

Oral History Interview
with
Thomas C. Blum and W.W. “Bill” Knitz

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Interviewer: Robert David Breton
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Thomas C. Blum and W. W. "Bill" Knitz

January 28, 2012

Robert David Breton,
Interviewer

BRETON: Today is January 28, 2012. My name is Robert David Breton, and I'm going to be interviewing Tom Blum and Bill Knitz at the studios of Mission Viejo Television in the Mission Viejo Library as part of the Oral History Project.

Tom, where were you born and raised?

BLUM: I was born in Madison, Wisconsin, raised there, went to high school there. Then I went to the University of Wisconsin, where I majored in urban planning and research. I spent a year in Korea, two years in the [United States] Army, came back and finished my degree, and then I went into my degree field.

BRETON: Where did you work first?

BLUM: My first job was in Stockton, California, and I have no idea why I was in Stockton, California. It was kind of fascinating to me in the sense that it was supposedly the oldest city in the United States, which absolutely it was, but it was a great steppingstone for me out of school and into the field where I could tell somebody that I actually worked in city planning.

My partner in school, [James G.] Jim Toepfer, was the Planning Director in Santa Ana, and he called and wrote, otherwise communicated with me up in Stockton to come down and join him. This was in 1958, and after about six months there was a legitimate opening that he had, and so my friend [Paul] Van Stevens and I went down to work with Jim in the City of Santa Ana. Van was working for San Joaquin County at the time, so we go back a long way.

BRETON: Bill, where were you born and raised?

KNITZ: I was born in New Jersey, but when I was young, just a couple of years old, my mom and dad moved back to Toledo, Ohio, which is where my dad was from originally, and basically raised there. Went through high school in Toledo. After graduating, I got a commission. I was in the N[R]OTC [Navy Reserve Officers Training Command], went to school at Marquette University, got a civil engineering degree from Marquette. As part of the NOTC, I took a commission in the United States Marine Corps and went through flight school at Pensacola, Florida, and Corpus Christi, Texas. After getting my wings, then we came out to California in 1960, and I was stationed at El Toro Marine Corps Air Station. I went back east for a couple years, worked with my father-in-law. That didn't work out too well.

Some friends that I'd stayed in touch with from school had an engineering business going out here, and so I came back to California and went in the engineering business with a small firm up in Fullerton. From there the company grew, and we ended up doing a lot of work for Ross [W.] Cortese, Rossmoor Leisure World projects. I was in charge of doing the one down near El Toro, and that's where I met the Mission Viejo Company people and got involved and ended up buying one of Deane's homes in the first two hundred houses built in Mission Viejo.

BRETON: When you did that, where did you go to church?

KNITZ: Mount of Olives Lutheran Church, which was the first little church there built in Mission Viejo. That's where I met Jim Toepfer and some of the other people from around here, so it was a great beginning.

BRETON: So we have both of you now linked, in that you both knew Jim Toepfer, and he was a friend of yours and a chum at college.

BLUM: Yes, he was. Matter of fact, his sister, younger sister, and I were in the same class in high school in Madison, Wisconsin. I had forgotten that even within myself, but she was a very nice girl, notwithstanding her brother. [laughter] We had a good relationship. You're right.

KNITZ: Jim was a very interesting guy to work with and socialize with and everything, and, like I mentioned, we were on the church council at Mount of Olives Lutheran Church and we started to do some things together. That's when Mission was just getting going. I don't know whether you heard about painting the hydrants yellow and all that kind of stuff. Those were all things that Toepfer came up with. So right from the very beginning, you felt like you were really part of a community, and everybody was. It was different than any place I had ever lived.

BRETON: And how did you come to meet Tom Blum?

KNITZ: Basically when he became involved with the company, we got to know each other, and later on, that was when I left Toups Engineering was because Tom was looking for somebody to manage the water district, Santa Margarita Water District.

BRETON: Tom, tell us what brought you from Santa Ana down to Mission Viejo, or who.

BLUM: Jim Toepfer. My family and I had gone back to the Midwest, where roots were roots and very strong. My wife and I did move back there, and I had a planning director's job in Minnesota in a city called St. Louis Park. It was just adjacent to the west side of Minneapolis, a very nice place. We enjoyed the lifestyle there very much, except, of course, for the cold.

I got the call again from my pal Mr. Toepfer, and he was telling me now he is with this Mission Viejo Company, and they're building a new town, which is hard to conceive of for me—back there building a new town is not possible—that kind of reaction. And then he kept calling. He needs somebody in this particular part of his company and he's having a really good time. I could tell that he really enjoyed what he was doing.

We had some problems back where I was working for this consulting firm. Midwest Planning and Research was the name of the firm I went to when I left St. Louis Park. I was a partner there, and we did, just as it said, planning and research for small communities in Minnesota and Wisconsin, primarily.

One night I was driving home from a small town south of Sheboygan, Wisconsin, it was called Chilton, and it was snowing. I had to get back that night, and it was just awful, so I snuck up behind a semi so it would plow the road for me. I said, "This is it," right then.

So we did, we moved, and Jim Toepfer and I reunited ourselves. The go-around with my family and me and Mr. Toepfer really happened. It was more than coincidental, but yet coincidental. It was really good. We had a great relationship. We enjoyed each other very much.

BRETON: Did he hire you directly, or did you have to come down here and be interviewed by [Philip J.] Phil Reilly and others?

BLUM: Mainly it was letters and telephone, and then I got a letter from him saying, "You've been hired and here's your salary. I don't think we can pay your moving costs, but we'll try to argue that one out." Phil Reilly approved the hiring.

So we did do that. I packed my four kids in the station wagon and came out in August of 1971, and we got to know the gang there in the office. He showed me my office and he said, "Okay, here you are. Just sit down, and I'll talk to you later," but later never came, so there I was kind of hanging in there by myself, trying to learn by myself.

It was really educational. [Martin G.] Marty Russo was on my staff. I didn't know that before, but there he was. Marty was a great guy. He was just so involved, just an involved guy. The only thing he couldn't get involved in was his morning alarm clock, because he was super

late every day. But he really helped me learn the community and learn the people. He told me all about everyone. It was just terrific. It was something I didn't bargain for at all.

Then we had a designer. His name was Bert [A.] Heidelbach. He, in my estimation, was probably the best hillside design man in the country. I talked to our engineering consultant later on, Jack [G.] Raub, who really agreed with that. He thought Bert was just terrific. He was a quiet little man who just peeled out subdivisions like he loved what he was doing, and he did. So I was very pleased to be a part of that. I learned an awful lot from that.

Barbara Angeloff [phonetic] was my secretary and she just treated me like a baby. She said, "Here's what you've got to do now." It was just a really good introductory experience for me, coming way across country. My youngest son was sick, but we made it. I tell you, Jim—I keep saying Jim, but it's true, he really helped me a lot in coming back to California.

BRETON: What was the company atmosphere where you worked? Was it full of energy? Was it exciting? Was it fun? Was it pressure-packed?

BLUM: It was all of those, Bob. I couldn't kind of get over what we saw when we drove into town. I couldn't believe what I saw, the signs and the olive trees in the middle of the median in La Paz Road and the reverse service stations. I never even knew anything like that existed. All the things that I learned had to come from somebody, and that's what I learned going to these staff meetings that I attended as kind of a whispering ghost kind of guy attending there so I could learn. And I did learn all those facets of building a new town, which is not just putting up two-by-fours. It was a whole lot before that, which, again, was a part of an education program for me that I never ever dreamed I could get anywhere, and you can't. You just have to experience it and dive right in.

BRETON: Did Jim Toepfer hand you a copy of the planned community text and ask you to read it as the bible of the master planned community?

BLUM: No, he just expected me to do that. He never handed me anything, and that's Jim.

KNITZ: It's typical Jim.

BLUM: But I think even the text that you speak of is something that was never heard of back in the Midwest, or even the East Coast, where no new towns were being built. How do you build a new town? I mean, here, this was something so unique and so far-out that you just felt automatic privilege being a part of it. It was just overwhelming, so I felt overwhelmed. Every day I got up and went to work, it was just amazing.

BRETON: So was it a magical experience for you that here you're part of a master planned community that is going to become the most successful new town development in the country? Was it something that you didn't grasp at first, that you were amazed to be part of?

BLUM: Those are really good continuing questions that you ask. I think you can't realize it until you get into it and be a part of it. I don't think you can be a sidebar, talk to the judge and say, "Here's what we're going—." You have to be a part of it. Whether it's grading, whether it's water or sewer, you just have to be there. And you know you've come somewhere when companies like Philip Morris [USA, Inc.] saw some attraction in us as a new town.

Our marketing guys came up with slogans about the new town. They blew me over. They're part of a different culture, and I learned that. I learned just offside from it I could never be one of them because I just wasn't. I didn't learn that.

BRETON: Didn't you feel like you were joining a family?

BLUM: Oh, yes, for sure. We had great meetings. Everybody was a friend and everybody was kind of thrilled at new ideas, like I was.

BRETON: They encouraged creativity, innovation?

BLUM: Oh, yes, totally.

BRETON: Thinking outside the box.

BLUM: Yes, there was a total encouraging part there.

BRETON: What type of teamwork was involved? Were there egos? Did the company encourage everyone to speak up and to share their ideas?

BLUM: I think sharing was kind of automatic. When you walked in, you felt that you wanted to share, not that you were waiting to be honest or you didn't want to step on somebody's toes by saying something you're not sure of. So I think that's the magic part of it, of where all of the staff people, no matter what their background was, got together and shared. It was just real simple, but you felt real good when you walked out of that room when the meeting was over. It was something that I had never experienced before, ever. So here I am.

BRETON: On the other hand, they expected you to work hard and to deliver the goods, to come back tomorrow with a good report.

BLUM: Yes, it wasn't like a concentration camp, where you must do this. You knew what you were expected to do, but it was never said. You were there and you did it and then you were so proud when it was done.

KNITZ: Bob, I might add, at the time that I met some of these guys, I was project engineer on Rossmoor Leisure World at El Toro, just up the road a few miles. When Toepfer asked me, through Toups Engineering, to do some work on a couple of the clubhouses for them, to do the engineering on the clubhouse side, some of those things, and having known Jim Toepfer and got to know some of the other Mission Viejo guys, what Tom says is right. It was new.

I had done a lot of work for big builders around in Southern California, and it was more like a rubber stamp. It was like, “This is the way we do business and this is the way we build houses, and we’re not really open to a bunch of new ideas,” whereas when I started doing some work for the company, Mission Viejo Company, mainly on some of their clubhouse sites, some of the engineering and planning and that kind of stuff, you were working with some of the people that Tom is talking about. You were getting some new ideas, and it was not like they were cramming them down your throat. It was like they wanted some of our ideas, too, as an outside consultant, and I think most of the consultants that the company had working for them would agree with me that that was one of the fun things about working down here on some of the stuff.

BRETON: So it was pretty dynamic.

KNITZ: From sanitation, water, streets, planning, all the way to landscaping we got involved in, which is very unusual for that back in those days. Still is today.

BRETON: It seems to me that the company was showing a lot of foresight or insight, as it reached out and hired former governmental planners to come on board as part of their staff. They were hiring, in Jim Toepfer and in you someone who had been on the other side, who had dealt with applications for the City of Stockton or the City of Santa Ana. Therefore, when you went to staff planners for the [Orange] County, you were knowledgeable in what they were looking for. Do you agree that the company was smart in hiring former people from the governmental side of planning?

BLUM: Oh, yes. I think if you didn’t see that side with your hiring practice, you were missing a big boat, because you had to anticipate what the people behind the counter up in Santa Ana, working for the county, you just simply had to anticipate what they were looking for, and you knew. The biggest part was just having them like what you did, and they knew what you knew,

and you both did. Like you said, Bob, you were behind the counter yourself. You were working for that city or that county or whatever it was, but it was a governmental entity. Mainly it's where most people get their experience. The private planning companies are not that many in the whole country, but now the planning and government agencies is just great experience for anybody. That's what you're saying, and it does work very well.

BRETON: Bill, when you were going to school, did you ever imagine you would be here participating in a project that involves building a community from the ground up?

KNITZ: You don't really think about something that ends up being that large. When I first came out and went to work with Toups Engineering back in Santa Ana in 1960, we were doing small subdivision stuff, two or three hundred lots at a time plunked down in Santa Ana or Fullerton. It was good housing and nice, but it wasn't a master plan. Two hundred acres was a big project, and we would do the planning, the engineering, design the streets, sanitation, water, all that kind of stuff, and sort of—I don't want to use the words “stamp it out,” but you were limited by space as to what you could do.

When you have something like what we had at Mission Viejo, you can really let your thoughts and thinking and ideas really flow, and when you get some people like they had around them, you can get things done in a different way.

Tom had mentioned, I think, the respect that the county planners and the county engineers that did the plan checking and reviewed all of our tentative maps and everything else that we used to process through the county. I don't want to say it was a breeze, but I think they respected what we were doing down here. So it was real good coordination and things worked.

BRETON: I would venture to say that it was more than respect, that it was total confidence, because [David A.] Dave Celestin said that there came a point later on where county planners

would allow the Mission Viejo Company to write their own staff report, to write the county staff report. They were so confident in the work that you produced, that they let the company write their staff report, and they would sign off on it because they knew that you had looked into all the considerations that needed to go into a project, the pros and the cons, and you had covered all the bases, whether they be traffic or environmental or any other aspect, and that their concerns had been met.

KNITZ: I remember going to [Orange County] Planning Commission meetings where we were processing through some maps or a new interchange or something like that, and the County Planning Commission recognized who we were and who we were representing. It was on the agenda. A lot of times they would move us up in the agenda because there wasn't any questions and there wasn't a great big debate. The chairman would look, and it was approved because the company and all of their consultants had done a lot of work.

BRETON: On the other hand, when Tom went, they probably moved it to the very last item on the agenda. [laughter]

BLUM: They were waiting for me to invite them to another party down here at Mission Viejo. [laughter] We were treated well—you're right, Bob—very well at the staff level.

BRETON: How do you build a community from scratch? How do you look at raw land, where there are just some trees and some split-rail fences and lots of head of cattle, and start building a community? What's the first commodity that you need in order to sustain life here?

BLUM: I thought about that, matter of fact, on the way over here. I think one of the things you have to have for sure is money. You have to have this exchange function that you can go ahead with on the pace of looking into it, even dreaming about a new town. The big money holders and the big land holders around here, there were few, the Irvine Company, the O'Neill people.

But can you imagine 160,000 acres that the O'Neills had, along with the Marine base, Camp Pendleton, or the Irvine Company and all that land that they had? Coming from the Midwest, I just couldn't even imagine those kind of numbers of land masses. So the land was around here for sure, and that's where Phil Reilly and [Donald L.] Don Bren and Jim Toepfer started. I really think so.

BRETON: Did you meet them?

BLUM: I have met them.

BRETON: Did you meet them when you started working with the company?

BLUM: I did. I did.

BRETON: And what impression did you have of their respect for the land and their concern that the master plan proceed in a fashion that would honor, as a stewardship, their respect for the land and for being environmentally sensitive to the needs of this land?

BLUM: That's a wonderful question, because I really think that, like your neighbor next door to where you live, you try to get along real good with your neighbor. Phil Reilly and Jim Toepfer, with the Mission Viejo Company going, this neighborliness with the O'Neills, they knew how the O'Neills felt about ranching. They knew how they felt about land itself, and there was such ultimate respect on both sides about cattle ranching, about citrus tree growing, or whatever you want. But they're talking about, again, such huge masses of land, that if you didn't respect each other, it's going to be a war and it never was there. It was always major league respect for each other and how the O'Neills—[Marguerite M.] Ama Daisy [O'Neill], the grandma, she was the one that led the fight almost, that says, "We're going to take care of our land. It has taken care of us."

BRETON: When you first arrived at the company, did you get the impression that the company and Jim Toepfer with his general plan wanted to preserve the rancho legacy, the early California features in creating Mission Viejo, that they wanted it to be reminiscent of the ranchland?

BLUM: Yes, very much so. If you look at the streetlights and the design and some of the entries to the communities, called Barcelona walls, there were Spanish colors even. The Spanish design of the houses themselves is absolute proof of the respect that they had for the land and for the people that owned it. They'd party together. They'd get together. By "they," I'm talking about Phil Reilly, Jim Toepfer, Bren, and the O'Neills. They'd hop across the fence. There was no fence. It was just terrific, the respect that they both had. So, yes, and I think it was so valuable in the long-term planning development process, this mutual respect society that was going, that it couldn't fail.

BRETON: Do you think that led to setting aside so much of the land here in Mission Viejo for open space?

BLUM: Yes, absolutely.

BRETON: And the preservation of the ridgelines, the arroyos?

BLUM: No question about it. There was never a question about that, even, which some land guys and builders, they don't like to waste a square foot. So going this route was just even more proof of the relationship that they had toward each other, talking about just us guys against them. It's both ways. They had a lot of good feelings. They got together a lot. There was a society of mutual admiration. It's so important in building this new town.

BRETON: This gentleman that you mentioned as being an expert slope construction designer, what did he do in his approach to grading and to constructing homes? What did he do in order to

preserve the natural contours or to ensure, through the use of cul-de-sacs or curvilinear streets, that the hills were maintained?

BLUM: Bert, first of all, his major goal was to move as little land as possible. He always told me that, one, it saves money; and, two, it gives you good land mass curvature in whatever he was designing. And it's really tough to build a subdivision or design a tract in hillside.

BRETON: You use cut and fill, but it's very expensive.

BLUM: Very, extremely. So that's where he really came into form with this Mission Viejo Company. He's one of the few people that anyone knew that could design like he did. I researched it to the point where I asked our engineer, Jack Raub of Raub, Bein, & Frost, what he thought of Bert's design. I didn't know him. He didn't know me. He thought it was just terrific.

BRETON: And what about Sully-Miller [Contracting Company]? Did he do some of the grading?

BLUM: Yes.

BRETON: Bill, what commodity do you have to have before you can build a town? What do you have to have before you start building the homes or infrastructure?

KNITZ: You have to have a known solution to the sanitation, water availability. Streets and highways sort of fall in, but not as easy as a lot of people think. Sometimes you get stuck widening existing roads, building arterial highways, new interchanges. One of the major things that I got involved in for Mission Viejo was designing a couple of the interchanges, mainly because I had done the interchange at El Toro Road for Cortese when I was project engineer up there, and [James G.] Jim Gilleran said, "Hey, Knitz, you did that one. I want you to come down and—." So those are things that you have to be able to get done in a timely manner without a

bunch of hang-ups, because they can hang you up for a long period of time, and time is money in the building business.

BLUM: Gilleran approached him because there was commercial inside the interchange on the cloverleaf. You've seen that? He wanted that and he was a part of that.

BRETON: I was going to ask you about that. On the northbound off ramp to Oso Parkway? That off-ramp is extremely nonconventional in the sense that it goes far off away from the freeway and leaves land inside for private development.

KNITZ: That was the interchange that he asked me to do after I'd shown him the one at El Toro Road that I had done for Cortese on the Leisure World project, two gas stations, four restaurants, a little bank building, and a couple of things like that that we put inside the interchange.

BRETON: Phil Reilly asked you to do this, right? Or was it Jim Gilleran?

KNITZ: Gilleran. Gilleran was involved in more the commercial end of it at that time, but the one up at El Toro, we put a lot of stuff in there that we could, and it doesn't flow like some. But anyway, Gilleran said, "Let's go down and look at the one at Oso Parkway." So we ended up, I think, with at least two motels, two or three gas stations, a couple little convenience stores. It is a big loop off there, but it flows and it works.

BRETON: It's safer, isn't it?

KNITZ: I think they are. I think some of the state's designs—and I've been involved in a lot of interchanges around Southern California—some of them get a lot of high-speed traffic right through the middle of the interchanges, but on the other hand, when you have a lot of congestion of things inside an interchange, you have to be careful, too, because it does slow things down a little bit. But they work, and I think it's good land use.

BRETON: Getting back to the first commodity that you mentioned, which is water, school children, if you were to ask them to create a new town, they would think of putting buildings. They might think of putting roads, but it doesn't occur to them that you can't even begin this process without assuring yourself of a water source.

KNITZ: Both getting it and getting rid of it at the other end after it's been used.

BRETON: So what options were available here? What aquifers were available when the Mission Viejo Company first started building, and what did they have to do in order to assure that there would be enough water to service a town of ninety thousand?

KNITZ: Luckily, we were in Metropolitan Water District of Southern California, which was one of the most foresighted water agencies in the country about getting water. When Mission Viejo Company and some of the big builders here in south county went to Metropolitan, Metropolitan started acting and building some pipelines and getting some things down here for us. But we still had to build. Mission Viejo Company put a lot of money into getting pipelines built. In fact, some of the south county feeders that we ended up hooking on to Metropolitan's lines, building lines through Mission Viejo on down to the coast, if it wasn't for Mission Viejo Company, the City of San Clemente would be hung out on not having enough water and so would some of the coastal towns down there, because Mission Viejo built some of the big pipelines, and we were the ones that stood up there and said, "We only need a 50-inch pipeline. What do you need?"

And Moulton Niguel Water District said, "I need so many CFS, cubic feet per second, capacity." And we just went around and shopped the pipeline, and pretty soon we have a 66-inch pipeline, and it was big enough to serve all the way down to San Clemente. But it wasn't easy. Lot of politics involved.

BRETON: When the first homes were being built, the first Deane Homes and Monterey Master Homes were being built, did the Moulton Niguel Water District exist?

KNITZ: Yes. Yes, that district had been formed a few years earlier and they were doing a project for a dairy farmer over on the other side of what is now the freeway, and not too far—it would have been southerly of Rossmoor Leisure World. It was one of the first subdivisions down in that part.

BRETON: So did the Mission Viejo Company approach the Moulton Niguel Water District about supplying its water?

KNITZ: In the first phases, yes, because they had some pipelines in and they had a capacity.

BRETON: And then what happened? What happened that led to the creation of the Santa Margarita Water District?

KNITZ: Probably some politics involved, wanting to be able to have—it's just an easier way to do it. We wanted to be able to go out and, just as I had mentioned a little earlier, be in control of our own destiny, in a sense of we know what we need and we'll build it if we have to.

BRETON: Is that the Mission Viejo Company talking or [Anthony R.] Tony Moiso and the O'Neills?

KNITZ: I can't say how much they communicated about pipeline capacity, but Mission Viejo Company said, "Let's get it done."

BRETON: Who did they approach as far as forming a new district? Did they go to LAFCO [Orange County Local Agency Formation Commission]? Did they go to the state?

KNITZ: You start with the county and you go from there.

BRETON: Do you have to put it up to approval of the voters to form a district?

KNITZ: The land was all owned by one party, and so that was easy.

BLUM: I think it's really important here to remember the boundary, that Marguerite Parkway and everything west was part of the Moulton Niguel Water District. Marguerite Parkway and everything east is part of Santa Margarita. Because most of the land was in the magical new plan or the new town plan on the west side of Marguerite Parkway, to put those units together and their needs for water and sewer was a lot easier. And then came along, later, like Bill was saying, the need for water in the Santa Margarita area. So, like Bill was saying, I think it made it easier. The way that the politicians did the boundary drawing made it a lot easier to decide.

BRETON: They couldn't ask Moulton Niguel to adjust their boundaries over to the freeway and just have Santa Margarita be all of everything east of the freeway?

KNITZ: We never really directly talked about that, but I do know that when I first got involved with Santa Margarita Water District, we had to give up some commercial property, the Ranch [Rancho Mission Viejo] did, I mean company, Santa Margarita, to Niguel Water District that would have been in the Santa Margarita Water District, for them to give us some water capacity just on a borrowed basis. So there was politics, and sometimes it got rough.

BRETON: What was your position with the Santa Margarita Water District?

BLUM: Okay, now we're going in a different direction here. There was a time, and I can't remember the exact year, probably in 1973, where Tony Moiso came over and talked to Phil Reilly and Jim Toepfer and said, "We think that it's time for us to get a planner on board for the Ranch."

So Jim and Phil talked it over and offered that we would interview and try to find a planner for the Ranch. So as Jim has done many times with me, he says, "Hello. I'd like you to find some people, interview them, see who would be a real candidate, and let me know what you think."

So I said, “Okay.” We always had this—I guess it was a habit. Every Friday we’d take our brown bags and go down by the harbor and talk, and it was great, and we did that for a long time.

At any rate, I did interview probably nine top-shelf people that I knew in the county. We took our brown bag and I said, “I just can’t find anybody that’s really suitable and has enough of the stuff that I think they should have.”

He said, “What do you think?”

I said, “Well, I think I’m the best candidate.”

So that was the beginning of me hopping the fence and go over with the Ranch. Now I’m employed by Rancho Mission Viejo, which is in the Santa Margarita Water District, and Richard [J.] O’Neill was on the board of the Santa Margarita Water District, and I was nominated to replace him. I was nominated by Tony and [James E.] Jim West to replace Mr. O’Neill on the Water District Board. So this was in 1975. I was on the board and I was elected president of the board. That’s the way that board stayed, and we really accomplished a lot.

The one thing we didn’t have was a general manager. We had a consulting engineer from a different firm. I talked to some people, “It would be best if we had a full-time general manager that works for us.” General manager is really a tough position because it’s political, it’s engineering, it’s everything. So I interviewed a lot of people. As a matter of fact, I hired a guy that I found out later on that was not the one I should have, so I had to un-hire him, and that was no fun at all. I knew an attorney who really knew the water business, and he recommended that I talk with Bill Knitz. So I did that, and luckily for us, he came aboard, and that was really a good stroke for us. It really was, and that’s how Bill got to the—

BRETON: Bill, did you feel up to the task?

KNITZ: Well, I thought it was a great opportunity, because I knew a lot of the people at the company, and Toepfer and I had known each other for a few years, and I knew he was going to be part of it. I'd seen what the company had been doing and I thought it was a great opportunity, and that these people would not be nickel-and-diming it. They were going to go there and get things done, and that's what we needed to do. You have to build some pipelines and make some deals and do some things like that. They were able to understand it and get things done and be tough. It was a great opportunity, so when we talked, I said, "I'm there."

BRETON: And what were your headquarters at that time? Where did you work out of when you were first hired?

BLUM: Estanciero [Drive] and Marguerite. We were upstairs there.

KNITZ: Yes, we were in the top story, and down below was the liquor store. In fact, it's just down the street a little ways.

BRETON: Just above the California Pizza Kitchen. Tell us a little bit about the major, major political coup of convincing the south county cities to the south of us to buy into the construction of the 66-inch pipeline.

KNITZ: Moulton Niguel Water District knew that we had to do something. They were a pretty good-size active water district at that time, bigger than Santa Margarita was, but they needed more water. The City of San Juan Capistrano, even though they were sitting on a groundwater basin, nobody knew exactly what was there and how big it was and was it enough. We knew what we needed at Santa Margarita. Moulton knew. We had to go all the way up in the north county to make a connection to the Met pipelines.

BRETON: Which came from what, the Colorado River?

KNITZ: Some of it's Colorado River water, but some of it's Northern California water, too, depending on where Metropolitan wants to siphon it from and take it to, and what the water needs are down here, and how much water we get from up north, and what kind of rainy year we've had, all kinds of things.

So we had a group: ourselves, Santa Margarita Water District, Moulton Niguel Water District. We had a hard time selling City of San Juan Capistrano, "Hey, you guys need some water? Do you want to buy capacity in this pipeline?" San Clemente didn't really want to get involved. They wanted us to finance it, "And then we'll buy the capacity later on when we need the water," those kinds of political games that people want to play.

Finally, after a lot of browbeating and playing tough, we got the pipeline built, and everybody bought a fair share, put up the money, and we got it built. But it was Santa Margarita Water District that ran the contracts, did the inspection, got the pipeline built, and all that kind of stuff, and administered it, the basic operation of the pipeline.

BRETON: And did you play hardball to the extent that you threatened to build a smaller pipeline?

KNITZ: We said we'd only build it big enough for ourselves and our near future. "That's as big as we're building it. We're not going to finance a pipeline." We're talking millions and millions of dollars.

BRETON: And they knew you weren't bluffing.

KNITZ: Oh, they knew, after a very short period of time, we weren't bluffing, yes. The Ranch was playing tough. There's always those kind of people around that like to say, "Well, hold out. We'll delay the project, and they don't want to be delayed." Well, they weren't going to delay us because we already had the approvals to build a pipeline. Metropolitan Water District loved

the idea of us building a pipeline down here, laid off a lot of things that they may have had to do in the future, but they were already loaded with work and project. Back in those days, water was a real problem.

BRETON: What about the Orange County Water District?

KNITZ: Orange County Water District serves mostly north Orange County. They were some help politically, but not financially or any other way.

BRETON: Did you have to put a bond measure out there to pay for it?

KNITZ: We sold a lot of bonds, the company did.

BRETON: Was that pre-Prop 13?

BLUM: That was our goal. We had to.

BRETON: What was the deadline then? What year was this that we're talking about?

BLUM: I don't remember the year. But it was pre-Prop 13. Do you know what year Prop 13 was adopted?

BRETON: Wasn't that around '79?

BLUM: I thought it was around there. That was our whole goal. Otherwise, it would have cost so much more and would cost all the people getting their little bill in the mail every month a ton more.

KNITZ: We also sold bonds not just for water, but to build sewage treatment plants and pump stations and sewer pipelines because we had some major facilities with the hills. We had a lot of sewage lift stations, and, of course, building the reservoirs and the tanks and everything else like that gets costly.

BRETON: How much money are we talking about?

KNITZ: Millions and millions.

BRETON: Eighty million?

KNITZ: I remember some bond issues that were 50 million and 30 million, so, yes, it was well over 100 million. Yes, we spent a lot of money. It's big business.

BRETON: What was that pipeline called?

KNITZ: The Diemer. Wasn't that the Diemer line?

BLUM: Yes, Diemer line.

KNITZ: The Diemer extension.

BRETON: Where is it located?

KNITZ: You know where the Metropolitan Water District Treatment Plant is up in north county?

BRETON: Yes.

BLUM: Brea.

KNITZ: It runs from there down along and then turns and comes southwesterly down into South County here.

BRETON: But where it comes into South County, is there a point where [the] 66 [inch pipeline] continues down to San Juan, or is it smaller?

KNITZ: It gets smaller as we get down there, but that was what it had to be up in the beginning. And down in here, I think it's 60-inch around here.

BLUM: Yes, it was.

BRETON: And that goes down along the railroad track, along the freeway, or do you know where?

BLUM: No, it would be southeasterly of the pipeline. If you know which way the railroad is down here. It's all down along that side. Remember when we ended the pipeline down there on the Ranch right near the Ranch Road? That was El Toro Road. Not El Toro Road.

BRETON: Ortega?

KNITZ: Ortega. Ortega Highway was our first segment. Stopped just right at Ortega Highway, and then we built the second segment to go on down to connect to San Clemente, San Juan [Capistrano], and a couple of the other—

BRETON: What about the construction of the reservoirs? Were you involved in that?

KNITZ: Yes. The district built all of those, mostly with bond money.

BRETON: And could you describe the efforts at water reclamation in the seventies and eighties?

KNITZ: It was something that we knew we had to get into for political reasons and eventually for an auxiliary source of water, not necessarily for drinking, but for use for irrigation and a lot of the other uses. So we got involved in that. Moulton Niguel Water District was getting into it, and I think our two districts were sort of the leaders in south county.

BRETON: Did Mission Viejo Company encourage the use of reclaimed water to irrigate the golf courses or—

BLUM: Freeway slopes, yes.

KNITZ: We ended up with basically two water systems, one for irrigation water and one for drinking water.

BRETON: Separate pipes.

KNITZ: Separate systems, yes.

BRETON: And for what purpose was the Upper Oso Reservoir created?

KNITZ: That was holding for treated water from our sewage treatment plants. We put in that reservoir for groundwater percolation and for uses in our auxiliary water system.

BRETON: Another question that a schoolchild might have is where do we get water pressure. How do we create water pressure so that it will come out of our tap when we turn the faucet?

KNITZ: The first thing we'd say, we have to pump it up the hill and put it in a reservoir so we always have water if the electricity fails. They seem to understand that, like electricity runs everything. And if you explain to them that when the water comes in, we pump it up there to store it, and then if we have an emergency, it can still flow down and serve all the people, but it has to be pumped up there when we have the power, and it has to be treated and stored and all those things.

BRETON: How many of those water tanks are there in Mission Viejo, do you recall?

KNITZ: Oh, quite a few, a lot. A lot of them, yes. We share a couple of them, I remember, we built with Moulton Niguel Water District, where we have joint capacity together. We did a couple of other—an open reservoir for irrigation purposes. So after we got going, I would say the south county water agencies have been very cooperative working together on our reclaimed water systems, saved a lot of water.

BLUM: If you say the word “gravity” to a second-grader, it's in this big holding reservoir up here, and your house is down here, so there you go, that's how you get pressure. I think that's the easiest one for a young child.

BRETON: What were your duties with the Mission Viejo Company, Tom?

BLUM: When I came there, they had just started a—I'm going to look at this. It says Environment Systems Division that they had just started, and Jim Toepfer was the overall director of it. I was named the Director of Environment Design, which had to do with

subdivision design and going to the county, getting approvals with not only the Planning Commission, but with the [Orange County] Board of Supervisors, as well as your getting onward with the staff. And then also the infrastructure needed to serve the subdivisions, sewer, water, etc. And finally, the other land uses that accompany building a new town, greenbelts, parks, rec systems, the whole thing, recreation centers.

BRETON: So you oversaw the development of all the slopes and the greenbelts and the parks?

BLUM: Yes. That was written in this little booklet here.

BRETON: In your job description.

BLUM: Yes. It seems like an awful lot, and they wanted to make this book thicker, I think, for a while. [laughter] But actually, this way of going about building a new town had to be. I don't think you could have done it other ways, to put these system parts of how you do things in a different system like we're talking about here, and that got it done. That was kind of the key or the secret. You had these things all put together and you did it.

BRETON: It was a collaborative effort.

BLUM: Oh, gosh, was it ever.

BRETON: But it had to be coordinated.

BLUM: Yes, and my role was kind of that coordinator, that guy there that worked with the different parts of developing a piece of land.

BRETON: And you wanted to make sure that the infrastructure was in place in time for that subdivision, so that the homes, when they were built, could be properly serviced.

BLUM: Had to be. That's right, exactly.

BRETON: Your sales department was counting on you to have that ready to go. In order to achieve that, did you work with the county, with the school districts, with the agencies, the

utilities in order to assure that they knew in advance, maybe a year or two years in advance, what your plans were for construction, for residential construction, so that they would be able to order what they needed, the supplies that they needed, and put them into place on time? How important was that?

BLUM: Yes, we did. Your question is overwhelming here. We had these bar graphs of events, and then the dates were up here and the months. So we did, we worked with the county people, with school people, etc., putting the time schedules together, and then attacking that in terms of needs for water, sewer, school facilities, the whole thing. It was very carefully done, and you'd better hit your nose on that little thing over there and then make it work, because otherwise, we don't get cash. There's no cash return on nothing done, so that was really important. Your question was very pertinent.

BRETON: You can't sell a home until it's built.

BLUM: That's right.

BRETON: And you're not going to build the homes until you get the infrastructure laid.

BLUM: That's right.

BRETON: So it all has to come together.

BLUM: That's key, absolutely.

BRETON: And then with the optional rolling options to purchasing new areas, they had to keep that cash coming in.

BLUM: Yes, absolutely.

BRETON: You did.

BLUM: Yes.

BRETON: So how important was it, then, for you to communicate with the county and with the school districts? Was that your job, to make sure the county was well informed of your interior data, your inside information?

BLUM: I kind of oversaw the thing. Marty would be talking with these different districts and he was very good at it. I mean, you had to like him, and he knew what he was doing, which was terrific. Some of the sales people attended our meetings, too, that knew schedules that we had to hit to complete water systems and so they knew too. This interchange of information was absolutely critical.

BRETON: You mentioned that there were separate pipelines for the regular potable water and the reclaimed water. Were those trenches dug initially at the rough-grading point or the fine-grading, or did you have to go back and dig new trenches for the reclaimed water?

KNITZ: No, we were probably one of the first districts and builders that we had enough time and we had the money and we were dedicated to a reclaimed water system that we were running two and three pipelines in the street at the same time, a sewer line, a reclaimed water line, a freshwater line, irrigations, pipelines. You drive around Mission Viejo, and it's one of the best, most beautiful landscaped cities that I've ever been in, and a lot of that is because the company just said, "That's what we're going to do." And all of that stuff has to be put in before they pave the roads or you're just spending a lot of money. It's real expensive to go back and dig it up and put in another 10- or 15-inch water line just for reclaimed water.

BRETON: And at the same time, the company was seeing to it that the trenches were dug for electrical underground and cable, so all of it had to be done in advance and could be done because of the master plan.

BLUM: And one of its objectives, of course, like you said, is every line was underground.

KNITZ: They started off, Deane Homes, ours was all underground. Everything was underground, wiring. The only thing that sticks up are the streetlights with the mission bell on them. There's one right in front of my house. [laughs] It's unbelievable.

BRETON: Is that one of the charms of Mission Viejo, the fact that you could—

KNITZ: You know, it is. I don't know how many people realize it when they drive through the community, but you just can't help—and so many people, friends of ours that come from the East Coast or any other place, they say, "What a beautiful area this is. Look at these streetlights. They're old mission bells," if they know anything about California history. That's different for a lot of places, and to carry it out through the whole city is another thing in itself. It just isn't done by most people.

BRETON: And didn't Phil Reilly have a stroke of genius when he decided that it didn't make sense to have two districts, a water district and a separate sanitation district, and when he decided he would propose through certain contacts that he had—I think a state senator and someone else—that he would propose legislation to Governor [Edmund G.] Brown [Sr.] that would enable a single district, a water and sanitation district, to be formed?

KNITZ: There were not very many dual agencies, water and san[itation] together. There were a few of them, but not very many of them. And to say, "We're going to put them together, water and sanitation," we bring it in. You've got to get it out somehow, and so they do go together. But it was not uncommon to have a sewer district, a sewer agency, and a water agency that really didn't have anything to do with each other. They were separate boards, separate tax rates, separate everything. Now, that's just a waste of money in itself when the two are really related. If you take it in, you've got to get it out somehow. I don't think we really thought about having—it was just we were going to be in the business.

BLUM: So the answer is yes, totally yes, that Phil had a great proposal and everybody went with it at Moulton Niguel. It was great.

BRETON: Tell us about the clubhouses that you helped to design or build. Where are they and what are they?

KNITZ: The clubhouses had swimming pools, and tennis courts, some recreation areas in the buildings, that kind of stuff.

BRETON: In Leisure World or in Mission Viejo?

KNITZ: In Mission Viejo.

BRETON: Are you talking about the Montanoso Rec [Recreation] Center or the Deane Homes?

KNITZ: All of them.

BRETON: All of them.

KNITZ: All of them. There were other builders that were doing that, but not the way that these guys did it down here. First of all, it was better done. They had made arrangements to have the clubhouses and the clubs run by people who knew something about the business, so that they were more than just a place where everybody goes and they end up getting torn apart. They were a community facility, you know, tennis, swimming, all kinds of recreational things for the kids, and they organized all kinds of things, and then, of course, the big clubhouse. It was just a real good system, and I think it sold a lot of houses. I'm a member of the Deane Homes group. The first one was built by the Deane brothers. That's the only one that's separate from the rest of the Mission Viejo Company Association, their clubhouses. I can tell you, it's more expensive in mine than what yours is. [laughter]

BRETON: And is that by design? Do you think that's because the—

KNITZ: It's just a smaller unit and we only have, I don't know, a few hundred houses supporting it vis-à-vis thousands.

BRETON: So you have economy of scale with the—

KNITZ: Plus you have the Lake [Lake Mission Viejo]. It's available if you were smart enough to join that and do those kinds of things.

BRETON: When you were hired to build the clubhouses, were you working for Toups?

KNITZ: Yes, and that was a good association. That's where I got to know some of the guys besides Tom and Toepfer. We were working with some of their planners and some of the outside architects.

BRETON: Why don't we move to some of your early experiences. Were you involved at the beginning with Jim Toepfer and some of the others, such as Harvey Stearn, in the Activities Committee or any of the events that were being planned at that time?

KNITZ: The Activities Committee, I was involved in.

BRETON: Could you describe some of those early days?

KNITZ: It was a lot of fun. It was sort of like, "Let's do that," and so we had the Christmas thing, putting all that together down there at La Paz Road, and painting the fire hydrants, and just things like that, getting some of the open space there off La Paz Road, you've all the big area, the Community Center down there. Those things have worked out so well over the years, it's unbelievable. I mean, they get a lot of use, well taken care of, and they have a lot of the people who are members that are running it better than the professionals could.

BLUM: How about those Mission Viejo Days? You guys had the parades. That's part of the Activities Committee.

KNITZ: Yes.

BLUM: Yes, I thought they were great.

BRETON: Did you participate in the Cinco de Mayo Celebration parade or the Fourth of July picnic?

KNITZ: Cinco de Mayo I remember. One time we brought up some small cattle from the ranch and had a steer-riding thing, but they were small. I still have a scar on my foot where I got stomped. That was Toepfer's fault. He's the guy that got me on the back of that goddamn thing.

BRETON: And did you participate at all in the St. Patrick's Day Parade?

BLUM: Where they had the Blarney Stone at the end. Yes.

KNITZ: Those were fun days.

BRETON: Let's talk about the low-silhouette fire hydrants. This was Jim Toepfer's idea, to have a smaller, lower fire hydrant, something that he had seen in Northern California, I think. He convinced the company to install them here and talked, I guess, to the fire district and got the approval, but wanted them to be painted green. You knew him from your church work.

KNITZ: Right. We were on the Church Council together, yes.

BRETON: Describe what your volunteers did as far as painting them.

KNITZ: We ended up painting them yellow because we couldn't paint them green, but I'm trying to think now what the company paid us per hydrant to paint, which we gave to the kids, because we had a lot of young kids out painting hydrants. We had more darn fun doing that. People thought, "What are you guys doing?" It was just one of those things. We painted all the hydrants that were in the city then yellow, and they continued to paint them that color. It's beautiful, yes.

BRETON: Okay, let's take a short break.

[interruption]

BRETON: Tom, how do you think that Mission Viejo was able to evolve from a paper plan to a vibrant world-class community in thirty years?

BLUM: I think the shortest best answer is that the right people were involved. When we talked before, I mentioned there was money, there was the elements, but I think the key to the whole darn thing is the right people. The right people owned the land; the right people were buying the land; the right people planned the new town. There was great reception. The economic climate was good. You had everything kind of going for you, with the people especially. That's my bestest answer that I can give you on that one.

KNITZ: Did you ever think about what the pricing structure was on the houses down here in those days? They were some of the best buys in California, let alone—I mean, I paid—I don't know whether I should tell you how much I paid for my house.

BRETON: Go ahead.

BRETON: Twenty-nine thousand, nine hundred and fifty dollars, and then I paid a couple of extra hundred bucks to get some additional wiring in and a couple of things like that. Oh, and a concrete driveway instead of asphalt, that was 150 bucks. We got out of that, it was just a little over \$30,000. Three years ago, the guy across the street from me—in fact, it wasn't three; it was two and a half years ago—sold his house for \$950,000, the same house that I have, only I have a view and a bigger lot. He did fix it up nice, but that is what happened to the value of homes and stuff down here.

BRETON: Well to attract people to move way out here in south county.

KNITZ: And it was in the boonies then.

BRETON: It was farther than Irvine, and so they had to offer a product that was a little lower priced, that was entry level, or maybe somewhere between entry level and the next step up.

KNITZ: My wife had to take two of our kids to school up in Santa Ana for the first three months because the school wasn't finished, but that happened to a lot of people, though. I mean, we didn't get upset about it or anything like that.

BRETON: And did they go to O'Neill School [Marguerite M. O'Neill Elementary School]?

KNITZ: Yes.

BRETON: How do you measure the success of the master plan, Bill?

KNITZ: Well, comparing it to other projects that I had worked on around the country, for the total connection of the outside and the inside together and how it all works, I've never seen anything better. It's the best one. The company I was with before I came with the district, we had offices in Florida, two offices in Florida, one in Washington, D.C. area, three in Arizona, two of them up in Northern California, so I had worked on a lot of projects around the country, and this is still the best that I have ever seen.

BRETON: Tom, did you experience something wonderful during this entire venture? How did this affect your life, this experience that you had with working for the Mission Viejo Company and then the Santa Margarita Company? How did this affect your life?

BLUM: Well, in so many ways. We met so many wonderful people. I added to my résumé by being a part of this whole act of building new communities. I think I learned more about people and their feelings, their generosity, and the whole spectrum of people and their feelings.

I think I mentioned to you that when we moved out here, our son had leukemia. We arrived in August. He was four years old and he died December 12th, four months later, three months later, whatever, and the outpouring of the people I worked with and kind of everybody was fantastic, but really significantly was the fact that they named a park—"they" being the Mission Viejo Company—after my son in the northern part of Mission Viejo on Valpariso

[Drive]. It's called Christopher Park. My son was named Christopher, Christopher Thomas

[Blum]. But I think that hit us harder than anything you could imagine, for them just to go ahead and name the park. I had inquiries from the county, "Are you sure this is right, this naming? We didn't approve it," or whatever. I don't know the complications, but it's still there, and I go there and it's wonderful. So I learned a lot, Bob. Just terrific.

BRETON: And what was the key to the realization of the original promise to the O'Neills? As you went over, jumped over the fence and worked with Tony Moiso and the Santa Margarita Company, do you get the impression that they are happy with the end result here in Mission Viejo?

BLUM: Oh, they're proud. They're really proud. As a matter of fact, they're beyond just simply being happily associated with the completion of the new town, a lot of experiences gained by all of us in building what the ranch is building now and undertaking new towns by itself, it's almost unquantifiable. It's almost—you can't describe it. What I was most pleased with, personally, was the way the two parties, major parties involved, respected each other, got along with each other, gained from just those things. I thought it was wonderful. I really did, Bob. These are grown people and they're great people.

BRETON: One last question for you, Bill. What advice would you give to those city planners or future city planners that may be listening to your words as far as what they should consider in planning a new town?

KNITZ: I've been on projects where they started without having a whole team. They had the owner and the builder and maybe a land planner, but they didn't have some people that knew how a community functioned or—like you've got to get involved in how are we going to take care of the schools; how are we going to take care of some of the transportation; what about the

economics of commercial centers and all of those kinds of things that have to go into a community in the early stages. I think Mission Viejo Company did a lot of that. It was not like, “Oh, jeez, you’ve got five thousand houses built and we forgot to do something,” like a shopping center. Or, “Hell, I didn’t know that railroad was going to cut through the north forty,” or something like that. I’ve seen those kinds of things happen, and those are things that the company did. I think maybe if you walked in the office, like I did, I thought, “What the hell are all these guys doing around here?” But that’s what they were doing and they did it right.

BRETON: Thank you very much. Thank you both.

[End of interview]

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