

TAPE #27ERNEST LUCOT

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(I believe your Grandmother was raised in Volcano.)

Yes. She lived all her life there until the last four or five years. She was quite ill, so she came down to Jackson and lived with one of my Aunts. One of the Briscoes who used to own the drug store. She married into the Lucot family, and we know nothing about the Lucot family. Only that we all stem from two brothers who came to the US from France and settled in Kentucky. Their descendents branched out all over the country, and one of them came to California; that would be my great-grandfather, Eugene Lucot. Apparently, he died very early in life. Great-grandmother raised the children, and most of them seem to have stayed right around this area. One of them you have probably heard of; Uncle George, he was the sheriff here. About 45 years, I believe. He was a sheriff, the probation officer and the tax collector. He was tough, but he was also very tender-hearted. If he heard of someone who was having a little trouble, he'd go down to the local store, Casinelli's, and he'd fix up a package of sugar and flour and coffee and send it to the people. Of course, that's why he was re-elected year after year. In the last ten years of his office no one bothered to run against him!

My dad was a guy who went to Alaska during the gold rush; he went broke and had to work in a cannery to get enough money to come home. That was about 1898. He would never eat salmon from then on. He owned a half interest in the Pioneer Saloon down here, and the only way

you could exist after prohibition was by bootlegging. Well, my Uncle became sheriff, and Dad couldn't very well bootleg his whiskey, so he sold out. Some local people bought it and made a pile of money. It was gambling and bootleg liquor. It was kind of a silly deal in those days. No one liked prohibition, and no one approved of it, but it was the law. Well, when they were going to be raided everyone knew about it; they'd get the news. But once in a while some one would get caught. They were caught so often at the Pioneer that the feds padlocked the doors. Apparently, the law stated that the doors had to be locked. Well, they would just build another door next to the first one, use that, and start in again! I think they built four or five sets of doors over the years.

Another uncle, Walter Lucot, had the old grocery store over in Sutter Creek. His great-grandson is Johnny Manisero, who had the insurance company. And one of my aunts is married to a Briscoe, Bertha Briscoe; they had the drug store downtown until he died.

(Is the family home still in Volcano?)

No, it was torn down a long time ago.

(Where was it?)

Grandma's home was about two doors above the community hall. It went a long time ago, and she moved up the street. But both houses are gone now. She would never leave Volcano. She had no running water and a privy out in back. She had to get drinking water from a spring about 150 feet from the house; when we visited as youngsters it was our job to bring in the water. I understand she sold the lot where the original home was for 50 dollars.

(Where were you born?)

In Sutter Hill. There was an old saloon on top of Sutter Hill and next to it the rock and wood building. Well, that was my mother's family who owned it; they were the Bottos. Their ranch went from there to the main highway. I was born in the house right next to the one that is there now; it was a boarding house. It burned down, and so built another.

(You mean the rock and wood building?)

No. That was the original building.

(What was it?)

It was a ~~grainery~~ granary. I'm surprised at this, but they grew a lot of grain up here in the old days.

(Where did you go to school?)

Over here in Jackson. My mother died when I was about two years old, and dad remarried. He moved to Jackson, and I went to school here all the time. That was through high school. I graduated from high school one week, and the next week I was working for the Wells Fargo Bank in San Francisco. It was the old Mercantile Trust then. My brother had gotten a job there as a messenger, and he lined it up.

(What did you think of San Francisco?)

It was in 1923 and was quite an experience.

(What was it like?)

It was horrible. You know, the smells there nearly drove me crazy. It certainly isn't a smelly city, but I could smell the sewers and the garbage. I was out as a messenger, and I had to go around the city a lot.

It was a rough transition.

(What was Jackson like when you were a kid?)

The big entertainment was the theater. We all went to Ratto's. That was a weekly occurrence for the whole family. But they only changed shows once a week, that was too bad for us. They had a person who played the piano.

There were a lot of sports for the youngsters. And hunting and fishing, of course.

(What were the dances like?)

They were really something. In fact, my dad told some stories of when he was a young man. He'd be up at Volcano, and he'd want to go to a dance on Saturday night at Mokulumne Hill. Well, everyone had to work six days a week, and he'd go home after work and take a bath, change into his good clothes, get on his horse and take off. It was traditional that the dances lasted all night. There was an hour break at Midnight when you would have a big ravioli feed, then you would dance till the sun came up.

(How long did the ride take him?)

Four or five hours, I imagine. He just get home in time to change his clothes and go back to work.

(Do you remember your first radio?)

My dad had the saloon then. And there was a great race between he and one of the other saloons as to who would get the first radio in town. Before that we just had crystal sets. Well, my dad got a young fellow up here, Gilman Schneider, to try to put it in, because no one in town knew anything about a radio. But they beat us anyway.

Yes, radio was a big thing up here. My grand-mother lived up in Volcano with my step grand-father, James Cosgrove, and he was a real character. He could tell you stories of the old days, because he didn't allow himself to be hampered by facts.

(Where was he from?)

Ireland. He was a miner, and he told us about a very tough man in Volcano that everyone was afraid of...except for my grandfather. Apparantly he was sick, what they called dropsy in the old days, and no one would go near him execept my grandfather. Well, he nursed him back to health, but finally he died anyway. So this fella left his mining claim to my grandfather. From then on my grandfather supported himself from that claim. We would go up there when we were youngsters; this was about 1915. Grandma was a practical nurse, and she would do that, but their only other income was from the claim. So, whenever they needed any money, Cosgrove would go up to the claim and work for a day or so, and come back with 50 dollars or so and that would keep them for awhile. But the claim was very dangerous. These big rocks were all over the place, and he would dig under them---well, the old timers had never dug there before and so he could get money any time he wanted. And, of course, he left word around that he had traps set there. I don't think that anybody ever bothered the claim. And that's the ~~walk~~ way he supported himself all those years. Just before he died, he sold the claim to the cement company. He got 10,000 dollars for it, and the cement company sluiced it all out, and they got about 10,000 out of it right away.

(How did the cement company get a foot-hold in Volcano?)

They came in years and years ago. They wanted the land, and so every time there was a piece of property available they bought it. There was no demand up there, so they got it cheap. They were also willing to bide their time and wait. They bought everything up, but this was over a period of 30 or 40 years.

(Tell us about Uncle George Lucot, the Sheriff.)

Well, Uncle George wasn't much of a talker. He would never brag about anything that he had done. His ~~deputies~~ deputies would give us most of the information. The first week he was in office they got word that some man had gone berserk and was shooting a pistol. Well, my uncle and his deputy went out in a buggy, and they got out close to where he was. Then this guy jumped out of some bushes by the side of the road, ~~grabs~~ grabbed the horse's bridle, and started ~~shooting~~ shooting at them. He had one of those big 44 revolvers, and he was shooting wildly. He was only 10 or 12 feet away, and they both pulled their guns and started firing. Well, the guy finally collapsed, but neither of them were hurt. When they hauled him in, they found six bullet holes in him. That was a very sad story, because Aunt Mary was a very religious person, and it hurt Uncle George too because you don't want to kill anyone.

I think he was respected, and people liked him.

(How did the chain of command go between the sheriff and the police?)

He had nothing to do with the police, but they cooperated with each other. They only had two people for the whole county, my uncle and one deputy. But they had constables in the areas that they worked with.

There were so few people in law enforcement, that every one had to work together. I'm sure if they needed help in town that Uncle George and his deputy would be right down there.

(How did they communicate with each other?)

By telephone, I imagine.

(He had long working hours?)

Time didn't mean anything then; it was a seven day a week job. I know he deputized my dad several times. The people were very public minded in those days. I can recall that one time they had a miner's strike, this was in the 30's. The miners were striking, but there was really very little problem. Well, this was during the longshoreman's strike in San Francisco, and some of the longshoremen didn't have anything to do, so they decided to come up here and unionize the miners and take over the town. There were a dozen or so of them, and they were going to help these miners. Two of them walked into my uncle's office one day, and they told him that they were taking over the town. They said that they had several hundred longshoremen who would come up if they needed them. Well, Uncle George politely listened to them, and they told him to just keep out of the way and you won't get hurt. Then Uncle George got up, walked over, locked the door, and just beat the Hell out of both of them! I think he told them that they had 24 hours to get out of town. That's how you handled things in those days. Anyway, these people went up to the mine, and the mine whistle tooted and that meant trouble. The townspeople were all at the Sunday ball game, and they all grabbed bats and guns and went up the hill. Well, these people were there and they were trying to organize the strike. My uncle warned them that they had overstayed their welcome. Well, my uncle was actually more afraid

of the townspeople than of the longshoremen. He said he could handle outsiders, but that he didn't know if he could handle the town folk; after all, he couldn't shoot them. Anyway, they started out in a truck and uncle was standing in the rear of the open truck with a tear gas gun. They stopped the truck and uncle let go at about fifty feet, and hit this one longshoreman right in the stomach with the tear gas shell. The guy just disappeared in a cloud of smoke. Then the truck took off, and that was the end of the strike!

(Was George Lucot sheiff at the time of the Argonaut disaster?)

Yes. He was on the rescue committee. They had quite a few mining men and some state men. I remember they had a lot of trouble with reporters. There were fifty or sixty of them here from all over the United States. Naturally, they wanted stories, and when they couldn't get them they'd fake them. And some of them even tried to get down in the mine. Uncle George said he wasn't worried about anything but the reporters. They were the ones who were causing all the trouble.

(Who owned the Argonaut at that time. Was it General Motors?)

General Motors was owner at one time; I'm not sure if that was the time or not.

(Was there any trouble from the families of the miners?)

No. You accepted that if you were in the mining business. But none of the families gave up hope; everyone thought they would get out someday. I know the townspeople gave a lot to the families, and a lot of San Francisco companies donated quite a bit. The Red Cross was also a big help. Upstairs in the museum is a file of letters that the Red Cross kept from people who wanted to help; you should read them! My dad had one of the few cars in town in those days, so he took it and went to work for the red cross. My mother worked out in the commissary they had out there. And I worked as a messenger.



They closed the high school, you see.

The rescue attempt was really the capper; it brought the ~~national~~ national headlines. Several movie stars sent up contributions. Will Rogers was one of them.

(Are there any photos of the rescue teams?)

Yes. I've seen the pictures. I'll try to get them for you.

And they had crack drilling crews from all over come in. They high-balled the trains through Galt to here.

(The teams set all sorts of drilling records. ~~XX~~ Is that true?)

Yes. They would work in relays. And the men would be exhausted when they got through. And while they were digging the locals had to go up and start digging graves. We had 27 graves up there in the Catholic Cemetery. I helped dig them, and the ground was hard as a rock.

(Were the graves marked at the time?)

They were marked at the time with wooden crosses, but a fire came along at a later time and burned them all. And nobody bothered to fix them. So many of the men were loners; many of them were single men who were out here from Italy. They had no relatives, and their only friends were the miners they worked with. After a year or so nobody paid any attention to most of the graves. This fellow in Sacramento spent years trying to identify his fathers grave, but it was just hopeless.

(How did you track down the relatives of the miners for the gravestone project you were involved in?)

Mainly by publicity. They came to us. Everyone thought it was a marvelous idea. No one thought we could raise 5000 dollars; they thought we were ~~xxxxxx~~ crazy. Well, we fooled them; we got 9000.

The Italian Society bailed us out; that's why their name is on the plaque. They were founded by Italian miners, so it was a natural that they would help.

(Do you know anybody around who can fill me in on the history of the Catholic Church in Amador?)

Eunice Largomarsino, she gave a talk the other day, she could help you a lot. She was my 4th grade school teacher. She lives right here on Pitt Street.

(Were there ill feelings toward the foreigners?)

Same as you get every place else. The Italians were looked down on, the Cornish were and so were the Chinese. But anyone new was. And they were poor people; they came here because they weren't satisfied with what they had in their homeland.

(What happened to the Chinese?)

Oh boy! Bull White, the man in Volcano who gave the claim to my grandfather, was a guy who hated the Chinese. They worked around Volcano, and they were treated terribly. Kids would throw rocks at them and cut their ~~pigtails~~ pigtails; things like that. Well, Bull came on his claim early one morning, and he found six Chinese hi-jacking. He pulled a gun on them, and he tied them together by their pigtails. Then he shot them to death.

That was a little too much, even for those days. The town decided they had to have a trial. Then Bull got on the witness stand, and the judge asked him, "Bull, did you intend to kill those Chinamen?"

And Bull said, "No, your honor, I just pulled the trigger without thinking much." They dismissed the case.