



Oral History of Lois Jennings Britton

Interviewed by:
John Markoff
Marc Weber

Recorded February 24, 2022
Bethesda, MD

CHM Reference number: 2022.0038

© 2022 Computer History Museum

Markoff: So I wanted to start by asking for your name and when and where you were born, right at the beginning.

Britton: My name is Lois Britton. Actually, it was originally Lois K. Jennings [ph?]. I grew up in Bethesda. I was born actually, in Washington, D.C, but my parent were living in Bethesda at the time. We don't need to go in...

Markoff: Tell me a little bit about your father and mother. What did they do?

Britton: My father was a statistician for the Federal Power Commission. My mother at the time was a housewife. She was going to school at the Corcoran-- It's not a museum. Corcoran School of Art and later on, she became a-- sorry.

Markoff: You said later on, she became a...

Britton: She became a-- she started out as a secretary at NIH and wound up as a draftsman.

Markoff: I see. Describe your childhood a little bit. What was your neighborhood like? What did you like to do, and were you proficient and interested in math in high school?

Britton: The neighborhood is very much the way it is now, except that my first memories were that they were gravel streets. Bethesda ended about a half a mile north of our house. Now it extends all the way to the next city. So there's been a lot of changes, but otherwise, the neighborhood itself seems to be very much the same. I became interested in math in junior high with a teacher, one Miss Dempsey [ph?] and it was just something about what she was doing interested me in math. That and I found out much later that I have a mild dyslexia, and it was obvious in math, but it forced me to focus on making sure that I didn't transpose numbers.

Markoff: Just a little bit about your family. Did you have brothers and sisters?

Britton: I had two brothers and a sister. One of my brothers is actually a half-brother, who is 12 years older than me. My sister was a year older. My brother was two years younger.

Markoff: And can I also ask a little bit about your parents' backgrounds?

Britton: My father was a farm boy in Iowa, and went to the University of Iowa, and then transferred to Northwestern, where he got a master's degree in commerce, as it was called back then. He then went to Yale to work on a PhD, which he abandoned. He taught commerce at the University of Kansas, where he met my mother who was a student at the Haskell Indian Institute. They moved to Maryland, got married, and he then-- I guess he taught at a school in Atlantic City for a brief time and then got the job at Federal Power Commission, and eventually was the chief of the division of statistics at the Federal Power Commission.

Markoff: And your mother's tribe?

Britton: She's Ottawa. It used to be pronounced Ottawa, but now it's pronounced Odawa.

Markoff: Was Native-American culture part of your childhood?

Britton: I was talking to a next-door neighbor about a year ago and he said, "Do you remember the powwows that you used to have at your house?" and the Indian community in the D.C. area was pretty small and had a lot of different tribes. So it was very Pan-Indian before Pan-Indian became a thing. My mother sort of gathered together all these people. She was very social and so did we have powwows at our house? Yeah, we did.

Markoff: And before school, where did your mother grow up?

Britton: My mother grew up in Benzie, Michigan. Actually, it's an even smaller town than Benzie is, a town called Honor, which is south of Traverse Bay. She went to the local schools. She did not speak English when she started school and always felt at a disadvantage. Then when her parents died, one of her sisters arranged for her and her other sister to be babysitters, basically, nannies in Chicago, so she went to high school in Chicago, and then transferred to Haskell Institute.

Markoff: Just one more question about the powwows in the basement. I think you told me that they included peyote ceremonies from time to time. Was that true?

Britton: Yes.

Markoff: Yeah, and you reacted-- I'm trying to remember what you told me. I think you said you reacted not positively to the <inaudible 00:06:33>.

Britton: I did not react positively. I had school the next day and the peyote drum, a water drum and it is very-- my feeling is that it shook the whole house. They were in the basement and didn't think about us, the teenagers who were upstairs, and I never slept-- I've never slept well and it really was infringing upon my alone time, yeah.

Markoff: And just generally, how would you describe your family values when you were growing up? Was it a liberal household, progressive? Were politics discussed at all?

Britton: I don't know how to answer that. I know that my father was a Republican. On the other hand, I think it was fairly liberal. As young woman, we were encouraged to go ahead and follow whatever it is you wanted to do, except at the time, the path for women was teacher, nurse, and interestingly enough, my sister's a nurse, and I was a teacher.

Markoff: So you mentioned junior high school as your first interest in math. Did it blossom in high school?

Britton: Yes. I mean, math came easy to me, and I liked the logic that follows, that goes along with it, and I actually think that-- I had a conversation at school when I was substituting, and in my classroom, there was a man who was teaching peace studies, whatever that means, and he would ask the students what they didn't like in school, and he had a kid-- oh, he asked me questions, and I said that I had taught math, and he said, "Well, don't you think math is kind of useless, and we shouldn't teach it in school?" and I'm there going, "Well, certainly not. We should because it really teaches you logical thinking." Anyway.

Markoff: Let me jump back a little bit. Did you learn your mother's language at all while you were growing up?

Britton: Only the bad words.

Markoff: That's great.

Britton: How to say hello, thank you, how to count to 10, and the bad words.

Markoff: Yeah. When you were just leaving high school, what did you-- before you got to college, what did you think your career trajectory would be? What did you want to do or be?

Britton: Actually, I wanted to be an engineer. Actually, my first thing was that I wanted to go to culinary school, and my father said at the table, "Only men are considered chefs and all you would be is a cook. If you want to just be a cook, don't bother," and my older brother had been a student at MIT, so I was kind of pushed to maybe consider MIT, which at the time only had 15 female students in the whole school. So I elected not to do that.

Markoff: Did that brother become a physicist?

Britton: Yes.

Markoff: Yeah, and how did you make your decision about college?

Britton: My father died and University of Maryland was the path that you took when you didn't have any money.

Markoff: Yeah, and did you study math principally while you were there? Did you major in math?

Britton: I majored in math. I minored in English, and I have a concentration in geography, and I'm certified as a teacher.

Markoff: How did you come to the course on high speed? Oh, go ahead. I'm sorry. <Inaudible 00:11:37>.

Britton: You're going to ask the question about the course that I took on...

Markoff: High speed programming, high speed computers.

Britton: Programming for high-speed computers. It was my senior year and I had an elective. It had to be in math, and that was an option, and it was much more exciting than any more advanced calculus.

Markoff: Marc wants me to ask you not to answer questions by stating yes. Just restate the question a little bit, rather than just-- so that we can see where you're going.

Britton: Okay.

Markoff: So tell me a little bit more about college life. What was good? Did you go away to college or did you stay home when you went to college?

Britton: At the University of Maryland, the standard was that because most of the students were from Maryland, which is a fairly small state, we stayed on campus for the classes Monday through Friday and went home on the weekends.

Markoff: Yeah. So you had wanted to be an engineer, but what changed the direction, and had you built things as a child, or were you somebody that liked to make things?

Britton: Did I like to make things? Yes, I liked to make things. I was always annoyed that I was not allowed to tinker with the engines. I did in fact, spend some time taking radios apart, and blowing on the pieces, and then putting them back together, just to see how they would work. I still enjoy looking at a problem that my husband is having and thinking up a solution. He tries his five solutions, which don't work, and mine does. Why did I not pursue it in college? I met the three girls who were taking engineering, all of whom dropped out. I took all of my original early math classes with engineering students. I think the real thing that threw a wrench in it was when I was taking physics, studying electricity, I was told when I came into the lab that I was not allowed to plug any machinery in because I obviously, being a woman, didn't know the difference between alternating and direct current.

Markoff: And so what was your first job after college?

Britton: I went to an interview at a school district nearby where it came out that I was Native-American-- American Indian at the time, and the assistant superintendent of that particular district, got up, walked across the room, closed the door, came back, sat down, and asked me if my birth certificate said I was black or white. I thought, nope, not going to do that. So my first job after the early brushes with teaching, I became a mathematical aide is what the job title was. The position was held by mostly women, and what we were, were computers. We did what computers now do very easily, but the more complex computing was the object.

Markoff: So those people have been described as being hidden figures. Do you put yourself in that category?

Britton: Yes.

Markoff: Also, I wanted to jump back. I remember you telling me the time you took the course in programming high-performance computers or high-speed computers.

Britton: High speed.

Markoff: They were not high-level languages.

Britton: There were no real languages. Businesses were just starting to come up with COBOL, and I forget what the other one is, Fortran. But at the time, since they weren't in much-- weren't widely used, the-- I'm not sure who did it, but it was a made-up computer language called-- I had it in the tip of my tongue a minute ago. It doesn't matter. It was a made-up computer language, and it really was just the commands that you gave directly to the computer. But we learned how to flowchart and then come up and write little programs that would do it in this made-up language.

Markoff: Yeah. Did you ever-- much has been made of the romance that hackers have with programming. Did you ever have a romance with programming computers in that period?

Britton: No. All the promises that those early computer programmers promised. I guess the Roomba works, except that they don't take into account that the thing does not work if you have long hair. But the mouse never chased the cat off the table. My cat sleeps on the table.

Markoff: Yeah. Could you talk a little bit more about Hidden Figures and about being a hidden figure? Did you have any sense-- what does being a hidden figure mean to you now and what was it like then?

Weber: I think John was asking to include it, if you could restate, just say, being a hidden figure meant, you know. Restate it as a standalone statement.

Britton: Okay. I didn't understand what you were asking.

Britton: Might. Okay. Why do I think I was a hidden figure? There were five women who were in this position at the Center for Naval Analysis. The majority of people who worked at that particular organization were men. Most of them that I had contact with were either naval officers or engineers. There were so few people doing what I was doing and we were sort of put aside. Interestingly enough, in the organization that I was with, we actually were hidden. We were given offices with doors and we were encouraged to stay within that position. Because if we wandered around in the building, it looked like we had nothing to do, and somebody else would take us, which is an indication that, yes, we had value within the organization. But in fact, we were hidden.

Markoff: Tell me again about getting that job. How did you learn about that job and how did you apply for it?

Britton: Interestingly enough, at the time, it was titled mathematical aid in the want ad section and I applied. There were not a lot of women majoring in math, and actually, at the University of Maryland, there were only, I think, five of us who graduated the year I did, and two of them were guys. Three were women and so there was not a big pool of people who would be applying for this particular position.

Markoff: Do you remember what kind of computers the center had?

Britton: We had none.

Markoff: Oh.

Britton: <laughs> We had no computers. The computers were Navy. We had to line up, sign up for time to use the computers. One was at the Pentagon, and the other was at Carderock, David Taylor Model basin. It was an interesting thing. We did have a keypunch operator. We had one keypunch operator and she was in great demand. I didn't actually interact with anybody else who had the-- what I was doing in the organization, but Giorgia [Baby]¹ was very popular, and people-- the men in the organization felt that they had to go and compliment her in order to get her to put them ahead of the line for punching cards. I never had that problem. I just went in and asked her to do it and she did it.

Markoff: Did you work on design problems principally?

Britton: Actually, what we had was a program which had been developed somewhere in California. SRA, is that right? Stanford Research Associates.

Markoff: Scientific Research.

Britton: Scientific Research Associates. They had written this program and we were using it to evaluate-- I'm not supposed to talk about it, but it's been a number of years, so it's probably okay. We were to evaluate whether or not this airplane would do what we wanted it to do and I would change some parameters. That's where the new punch cards came in. I had a box of punch cards that were about two and-a-half feet, and there were like three or four cards that I could change the parameters that were put into what was happening with this aircraft, and I kept getting the same results. I'd get these printouts back, and I'd examine them, and they would be exactly the same. It didn't matter what parameters I put in. The printouts were all the same. So it was decided that there was some problem with the program. They sent a programmer, I guess is what he was, from California, to work on this, see if we could figure out how to debug this particular program. He came in. His name was David Kaplan, and I will say that of all of the people that I worked with at the Navy, he was the most willing to accept the fact that I could actually do something. Anyway, David asked me if I had any ideas of what might be wrong, and I said, "I think it's the random number generator," and he said, "Well, okay, well, we'll look at that." Didn't seem logical to him at the time. Anyway, I think he was there about four-- I think he was supposed to be there for one month and it stretched to two. But we kept having to try, and it was always a struggle to schedule

¹ Her nickname was GB.

computer time, and because the box of cards was classified, and in order-- it had to be packaged up, and then shipped over, and then came back, and had to be very careful, and heaven forbid that you drop the box. That would have been a disaster.

Markoff: Do you think it was easier being sort of a female mathematician or a data analyst than being an engineer in that situation in the Navy?

Britton: It wasn't. I always felt I was being a glorified secretary. It wasn't particular-- you know. It wasn't a particularly challenging thing for me. I mean, maybe looking at the data, I didn't think that that was particularly-- largely because it never changed. It was always the same. No. It was more-- I felt it was more like being a secretary, to be quite honest. Although they gave us the impression that we were really very valuable to the workings of whatever it was they were doing, I don't think I did very much. It was nowhere near as challenging as teaching a class full of eighth graders.

Markoff: Okay. Did your American heritage ever come up while you were working there, American Indian heritage?

Britton: No.

Markoff: Did you leave that job to teach in Montana? What was next?

Britton: Yes. Well actually, I had met Stuart Brand at that point and there was much more out there than sitting in an office where I wasn't particularly challenged to do much of anything, except not drop the box. So I just decided-- oh, at the same time, I had been a volunteer at the National Congress for American Indians, and so had become-- I wish I could think more smoothly-- more challenged in participating with different tribal workings. My sister had become a nurse out at the Tongue River Reservation, Northern Cheyenne, and she told me there's a position for an English teacher at the school. So I thought, oh, I could do that. So I applied and they decided that what they needed really was a math teacher because they actually were not looking for a math teacher because they hadn't had one in a number of years. So they just kind of threw up their hands. So I went out to teach math at the Busby Boarding School on the Tongue River Reservation.

Markoff: And then did you move to California in '65 or '66? Do you remember which year?

Britton: I think it was '66.

Markoff: Yeah. You visited frequently at that time.

Britton: Yes, I had visited two or three times.

Markoff: Yeah. One of the things I wanted to ask in a general sense is both you and Stewart [ph?] were involved in the creation of one of the first communes called Lama, and I just wanted to ask generally about your memories of that period you spent there, and why you guys didn't stay?

Britton: Well, Lama. Okay, I don't think of Lama as one of the first communes because we had been involved with USCO, which was a commune in New York, and two of the principles from that commune were the ones who went out to start to look for, I guess, what, an ashram kind of situation, and because Stewart had had so much traveling about in Arizona and New Mexico, we went out to assist them. It was never our intention to stay. It was more the search for a piece of land.

Markoff: Yeah. Marc noted that I forgot to ask you about how you met Stewart. I know that story well, but I was wondering if you could describe meeting Stewart over again at the Congress.

Britton: Okay. You said Marc, but you meant me.

Markoff: Well, no. I'm getting texts from Marc while we're doing this.

Britton: Oh, okay.

Weber: I'm sorry. We're using the chat feature.

Britton: All right. Yes. The National Congress of American Indians had a yearly conference and my mother was a recordkeeper for them. That was what she had learned at Haskell Institute, how to take shorthand. People don't do that anymore. So we went out to the-- it was in Sheridan, Wyoming. We went out and because I was with my mother, I was given the job of registering participants, and Stewart came in and registered, and he looked like no other people who came. His blonde hair and his very fair skin. Everybody else had black hair and kind of olive tone skin. Yeah, he made an impression just physically.

Markoff: And at that point, he was traveling with a VW bus. What do you remember about his bus?

Britton: It was supposed to be red, but it wasn't. It was kind of an overcooked tomato juice color, and it was his turtle disguise. It was his turtle shell and he was living inside it. I don't know. Otherwise, it was...

Markoff: That would have probably been-- would that have been as early as 1964 or was it...

Britton: When did Lyndon Johnson actually become...

Markoff: He became president in the fall of '63.

Britton: It would have been '64 then. It would have been June or July of '64.

Markoff: '64, yeah. I believe Stewart got there because he had a connection-- let's see. This was the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He was the interior secretary at the time.

Britton: Stewart Udall.

Markoff: Stewart Udall had alerted him to the Congress, I think.

Britton: It could have been.

Markoff: And Udall actually spoke at the Congress. Do you remember Udall appearing at the Congress?

Britton: No. Could have been.

Markoff: Yeah. Okay. So you guys lived for a while in San Francisco. But then at some point, you decided to move to Menlo [Ph?] Park. <Inaudible 00:36:45>

Britton: Okay. Well, when it comes to decided, the fact that they tore the building we were living in down sort of kind of made us move. Actually, Stewart had managed to somehow-- after having graduated from Stanford, to find this place above Louie's Fresha Fisha in North Beach. He rented two, I guess they would be called studio apartments, for \$50.00, and no, must have been \$55.00, and the apartment that he was in was the one that was lower down, and he charged himself \$25.00 a month, and the upper one, which had a view, \$35.00 a month. So it was \$60.00, right? Let's do the math here. Anyway, the developers-- next door was a nicely redone apartment complex where all the stewardesses for the airlines were living. So this property became very desirable because of all of the lower rent people who were living in there, which was us and the fish shop. So somebody bought it. The building was going to be torn down and we were evicted. There was an elderly gentleman also living in the same complex. He was slightly away from where we were, and the man got his eviction notice and died. It was very sad. But anyway, that's when we moved to Menlo Park. Stewart had friends who lived in Menlo Park, the Fadiman's [ph?], Jim and Dorothy Fadiman.

Markoff: He also writes in the journal he was keeping at that time that he wanted to move to Menlo Park. The quote was, "to let my technology happen there," which was a very interesting quote to me. He said he spent a little time trying to get Dick Raymond's help in getting a job in business technology. This would have been '67, and he referred to it as a boom area. Do you remember any of that?

Britton: I remember going and meeting Dick and Ann Raymond. And I knew that Dick had been a friend of Michael, Stewart's older brother Michael. And I guess '67, yeah, he-- at the time, probably, there was a problem with money. I don't know for certain about that.

Markoff: Yeah.

Britton: We were living on Stewart's income from I'm not even sure where. I didn't take over the finances until actually it was necessary for the Whole Earth Catalog.

Markoff: Yeah. So, the first project before the Whole Earth Catalog was this effort to create an educational technology fair of a Dick Raymond idea that came from something Michael Phillips had done at San Francisco State. Do you remember the innovation fair in San Francisco State?

Britton: No.

Markoff: Okay. That doesn't ring a bell?

Britton: Unh-uh.

Markoff: But you do remember the sort of six, seven, or eight months you spent with the Nixon's, James and Cynthia Nixon, trying to create this educational technology fair at the San Mateo County Fairgrounds?

Britton: I do remember that. Yes. But I don't remember Mike Phillips being involved.

Markoff: No, Mike Phillips wasn't involved in that. He was involved in the previous thing.

Britton: I--

Markoff: I believe Phillips was on the board of the Portola Institute, which was to Raymond's--

Britton: Dick Raymond's Portola Institute, and yes, Mike was there, but I don't recall him being involved in any projects.

Markoff: Yeah. Okay.

Britton: He was the guy who looked after finances.

Markoff: Yeah.

Britton: He was the Grace Cathedral.

Markoff: Yes.

Britton: Yeah.

Markoff: What I remember is that you guys spent about a half a year trying to raise money, some of it from foundations, and trying to get the support of corporations that you wanted to exhibit, and it just didn't take off.

Britton: I guess just Stewart was the one who did all that telephone stuff. I am not particularly good at that.

Markoff: Yeah, but in the journal, you were very active in the planning. You can see that there was a lot of discussion, that Cynthia Nixon and James Nixon and you and Stewart met constantly for a half a year.

Britton: Yeah, I remember meeting with them. I guess maybe I wasn't particularly interested in actual workings of the thing. It was like an okay, we'll keep going until I find something that I would be useful at. And I guess since it didn't take off, I didn't see that I was particularly of any use.

Markoff: Okay. Another thing that we talked a little about is you described to me during that period of going to Doug Engelbart's home and getting a demonstration of his system he was building with the mouse. Could you talk about that?

Britton: I'm not sure what brought it about. I think we were involved at that point in the early workings of trying to make the catalog work. A lot of things have gotten very hazy. This is one of those things where I see a picture and I see him, that's Doug Engelbart, demonstrating, he had the mouse on the table, and there were a lot of people around. I am a kind of person who will sit back and watch rather than actually participate. It was interesting, and actually, what I found more interesting was rather than the mouse was learning how people count if they don't have an abacus with their fingers. Anyway, that's my takeaway from that. Not--

Markoff: Was that the key chord? Do you remember this other device, which was called a key chord? It wasn't the keyboard, but it was a 5-key pad that was on the other side of the mouse from the keyboard.

Weber: Like piano keys.

Britton: Like piano keys. I don't physically remember it as being a thing. Like I said, there were a lot of people who were much bigger than I am who were hovering around. And I will take my position of I'm not going to be pushy.

Markoff: Yeah.

Britton: I--

Markoff: At the time, you told me they were largely self-important men. Is that true?

Britton: I was trying not to say that. Yes. It's always interesting that even now today, my husband, what he does is important. What I do is just kind of fringe.

Markoff: Yeah.

Britton: The fact that it keeps getting the food on the table and cleaning up afterwards is non-descript. That's essentially the way I felt even working for the Center for Naval Analysis is that the women who were there, and there weren't that many, there were some secretaries and the five-math age, and this organization took up for four floors of a high-rise building. It was a big organization. And maybe one-quarter of the people who were there were women. All the rest were men. And they were all important.

Markoff: I remember I forgot to ask you, before coming to Menlo Park, one of the things that you worked on when you were in San Francisco was Stewart's multimedia slide show

Britton: I did not actually work on that. I saw it and said, "Oh, yeah, keep going," you know, encouraging. If I think back on it, I was probably a little embarrassed. I don't like to be the focus. I mean, I'm embarrassed right now.

Markoff: Don't be. So, I wanted to ask a couple more questions about Doug Engelbart. I know things are vague, but things showed up in this journal that were really quite interesting to me and to the history. Engelbart actually, there's a couple of references to Engelbart coming to your household as opposed to you going to Engelbart's house. And there was one dinner where Engelbart talked about the idea of scaling, which was a really important contribution he made. It showed up in Stewart's journal. I have no idea if you remember the conversation.

Britton: I would have thought that I would have remembered making a dinner, and--

Markoff: Yeah.

Britton: --I don't.

Markoff: Okay. Okay. No worries. Also, there was a discussion of a trip that I think you were on to raise money where you went to Oregon and visited Tektronix.

Britton: Yes. I did not go to the meeting. We went to Oregon and I stayed with Gail.

Markoff: Yeah. By that time, Stewart had been introduced by Engelbart to his online system, and he'd become very enthusiastic about it. He writes about it in the journal in a very excited way, and he talks about going to Chuck Kesey home and being a guest lecturer on computers, which, of course, he doesn't remember at all, but it's in the journal, and I wondered if you remember anything about discussing computers with the Kesey's in Oregon.

Britton: In Oregon?

Markoff: Yes.

Britton: No. I mean, I remember the trip.

Markoff: Yeah.

Britton: That would have been when they were living in the- well, they were not living in the barn. They were living in some place else, another out building, which had been converted.

Markoff: By this time, Ken Keyzie had left the Bay Area and moved back to Oregon.

Britton: As far as I know. I mean, if that's the same trip. Now, if Stewart went and talked to somebody, he would have done that on his own.

Markoff: Okay. Okay. Do you remember giving up on the education theorem, the project ending?

Britton: Yeah. It just sort of fizzled out. I think everybody sort of became tired and it was one of these, okay, that's enough of that. We don't need to continue with this.

Markoff: Only a couple of weeks after that, Stewart's father had died, he traveled back to the Midwest for the funeral and to see his father before he died. And then, coming back, much has been made of him coming back on the airplane and getting this idea of creating a truck store for his friends. I wondered would you describe Stewart coming back from that trip and what he said to you?

Britton: It was that he had this-- Well, okay, we did in fact talk about the whole experience of being in the hospital with his father and being connected to all the wires and bells and cords and tubes. And I remember vividly him talking about his father becoming sort of conscious of where he was and what was happening. And he said, "No, I'm free. I'm free." And started pulling all of the cords out. And I don't actually remember specifically. Okay. I'm having trouble deciding when in this course of this that I sold my car and bought a truck. And I guess maybe it was because-- well, Stewart never liked my car.

Markoff: What kind of car was it?

Britton: It was a Comet sedan. And it was blue. It had a license plate that said SAY500. And I liked it. It was the first new car I had ever bought. I had had a used car before that. But I think it was he had this idea that it might be a good idea to sell books. And we needed to sell books that would be of use to our friends, which I think consisted mostly of Steve and Barbara Durkee at the Lama. And by then, we had met Steve and Holly Baer, the Zomeworks people. Maybe you can tell me, because I'm not sure, I remember going to a commune in Colorado and meeting a guy calling himself Peter Coyote. Is this the same Peter Coyote?

Markoff: It's quite possible it was. Yes. I think it was.

Britton: Okay.

Markoff: Yeah, I don't know about his commune period, but it's quite possible it was Peter. Well, Stewart had met Peter Coyote earlier. Peter Coyote was at the first Trips Festival, for example, at the asset test.

Britton: Okay. I didn't go to the acid test. I've never been to an acid test.

Markoff: As I remember, you helped set up the Trips Festival.

Britton: The Trips Festival, yeah. Just kind of things like Stewart had hired a publicist. His name was Bill Graham. And we had a parade with the Kesey's bus, and Stewart's, by then it was a camouflage painted

VW bus. And Bill Graham had bought peanuts and it was peanuts and something else. I want to say Cracker Jacks, but that wasn't that. It was to toss these bags of things to the crowds on the sidewalk. But it sort of didn't turn out that way, because we were unable to get a parade permit from the city.

Markoff: You had a stealth parade. What was your impression of what the first Trips Festival was supposed to be? How would you describe the idea before it happened?

Britton: I have a feeling that, I mean, my impression, because I've actually never been to a-- this is terrible, isn't it? I've never been to a rock concert. I have never been to a Trips Festival. I didn't go to the Altamont. It was another one. Stewart went. I'm there going, "Nope, no live music, no crowds." So, basically, I was just kind of- I feel like I was just sort of there. I don't feel I participated.

Markoff: Yeah. At that point, I mean, no live music, you weren't enthusiastic about rock concerts, describe your perspective on psychedelics back then. How did you react to the use of psychedelics?

Britton: How did I react to the use of psychedelics? To be quite honest, I didn't really understand. I knew what peyote was and what it was supposed to do, but it was to enhance a mystical experience that you could have without taking it. You know, that's the whole fasting. It allows your mind to kind of go into that frame of mind where you sort of see things. I didn't really understand. Stewart took some acid one time when we were out, and I didn't know what it was. I don't know what was wrong with him. I didn't ever figure that out. I heard then about it, and it was explained to me what this substance did you, and I certainly know a lot of people who did take acid. I wasn't particularly interested in trying. It struck me very much like smoking, which I haven't done either. Well, I smoked enough to know that I never wanted to do it again after, like, two tries. So, that and then, there was the such and so is having a bad trip next door. And for some reason, I was encouraged to go along with somebody who was going to try and help. Whatever that meant. And it turned out that I was a big help, because I did not change my appearance to somebody who was having a bad trip. So, I found myself a couple of times in the position of such and so needs help, and there you are. And since I had never experienced the change in the vision of people, I didn't really understand it. I just was being there.

Markoff: Do you remember when and why you decided to get a storefront for the truck store project?

Britton: Actually, we did not set out to get a storefront. What we set out to do was to have a place much like Marc here has this place that we're filming in, a place to produce the catalog. We did in fact have a whole bunch of books that were purchased when we made the drive around New Mexico and Arizona trying to sell the books. Stewart felt the need that if we were going to do this, we have to have examples of what it is, what they are. So, he bought the books. We set up A-frame display racks with the pegboard that you put the little pegs in, and he carefully drilled holes through all of the books, and the books within, placed on these pegboards, and they had little strings on them which were tied to the boards so that they wouldn't get stolen. Yeah. And it was so somebody if they wanted to come into the catalog, they had something that they could see that we were doing. And then, it came into, well, why don't we just go ahead and turn the thing into a bookstore? We did not set out to do a storefront.

Markoff: You know, in the Silicon Valley, much is made of startups that start in one direction and then pivot and go in another direction, and I think you were one of the first sort of pivots that I know about. You pivoting to the catalog from the truck store.

Britton: Oh, from the truck store to the catalog to the storefront, which was still called the truck store.

Markoff: Yeah, yeah. How did your role evolve in the project? Describe your role.

Britton: My role in the project was originally I didn't have anything better to do, so I just kind of observed until I saw a real need, which was Stewart with these bills for the books that were coming in, and every time one came in, he would write a check for it. And I'm there going wait a minute now, there's something wrong with this picture, and went and started going through the invoices and receipts and finding that he had paid these book companies twice for the same books. And, of course, they were not telling us, writing us back and saying you overpaid. They were just keeping the money. So, I'm there going why don't I do this instead of you doing it? You know, you're busy with what you're doing, so why don't I just take this part away from you?

Markoff: Would you call your role ultimately office manager or chief operating officer or how would you describe your--

Britton: The kids that worked for me at the truck store said that I was the den mother. In fact, we did have an office manager. We had several office managers, and they were officially the people who were doing it. And I was on the side of since I wrote the paychecks, I think I took on a role of being important enough to be nice to.

Markoff: Were you seen as a co-founder by people at the time?

Britton: I wasn't. It's 50 years later before I was named a co-founder, 50 years.

Markoff: So, John Brockman, who was a friend of Stewart's first in the Esco [ph?] commune a little bit, and he describes visiting you guys in Menlo Park and spending the day sitting around with Stewart underlining a book by Norbert Wiener while you did the real work of laying out the catalog. Does that strike a bell?

Britton: Yeah. I remember John very well from that trip. John had a toothache and it showed. He had a big aura around him. He was sitting in a pinkish aura, and I just looked at him and I remember going, you hurt. You've hurt all day. What's the problem? So, he wanted a native remedy to solve it, and I suggested a dentist, which is what he finally did. But I think I probably was doing office work, filing, writing checks, looking at invoices, cleaning up.

Markoff: Yeah. The IBM Selectric typesetting system was right from the beginning, wasn't it? Was that something you guys got very early on?

Britton: Yes, very early on, because we could vary the type with the little ball.

Markoff: Yeah. That was sort of the birth of desktop publishing in some ways, I think.

Britton: It may have been. I mean, also associated with the Portola Institute was a company called Dymax [ph?] and they in fact were doing desktop publishing. And I don't know whether the Selectric came from them or whether-- I think it probably came from somebody else at the Portola Institute.

Markoff: There's a chronological issue I wanted to ask about. I thought that Dymax grew out of People's Computer Center, which became the People's Computer Company, and then there's the--

Britton: No.

Markoff: Or the other way around.

Britton: It's the other way around.

Markoff: Ah, okay. Okay. And Dymax was an Albrecht creation, a Bob Albrecht creation?

Britton: Bob, yeah. Bob and Mary Jo and they were doing the original my computer understands me when I speak basic.

Markoff: Yeah. And so, that was going on at the Portola Institute while you started the Whole Earth Catalog.

Britton: They were original at the Portola Institute, and they had a say on whether or not we would come into it. I didn't find that out until later.

Markoff: Okay. I want to ask about a couple of the cultural sort of attributes of the Whole Earth Truck Store. It's famous for the daily volleyball games. Did you participate in the volleyball games?

Britton: I sprained one thumb. I took volleyball in college, and I sprained one thumb one week, well, I think I took on Tuesday and Thursday, I sprained one thumb on Tuesday, and the other one on Thursday, and I was minus my thumbs for a good two months. No, I did not participate in the volleyball games. I'm there going, "Do I want to do this again? No. Not again."

Markoff: Another thing I want to just ask is whether was the Sears catalog at all, it must have been an obvious example.

Britton: Yes, it was the Sears and the Montgomery Ward that was another big catalog. Did Abercrombie and Fitch have a catalog?

Markoff: It was another one. It wasn't the Abercrombie and Fitch. What's the other catalog?

Weber: LL John--

Britton: LL Bean.

Weber: --and LL Bean--

Britton: LL Bean.

Weber: --as being a real inspiration to Stewart.

Britton: Yeah, mm-hmm.

Weber: Particularly him.

Britton: Yeah.

Weber: But I mean both of you, obviously, the Sears catalog was very familiar.

Britton: Yeah.

Markoff: Another sort of attribute of the Whole Earth Truck Store was the daily lunch that you prepared. Did you come up with the idea of eating lunch at the catalog truck store?

Britton: I don't know how that evolved. I have a feeling it may have been just-- a lot of it had to do with the fact that everybody got paid exactly the same amount. It didn't matter what they did. They got \$5 an hour. Stewart got \$5 an hour. I got \$5 an hour. Bernie Sprock, who was our high school student who came to work and sweep up as long as he got to keep all of the stamps, he got \$5 an hour. It didn't really matter. But this was even at the time, a pretty low wage, and it was not unreasonable to go ahead and pay for everybody's food. And then, we actually hired a person to shop and cook. And she got \$5 an hour as well.

Markoff: What do you remember about the rocketship-like growth of the catalog?

Britton: It led to having more people. We had more people. We had to buy furniture, shelving. We had to get rid of the A-frames and the books that had holes in them. There wasn't a lot out in the storefront, so in fact, we didn't really look like a store, because most of the books we sold were in the back on the shelves, and the sales person in the front would just walk back and pick up a book. The building wasn't all that big. It seemed a lot when we signed the lease for it though.

Markoff: So, the catalog itself, the beginning ended in 1971. You guys separated, but the truck store continued. Did you stay involved in the truck store? How did it change after Stewart left?

Britton: Yes, it did continue. The foot traffic stayed about the same, and it operated as a regular bookstore. We changed managers a couple of times. And there was one, an Irishman who actually came from a business sales background, admittedly it was with sweaters and woolen products, but he was very spit and polished. He kept the store really neat and it looked really nice. The kids who worked in the back were all still the high school kids that-- well, they weren't high school kids by then. But they stayed and I did not actually work there. I didn't work there, but I worked in a building across the back parking lot. So, and that was with the Point Foundation. I was the bookkeeper.

Markoff: Oh, I didn't see you were doing Point by that time. I understand.

Britton: I was doing Point Foundation by then.

Markoff: And the Point Foundation was set up from the revenue taken from the Whole Earth Catalog. Is that correct?

Britton: Right. The million dollars.

Markoff: Yes. So, this period, I'm super interested in this period, because this is the world that personal computing grew out of, and let me begin by asking about one young man who was hanging around the truck store at a certain point writing something called the hidden information network without computers, a young man by Fred Moore. Do you remember Fred?

Britton: Oh, yes. But I remember him more from not the truck store, but from the People's Computer Company, which grew out of Portola Institute, the Dymax, the Albrechts. Portola Institute had a couple of desktop publications. Since I really wasn't involved in the production of it, I don't know what printers they used, you know, boxes, books, and selling through the mail kind of thing. But Fred Moore, interesting, Fred Moore with his daughter and I remember him more, People's Computer Company set up, moved out of Portola Institute, sort of became its own stand along thing, and moved to a different little strip mall in the other side of the railroad tracks. And I think Fred was just, he always seemed like a loose end. He didn't really have a place for himself or an aim. He just was trying things and associated with that.

Markoff: Fred fits into the puzzle of everything in so many interesting ways. It was Fred who took away the money that Stewart gave away at the--

Britton: At the Demise party. The Demise party. That was fun, because well, first of all, I drove around with the money in my truck. And I had a friend drive with me and we went around to the different bakeries and places to get the food that we were going to supply for this party, and I kept saying, "You stay here, and I'll go in." She comes back, and finally when the money came out at the party, she comes over to me and she said, "Is that why I had to stay in the truck?" And I'm going, "Yeah, because there's \$10,000 in the truck." No, but that whole thing with the party and having everybody come up and say what they wanted the money for and what they were going to do with, and people going yay, nay, and Fred just outlasted them. That's really how he got it. He just outlasted everybody.

Markoff: But he was keeping something he called the information network on file cards at the truck store, and Bob Albrecht invited him to move the project to PCC and teaching in the PCC.

Britton: Yeah, I guess. Electronics. But it wasn't at PCC. That would then have been Community Computer Center by then.

Markoff: Oh, I see, which was then this other strip mall in Menlo Park.

Britton: They were adjoining buildings in Menlo Park. PCC was on one side, Community Computer Center was on the other. And there was a door in the back that went through. Otherwise, you had to walk around.

Markoff: Was there a point at which you became the bookkeeper for that organization as well?

Britton: Yes. I was the treasurer of People's Computer Company. Actually, I was a founding director of People's Computer Company.

Markoff: Okay. And that was later. That was like '74, '75? Or do you remember which?

Britton: It was right at the very beginning, so--

Markoff: Okay so, and this is a side question, but did you know that my sister worked as a receptionist at the People's Computer Company? I don't know what she did, but you don't remember Ellen, do you?

Britton: You know, I think you had mentioned this before, and I thought I remember an Ellen, but who knows, it could have been Ellen Smith. I don't know. Maybe if you showed me her picture, I could tell you whether or not I remember her.

Markoff: I'll send you a copy of her picture.

Britton: <laughs>

Markoff: So, at what point did you meet Keith, your current husband?

Britton: It was when the Whole Earth Catalog production team moved out of the storefront and up to Rancho Diablo. They worked out of the garage at Rancho Diablo. Don't ask me the year. I don't remember, but Keith had actually-- the garage at Rancho Diablo was heated with a wood-burning stove, and Keith had cut wood for them and delivered wood, and he turned up needing to be paid. So, that's how I met him.

Markoff: I learned about him first as a computer hobbyist because he was involved with the Homebrew Computer Club at the very start. Did he have an interest in computers before the emergence of Homebrew?

Britton: No. No. It was--

Markoff: He was an explosives expert, is that right?

Britton: He is an explosives-- yes, an explosives technician. He's English. Clubs in are all-inclusive in England. Everybody joins some club or another, and he became interested in--

Markoff: I believe he attended the first meeting of the Homebrew Computer Club.

Britton: I asked him about that, and he said he never was at Gordon French's garage, and he doesn't remember Gordon French at all. So, which is weird because I remember Gordon French, and I remember being in the garage, so, hello.

Markoff: Is there a possibility you were at the first meeting?

Britton: It's possible, but it's also possible that Gordon French came to one of the potlucks that we had at PCC.

Markoff: Yeah. Tell me about the potlucks at PCC because they preceded the Homebrew Club meeting.

Britton: Oh, yeah. They probably had been going for six or eight months before the Homebrew. And I do remember Fred Moore coming to the potlucks and not watching his daughter. It drove the women who were at the potlucks crazy because that little girl would be running all over, and Fred would just, you know, she could have gone out the door and down the street, and he would never have noticed. I shouldn't speak that way about Irene. She's probably a lovely young lady now.

Markoff: She turned out very well.

Britton: <laughs>

Markoff: She lives in Berkeley. I interviewed her. She was a success story, even though she had that wild childhood.

Britton: <laughs> Yeah, the potlucks were great, and it actually-- I think I just told you earlier about talking to I think he's the curator of computers. Oh, he's doing something called Whirlwind up at MIT. And he is researching it. And anyway, throughout all of this, I looked up something and saw a picture of John Draper. And I thought, John Draper. Did you interview him, now?

Markoff: Yes.

Britton: And I looked at him, and I thought, "Wow, he found a shower." <laughs> He used to come to the potlucks. He was religiously, he was there early and stayed late and ate, never brought a thing, never-- you know, not even a bottle of beer or anything, just him.

Markoff: That sounds just like John Draper. Marc is asking me to ask you to give more context. Marc, will you sort of describe what you guys would like?

Weber: There are a lot of-- we you've been talking about from John's questions as sort of filling in, and, to some of the people seeing, they won't have any kind of background on-- maybe just describe a little bit more, step back. You did talk about the Albrechts and leading to the People's Computer Center, but just to give-- paint a little sort of a picture of some of these key players that you're talking about and-- in the order that you knew about, roughly.

Britton: Okay. Bob and Mary Jo Albrecht-- Stewart and I were invited by Dick Raymond to meet Bob and Mary Jo Albrecht, and this was in regard to joining the Portola Institute, which was, at the time, developed to be an umbrella organization for startup nonprofit educational, what do you call them, beings, whatever. It turned out-- and this we did not know at the time, it turned out that Bob and Mary Jo were doing books called-- Bob Albrecht was a teacher, and then he wanted to do some books on making introductions to younger children on how to program for computers. And a language had been developed called BASIC, which uses the nice terms like Run, Stop, Go, Go to, which were not things that I had learned in my programming for highspeed computer-- the title of the language was TYDAK. I finally remembered it. And it turned out, and I found out much later, that Bob and Mary Jo actually were the first people to participate in Dick Raymond's Portola Institute. All of these organizations had to have some money to start with. Dick did not-- Portola Institute didn't give people money to start with. It was just you start, and they supplied legal advice and some office type stuff, letterhead. It was all to give everybody a-- I wish I could find the words that I'm looking for faster-- legitimacy.

Weber: It almost sounds like a nonprofit incubator.

Britton: Yeah, legit-- make them look legitimate, like they really are--

Weber: A front.

Britton: <laughs>

Weber: To give an institutional gravitas.

Britton: Yeah. So, they did what they did. And a percentage of the money that they went in actually went into Portola to support the front to pay the rent for the building, and--

Weber: Portola was a nonprofit, and they could be fiscal sponsor if money came in.

Britton: Right. So, it was-- and Bob and Mary Jo were the first people there. And I think Stewart and I were the next people who came. Then there were a couple of others, and, to be quite honest, the only one I can really remember with any certainty is something called the Big Rock Candy Mountain, which, again, was-- I'm not actually sure what they did, but they were nice to chat with when you wanted to take

a break from whatever you were doing in the-- we were in adjoining buildings. We were not in the same building.

Weber: You had said the Albrechts were also doing the desktop publishing.

Britton: They were doing something which turned into Dymax to produce these little booklets on teaching kids how to program in BASIC.

Weber: It was part of the--

Britton: Yeah, and then People's Computer Company sort of came out of that because one of the things that was needed was to see whether or not this was working and to give us a connection with schools. One of the other directors, initial directors, was Leroy Finkle. And Leroy actually was teaching at Atherton high school. So, we had some connection in the school to get kids to come. And then there was a PDP-8 computer with two Teletypes, and they would load them in the van and take them to the school and unload them and have the kids work on it. So, that's how People's Computer Company started with actual interacting with school kids. The storefront then had in it, the Teletypes were there, and the kids would come in. And by then, they were using punch tape. So, we didn't need the big machine that did the punch cards, the key punch cards. So, they were using punch tape and reading it with a Teletype.

Weber: My mother actually took me by there. And I have to-- it's embarrassing to admit that I did not take to it. I didn't get interested in computers then. It was later.

Britton: You know, it wasn't until it got to the screen so that they were able to interact through a cathode ray tube, right, and you'd see the, you know, all they were doing was moving pixels about on the screen. And some kids were just focused, laser-focused on these pixels. And Pong was a big game then.

Markoff: That's interesting. Albrecht is such an interesting character to me. One thing I remember him talking about was being so much in love with folk dancing.

Britton: Oh, yeah.

Markoff: There was a Tresidder folk dancing scene in the evenings. Did you ever go folk dancing with Albrecht?

Britton: No. No, I didn't, but I-- he was always doing it. Greek, Greek folk dancing, it wasn't just folk dancing. My half brother was also a contra dancer, and he's written a whole book on contra dancing, so maybe there's some geeky thing going on there.

Markoff: I think there might be. I know a lot of people that Friday evenings over at Tresidder. I know Engelbart went there. I think Stewart went there, occasionally. Do you remember--

Britton: No, I don't remember Stewart being a big dancer, no, but Tresidder, yeah.

Markoff: So, in terms of the timing of stuff, well, in terms of the other characters who are around Homebrew, what are your memories of Lee Felsenstein, who was an early Homebrew person?

Britton: We met Lee before that. He was up in San Francisco, and somebody, I don't remember the name of the company, it was like IBM or something, some big company, anyway, had a big mainframe computer, and they wanted it out of their building. And so, it was donated. Project One?

Markoff: It was Project One, and the company was TransAmerica. It was a leasing company, and it was an XDS. It was originally, the Dex [ph?] computer in Menlo Park, and it got mothballed and ended up at Project One.

Britton: Yeah, and Lee was the person who was supposed to get it going. Yeah, so actually Stewart and I went up to Project One. Stewart was not impressed with Project One, but I was fascinated by this character who thought he was going to get this big thing going. Yeah.

Markoff: He got a friend of his, Efrem Lipkin, helped program it. They did get it going finally.

Britton: Yeah, he said that. Yeah. I was--

Markoff: Lee became a regular at the PCC potlucks before Homebrew.

Britton: Yes, he came to the potlucks, came to my house more than once.

Weber: And Efrem, as well?

Britton: No, I don't know him.

Weber: And then what was-- oh, what was her name, the third person?

Markoff: Oh, Pam. What was Pam's last name?

Weber: Oh, Jude.

Markoff: Oh, yeah, Jude. That's right. I don't remember Jude's last name either.

Weber: Did you know her?

Britton: No. Or maybe I did, but I-- no, the big thing with the potlucks is that he attracted Mac² and Bob Mullin, and we had been coming to potlucks for several-- I guess they were weekly. And I was sitting and talking with her, and we were chatting, and it came up that I had gone to the University of Maryland, and Mac had gone to the University of Maryland, as well. And, "Oh, were you on campus?" "Yes." "Where did

² Marilyn Ann Crawley.

you live? Oh, Centerville South. I lived in Centerville South. What floor?" "Oh, I was on the 8th floor." "So, was I." Mac Mullin was my little sister, one of them. I had 30 little sisters, but Mac Mullin was one of them at the University of Maryland.

Markoff: Were they involved in computer stuff on the West Coast?

Britton: Mac's husband, Bob, had worked for Xerox and left corporate America and was looking for a project to do, and he developed an extender board to use on the early computers to do debugging, you know, connecting circuits, whatever, anyway.

Markoff: Could I ask you to step back just a little about this era to talk about little computers and big computers because what I remember about people like Fred Moore is he was just hungry to get his hands on his own computer, which was one of the driving forces that led to Homebrew. And I was just wondering if you felt that sense that young men had at that time to get these machines to be fantasy amplifiers, to pay with them, or whatever they wanted to do.

Britton: Yeah, I was all very much-- well, having a background of having been a Hidden Figure, I can understand why somebody would want a computer to do whatever it is that they wanted to do. Now, a lot of these people didn't understand that there's a lot involved in the programming, and, if you can do the programming, the machine is not going to do you any good. And a lot of these people, my impression was that they didn't really understand. They thought if they got their hands on it, it would do what they wanted. That's why the mouse never chased the cat off the table. But yeah, I can understand their interest, that and the-- it's the whole boy toy perspective that I think drove a lot of this. That and the need for a hobby. It's-- Stewart's father had been a ham radio operator, and I suspect that it was, this is terrible, just to get away from the kids and the wife. He had this big ham radio thing in the basement. And he'd go into the basement and close the door. And I sort of feel that way is-- that is often true, whether it's a computer that you're tinkering with with our soldering iron or a miniature soldiers, you know, or trains, or any of those things.

Markoff: One of the other projects that came out of PCC was Dr. Dobbs. Were you involved in the Dr. Dobbs emergence, or this was an early computer--

Britton: To be quite honest, that one didn't come up in my-- since talking to you and I've been trying to come back-- remember all these things, that as Alison.

Markoff: Yeah, Dennis Alison.

Britton: Dennis Alison. He did his production in the PCC production facility. Yeah.

Markoff: Dennis was one of those people. He was a physicist at SRI, but he described to me how he would frequently come to the Whole Earth Truck Store and just wander around and look at neat things that he would often-- he was customer. He would buy things. Did you meet Dennis before you started the Dr. Dobbs project?

Britton: Yeah, probably at a potluck. Yeah. I-- you know, the potlucks were one of those things where people were around like John Draper where people would float in and out. There were never really introductions. It's like my-- just happening to come up with my little sister from college. But yeah, okay, Dennis is very tall, like actually you are tall. He always struck me as a little officious. You know, I'm right, and you're not. <laughs>

Markoff: He had put together an early version of BASIC called Tiny BASIC, which I think might have been used at PCC.

Britton: Bob Albrecht, that's where he comes from then.

Markoff: Yeah, yeah.

Britton: Okay, that makes sense.

Markoff: Marc, are there other questions that are on your list?

Weber: I'm wondering a little bit, did you get interested really in computing, programming, doing things yourself. I know you did some for bookkeeping and things, right?

Britton: No, I just used paper and pencil. It was kind of like being originally at the Center for Naval Analysis, where we used pencils and paper. Not really, I mean I've done some programming. I've gone-- when I started substitute teaching here in Maryland, one of the things that I did, of course, was go into a lot of math classes. And it turns out that the computer teacher, at the time, was also a math teacher. So, I went into his, I think at the time it was geometry classes, and then wound up in his computer programming classes. He was using C and then C++. And I looked at it and I thought, you know, this can't be that bad. I can read it. I did, in fact, have a passing nodding acquaintance with FORTRAN and COBOL with having-- having had the type-- original background, which was with the TYDAK and actual machine language, a lot of these programs make sense to me. BASIC especially was really, yes, it is very BASIC. And it's good. I think basically, at the time, I had my son, who was fascinated with computers, and I went in a couple of times with Kindergarteners and 1st graders using BASIC and a PET computer. Does that make sense, PET? And teaching kids to write their name and be able to print it out, and then, when I was subbing then for the computer classes, the programming classes, I could read the stuff. And I thought I don't want to be bothered, you know, because I think about back where you had to do every line. Every move the computer made, you had to physically give it an instruction. You don't have to do that now, but when kids would say, "My program doesn't work," I could have them run it on the screen, and I don't know why it doesn't work, but here's your problem. And I could point to the place on the screen where the error was, and then they could go back, bring up the code, and find where they had made the error. I don't know. It's magic. I have no idea why it works, but my son says that that works for him. When he gets really frustrated, he just sits back and waits for it to glow. My son now is a digital engineer I think is the title they've given him. He works for a company called Vanu, Inc.³ in, I guess, Cambridge. Yeah. And he

³ This was a wireless radio company founded by Vanu Bose.

writes soft-- he writes the code to connect the machine to where the software engineer can see it. Does that make sense?

Weber: In the PCC and Homebrew days, there are a lot of people with huge visions for the future of computing and an interest in it. Did you buy into that? Were you excited by what computing could accomplish? Did you believe some of the optimistics?

Britton: Yeah, I believed it all along. I'm not particularly interested in it. I don't have a cellphone. That's a lie, but I don't have a cellphone. I don't care. I can ignore the phone on the wall when it rings. Yeah, I worry that people have bought into it so much that when the power grid goes down, and it will, they're at a loss.

Weber: Right, but back in those early days of the PC, it made sense, though?

Britton: Yeah, it all made sense. Yeah. I think that.

Weber: And John, you might want to I think in your notes to ask whether she visited SAIL and PARC and some of the other places.

Markoff: I was curious if you were aware of the Stanford Artificial Intelligence Laboratory in the D.C. Power building out on Arastradero Road behind where you guys lived. Did you ever go out to see that computer center?

Britton: No.

Markoff: And PARC was-- well, you knew some people from Xerox. Did you ever-- were you aware of the Palo Alto Research Center, Xerox PARC?

Britton: I'm aware, but they had left Xerox. They were not there any longer.

Markoff: And how about, one of the people who left Doug Engelbart and then went to PARC, who became a good friend of yours, I believe was Bill and Roberta English.

Britton: I would say that it's-- they were mostly Stewart's friends. I don't-- I will go ahead and say the first computer that I saw was at the Bureau of Standards when I was Girl Scout, maybe eight years old, and they had this huge room and this wall of glass with tubes, tubes. And the guy went over, and he walked-- it was very hot in there. And this was early air conditioning. There was not a lot of huge buildings that were air conditioned. He went in and pulled a tube, and it played Daisy. It played a tune, anyway, just by pulling a tube. That was my first introduction to computers. So, it's-- I-- alright, the computer teacher now, who-- I'm at the school. I no longer sub there. The head of the department, teaching programming, had been my daughter's music teacher in the 7th grade. <laughs>

Markoff: The first computer you'd seen was probably either an IBM or a UNIVAC.

Britton: Probably a UNIVAC. Well, I don't know, it's Bureau of Standards, so I don't know. I did see a UNIVAC computer, though, on the street when I was walking on a street downtown and looking through. They had it out there. And when I started work at Center for Naval Analysis, there was one evening that we got computer time, and it was a rush, got computer time at David Taylor Model Basin, and the-- my boss was insistent that we go out there. And I said, "Why?" And he said, "Well, to watch the computer run." And I'm going there's nothing to see, lights flash. There's really no point. What you want is the output. You don't care <laughs>.

Markoff: Like watching grass grow.

Britton: <laughs>

Markoff: This is good. Marc, I think I'm done. Are you?

Weber: I did want to ask about the-- so, like during the period toward the end of the time you were in-- no, I guess the middle of the time you were in the Bay Area, when there's the American Indian Movement, the occupation of Alcatraz, a lot of activism politics, how did you-- did you feel that-- did you identify with what was going on, participate?

Britton: It's always nice to think that Indians all see the same things. My kids have gone to what we call the American Indian education program here in Montgomery County, Maryland. There are school age kids that live and go to public school in the county. We have regular events for the kids. My kids no longer belong, so, but I still go to them and see the people I'm friendly with. But Indians can be very tribalistic, and when you talk about having tribalistics, and Indians always identify themselves by their tribes first. They don't always get along. And it's nothing more than "I don't happen to like the way your eyebrow looks" kind of thing. It's kind of silly, but a lot-- maybe because the history is not that far along. My mother told me a story, my mother, who was born in 1914, told me a story about her grandmother, who was 1880, something like that, maybe 1860, traveling up near Michilimackinac, where the bridge is now, traveling in a canoe and having to be very quiet because there were some Hurons there. Now, presumably this was-- it's probably very much like being in New York City and not wanting to walk down a particular street because you're not whatever. So, I will say that, when I was in San Francisco, I didn't know really any of the Indians there. I don't have a problem doing it here because I grew up here, and I do know a lot of the Indians who are here. So, no. When it comes to AIM, my brother-in-law, my sister's husband, is a Sioux. And he went to school with one of the founders of AIM and on the reservation himself. And there again, you start getting smaller and smaller. This family doesn't like that family. And this family doesn't like that family. And if you get into the wrong place and identify yourself with the wrong family, things can become unpleasant, distant maybe, rather than anything physical. It's just very distant, so I will admit that I just kind of keep all of that at a distance because, even in my own tribe, I had a women when we were up there, and I will admit that this was in high school, when I was in high school, and a woman came up to me, and she said, "You have a very nice outfit, but these kids are real Indians." So, it was embarrassing, but my uncle stood up for me. So--

Weber: I think you had said to John something about the way you identified among Whites as Indian, among Indians--

Britton: As tribe. And then as-- when you're within the tribe, then you identify with your family. We did that. We had actually two years ago, when we went-- I went with my son and daughter-in-law and grandsons to South Dakota to visit my sister, my sister has a buffalo ranch, and we-- she said, "Be sure wherever you go, you identify yourself first." And we identified ourselves to one woman, and she said she didn't know any Blackfeathers. "I don't know any Blackfeathers." And then we saw her again, and it turned out that one of my sister's sisters-in-law is a Blackfeather, and they were friends. So, it's-- it was just kind of one of those kind of awkward situations. But--

Weber: Did you know any other women who were Indians in the fields you were in? I mean in mathematics, computing, things like that.

Britton: No. When I was teaching in Montana, there were two Indian teachers in the school. And well, no, three, but one of the White teachers said something to me in the teacher's lounge that the Indians were unteachable, that was a long time ago. <laughs> I presume that they've come a long way. Actually, they have come a long way and it's just the whole society has made a big change. I am old enough to remember when they had a yellow line in the bus, you know. Certain people had to sit behind the yellow line. And I can remember asking my mother, "Do we have to sit back there or do we-- Can we sit here? And why can't we sit back there?" Because kids always want to ride in the back seat of the bus.

Markoff: Let's go to just what didn't we ask, Lois?

<laughter>

Markoff: I mean, just something in the-- particularly in the computing stuff from the seventies, is there anything that we didn't cover?

Weber: Just fun anecdotes.

Britton: Yeah, the-- Well, they were-- I mean, in the East Bay, because Keith and I had moved into the East Bay at that time, there were a whole lot of startups there. George Morrow then Lee with Compu-something. You know, what's terrible is that I should have gone to the basement, because we still have all those old computers, I think.

Weber: You know, we're potentially interested. [ph?]

Britton: <laughs> Actually, I did get-- I did-- My son did take the Radio Shacks. <laughs>

Markoff: Was it a model 3 or a model 100?

Britton: Oh. My son had a model-- an original it began with an A. It was a computer.

Markoff: Oh, an Altair.

Britton: Yeah. He had an original Altair and he sold it.⁴

<laughter>

Weber: Computers, we have quite a few, but I cannot-- [ph?]

Britton: But it was funny, because when the guy he sold it to, he opened the cover, right, and all the signatures were in the inside. <laughs> And we didn't even know. <laughs> But I-- His first computer was a VIC-20.

Markoff: Oh, yes.

Britton: He was 5 and he had a little VIC-20 and I have a picture of him with the VIC-20 and a television. It was cute.

Weber: So when did you move to the East Bay?

Britton: Oh. We moved to the East Bay it was the end of '75-early '76.

Markoff: Were you in Loma Mar before then?

Britton: Yeah.

Markoff: Loma Mar is way out there. You were in the boonies.

Britton: We were in the boonies, yes. You know, we were the cows. Actually, yes, the guy we rented from had cattle. One of the cows got onto the road, managed to get hit. The cow's name was Arnie. Arnie got hit by Cosmos Smilington, <laughs> who was a purveyor of genuine Indian jewelry. <laughs> We had a laugh.

Weber: So they were--

Britton: Genuine. He gave me his card. Genuine Indian jewelry and I just, I thought, "Oh, God." <laughs> Let's see. You know, I can't remember if Steve Baer-- I remember him specifically. He was one who made all those false promises.

Markoff: What kind of promises? Tell me--?

⁴ The computer was actually an Amiga.

Britton: About the mouse and the robotic vacuum cleaner and, you know. It was going to do all of these wonderful things. And I thought, "Only if you can do more than just have it play a tune." Because his-- "Fool on the Hill?" "Fool on the Hill." You've interviewed all these people.

Markoff: Yeah. Baer is an interesting character because some people believe he's the one who took Bill Gates' copy of Basic and gave it away to the Oakland blue card [ph?] but it's never been proven and he denies it.

Britton: <laughs> Yeah. Those meetings were kind of interesting because it was just all these people milling around and Lee trying to make order and I think that they were actually trying to make speakers. Now we went to those. Keith, who really didn't know anything about what was going on, but saw a value for computers. And Bob Mullin and Mack and I would go in and we had a bottle of wine and we sat up way at the top of the auditorium at Slack watching these, what, 100 men down there all vying for position and trying to learn how to do something. And I wonder how many of them-- Well, a lot of them, you know, they did, in fact, go on. They took it somewhere. I don't think it, it was more like an octopus rather than a straight line something. But that's reasonable for business.

Markoff: Those meetings were great fun because everybody liked to gossip.

Britton: Is that what they were doing? <laughs> Because Mack and I were just up there laughing at them. <laughs>

Markoff: Yeah, I went to some of the later ones probably in '79 or '80.

Britton: I read that-- I'm getting a lot of this confused with I, you know, because I re-read this one article that was the history of the Asilomar's group and how they met in the Safeway parking lot. And I'm there going, "Well, I remember the Safeway. I bought a lot of stuff there." <laughs>

Weber: Which Safeway? The one on--?

Britton: The one on Sand Hill Road.

Weber: Sharon Heights, yeah.

Markoff: Oh, yeah.

Weber: That's where I grew up in--

Britton: It was--

Markoff: If you don't mind me asking, any other memories about the Whole Earth Truck Store and what it was like?

Britton: I, you know, I do remember one incident and I think it was Steve Bear who looked at the books and thought they were interesting and everything and he was probably not the only one. The people that we were talking to expected us to give the books away. They didn't want to buy them, they just expected us to give them to them. And it was deflected with, "Well, we need them to show to other people," rather than, you know, "We can't just give it away to you." I think it was the nature of society or our little corner of that society at the time, everything needed to be free. And, you know, you can't do that. <laughs> Maybe, maybe you haven't figured this out yet, but it will become clear at some point.

Weber: So maybe a little more of just what it was like in the Truck Store.

Britton: The Truck Store. Vivid memories of the Truck Store. Lunch was good. It was a break from bookkeeping to go and sit in the front of the store while everybody was playing volleyball. It was a little bit of a downer when all of the dogs started coming in and I was sitting at my desk and I heard a dog and I turned around and looked and that dog pooped on the floor. And I'm there going, "No more dogs." <laughs> "No. You can't bring your dogs anymore." Stewart and I didn't have a place to live and he set up a parachute and our room was the parachute. It had a bed [ph?] in there. That was not so nice. But then that was taken over as the storeroom. It was really nice at the whole-- at the thing that happened, what, 2 years ago, the 50th reunion?

Weber: What was that, the 50th anniversary? Yeah.

Britton: 50th reunion. To see all those kids who had graduated from high school but weren't planning on going anywhere. And they all wound up going to college and having substantial lives. It was really nice. I enjoyed that. It makes me feel good. <laughs>

Markoff: So the Truck Store was their gap year.

Britton: Yes. Exactly. <laughs> And that was before gap years even-- <laughs>

Weber: Yeah.

Markoff: I just had-- I just had coffee with Nelson Bonner. Do you remember the Bonner kids?

Britton: Yes. Joe.

Weber: Yeah. Jay and Joe and Nelson I think were the three kids who were around in various ways.

Britton: Well, Joe actually worked for us.

Weber: Yes. Yes.

Britton: So. Yeah.

Weber: Yeah.

Markoff: And Marco Brown was one of the kids and--

Britton: Marc never-- Marc didn't work with us. He was with more with People's Computer Company.

Markoff: Yeah. That's right. That's' right.

Britton: Yeah. And that's because Marc and Dick Raymond's son went to high school together.

Markoff: Yeah.

Britton: So that's what--

Markoff: And I think Shel Kaphan was part of that group in some way or he was a friend of Marc's. But he worked at the-- Shel worked at the Truck Store for a little bit.

Britton: Shel, yes. Shel worked for a little bit.

Weber: And you, you know he went on to be Amazon employee number one.

Britton: Really? <laughs> No, I didn't know that. <laughs>

Markoff: Yeah.

Weber: Were there any-- Maybe this would be more the PC Sierra [ph?] but contacts with Peninsula School, Nuevas and the local school. Alternative school.

Britton: Well, yeah. Okay, my real contact with the Peninsula School was when I had a head on collision with a guy who was volunteering as a teacher there. He was very upset. <laughs> But that's, you know, I don't know. I really didn't have a whole lot of contact with the school because it was mostly for me bookkeeping, clerking, whatever. And I would occasionally read-- I didn't actually think about it but I would look at ways of teaching things looking at whether, you know, lesson plan 8, that stuff, it's not all computer at all. But now--

Weber: When did you move-- Oh, go ahead.

Britton: Go ahead.

Weber: No, I mean, education is such a sort of thread that keeps looping in and out of your life and all of these entrants. [ph?]

Britton: Well, I would not have been called-- involved in the People's Computer Company if it had not been for the education background.

Weber: You believe that computers could really change education?

Britton: Well, I'm not sure what most people think about education. Education tends to be we are giving everybody a smattering of everything that's out there so you can pick and choose wherever it is you want to go. You run into parents who are absolutely convinced that you're not teaching them anything if in fact all you do is put them in a room and teach them good manners. They don't see even that as a bit of education in a person's life. And you don't know what it is that they're going to pick up and run with.

Weber: And so you, when you moved to the East Bay, where did you move and did you guys keep on going to Home Brew after that?

Britton: We kept on going. We moved to San Leandro and we were three blocks from the Oakland Line, so we were in North San Leandro. And we were by then close friends with Bob and Mack Mullen. Bob always wanted to go. Mack went with him. Keith and I went as well. So, yes, we were also, Lee lived in-- Lee Felsenstein lived in Berkeley. The Morrows lived in Berkeley. Bob-- Bill Godbout, does Godbout come up in any of your things?⁵ He was a--

Weber: What was he?

Britton: A junkman. He had a junk place, several large buildings filled with old electronics and so I guess he was an electronics dealer. And Vinny, Vincent Golden worked for him. And so he was the source for all of these computer hobbyists to get their stuff, their resistors and transistors and everything. And there was a Bill who jokingly sat around as living on old coffee and stale donuts. It was a joke. <laughs> But it was a place where all of these people. And these were the hobbyists, the real hobbyists people came through to get the parts to actually build their computers.

Markoff: What was the name?

Weber: What was the name again?

Britton: Godbout. G-O-D--

Weber: Oh, yeah. Bill Godbout. Of course. That's the name I was trying to think of. Yes. Godbout was this chain-smoking guy who had one of the early computer companies.

Britton: Yes. He did.

⁵ I said Godbout but I have him mixed up with Mike Quinn. They both operated out of the surplus buildings in Oakland. Both dealt in surplus. Some of the memories were Mike, some were Bill.

Weber: Yeah.

Britton: But that was-- that was an offshoot from him being-- having all of these old parts. And he told the kids that they could have whatever they found on the floor. And this was <laughs> so it would usually be just a transistor or a resistor or something like that. But my daughter found a brass bell on the floor and Bill wouldn't let her have it. <laughs> Because it was, you know, about 2 x 2 and weighed about 100 pounds. But he wouldn't let her have it.

Weber: Yes. So it was, first it was Godbout Electronics but then later it was CompuPro was the computer company that came out of his hobby.

Britton: Really? Well, it wasn't Bill's. Bill's, I think he was mostly an electronics dealer at-- CompuPro, really was his? I don't think--

Weber: Yeah. Well, it says-- Well, yeah, Wikipedia now it says we named the company CompuPro and he worked with George Morrow to develop the S-100 bus.

Britton: Okay.

Markoff: And things of that nature.

Britton: And then, then George Morrow did his own machine.

Weber: That's right. And Morrow had an-- later had an early portal, one of the--

Britton: Yes.

Weber: Landfills and things.

Britton: Yeah. Those were the people that we were friendly with, so.

Weber: Yeah. And where was the store?

Britton: What? Bill's store? In Oakland.

Weber: I mean, the, like--?

Britton: In Oakland.

<inaudible 02:16:50>

Britton: No, no. He's talking about Godbout's store. And it was a huge old World War II not a hangar. It was one of those temporary buildings. I know I went to high school in one of them at one point. But it was

a long one. And he actually had two buildings out there. And it was near the airport, near the Oakland Airport.

Weber: Yeah. Because I remember, I mean, Haltech out there, but-- [ph?]

Markoff: That was on the other side. Haltech and Halt Ed [ph?] with also weird stuff on the other side, yeah.

Weber: True, though, is on the other. Yeah.

Britton: Yeah. Bill--

Weber: Oh, go ahead.

Britton: Bill died but I do remember at one point we were watching TV and Bill saw a banner on the arena. It has to have been, like, a football game or something. He saw a banner on the arena with somebody's name and he wanted to have that. So that's-- <laughs> That's a dumb-- <laughs>

Markoff: Did you ever go to any of the early Comdex Computer Shows in Las Vegas?

Britton: No.

Weber: Or West Coast Computer?

Britton: Well, the West Coast Computer show, isn't that the computer show with Jim Warren?

Markoff: That was a Jim Warren event, yeah.

Britton: Yeah. I don't think-- I can't remember him being very popular as a person. So, no.

Markoff: Yeah.

Weber: But then Comdex, you went to or--?

Britton: Un-uh. No. Don't remember. A lot of the--

Weber: I mean, Lee was working for Adam Osbourne in that period, right?

Britton: Lee?

Markoff: At the very end. Osbourne didn't start until '80 or '81.

Britton: Really?

Weber: True, yeah.

Markoff: Yeah. Like, well, he was around but he-- The company launched its first product in '81.

Britton: Well, but it took Lee awhile to develop it to begin with.

Weber: That's right, Ryan. [ph?] Because he was working on the terminal before that and then switched to the--

Britton: Mm-hmm.

Weber: To the Osbourne.

Markoff: Yeah. Well, he was at another company in Berkeley. What was the Berkeley company called before Osbourne? He had-- He did an early personal computer. It was an S100 bus computer but I'm forgetting the-- Yeah. Which is why Adam hired him.

Weber: Yeah. No, now that rings a bell.

Britton: <laughs> The only thing I remember about that was Lee came to dinner after the Osbourne came out and he was driving a very, very nice new car.

<laughter>

Markoff: Yeah.

Weber: And then? Oh, go on.

Markoff: No. Lee almost got very rich because for a while Osbourne was going to be this powerhouse. And then of course they collapsed and Lee, unfortunately, never got really rich.

Britton: Yeah. That's too bad.

Markoff: Yeah.

Weber: So you were in the East Bay for how long before that?

Britton: Till my mother died. She died in '87.

Weber: And then you moved back.

Britton: Then we moved back. Mm-hmm.

Weber: And why did you move to the East Bay initially from the Peninsula?

Britton: We got evicted. <laughs> Once again. <laughs> We were living in Loma Mar and our landlord's son was coming in and out of our house and he stole several hundred silver dollars which had belonged to the Pescadero Fire Department. Our landlord's son broke in and stole the money. So what did the landlord do? "You accused my son of theft and you need to move." So we bought a house. The Mullins lived in Castro Valley, so we bought a house.

Weber: And then since you've been in Maryland, you teach.

Britton: Yeah. Well, I grew up here in Bethesda, which is where we are right now. As a matter of fact, we are upstairs from my bank. <laughs> And to be quite honest, not to cast too many aspersions, the house that I inherited when my mother passed away was in the best high school district in the State of Maryland, so it was a good time to move my kids here.

Weber: I think so. How many kids?

Britton: I have two, a boy and a girl. Yeah. The digital engineer who went to MIT and his artist little sister who went to Tufts, so.

Weber: The stuff way back in the story, in John's book it talked about you and Stewart visited a number of communes in various communities. Are there any that particular <audio glitch 02:23;31>?

Britton: Something happened with the sound.

Markoff: We lost your sound, Marc.

Weber: Oh, I'm sorry. I think I muted myself.

<laughter>

Weber: I was asking the stuff way back, so in John's book he talks about how you and Stewart visited a number of communes.

Britton: Mm-hmm.

Weber: Various back to the land places. And you had I think some mixed feelings about the way they tended to structure themselves hierarchically. But if you can just talk about some of those, you know, impressions of communes you went to and some of those trips.

Britton: Well, the first one that with us going, New York, yeah. Take the bus to Poughkeepsie or something like that, I don't remember exactly. Anyway, yeah, it was an old church. It was kind of interesting because everybody carved out their own space. Stewart was taken to living in the steeple of

the church, so we broke through a wall to get into the steeple. And the bells had been removed so there wasn't anything up there but pigeons. And we had-- <laughs> we had to shoo all the pigeons out and put up a screen-- screening. And you know, in retrospect, we should have spent more time cleaning off the guano that was up there.

Markoff: <laughs>

Britton: <laughs> And it was also a little disconcerting because we had to climb-- go through somebody else's living space to climb up through the hole that had been created. That was kind of weird. Then the-- There were people had all kind of found a little place, a little niche to call their own, but it was a real hierarchy in how things were done and if you were a woman, you must either clean or cook. And you could only cook if you were on top of the hierarchy, which meant it was kind of a first in, you know, last out. So it was exactly what the other jobs were amongst the men and how they were sorted out, I really didn't pay much attention to. So I don't know exactly what that went to, but I talked with Gerd Stern I guess it was about six years ago, seven years ago, and he said, "You know, that was really sexist what, the way the whole thing was set up. And just that we were talking once again about just a change in society the same way as true with racism and sexism in society. Now Lama in New Mexico, we were not around long enough for that. We were there when, you know, the decision was made on which piece of land to buy on Flag Mountain. We did not become involved particularly as members of a commune there. I always felt like we were just visiting. There was another commune that we had visited in Colorado, not with Peter Coyote. That was another group. And in fact, nobody was home for the most part except one woman who was actually cutting up wood to make a dome. And I think really the reason we went up there was because they had gotten plans from Steve Bear on a particular dome thing to do. Other than that, I mean, I'm sure that what Stewart saw and what I saw were totally different and, you know, he probably got some important ReBIT [ph?] to follow. For me, it was just more personal where I kind of would, you know, watch somebody and wonder why are they so nervous? Because there were a lot of nervous women that we ran across.

Weber: And why where they?

Britton: Huh?

Weber: And why were they?

Britton: I don't know. I don't know why they were so nervous.

Weber: It sounds like both you and Stewart had a sort of attraction to country or really rural things and also to cities and kind of bounced back and forth in some ways. [ph?]

Britton: Well, I grew up in suburbia, but both of my parents had come from farmers. My father's-- That and actually when I think about it, my father owned a farm in Pennsylvania, a dairy farm, which when he passed away went to my older brother. But there was a lot of, I mean, I always feel a little bit sorry

whenever I walk up the street to the elementary school that the strawberry patch is gone. Because <laughs> they built houses on it. <laughs>

Markoff: Same thing happened in Santa Clara County.

<laughter>

Weber: It sure did.

Britton: Oh, I looked at a map thinking, you know, and I-- I was looking at the map and I'm there going, "Where did all these roads come from? They weren't there."

Weber: No.

Markoff: Yeah.

Weber: It did change. Well, it did. I wanted to ask also a little about, you know, Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters and how you felt about them and relationships with them.

Britton: Oh. Well, you know, I don't think I probably had more than a 10 word conversation with Ken. But he was a very interesting person to watch. It turns out that Ken and I, our birthdays are two days apart, which I found out from Faye. So he's technically a Virgo and Virgos tend to be much more introverted. Ken was definitely not introverted. I often wondered exactly is what these people saying really that important? They sort of felt it was. Jerry Garcia was really bad at that. He, you know, everything Jerry Garcia said was important. Or that was what he was exuding when he was saying things. When Ken was serious he'd lower his voice and it was really <laughs> kind of like when I think back on it, it was kind of Godfather-ish. You know, he would ask you to do something which was why Stewart and I went and picked up-- think of his name-- the author. "Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test."

Weber: Oh, Tom Wolfe?

Britton: Tom Wolfe. Yeah, we, Stewart and I were set off-- set by Ken Kesey to go and pick him up at the airport. Which I for me it was interesting, you know, because I got to sit and actually talk with him and have a conversation, which was separate from him trying to be important. Although he was very low key. But there were some situations where when I think back on it, like, I would not have had if there hadn't been this fringe, in my mind fringe association with these people.

Markoff: The other Prankster that you came in contact with was Neal Cassady.

Britton: Neal. Yeah and--

Markoff: Yeah, you're in American Culture.

Britton: <laughs> Neal is-- Neal was very interesting. Neal was on stage all the time and if he didn't have an audience, he was totally at a loss. He just wandered around looking for who's going to see me, who's going to watch? Who's going to do this? Yeah. I think Stewart was taken by Neal's fame being I'm not sure that he ever really actually-- and it's entirely possible that he didn't have any empathy for the strife that Neal was going through in his own life. But there again, that's a-- Oh. I would have never come in contact with him had it not been for this other stuff.

Markoff: Yeah.

Britton: And more-- most recently, of course, was the bringing to mind the two hours that I spent with Jake Rabinow, which wouldn't have happened if we hadn't happened to go to this meeting, which had something to do with computers. Who knows what? Who cares? <laughs>

Weber: You were-- You lived in North Beach for a while, right?

Britton: Yes. We lived, that was when we lived above Louis Fresh Fish [ph?] in the three-room--

Weber: In there with-- I'm sorry, go ahead. [ph?] But I know it's the interest in Beats going on--

Britton: Yeah. Yeah, there was. That and the proximity to City Lights Books. There again, I think a lot of the attraction, too, was City Lights Book and Lawrence Ferlinghetti, whom I never met, but was good friends with Shig, the guy who really kind of ran the bookstore.

END OF THE INTERVIEW