

Interview with former city clerk John Landes by Randy Mitchell

Interview with John H. Landes in 1968 by Randy Mitchell. Transcribed by Kristi Hawthorne

Randy Mitchell: The following is an interview with John H. Landes, 814 Missouri Avenue, Oceanside, who for a great number of years was city clerk. The interview is taken by Pete Eiden of the San Diego Union and Randy Mitchell. Today is March 18, 1968. The purpose for the interview was a feature story to appear in the San Diego concerning the mayor's that Mr. Landes has known through his time in Oceanside. However, a great deal of other facts will be contained in the interview which follows.

Pete: Mr. Landes, I've been wanting to meet you for many years and I appreciate you taking the time out. Mainly what I want to get you to talk about is the many, many elections that you have been involved in in Oceanside, as the clerk, as an observer and as a citizen. Let's start with a few basics. Mr. Landes, you were city clerk for what years?

John: Thirty-two years.

Pete: Until '56?

John: Yes, I guess it was.

Pete: That would be back until 1920?

John: That was twelve or thirteen years ago, I think.

Pete: You were first city clerk in 1924?

John: In 1924, yes, I'm not sure if it was 1923 or 1924, it was about that time.

Pete: Was that a part time job at first?

John: Oh, no! That place was in such a mix-up! Now, for instance, the cash they took in was put in a box in one of the things wide open, they had those large places, the books you know, the large books and they were in a little box in there and some of the things, the books and so forth, the most important ones, were put under the staircase that goes upstairs to the ... you know the old place, don't you?

Pete: It's the USO now?

John: Yes.

Pete: What's the USO now? Was that city hall?

Randy: Was it Third and Tremont?

John: No, it was right on the highway there, you know. Of course now it's stores there.

Pete: Is that where Huckabay's is now?

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John: Huckabay's, yes!

Pete: So, that would be Third and Hill?

Randy: First and Hill, or Second and Hill, or Mission.

John: And they had both the library in there and what little they had in the clerk's office. They had practically nothing there. They had no safe. As a matter of fact, the council, I asked for the safe and they said it was absolutely unnecessary! Finally, I was permitted to have a safe there for say about 6 weeks. Well, I knew that was the entrance and it became our permanent safe and it's still there.

Pete: Oh really? It's still there.

John: Yes, sir. I was able to bring the books, the books were under the stairway, to bring the books into a safe and that safe is still there. City hall. It is the one that's farther back, right behind the office there.

Pete: It's a floor safe?

John: Yes. So, we had something to put our books in and the money. Because the money, for the money they just had drawers. And here is another thing, right next door on the corner, was a hardware store, now the name, he used to be an old friend of mine but I couldn't give his name to save my life, but he also was a member of the bank there. So every Saturday, every weekend, even then they worked Saturday, why, we took the money that we had gotten during the week to put in the bank. We had nothing to do with the bank or anything like that. Well, one Friday or Saturday, we brought the money in a paper bag and he said, "Well, the bank is closed now." But I'll tell you, he had a large box for trash in his office there, all papers, you know. So, he went in there and grabbed, grabbed up until he got bottom, he put the bag with the money in there, filled it all back, he had a mouth of chewing gum, "They won't look for it there"!

Pete: How much was it, Mr. Landes?

John: Oh, it was sometimes maybe around \$100, \$150, whatever we happened to get in. Nothing large, not large. Well, sometimes, yes, when it was near our collecting time, but never larger. Oh, he was good old scout.

Pete: When did you first come to Oceanside, Mr. Landes?

John: I passed through Oceanside in 1915 when there was a great World Exposition farther north. What is our big city up there? San Francisco, they had the World's Fair there and we had just married. And this was our trip up there after our marriage. At the same time, since we were here, we also wanted to see San Diego and we learned of the people that are still out there, up on the hill, who are they now? Just before you get down the hill. They're still up there.

Randy: Rosicrucians?

John: Rosicrucian. Yes! We got a cottage there, we passed through going down and then on the

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way coming back, we hired a cottage there for a little while. It's the one right on the hill there. We were there 3 or 4 weeks, I think. I had given up the position that I had.

Pete: Where were you born, Mr. Landes?

John: I was born in ? Bavaria.

Pete: What was your date of birth?

John: The 30th of March, 1879.

Randy: The timing is good on this, Pete. You got a birthday story.

Pete: That's right, we do. That'll be 89.

John: Yes, I'll be 89 years old this next week.

Pete: When did you come to this country, Mr. Landes?

John: I came to this country in 1893. I got away from my family. They were on a large estate, somehow it struck me I wanted to go ... now, that's another thing.

I wanted to go to America. Now friends of our family came over here, the parents were almost the same age as my father, they were close friends. So I begged father to let me go with them. Well, first father said, "Why, no, you belong here. You're just 14 years old now, this and that and the other. I can't let you go." But I had a good long talk with him. So he said, "Well, I'll see." He said, "Well, the thing is we have five or six youngsters here" there were some of them my age and two of them and going into the new country we really don't know what we were are getting into and take over more than our own family, why we have load as it is." So, father said, "Well, you can't burden those people and anyway, you're too young, you belong here."

My parents with other relatives held a large estate there. I have a picture of it if I could find out where it is. We had so many families there that we kept a kindergarten for the children of our workers up to the time they had to go to school. We lived in an old castle. It was a castle there with the old moat, but the moat was filled up it had a green yard, you see, and the village was on the other side, beside that, around that, used to be all water, you know. The village was on the other side of the estate, about one third of the ground belonged to the owners of the village.

Pete: Do you know when the castle was built?

John: I think it was the 14 century.

Pete: Were your parents royalty?

John: Oh, no my parents, they had taken that place over for operation.

Pete: Did you come with the family friends?

John: Well, just a minute now! There were two other buildings there, the laborers, the whole families lived there and we had the kindergarten, the children right there. But the teacher lived with

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the other family. My father's sister and her husband was our family jointly operated that. They lived in the buildings in the village and we lived in the old castle. So, the children's school was over on our side in one of the other large buildings. It was not only the castle on the other side of the bridge.

Now, sister Catherine was the teacher for those children. But she lived with the other families. I happened to come over the bridge, to the building where she had her children and she came around the other way from the other building. As I came near her, she helped me and said, "John, you wanted to go so hard to America. Now, your aunt's son has find a ride there. His mother has found a ride for him and she will be going in about three weeks." But once my father said no to the thing, he didn't want it brought up again. He was strict, but as fine a father as one could have. So I thought it over and then I talked with mother, I talked to her and finally made her promise that she would not speak against it. "I'll not speak for it," she said, "but I'll be silent. I'll not speak against it." The next day ... every evening we marched through up to the bedroom, the goodnight kiss, I had a letter written addressed to father and I put it in mother's hand just as we kissed them good night. So next day we came to the breakfast table and father looked very serious, didn't say a thing, as we rose, "I want to see you in your room." All right, I marched on and followed him and he turned to me "I read that letter. What have you on your mind? Are we treating you right? Are you falling short? Why must you go?" I just had to go. I just had to go. He gave me quite a little lecture again. "Now try to get off your mind and I'll see you again tomorrow morning. Now, I hope you have that off your mind." I said, "No. No, I cannot get it off my mind." We had a few words and he walked up and down in front of me and he said, "Well, if it has to be, then in God's name." Oh, I could have jumped to the ceiling, but I looked very serious, he past that way and I went the other way and got out of the way there was a back door and "OOOOOOOOOOOOOO" I roared along there!

I came over with family friends, and that lady with whom I came over died a few months ago. She was up in Elkhart, Indiana. And there I stayed for seven years.

Pete: What did you do for a living? Did you farm?

John: No, I was no farmer. There was a publishing company that published papers and books for the German speaking people that lived up north which started up in the Dakotas and from down there to Nebraska and the publishing company printed the papers for them. But there were hard times in the later part of the century. They had sent a man there and they had men there through him they got the orders and to collect the money. They hadn't been be able to pay us anything because they had those hard time for a good while. Most of them were from Russia. Russia had a great many Germans and for a long time they were free, they didn't have to join the army or anything like that. But after that was made necessary they came over to this country. And up there in the north, why they had the cheapest kind of buildings, I found that out after I got there. The publishing company had sent one of their men out and he said one day "That's a place where neither I nor anybody would go to." I got with that publishing company and that's when I first found something and then they wanted me to translate from German into English. So the first year I was in the typesetting department. Then they put me in where the men were and worked in the editorials. First of all I made the simple translations but by and by I could translate almost anything into English and later on they let me go down there where the men where they had their business department. There was one elderly man, he was the main man in there. His brother was the businessman. He did the collecting and so. The man brought me down into the business part in his department.

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Pete: How did you get to Oceanside?

John: Well, the first time we went through to the , we stopped here and I fell in love with Oceanside. My wife didn't. And when I spoke of coming out here, well, she just didn't want to. We had relatives farther north who had been in this country for a generation or two. She and our daughter, who was about five years old, and they liked it. They were here for about six weeks, up and down the country, visited friends and after that my wife was willing to come to the United States. I was in the back when I got charge of the ? and then I did the various things , they come through the bank and the bank charges you a few cents, so much and they are cleared.

I was in Indiana the first seven years and then I went to Atlanta. Someone from there came down there and I went with them to Atlanta. Since I had to make a start, I made friends there and with the State building, printing department. So they gave me a job there and of course I was there until something better came along.

Pete: What is your wife's name?

John: Zuleika.

Pete: Is she from Germany, too?

John: Oh, no. Her foredads were four hundred years on this continent. They were french people, before it was the United States.

Randy: Where did you meet her, in Indiana?

John: Oh, no. Down in the old South.

Pete: What year were you married?

John: We were married in 1915.

Pete: You were out here on your wedding trip?

John: Yes, that is right.

Pete: How many children did you have?

John: We had only one child. You see, my wife was near 40 years old when we had one child. It was very difficult for her to give birth.

Pete: How old is your wife now?

John: 92. There is a thing, we had been up to there
Elizabeth Shere

Pete:How did you get to be city clerk?

John: They appointed me. Now there's another thing. We had this house built almost as soon as

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we got here. As soon as this home was built, we moved there. This is the house we are in right now. This is where Elizabeth grew up. I did not feel well for a while and friends help me to get one of the places Friends of mine were there working in the garden where the plantings are and one of them said, "Come down and we'll help you." I came they had a large place there

Pete: How much was your salary?

John: When I first became the city clerk. It was very low. I don't even remember now what it was.

I went through eight elections. There was a man here, Masonic Order, the district but I did not always maintain it when I came up here. It was before Christmas, I was at the city and as I came out he said, "Hey John you are going to have somebody to beat,"