma Woodbury Kolb.

Kristi: Where were you born?

Erma: I was born in Beaver County, Utah on November 12, 1907.

Kristi: What were your parents' names?

Erma: My father's name was Charles Robert Woodbury and my mother was Agnes Isadore Bickley. My mother was born in Beaver and my father was born in St. George, Utah. My mother was born February 28, 1876 and my father was born January, 1876. My great grandfather came with the Mormons in the 1800's when the Mormons settled in Utah. They married in 1898.

Kristi: Do you have any brothers and sisters?

Erma: Yes. I have three sisters and three brothers. My oldest brother died, Francis, and Jennie, Jennie married Lee. She's 89, and Zola will be 87 in December. I'm 84. Frank is 80, Don is 78 and Vilda is deceased, my youngest sister.

Kristi: What was your other brother's name? The one that passed away?

Erma: He died at birth, his name was George Washington. I guess he was born on Washington's birthday. I'm the middle.

Kristi: Where did you go to school at?

Erma: I went to school in Beaver and in Hinkley, Utah. It's on Highway 6 that goes out to Nevada by Delta, in the desert. I went to school there. My father had a grocery store. I graduated from high school in 1925 and left home shortly thereafter. It was small town, very small.

Kristi: How far away were you from Salt Lake, City?

Erma: About 150 miles.

Kristi: What was the name of your school?

Erma: It was Hinkley elementary school, I guess. It was Millard County Academy because people came to that high school, it was the only high school around for quite awhile.

Kristi: Did you stay in Utah before coming to Oceanside?

Erma: No, I went away to business college in Salt Lake. I was eighteen, about eighteen, I guess. I wanted to be a secretary.

Kristi: Did your other sisters go as well?

Erma: No, I was the only that left home. I was a rascal!

Kristi: Did they stay in Utah?

Erma: Well, no. They're scattered around. I have one brother that lives up in Concord. My oldest brother is deceased. My oldest sister lives with her son in Salt Lake. My other sister, Zola, lives with her daughter in Idaho and I live here by myself and Frank lives in Concord with his wife and Don lives in Provo with his wife, Mary. All of my brothers and sisters have arthritis. They're all ill, you know, more or less, old age.

Kristi: But they're all long living. How long did your mother and father live?

Erma: Yes. My mother was 87, my dad was 88 when he died.

Kristi: Did they stay in Utah?

Erma: Yes, my mother had a stroke and died in a nursing home and my father was delivering an insurance policy, a friend was taking him to deliver an insurance policy and they crossed Highway 6 and a car hit them and injured him. He died a few days later. But he was aged, but he was still selling insurance.

Kristi: He was in the grocery business when you were young, what was the name of his grocery store?

Erma: Hinkley Cash Store.

Kristi: Did you work in it?

Erma: Yes. We all worked, the girls especially. You should have seen the cash registers in those days, about that tall. Old tin things, you know, or brass. It was very uncomplicated.

Kristi: Did your store have any competition?

Erma: Well, yes, there were several other stores in this small town and a creamery.

Kristi: Was it a Mormon community?

Erma: Yes, mostly, not all, but mostly.

Kristi: You were the only daughter that left home, did the boys stay in Hinkley as well?

Erma: Well, they were younger than I. I think Frank left home, went to Texas, I think. Don stayed home. I graduated from high school in 1925. I left home, I think, in either '26 or '27.

Kristi: What did your parents say when you left?

Erma: They cried when I left. I was determined. I was 18.

Kristi: Did you go by yourself?

Erma: Well, we had arrangements at the school, of course. I had to work. I went to work for a lady with heart trouble, took care of her house and her kids for my board and room and a little money. I went to school, not very long, probably six months or so. I didn't graduate. It was Henniger's Business College.

Kristi: Why didn't you graduate?

Erma: Well, I got a roving foot. Wanted to come to California. I was about 19, I guess.

Kristi: What made you come to California?

Erma: Well, why does anybody come to California! Why did you come to California? Anyway, I came to California in 1927.

Kristi: Did you come by yourself?

Erma: Yes, on the bus. It brought me down, I never will forget, it came down through San Bernardino and I saw all those orange trees, thousands of acres of orange trees. The bus stopped and I said, "Boy, when I get to California I'm going to eat all the oranges. I'm going in the grove and I'm going to eat all the oranges I can!" Somebody said, "You better not go in the grove." And I said, "Why not?! The oranges are there." And they said, "somebody will shoot you!"

Kristi: Well, did you get any oranges?

Erma: Well, sure. But I didn't steal them! I came to Los Angeles, which wasn't a very big town. Then I wondered around. I was young and rash. I went to a hotel and did whatever I could do. Waitress, insurance, working in an insurance office. It was easy to find your way, I can tell you that. Street cars. I went to Bakersfield and then I went to Stockton, I think it was. Stockton, where I met my first husband in 1932. Curly, Gordon Wahl. Called him Curly. I had a hotel and he had a restaurant underneath the hotel.

Kristi: How did you manage to get a hotel?

Erma: Oh, gosh. You're asking too many questions! I couldn't give you the history of my life, truly.

Kristi: So somewhere between 1927 and 1932 you got in the hotel business.

Erma: Yeah, I was always very thrifty. He had a restaurant and we met and decided to get married. So, I sold the hotel and we both worked in the restaurant. It was in Stockton, Curly's Restaurant. We sold dinners, it was during the Depression, of course. We sold complete dinners for 25 and 35 cents. I'll show you a picture, one of the cooks is standing in front of the thing, so you can't see very well, but hot cakes, coffee for a dime. Rib steak and a whole complete dinner, including desert and coffee, for 35 cents. This was during the Depression and the bakery used to bring their leftover bakery goods and we'd display them in the window and the men that were with out work or just working a little, they could come in and get a couple of those sweet rolls for a nickel or a dime with all the coffee they could drink. Maybe that's all they had to eat all day. It was a sad time. We survived, until we separated.

Kristi: What year did you separate?

Erma: 1940.

Kristi: Is he still living, do you know?

Erma: Oh, I have no idea, no. By this time we were in Modesto. His restaurant was in Stockton and then ... we had two restaurants. We had opened one in Modesto and then we closed the one in Stockton. So this was in Modesto, it was on the highway. Both of them. Of course the highway in those days went right through the town, you know, there was no freeways at all. I went home and stayed with parents for three months. They were getting older and I didn't know what I was going to do. I was always very thrifty and if I didn't have a few hundred dollars, I was just desolate, I just couldn't stand it. So, I went and stayed three months with my parents, then I went to Phoenix and then I went to San Diego and I wanted to buy a hotel, but by that time World War II was in the making and prices had gone sky high in San Diego. So I went to a realtor and he told me about a nice hotel in Oceanside, twenty-five rooms that Elizabeth Butler, and her husband ... she was Walt Johnson's sister. They had built this, where the vacant lot is now, between First and Second on Hill Street. They built this hotel for a retirement home and Mr. Butler died of TB.

Kristi: So that hotel has been torn down?

Erma: Yeah, all of those buildings.

Kristi: What was the name?

Erma: Palomar Hotel. I had to borrow \$900. I had to buy the furniture, of course, I didn't buy the building. They still owned it, Walt Johnson managed it. I borrowed \$900 and I rented rooms for \$1.50 a night, \$2.00 with a bath, sometime \$2.50. This was 1941. I think I came to Oceanside in February, 1941. This was before World War II and my payments weren't much, but I had a hard

struggle. Then they began to build the Fallbrook Ammunition Dump and of course, there was no housing in Vista, Fallbrook, any of these small towns, just no housing. Just a few small hotels, you know and the Carlsbad Hotel in Carlsbad and the Beach Hotel in Oceanside, and of course the Del Mar Hotel. But there was just no place for people to live while they were building the ammunition dump. When that began and the people began to come in and they needed a place to live, my rooms filled up.

Kristi: Did you raise your prices?

Erma: Well, sure and then rent control came! I soon paid off my loan. Then when Camp Pendleton ... there was a nice lobby and I had gone out there many and many a night and there would be women, children, men just laying like sardines in a can in that lobby because there was no place to stay. Then they began to abuse the privilege, using my trash barrels for everything.

Kristi: Oceanside was a sleepy little town when you first arrived.

Erma: It sure was. It was sad. I had to finally, to keep the Marines from coming up the stairs and throwing up all down the hall, drunk, going to my bathroom, ruining my carpets and everything, I had to put a lock on the downstairs door with a bell. I had an apartment there.

Kristi: When did you meet Buster?

Erma: Well, he came up to rent a room in 1943, I think it was. He was born in Oceanside, he was an Oceanside boy. His parents, well, his mother was born in Monserrate and his father was born in Rainbow.

Kristi: What was his full name?

Erma: Elvin Elmer Kolb. He hated it, but they called him Buster. His folks bought him a Buster Brown suit when he was a little kid, according to what I hear, so he became Buster, never legally, but he was buried under Buster. He was born February 5, 1905. He passed away the 31st of July in 1976. He's buried in Eternal Hills in the Mausoleum.

Kristi: What kind of information do you have on the Kolb family?

Erma: Well, there's quite a bit going back to his great-grandfather Combs, who came to California during the gold rush. The only one was Bob Kolb, the radio Kolb. His father and Buster's grandfather were brothers.

Kristi: When did you and Buster get married?

Erma: We got married December 7, 1944 in Yuma. I don't know why we went to Yuma, why we didn't get married here, but we wanted to go to Yuma. There were no tires. You couldn't buy a tire, if we'd had a flat tire, we'd a been out of luck. During the war, you know, everything was rationed.

But we went to Yuma and got married. We lived at the hotel and we bought some land down in South Oceanside from Fred Hayes. Buster began to build some store buildings, he was a carpenter. He began to build these store buildings and then we decided to ... Bill Evans bought the Butler property. So he bought my furniture lease and we lived with Buster's mother for a while. Well, you had to go to San Diego, you couldn't build anything because everything that was built was sold to marines. We wanted to buy a place down on Broadway or one of those streets where the houses were being built then, but they wouldn't sell it to anyone but marines. So Buster went to San Diego and talked to the authorities down there and by that time we had taken over his mother's flower shop and they finally allowed us, if we would build a little house and attach it to the store building, they would let us build. So he began to build this little tiny house which is still down there. It's 1819 South Hill Street, one of the store buildings has plumbing in it. We had Kolb's flower shop. We bought it from his mother. His mother was getting old. She had a flower shop between 1st and 2nd and Bea Nelson had a dress shop in the same little alcove. When the Marines, course when they went overseas they wanted to send FTD to their girls, or mothers and fathers. She was getting old and it just wore her out because she was so busy. So then she moved out, moved her flower shop out on Mission Avenue, where the freeway is now, that's where their home was. Then she decided to let us run the flower shop. We more or less bought it. We moved it to our store in South Oceanside, at 1819 S. Hill Street.

Kristi: What was Mrs. Kolb's name?

Erma: Her name was Frances Augustus Higgins, but they called her Fannie. Her husband died in 1941. His name was Elmer Augustus Kolb. They called him Gus, known as Gus Kolb. They came here when they got married in 1900. His grandfather had that livery stable on Tremont Street. When Fannie and Gus got married they came to Oceanside and that's where they settled and lived here the rest of their lives. Their home was on Mission Avenue where the freeway is now. They took out a whole neighborhood for the freeway.

Kristi: Where did they go when the freeway came in?

Erma: Well, mom was alone by that time, of course, and she bought a house on Vista Way where she lived until she passed away. We lived in this little house. We had a good business. There were people, wonderful people like Dr. Reid, who had probably delivered Buster and his two sisters. He used to go by horse out all over the country and wade streams and everything. He was a wonderful man.

Kristi: What were Buster's sisters' names?

Erma: His oldest sister was Dorothy and his youngest sister was Marguerite. Dorothy Grant, she married a Grant, she was married a couple of times. They're both deceased. All three of them are deceased.

Kristi: Did Buster go to school here?

Erma: Yes, he went through his second year at High School.

Kristi: Before the freeway was built, Hill Street was the 101?

Erma: Yeah, 101 was Hill Street. It went right by our store. That was the dusty freeway. We had the Franciscan pottery franchise and we used to set our dishes out at the front of our store on tables, to attract people. Everyday we had to dust them! We sold pottery and for a little while we had plants, a nursery.

Kristi: Did you make the pottery yourself?

Erma: No, no. We had an old truck and we used to go to Los Angeles to pick up our pottery and dishes and things and go to up there on Wall Street to get our ribbons and our floral supplies. In those days when you made floral arrangements, you had to make your own form to put your flowers in. Pull it real tight and wind it with wire so it would be real firm so when you when you made a spray the flowers would stay in. It was a lot different then it is today. We sold our business in 1950. ... There was a man who built those three stores where the barber shop is and some people had a candy shop and we rented, I can't remember. I guess we must have built the apartments back in '51. They were on Tremont Street right behind the store.

Kristi: Do you remember the name of the apartments?

Erma: Yeah, Kolb apartments, naturally. We moved into one of the apartments. We lived there until '71, when we came here. I think our two bedroom apartments rented for about \$75 or \$80 a month and our one bedroom apartments, for about \$60, maybe \$65. We had a little bachelor apartment that we rented for about \$60.

Kristi: Is it still standing?

Erma: Yeah, it's right on the north side of Tremont Street, there's a gas station and I think they're painted white. They're between Cassidy and the next street down. There was nothing down there then, hardly except that medical building.

Kristi: When was that built?

Erma: Oh, I can't remember, it must have been around the '50s. That a was doctor's office, and then Doctor Pace and Thatcher built the medical building on Cassidy street which is now moved out there and still called the Cassidy clinic.

Kristi: Buster was a carpenter, did he build the apartments?

Erma: We built the apartments, most of it. Of course, not the electrical work or the roofing, but we built the wooden part ourselves. We lived there, but of course he went out and worked. He did various things. We were in the sport fishing business.

Kristi: Tell me how you got started in that.

Erma: Well, the Lady Angler's formed and they wanted me to join.

Kristi: Who got you interested?

Erma: Well, just people who came in the flower shop. I decided I wanted to go fishing because Buster was a fisherman from the time he was born. Well going back, they settled in Oceanside and they had four children, and he was a vegetable farmer and would rent land all around and raise vegetables and she would sell them from a horse and buggy. Like three cantaloupes for a dime, two or three cents for a big head of lettuce. She sold the produce that he grew, then later on when they got an old Model A Ford, then of course she sold it from the car. Then they started the flower shop. Buster, of course, he had to help his dad a lot because he was the only boy. But when he had time, there was a short pier at that time, and he didn't have very much money so he'd crawl under the pier and get the line that other people had lost from snagging and make himself a line and he loved to fish. They used to catch big fish, white sea bass off the pier because it had never been fished. But going back, when he was small, his dad liked to go camping and he would take Buster and they'd go on the horse and buggy out on Camp Pendleton, which was the O'Neill Ranch then and camp and catch rabbits, which his father sold and then they would go over to the ocean and fish and his dad had a big line like a little rope and he used a horseshoe as a sinker and he'd whirl it over his head like this, and let it go out in the ocean and catch a fish almost every time so they always go home loaded with rabbits and fish. They had a great time doing that. He was just a little kid, and Marguerite, she wanted to go, but he always said that they didn't want her, because she was a girl! Later on, of course Harry Whitman, he was the foreman of the O'Neill ranch, well they just had quite a time. He and Buster were good friends and he'd let him go on the ranch and he wasn't supposed to. But then of course, when they sold it to the government, that was 1942, I think, Harry was still on the ranch for a long time.

Kristi: When do you start fishing?

Erma: I started fishing in 1950. Well, anyway, I wanted to tell you, he married Laura Ferbrache. They had two children. They got married on December 1, 1924. I think she was born in Oceanside. There's a whole family of them here, or was. Most of them are gone now, I guess. Their first child, Richard, was born on April 2, 1926. Shirley was born the 21st of June, 1927. They were both raised here. Richard lives in Bodfish, California and Shirley married Ernest Kionke. He was a marine in World War II and when he went overseas he sent her back to Buffalo to his parents. They live in Gowanda. They had five children, who of course, are all grown by now. I got a letter from Shirley on my birthday. She was married before we were and Richard, he married a girl from Carlsbad and they had two children and then he went away, they separated. He and Buster and Laura were divorced. He worked as a carpenter and a cement finisher, worked at Camp Pendleton and there was a Mr. Zaiser, he was building all those houses towards north Oceanside and Buster, after he had quit working in Camp Pendleton, he went to work as a carpenter for Mr. Zaiser and worked for him for a long time. Over the years we were in the boat building business, we were in the sport fishing business. He worked for other people doing one thing and another until we retired.

Kristi: You were in the boat building business? What was the first boat you built?

Erma: Well, the police department still has one of them. Anyway, there was a quite of few of the people in town had a share in it when it went bust. It wasn't very successful, because everybody wanted them wholesale! We kept busy and he had a lot of hobbies. He went into taxidermy and he did jewelry, cut and polished jewelry. He always had something to keep him busy. We had a trailer and we used to go camping a lot. We went to Clammouth Falls and went fishing and to Mexico. You could go to Mexico safely in those days. We'd camp down Rosarita Beach, right along the top of the bluffs and nobody would bother you. You could go away all day and leave your stuff and nobody would bother it. We had a lot of fun fishing down there for quite a few years.

Kristi: Do you remember the new pier in 1947?

Erma: Oh yeah.

Kristi: And people fished off of that pier ...

Erma: Oh, sure. They still do. They don't catch much now.

Kristi: They had a boat launch off the pier?

Erma: Oh yeah! They had those stairs, the tackle store, the restaurant on the end of the pier. And on this side there were stairs that went down to the water and we would anchor the boat, the boats were anchored out in the ocean and there was a thing were they let a little boat down to go out to the men to get on the big boat and they would bring them in to the pier and as the swell came ... we'd watch the swell come under the pier and as the thing leveled off the deck hands would lift the people on to the boat. When we came home it would be the reverse procedure. We were busy, too. There was lots of fish. We would have our gunny sacks loaded with fish and go up the stairs, have to drag those sacks of fish up the stairs.

Kristi: Was it the McCullah's?

Erma: McCullah's, yes. Two brothers came here and started it. They had ticket building, we had a restaurant, which of course the city rented to people, and we had the tackle store, which my husband managed and later on the Navy built that watch tower, which they blamed for the pier falling down.

Kristi: Do you think that was the cause?

Erma: I never did. I think it was the storms.

Kristi: When did they build that tower?

Erma: I don't remember. Well, that's the one that had the stairs and the ramp and everything where we launched the boats and that, until it washed away in, it must have been about 1959. Anyway, after they opened the harbor, then, of course the pier was gone.

Kristi: Did you have boats in the harbor?

Erma: No, no. I think the McCullah's did by that time. We were only in the management about three years, I think. I think they were at the harbor for just a very short time and the people that have it now took it over.

Kristi: When did Buster start at the Tackle Shop?

Erma: In the '50s sometime. It must have been, we were probably in there about '54 to '57. I was with the Lady Anglers until fishing got bad. I don't remember when we quit. I started in 1950. I think I got interested in golf. The golf course was where Kmart is, the first one, and then when they built the course by Heinie Hills, we were charter members. It was an 18 hole golf course. It was El Camino golf course.

Kristi: You mentioned Dr. Reid a while back, what else do you remember about Dr. Reid?

Erma: Well, Dr. Reid, he was a good flower shop customer. Every year he would buy ... we used to get our Poinsettias and other flowers from Paul Ecke .. and for all of his customers, he'd come in every year, and buy a whole bunch of Poinsettias and Hydrenches and we'd deliver them to his customers. He was just a good customer. He was a wonderful man. He had been a doctor since long before I got here, and like I say, he used to go with a horse to deliver babies and things way out like to Fallbrook and up to Monseratte, well all over, sometimes wading streams. But he'd go out by horse to make his house calls, according to what Buster told me, and other people.

Kristi: Did you ever meet his daughter, Elizabeth?

Erma: Yes. I guess she's probably about my age, no, she'd be older.

Kristi: Walt Johnson must have been somebody you knew pretty well.

Erma: Yeah, well, Walt Johnson was the fire chief and he was a swearing man! You could hear him a mile away. He'd come down Hill Street and he'd see somebody he'd know and he'd go like this, "Hello, you old SB, what are you doing today! "GD", you know! Have you heard that before? I always knew when he was coming to collect the rent!

Kristi: I've always heard that Walt was a character, but everyone liked him.

Erma: Oh, he was a good man and, like you say, he had a real good disposition and everybody liked him. Well, it showed. That Fred Sickler, I told you about the "door knocker". Well, his name was Fred Sickler. There were very few policeman, you know, but he would come every night and try all the store doors to see that they were locked and we called him the "Door Knocker". I think he lived up out at Bonsall, but anyway, he was a policeman in Oceanside. There was another policeman, he used to love fish. His daughter's around here, I think. Harold Davis. We'd bring so many fish home and he was one people got tired of calling them asking if they wanted fish. Cause

heavens, we'd catch barracuda that long, and great big fish and Harold, we always could depend on Harold. We'd call Harold and say, "Harold, would you like some fish?" "I sure would," he'd say. Of course, they were always cleaned. A lot of people when you call them up and ask them if they want fish, they say "Are they clean?" But Harold never did. He always liked to get fish. Oh, he was a prince. He was a very nice man. I was trying to think of the Mayor. Mayor Sklar, he was the one that instigated the harbor. That was all just land, no water where the harbor is. He was Jewish and some people resented it, you know. But he was a wonderful mayor. He was a good mayor. He started negotiations, I'm sure, for the harbor and saw that it went through, finally and they began to dig it before he died.