Introduction

Now in her mid-nineties, Esther Abbott achieved a long and impressive career as a photographer. With her husband Charles (Chuck) Abbott, she also shaped the urban landscape of downtown Santa Cruz through her historic preservation activities, and her advocacy on behalf of the pedestrian-centered Pacific Garden Mall which was constructed in the late 1960s. This oral history, conducted by Evelyn Richards of the University Library's Regional History Project, illuminates the life and career of this remarkable and vibrant woman. Evelyn Richards was a UCSC student at the time of this interview, and graduated in Community Studies in 2004.

Esther Abbott loaned the library the frontispiece for this oral history and kindly reviewed the transcript for accuracy. Copies of the manuscript are on deposit in the Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley and in Special Collections at McHenry Library at the University of California, Santa Cruz. The Regional History Project is supported administratively by Christine Bunting, the head of Special Collections and Archives, and Acting University Librarian, Robert White.

The University Library's Visual Resources Collection also has a collection of 4700 slides of urban development and scenic views of the United States taken by Esther and Chuck Abbott during the 1950s and 1960s. In addition, Special Collections has a collection of Chuck Abbottt's photographs documenting his time in World War I Europe, as well as his career from 1920 to 1935.

—Irene Reti, Director, Regional History Project, February 2005

Evelyn Richards wrote the following introduction:

Esther Abbott was born Esther Henderson on July 24, 1911 in Oak Park, Illinois. Her father had retired by the time she turned eighteen, and since her mother had died by then, he devoted himself to the development of her career—first as a dancer in New York, and then as a photographer. It was as an established photographer in Tucson in 1940 that Esther met Chuck Abbott, a photographer from California, whose hire into a Tucson club she protested until she met him in person. Chuck was born in Cambro, Michigan and moved to Oregon when he was six. Somewhere between twelve and fourteen, Chuck left home and went to Hawaii to work on a pineapple plantation for two years. At sixteen, he enlisted in the army and later began a long and varied career as a photographer. When he met Esther he was working as a publicity photographer putting on cowboy parties for clubs in Arizona.

Three months after Chuck and Esther met they were married, and both became renowned in the Western states for their freelance photography, which has appeared in

many magazines, and which eventually influenced the style of the Pacific Garden Mall. They moved to Santa Cruz, California from Tucson, Arizona in the spring of 1962 and quickly became interested in the architectural development of the Pacific Garden Mall. Together they created and organized slide shows for nearly ten years suggesting the improvements that could be made to store fronts and the style of the mall. Their slide shows juxtaposed photographs and financial intake of malls and stores around the country that had reduced signage and quaint-looking architecture with less beautiful and less lucrative stores and malls that were cluttered with signs and concrete, impersonal architecture.

As Esther explained in this oral history interview, she and Chuck had no direct stake in whether or not store and club owners followed their advice, but were just interested in beautifying the town, and so they quickly became a generally welcome part of the community. They were eventually successful at convincing storeowners to create the beautiful mall that existed on Pacific Avenue from the early 1970s until the Loma Prieta earthquake in 1989.

I went to Esther Abbott's house on Lincoln St., four or five homes down from the corner of Chestnut and Lincoln Streets on May 5, 2003. I could hear her playing piano as I walked through the small white gate and up the pathway to her house—a seemingly tiny structure with wooden shutters on the windows, sunken further back from the street than most homes on Lincoln, and buffered from the street by a colorful garden and tidy walkway. Esther answered the door right away, as her piano is in the front room,

and pulled two chairs up in front of the large black piano where we could talk. She toured me around the house before we started recording this oral history.

The house did indeed start as a tiny structure, with only Esther's piano room, taken up almost completely by the piano, and an adjacent room the same size. A slightly bigger room was added on behind the second room in 1869, and when Chuck and Esther bought the house in the early 1960s, they added a kitchen, living room and bedroom even further back. Even with all the additions to the house, the backyard is still expansive, and looks like a miniature farming plot, with rolling mounds of rich soil. Esther's son, Carl, and his family live next door and grow their own fruits and vegetables.

Esther and Chuck also contributed to the architectural development of Santa Cruz by fixing up homes on their own street. Lincoln and Chestnut was a "dump" of a neighborhood when Chuck and Esther moved in, but is now considered one of the classiest areas of the Santa Cruz flats. Esther describes how her family came to own the entire four-hundred block of Lincoln Street and how important "fixing things up" and making things nicer was to both Chuck and Esther throughout their lives together.

—Evelyn Richards, June 2003

Santa Cruz, California

Early Life

Richards: I'm interviewing Esther Abbott for the UC Santa Cruz Library. Esther, when and where were you born?

Abbott: I was born in Oak Park, Illinois in 1911. I'll be ninety-two in July, so I've lived through three or four generations, depending on how you count generations. But it's been a marvelous time, because when I was a child our sidewalks were made of wood, and our electrical outlets in our house all had a gas jet on the fixture, so you could either—if the light failed, you'd have the gas. So it's been years and years since there was a gas jet on every light plug. And we moved from that place…I went to a private school, so my mother made sure I'd get a good education.

One thing I remember especially about my mother was…Nobody had a car in those days, automobiles were almost unknown. There was one automobile on our block, within the two-block radius as a matter of fact. So, I took a cupcake that my mother had baked over to the neighbor with the car. They were wealthy people—you know, compared to the rest of us. And she gave me two pennies and I brought it home and showed it to my mother; and my mother made me take it back and that killed my soul. You know, I felt I had *earned* that and to have to return it…But anyway, that's a vivid memory of that era.

I was born in Oak Park, Illinois, you know, the flat land and I always wanted to go where there were mountains. I prevailed upon my parents to go where there were mountains, but my dad was a fisherman and they had a fishing home, summer place, shack, in Minnesota, so that's where we went for many years, summer in Minnesota. Which was

very nice, except that I wanted to go where the mountains were. But anyway my parents said, "You can't do anything until you get your education."

When I was sixteen I graduated from high school and then I was free to be on my own. My dad had enough money to set me up in business or send me to college. And I chose business. He said, "What kind of business?" And I said, "Show business!" So of all the dumb choices, but that was what I wanted to do. I had been educated to dance and play the piano, so I went into show business. A man by the name of Gus Edwards, you wouldn't know that name because he was an early, early entrepreneur and he found talent. He found Walter Winchell. He had an act with Walter Winchell and Eddie Cantor and certain old-time names like that were this act. And when I came along, of course I was sixteen, or by that time I was seventeen or eighteen, and he was starting out with new talent, finding a new round of young people wanting to get in show business, so he was my first manager.

I was in New York. I went to New York and that was before prohibition. I had lived in Chicago [during] the speakeasy time. So anyway, I played nightclubs there because that's the only place a girl dancer could work. And in New York, when prohibition was repealed, then that opened up and was very nice. I played hotels, separate clubs, and it was a lazy life. I only had to do two shows a day and I lived in a very nice hotel, got room and board and a salary, and so forth. And my dad also lived there. My mother had passed away. My dad was with me, and I'm an only child and didn't have any relatives, aunts or uncles or cousins. I did have [some relatives], but they were down on the farm.

I did toe dancing and ballet, in separate clubs. It was a popular type of dancing. Although it was on toe, it wasn't really strict ballet, but it was on toe. It was very flashy. I promised my dad I would get out of the business when I was twenty-five, young enough to do something else. So when I was twenty-four, I was in New York and I played lovely places in Washington, D.C. and down in Atlantic City, real nice places. But my dad said, "That's a lazy life." Of course, I thought that was great because I could do anything I wanted all day long, just do a separate club, a dinner date at the six o'clock show and then an after-theater show at midnight and that was all. But anyway, I lived and worked around New York, Boston, Schenectady, and the Eastern seaboard—nice places—until I was twenty-four.

And then my dad wanted to go back to Minnesota in the summer time. My mother had died, so we didn't exactly want to go back there where we knew my mother was gone and it was so different, but we went back and I hadn't realized what being in New York and being just in the city—so many people, so much pavement. I hadn't even seen a green tree outside of Central Park for a long time, you know? When we went back to our old place in Minnesota it was just so wonderful. We had a very nice summer there and it brought back old times.

When I got back to New York I looked out the window—we went back to the same hotel, the Claridge Hotel, 44th and Broadway—it's across the street from the Astoria Hotel, in Times Square. I don't know if it's still there or not. But anyway, I looked out of the window. We had gotten back that day and this was in the evening and I saw people like ants when you look out of the top story window in New York. And I thought, I must be

crazy, because the world goes on outside and has so much more to do than just what I'm doing. And by the way, the Claridge Hotel is across the street from the Paramount Theater and…I can't think of his name now…gee, a real popular fellow, a singer, he's dead now, but he was…who was in the rat pack? Sinatra! Frank Sinatra! He was just a young fellow, and the kids were swarming on the streets, the street was closed off, they were hollering. And I said to my father, "What are they hollering all about? What's all that about?" And he said, "Oh, I don't know. Some punk kid." [laughter] Frank Sinatra made his debut then. I guess he was a teenager—very, very popular. Anyway, I made up my mind then to quit.

Becoming a Photographer

That night I looked in the phone book to see what I could get into because I was twenty-four. I didn't want to go to college. I didn't want to go into nursing, or something like that, or do something that would require two or three years of training to do. The only thing I could find to do would be show business. When I came to photography, I thought, well that deals with line and light, and that's something that I know something about, because that's what dancing is, you might say. So that's what I did. I had $239 saved up, and after seven years of business that's all I had, so you know what kind of a business it was—you work a week, you're laid off a week—so it's no business. And furthermore, it's the one thing that…when a girl dancer…Any other business, when you age you're better or you're considered to be better, and you are better, you're more skillful. But a girl dancer is considered worse. You know, the agents say, oh she's been around. You know, they're always looking for somebody younger, somebody new. That

was a fact I didn't want to face in the beginning, but finally I did face it. So the very next day I went and enrolled in the New York Institute of Photography.

Richards: Wow! Your decision was based just off looking in the phone book?

Abbott: That's right.

Richards: And the next day you enrolled?

Abbott: I did. [My focus was] commercial and portraiture [photography]. I had a wonderful time there. I took two courses. It was an all-day-long affair. I rigged up a dark room in the bathroom and my dad helped me. My dad was a model [for my early photography], and wanted to help me do anything he could, and I wanted to do as much as I could while I still was in school because I was going to graduate after a three-month intensive course. There would be no one to ask after that, once I left there, if I made mistakes and so forth. So I started out and my dad said, "Which way shall we go?" I said, "I have no idea. What do you say, pop?" So my dad said, "Let's follow Horace Greeley's advice and go West. 'Go West, young man, go West.'" So we did. We went to different places. Norfolk, Virginia. I got a job as a receptionist. I stayed there a couple of months to learn what that was all about. Then I went onto another place—San Antonio, Texas, and I got a job in the darkroom there. That was not my goal, but it was experience because I was greener than grass. It rained all the time, almost all the time on this whole journey of the south. So when we left San Antonio we went to Arizona and that was the first time we had seen the sun in three months, almost. The sun had come out, maybe one day a week somewhere.

Richards: And what year was this?

Tucson, Arizona

Abbott: It must have been about 1934, because my first year in business was 1935. But in 1934 we would look in all the towns in Arizona as we went by, and when we went by. I'd look in the windows at the work to see what the competition was going to be, to see if they needed a good photographer at that time. When we got to Tucson I looked at the work in the window and I figured, well, here's the place for me. They can use a good one, and I'm good. You know, innovative and good. My dad had enough money to settle down. My dad was retired. So we rented a little house and to gain experience I took everybody's picture—the mailman, the milk delivery man, whoever came to the door in the neighborhood that I knew—just to get experience, so that when I really opened up a business I wouldn't fall on my face. So that's how I started out.

When things were going good, my dad built a house, a studio house, it was a combined studio and house at the same time. We had sold our property back East, so we had enough money to do that. I was cleaning house. It was brand-new and there was plaster and dust and everything around me, you know. This was 1935. I know that because that was my first year of business. I sent my dad down to get a photo license. And he came home and I said, "Well did you get the license?" And my dad said, "No. They wouldn't give it to me." And I said, "What do you mean they wouldn't give it to you?" He said, "You have to make a test portrait sitting in the local studio." In the studio of this man, Al Beuman happened to be his name, and I always thought that was a funny name. If that were my name, I certainly would change it. But that was his name. Anyway, I of course

said, "I'm not applying for a license to work in *his* studio. I want to work my own studio." Well, that was the law. So, I went down, and you had to take an examination, so I sat down. The examination was open to the public so it seemed like an honest thing, but it was a phony thing. The first question was: "Define light." Well, I think in *Webster's* dictionary there are three pages there [about light], and I said, "Light enables me to see this is a frame-up." Well, that isn't going to make friends and influence people. So every question I could answer in a sassy manner, I did. And of course, I didn't pass the examination. So, then when I didn't get the license I went to a lawyer and said, "What'll I do?" And the lawyer said, "Don't do anything. Just open up your studio and start business. Let them come and get you." So that's what I did, and I told all my customers that I didn't have a license because the mean ole people there wouldn't give me one, and it was very unfair. Well, the newspaper took it up. Here's this little lady here. She makes beautiful pictures and everything, and they won't give her a license. So that really helped me more than anything else. Nothing could have helped me more than that. So the little lady finally got the license and went into business.

Richards: How did the media find out about it? Just from the people you told?

Abbott: You know, when you do good work it gets around, and I made beautiful pictures. I'll show you some. I was in photography for fifty years. I had a studio for fifteen years and I finally sold the studio, and by that time I had enlarged, [added] a framing department and other things. My reason for selling it was that women whose pictures I had taken fifteen years ago came back with their children. When they got their proofs they would say, [gasps], like that, and I never knew whether they thought, "Oh,

how wonderful!" Or, "Oh how terrible!" You know: "You made me look terrible. I looked better fifteen years ago." Well, everybody looked better fifteen years ago. So I thought, you can't win. So that was the end of that. From that, and of course by that time I had a reputation and my husband…I had met Chuck [Abbott] and together…He was also photographic, but he was doing publicity photography, and so we became engaged and married.

Meeting Chuck Abbott

Richards: What year was this?

Abbott: I think that was 1940, because I know where I was when the Japs attacked Pearl Harbor. I was in the darkroom and I was married at the time. So I think we were married in 1940. I think my father died in 1939. It's been a lot of years and I don't count up the years.

Richards: Did your father and Chuck ever meet?

Abbott: No, they never did, no. I was all alone. And as a matter of fact, a fellow that knew me, a local businessman in Tucson, said to this fellow from California, [Chuck], a Californian photographer…I had called [the local businessman], he was the president of the Sunshine Climate Club. I had done work for them, and they wouldn't allow me to make a booklet that I wanted to make on Tucson, a great big one, by taking the photo engraving out of town—I could make it bigger and better. They wouldn't allow that. Everything had to be done locally. Well, this photographer comes to town, Chuck Abbott. I called [the president of the Sunshine Climate Club] up and I said, "How come

you won't let the photo engraving go out of town, but you can bring a photographer from California, of all places, in?" The man said, "Well, Miss Henderson, he's a photographer and he's also a cook." And I said, "Well, what the hell is he? A cook or a photographer?" He couldn't be both. But what Chuck did, was he photographed…publicity photographs. He put on cowboy parties—they were spectacular, really—for rich clubs. Wonderful outdoor…his fires would run twenty feet down, out in the open. He had three cowboys to help him and he had great, big skillets and he'd flip the potatoes up and they'd all come down without scattering. If I did it, I know that they'd be all over the place. But anyway, that was how the cook business got started.

Richards: So why did they hire him?

Abbott: He had a good reputation in California. There wasn't anybody doing what he was doing. One of the things that he did…by giving these parties (this was during the depression)—they couldn't advertise a "Dude Ranch," but he could show pictures of Mrs. Joe Doaks gnawing on a chicken bone at the chicken ranch and that would be publicized in the Cleveland paper, or wherever she came from. And then they would think about coming to Tucson for the winter, a winter resort. It was a publicity angle.

The thing I had against him coming was—here he comes in [without] having to take an examination. It took me a year to get a license, you know. And by the way, they gave it to me a month before it expired, so it didn't do me any good. Not only did they have him do that, but I used to have a Sunday paper with my [pictures] of society ladies in different poses, with a hat on or whatever, and suddenly my pictures disappeared from

the Sunday magazine section and here's a woman chewing on a chicken leg in place of my beautiful picture of a society woman. So that didn't set too well. [One day] I was in the darkroom. My secretary was in the outer room. She knocked on the door and said, "Chuck Abbott wants to see you." And I said, "You tell him I don't want to see him, and this is Christmas rush and I'm busy—no time." When I came out of the darkroom for lunch, I said, "Did you tell him what I said to say?" And she said, "No. He seemed awfully nice, so I didn't say that. I just said you were busy." So I thought—well, that was a dumb thing for me to do. I know if my dad were living, my dad would say, "Have him come over and give him a couple of drinks and see what's going on." So I called him up, "Mr. Abbott, would you like to come over? I'm so sorry. I was busy."

So he came over and when I opened the door and I saw him…And you know, Chuck had white hair very early in life, and he was so nice looking. I thought—gee, look at what a nut I was. Wouldn't even talk to him! Wouldn't even see him! "Come in Mr. Abbott." So I poured a drink for each of us, highball. I drank up mine and said, "Mr. Abbott, let me freshen your drink." And he said, "No, no, this is all I ever take." So I wasn't able to get him drunk.

Richards: Darn!

Abbott: Darn, yeah. So anyway, three months later we got married.

Richards: Wow, that was a whirlwind romance.

Abbott: It really was, yeah. It was just great. We were together in business until he died. Well, he was retired when we came here [to Santa Cruz]. Chuck always said the last ten

years of his life were the most fun because he was busy around town with the mall and everything, you know, which was awfully nice. I'm so glad that he did it. At that time, we owned the houses…. The first house that we had is the one on the corner [of Lincoln and Chestnut], a purplish house.

When we first came to look at this town, we were very heavily engaged in Ouray, Colorado, a little mountain town. A beautiful mountain place, not very far from Telluride; not near Vail, but the same kind of situation. A million dollar highway comes through there. They call it that because it was paved with ore containing a million dollars worth of gold and silver. The town is at seven thousand feet. It's right in a bowl of mountains, highest mountains in Colorado. Just a beautiful place, and we had plans to be there. We had bought a ranch there. We'd bought an old building—we were going to have a store there in the summertime—and this and that and so forth.

Coming to Santa Cruz, California

When we came here [to Santa Cruz] we had a heavy load there [in Ouray] to carry and we hadn't moved out of Tucson either—we had plenty there. So Chuck said, "Now remember. We're not going to buy anything, we're just going to look." The first place we saw, I said, "Papa, this is perfect. Just perfect." And he said, "No, I don't care what you say, we can't. We have no money!" Which is true. We had land, but we had no money. The real estate man took us to different places. He was an awfully nice fellow; we became good friends until he passed away. The house we saw was that [purplish] house there [on the corner of Chestnut and Lincoln Streets]. It's a beautiful little house. Not as big as you think it is. But it was so beautifully built—beautiful woodwork and things in

it and so forth. The price was $18,500. That night, Chuck said, "I'll offer them $15,000. I know they won't take it." They did take it. Suddenly we had a house! But we couldn't move into it because we had to dispose of something else before we could, you know…. It gradually took us ten years to get free of all the stuff we had in Colorado. We moved into the house in 1963. That's when we came here.

Richards: What was it that made you come to Santa Cruz in the first place?

Abbott: We were freelance photographers. We had, for years, taken cattle and environmental pictures—calendar pictures, all kinds of stuff. We had never seen the sunshine [in northern California.] We'd been to Carmel lots of times, but we had never been to Santa Cruz because it's out of the way, really. We had been up and down the coast, but never to Santa Cruz. The Oregon coast we had done a lot, and the mountains, Montana and the Rockies and so forth, but we had never been here. The real estate man who took us around was really out of business. He was just…he sold a little when he [could]. He didn't operate out of any office or anything. He said, "I'm free. I'd just like to show you folks around." We became friends. And I said, "What's the climate like?" He said, "It's like eternal spring. You'll love it." And that's true. It is. That's the way I would still describe it now—eternal spring. That was it. That's how we happened to come here.

And it distressed us…one year when we were here they tore down five beautiful old buildings between here and the mall. We made up our minds to do something. So we joined SCOPE—Santa Cruz Organization for Progress and Euthenics. It was a good outfit. It was all there was at that time. We all got together. We'd sit around a table, and at that time I think I had a darkroom…No, I didn't have anything in the way of a

darkroom. I had all the equipment of course, and I was working all the time. Chuck was retired, but I wasn't. I was photographing. I made three or four trips back East by myself, but it was pretty hard to drive all the way and do all the carrying. It's a lot of stuff [photographers] carry.

Richards: Where did you go back East?

Abbott: Oh, everywhere—Vermont and New Hampshire in the fall, and the Adirondacks**.**

Richards: To take photos?

Abbott: Yeah. It was wonderful, just beautiful back there, but the weather is…you can make the whole journey and have rain come and knock down all the leaves. Make your trip for nothing. But you get used to that when you're photographing outside. That was a great time. Chuck was busy remodeling that house over there [the purplish house on the corner of Chestnut and Lincoln]. We bought the house next door and the house next to that, all three houses. But Chuck wanted to be on this side of the street and he wanted those old houses, the row houses. He wanted them, and they were the biggest mess you ever saw. The people in them hadn't paid any rent for months and months and months. They were fixing old automobiles on the street, you know. When I would walk by, walking downtown, I'd cross the street and walk on the other side of the street rather than walk in front of those young fellows there that were repairing [cars].

Richards: When was that? Mid-1960s?

Restoring Houses in Downtown Santa Cruz

Abbott: 1963 was our first winter here, so it must have been in the early 1960s. I don't know exactly what time we bought those houses. But anyway, Chuck wanted to [buy them]. I didn't want to. I thought they were a terrible mess. I was happy with what we had on the other side of the street. I just wanted to get clear from indebtedness, you know, because we had so much.

But Chuck still had his eye on that stuff there [the row houses]. But he was already eighty and I didn't know what to give him for his birthday. He didn't drink. I couldn't give him a bottle of liquor. I couldn't give him a shirt or anything fancy in the way of clothes because he already had everything. So what else was there? There wasn't anything really I could give him. And I thought, "I'll tell him to sell the property." So I did. I said, "Let's move from Lincoln Street, from across the railroad tracks." And he said, "What got into you? Really?" It made him happier than anything I could have done. And of course by thinking of somebody else I benefited myself. I didn't mean to, but I really did. With the property we got all this land in back. My son [has an organic farm in back], this is beans for them, and the kids, they're home schooled. They've got their own time; they can do what they want to. They're not slaves from nine-to-five. I never was a slave. My dad left me with enough to be independent. Independent meant a lot to us.

Richards: What did your parents do?

Abbott: My dad was an inventor. He became vice president of the biggest printing press manufacturing company in the world. My father never saw a day of school after he was

nine years old. He was just self-educated, self-made. His father left his mother. They left in Mt. Zion, Illinois—never even heard of it. It was a wide place in the road, near Decater in southern Illinois. So my dad had to go to work and he supported his brother and mother for many years. Eventually, he lost quite a bit of money during the depression, but then everybody else did, too.

Richards: Were your kids with you when you moved to Santa Cruz, or were they grown by then?

Abbott: Yes [they were with us]. One son, when we moved here, Mark, went to high school. Mark that drowned, you know? When he was eighteen…I guess he was sixteen when we moved here. Because I know when he was eighteen…you always fear…you [think] you won't have to worry about your kids anymore [when they turn eighteen]—now they're on their own. Then he drowned. He was eighteen in January and he drowned in February. The oldest boy, Carl, he was in Vietnam [at that time].

Richards: So Carl and Mark were both with you when you moved here?

Abbott: Carl was already gone; he was in Vietnam. We told Mark, "Never go swimming without somebody." Well, he had three friends with him, but they weren't in the water. Not that they could have helped. When one of those big waves comes, that's it. We were lucky that they found him that day. The sheriff told us that if they didn't find him then, they wouldn't find him maybe ever or maybe for three weeks, but they did find him right away.

Richards: That was 1965?

Abbott: Yeah.

Richards: What year did Carl come back from Vietnam?

Abbott: I can't exactly remember the year, but we lived in the other house. We lived over there, and Chuck was still living.

Richards: Was Chuck a lot older than you?

Abbott: Yes, fifteen years.

Richards: So when Carl got out of Vietnam, he moved here to be with you in Santa Cruz?

Abbott: Oh, yes. Carl and his former wife—he was married twice. Leslie is his second wife. He married a Swedish girl who I was very fond of; she was a lovely girl. When he first came home…that was a lot of years ago and Chuck and I said he and Ingala—they weren't married then—couldn't live in the same bedroom in our house, being unmarried. Now that probably seems pretty narrow, but anyway that's the way it was. Anyway, Chuck financed a bus and they lived in the bus. They both got jobs. First, we got them a motel room until they got on their feet, until they got over…they both had…gee, I think they had hepatitis, I don't know what they had. They had something, though. When they were feeling better then we got 'em the bus and then they went into the Valley and they both got jobs and they both did all right. Before that they lived together in Japan and Sweden, and they had walked across a desert in the Sahara and I had a Christmas letter from Ingala's mother saying, "Have you heard anything from Ingala and Carl? They're somewhere in the Sahara." So they had plenty of excitement,

plenty of stuff. So anyway, [their marriage] wasn't meant to be. Ingala now lives in Bellingham, [Washington]. I introduced her to Bellingham. It's my favorite part of the country, Washington State. She lives there now, with a fellow from Illinois, [which is where I'm from], so that's odd.

Richards: So what does Carl do now?

Abbott: He makes Shakuhachi flutes and he sells them in Japan town, and he has a book. Then he also has a bluegrass book. He and the kids, the whole family, are bluegrass people and this is their book [*Family Tradition*]. They're very good. Saturday morning, they're going to entertain…the sheriff is having something for crippled children, so they're playing there. Carl teaches the kids. They're home schooled, so Carl does that and Leslie manages the properties. This is the cover of the Shakuhachi book, and the kids look so sweet there. Of course, they're a lot older now, both of them. They're thirteen and sixteen.

Richards: Do you really play the guitar or is that just for the picture [on the *Family Tradition* bluegrass book]?

Abbott: I tried to play the Dobro, but it interferes…I didn't have time.

Richards: But you play the piano…

Abbott: Yeah, I play the piano and the organ. I have so much to do. On Sundays I have at least ten hymns, and it just takes a lot of practice, partly because my eyes are so bad. I can't sight read. I have to learn everything. I have to memorize everything.

Richards: So this is at church that you play?

Abbott: Right.

The Salvation Army

Richards: How did you get involved in the Salvation Army?

Abbott: Years ago, when I was in show business…that was sixty or seventy years ago, when I was eighteen. You can subtract eighteen from ninety and know how many years ago it was. [Seventy-two.] Even I can't figure that out [on the spot]. But anyway, when I was walking down the sidewalk in New York, late at night, the Salvation Army might be standing under a streetlight on the corner, with about four people, playing coronet, a little band, and singing and you know, passing the hat. It touched me to see them out there. It looked like such a hopeless thing. You know, for pete's sake, who wants to do that? I thought, someday I'm going to find out what makes them tick. I thought of that very thing, that way. When we came here, I saw that the Salvation Army is right here! Right on Laurel Street, where I can walk to church. So, I went the first Sunday we were here, and I've been there ever since—forty years.

Richards: Is your family there too, or is it just you?

Abbott: No, it's just me. As a matter of fact, they [Carl and his family] have a church. Carl is a bona fide minister in the Tao tradition. [Their church is the] Tao Center [located two houses down from Esther]. They have services, but not very many people are interested in that religion. It's sort of nature… But [Carl and I] are not at cross-purposes [regarding religion]; we're really on the same page.

One reason I joined the [Salvation] Army is because you can do so much. As a matter of fact, I was unchurched for years and years—my whole lifetime. I was born and raised a Presbyterian, but my parents never went to church, never took me to church. They sent me to Sunday school and I hated it and I quit when I was ten years old. My mother said I could stop going, so I stopped going. But that's what church meant for us—it didn't mean anything. I like the Army because I love the old music, the old revival type tunes. And they're no fuss—nobody puts on their best clothes to go to church or spends any money on clothes, because we all have a uniform and [dressing up] doesn't mean anything. There's no show, and I like that. It's down to basics. We put our money and our effort where our mouth is. Nobody is hired to do anything, except the janitor and the secretary—and the pastor, naturally. But all the other people, it's all volunteer work. I just got a twenty-year pin yesterday or last Sunday for playing in rest homes. I've been doing that for twenty years. At first, I did that three times a week, but now I just do it once a week. I was a member of a little band. We had a good time, we played everywhere, but they all died. There were twelve people in it. They're all gone but me and one other fellow.

Richards: Do you two ever get together and have lunch?

Abbott: No. It's kind of sad. We never do. Our paths are divergent. He still belongs to some men's clubs. I don't know exactly what they are. But anyway, he's a different type from me. And I'm fully engaged with the [Salvation] Army. I work every morning. Some days I get through before noon, but some days I don't. And of course, during Christmas

time, it's all day long. So that's fine. I've got the time and nothing else to occupy me, but a little garden.

Santa Cruz Organization for Progress and Euthenics [SCOPE]

Richards: So tell me about when you guys first moved here and you started getting involved with SCOPE.

Abbott: We sat around a table. We made photos. I could show you them, too. At that time, I was traveling and Chuck took pictures that would pertain to SCOPE, while I took pictures on the big camera [we had] for my purposes. We would see everything and we accumulated quite a batch of pictures that told a story. When we'd come in off the road we'd show the pictures. We made overlays. For instance, Walnut Street, Burdick's old music store used to be there. I remember that in particular because we used to walk down that way a lot. And there was nothing but signs about. One of SCOPE's first projects was eliminating signs from downtown. So we had photographs of places that had signs, and places that had eliminated signs, and they looked so much better. We played the chicken salad circuit for months, a couple of years, as a matter of fact. We put on shows. The University has those shows, all the slides we took at that time. And we finally got people interested in making the Mall [on Pacific Avenue]. That was Chuck's project.

Richards: I heard you used Grand Junction as one of your models?

Abbott: Yes, we did. We did wherever…Grand Junction, they had a mall. And we visited other malls. I can't remember them all now. We made all the pictures at the University

now—before and after pictures, pictures that show the difference between who has and hasn't had sign control, or whatever.

Richards: So you were saying you played the chicken salad circuit? What was that like?

Abbott: I'll tell you, because we didn't have any business here, nothing to sway people—and we didn't know anybody—it was in the dark; we'd show our show and we didn't mean anything to anybody and they didn't mean anything to us. We didn't know them. So, when they see these pictures…"Oh, Harry! I never knew your place looked so terrible!" In the dark we would hear these voices. So we got a lot of publicity or promotion and made a lot of friends. We were busy all the time showing this show because it was so effective, and effective partly because we had no axe to grind. We didn't have any business to promote or anything.

Richards: So you were mostly giving your show to business owners…

Abbott: Yes, business people and club owners, because they were the people… Our motto was, "Beauty is good business." Civic beauty. You know, if you preach beautify to anybody, they're going to be deaf, but if you convince them it means good business… And it's true. We had picture after picture of neighborhoods that had gone down, that were once prosperous and just had gone down and tumbleweeds were now in the corners of stores because they had just let it go to pot.

Richards: What do you think about the way the Mall has evolved?

Abbott: I think it's nice. My son doesn't like it, but I like it. I think it's very nice. It can never be the same again [as before the earthquake]. It's just like the tornado that took away the old buildings in Missouri. I know what those buildings look like, and they were beautiful old buildings, but you know, they can't come again. So that's that. No, I think the Mall is fine, and I think they do good business. It always seems very popular and active.

Richards: Yeah, it does. Do you go down there much?

Abbott: Oh yeah, sure. I shop at Zanotto's [grocery store], so I go there at least once a week.

Richards: Do you still know any of the people that you were originally working to convince to change the Mall?

Abbott: No, I don't. All of the people I really cared about are gone. I've outlived them all. At my age, there's just nobody left that I know. I first came here and went to the [Salvation] Army forty years ago. I'm the last one that was at the church at that time. The rest of them are all gone. How does that make you feel?

Richards: You've got great genes! How *does* that make you feel?

Abbott: Well, it's sad in a way, you know? It means that you say goodbye to everybody that you used to know. People that Chuck and I…Chuck's been gone for thirty years. People who were fifty then are eighty now. So, they're not exactly looking for new… The older you get, the less likely you are to make new friends. I wouldn't because I'm

interested in doing what I do in my college courses on the video. [Esther has dozens of educational videos lining the room that was added to the house in 1869.] I never went to college so it's very satisfying to me to have the time and the means to access…I've been on Ancient Greece, now I'm on…in the Story of Civilizations…I'm on Turkey. All kinds of stuff; they have Anatomy now, and Commerce. They have all kinds of stuff there.

Richards: So tell me about the properties you guys own and why you decided to buy them.

Abbott: Oh, to save them! To save them. This is the nicest neighborhood in town, now. [Then] this was the crummiest [neighborhood]. We told the real estate agent, "Take us to the cheapest, worst place in town." He took us here. [laughter] Really.

Richards: And what did you think when you first saw it?

Abbott: Well, with the old cars on the street and everything, I thought it was a dump. But we didn't have any money. And my husband and I liked to fix things up. We always were fixers. Wherever we went we made it nicer. When we had left Arizona, we had built eighteen different buildings of one kind or another—houses or commercial buildings—just because we liked to. We'd make a little [money], lose a little [money], but we always had enough to start another project. And we never did anything for money; we did it just to make it beautiful. It all turned out very well. Had money been our goal, we probably would've lost it. We probably would have played the stock market or something we didn't know anything about. But [we were just] always wanting to make

something nicer. All of these houses have new foundations. Everything is new underneath.

Richards: How much do you own on this street?

Abbott: My son bought the house next to them, so we have the whole four-hundred block on this side of the street. Chuck wanted the row houses and I didn't want them. But then after we had them we got this one and then three houses here.

Richards: So you owned those when you lived in the purple house…

Abbott: No, we didn't own any of them when we lived in the purple house. We bought the house next door to that on the right hand side, and the house next door to that. We owned the three houses on Lincoln, on the other side of the railroad tracks.

Richards: Do you still own them?

Abbott: No.

Richards: Did you sell them to buy over here?

Abbott: Yes, to buy over here. And even then we couldn't make it, but the man who owned these house was an awfully nice man. He wanted to get rid of them because he wanted to do something else for the money, and they were condemned. That was why we were able to get them, because they were condemned. He either had to put $10,000 in them to bring them up to code, or knock them down.

Richards: How much did you and Chuck end up having to pay?

Abbott: $10,000. So, that was a marvelous bargain. We took our life insurance; we took every cent we had to put it in the houses.

Richards: So the $10,000 was to improve them so they didn't get knocked down, or the $10,000 was to buy them?

Abbott: It brought them up to code enough so that we could rent them. But in order to get rid of the people that were there, my husband found another place for them all to live, which believe me, the way they were it wasn't easy, and he paid the first and last month's rent for each one of them. That's the only way we could get rid of them, and believe me they were something to get rid of.

Richards: How did you explain to them why you wanted them to find another place?

Abbott: Oh I don't know. Chuck was pretty good at that. I don't know what he did. He probably told them the truth, that we wanted to fix it up. They hadn't paid any rent, so they didn't have any reason to want to stay there, as a matter of fact. I had scraped dog poop off the stairs. They threw the garbage out of the window. It was just a slum. At that time there were plenty of slumlords in this town, where there would be eighteen or twenty people in a house that would only accommodate half a dozen, at the most.

Richards: How do you think that changed in Santa Cruz?

Abbott: I think property just became so expensive and rents became high. We have the lowest rents in town I'm told. It's not fancy, but it's nice. And we never put anybody in. Everybody has the vote on who goes in. We never have a vacancy. They usually have a

friend or somebody who wants to live there. So that's a whole different set up than the average rental. It's sort of in the family, you might say. And my daughter-in-law, she's very friendly. She visits with everybody. She knows everything that's going on. Me, I couldn't care less, but I'm glad she's the way she is because she keeps a good look out on it. And when they do have trouble… Carl's very good at that too, smoothing things over, finding out the troublemaker—who's the troublemaker, you know? They have a meeting and they vote that person out, and the person leaves. Who wants to stay where you're not wanted? So it's very harmonious. My son and daughter-in-law wouldn't be happy any other way, so it makes a nice situation. And it's nice for me, because I don't have to bother with it.

Richards: Is there anywhere else in town you think people have done a good job of keeping up the old architecture?

Abbott: Well, a lot of people have fixed up their property. I don't know of anybody who's been able to make as big of a thing as we were able to because this was condemned; that made it possible.

Richards: Would you say you were kind of the forerunners of fixing things up?

Abbott: Oh, I think we were, yeah, because when we first came to town nobody thought about fixing anything up then. If people didn't like this area, then they went on the hill; they went some place else. They never tried to fix this area up. This was not the nicest place in town, but since then—and we pointed this out because in Philadelphia they've taken the oldest part, called…Society Square…I forget some of these things because it's

been so many years. Our pictures are full of it. But there are places in other cities where they took the oldest, most run-down place in town and made it charming. Germantown is like that and places in Alexandria, Virginia are like that, too, that are still very much alive. Innumerable [places]—Strawberry Hill in Portsmouth…New Hampshire, I think is where it is. I'm not sure. It's been years since I've thought of those things that were in our show. But we showed what could be done, and done in the worst part of town. You know, brought the town back. Now it's the most desirable place. Rents are very high. If you wanted to live near Washington in Germantown, it'd be very, very…It's like the cost of living on the hill here or something like that. [Living in the flats in Santa Cruz] is lovely for people without cars. It's a good walking town. This is a good walking town anyway. What else can we talk about? [laughter]

Richards: I'm thinking it would be nice to talk about some of the things you guys did, like the show. How long did you guys do that for?

Abbott: It seems to me that we were doing it for about ten years, but not as much as in the first years. The first five years probably we were doing it a lot. But we actually did it for about ten years, more or less.

Richards: Did you do part of the coordinating to get the new Mall built? Or you just kind of planted that in people's heads that using your ideas of remodeling would be the best way to do it when things did change?

Abbott: We just did it on our own. We didn't consult with anybody.

Richards: How did they finally make the decision to rebuild the Mall?

Abbott: I don't know. I think they realized what a rotten business they had. We pointed it out in the lectures. I rewrote those lectures…every week it seemed to be! Every time we had a show I re-did everything, because we had added more information and more pictures. Chuck was always taking a picture of something that we thought should be in the show, you know? In the middle of the season it seems to me, as I recall, there were eleven store vacancies in the center of the Mall, what is now the Mall—in the middle of the season. You don't have to be a brain surgeon to know there's something vastly wrong if a summer resort, as beautiful a place as this, you've got eleven empty stores in the middle of town. You've got to do something. So it wasn't hard. Chuck was meeting all the time with the merchants on the Mall. Really, he knew them all and they knew him; the only person who was against him happened to be Abrams, the brother. Eve Abrams and I were good friends. She was awfully nice and I liked her very much, but her brother, I forget what his name was, but he wasn't in favor of… He said, "Chuck, I'm not in favor of what you're doing, period. Goodbye."

Richards: What did he own?

Abbott: Abrams had the store down on the southwest corner of Lincoln and the Mall. I think it's Graphix or something now. Something else was in there; a Japanese store that was very popular was there for a while [Lily Wong's]. But he was the least favorable to Chuck. A lot of merchants, the Santa Cruz Hardware Store, Ken Windsel… Ken Windsel and Chuck were good friends. Jim Hammond. The reason we came to Santa Cruz is we got such a good letter from Jim. Before we came, we were thinking about where we were going to come to. Chuck wrote Healdsburg and Santa Cruz, and there were places

around. The nicest letter we got [back] was from Jim Hammond, from the County Bank in Santa Cruz. He's still living, but he's not well.[1]

Richards: Did you guys know him previously to getting his letter and moving to Santa Cruz?

Abbott: No, we didn't know anybody.

Richards: How did he get your letter?

Abbott: Well, I guess we sent it to the Chamber of Commerce because we didn't know anybody. Chuck also wrote letters to Healdsburg and Larkspur and Marin, and different places.

Richards: Didn't you say you were just coming to visit Santa Cruz, but you weren't planning on moving here?

Abbott: No, we were planning on making a move. We put it that way. We didn't know where we were going to be. We knew we were going to leave the desert and we knew we were going to come where there was water and oddly enough…this is a dry climate, this is a drought area. I never thought I'd hear the word drought again. I paid a hundred dollar fine for watering a decrepit little plum tree that I had out in back during the drought. I didn't want to tree to die and the water just disappeared. It went down a gopher hole. I don't know where I went. All I know is I spent the hundred dollars worth

1. James Hammond died on December 17, 2003 at age ninety.

of water on that dumb tree. And the tree died. Of course when we uprooted the tree we found the gopher hole. The tree was doomed from the start.

Richards: I want to clarify something, because maybe you said it and I just didn't understand: I thought you were moving to Colorado when you happened into Santa Cruz?

Abbott: Well, we had been. We had thought about it. That's true. We had established this store in Ouray.

Richards: How's Ouray spelled?

Abbott: O-U-R-A-Y. *Our*ay. But they call it *your*ay. *Our way, your way.* It's a marvelous place.

Esther Abbott's Photographs

Okay, let me go get you some pictures. [I photographed this] and then printed it and enlarged it.

Richards: What is it?

Abbott: It's somebody getting their teeth fixed. It's a gruesome looking thing. [laughter] But that's the way it was, and I thought that was so shocking because I made so many beautiful things, you know. This is the kind of thing that we did here that was so influential. [Shows picture from Fresno of modern-style concrete buildings from the 1960s and 1970s with signs and little greenery contrasted with pictures from Carmel of more quaint looking buildings, brick and wood, with flowers and plants in front and

twining up the building.] Showing what you *could* do with something. There's Burdick's old…that's Walnut Street—signs, nothing but signs. Here you've got a beautiful area; here they do business [points to Carmel buildings], here they don't [points to Fresno buildings]. Look, that's the way it used to be. One look at that…

Richards: And you change your mind. The first one especially—that's so ugly and the picture next to it is so beautiful.

Abbott: If you're going to make a change do something beautiful.

Richards: Does UC Santa Cruz have some of those photos?

Abbott: I don't think so. The University? I don't know whether they do or not. The only reason I have them is because I carefully did it. I was an expert color printer. I was an expert photographer, too.

Richards: [Pointing at glamorous looking head shots of young men and women, mostly women.] Who are those?

Abbott: Just people I took pictures of. That's how I made my reputation.

Richards: They are beautiful.

Abbott: Yeah, they're beautiful, and they'll always be good, no matter…because they have no clothing on that is… This is an old, old, old color picture of my dad, when color first came out. It's not very good color, but that's the best that it was. And this is the sheriff. This is the sheriff [that caught] [John] Dillinger. I don't know if you've heard of

Dillinger or if you're too young. Dillinger was a crook; he was a bank robber, he was everything. This is the way color used to be.

Richards: Who's this?

Abbott: An old lady who lived next door to me. This is me and some flowers.

Richards: So you've always done your hair the same way?

Abbott: I do it any way that's easy to do. I'm not interested in fussing. This man looked like Lionel Barrymore. Here's my dog. Isn't that sweet? And here's another sweetheart [dog]. This is Carl and this is Mark [when they were kids]. I told Mark to smile and look at him. I was scolding Carl and Peter, the dog, and he looks so sad. This woman was our secretary [in Tucson], a pretty girl. These are college girls. I was a big college photographer. It was a very interesting business. I was glad to do it, glad I had that time of my life. I liked to take interesting pictures, not the same old thing. This is a very stunning girl. What I was really looking for is anything that pertains to what you're interested in. These things, see? [Shows magazine covers] Those are just things that I took along the road that were published.

Richards: So you would take a picture and then find different magazines you thought might publish it?

Abbott: That's what an agent is for. You send everything to the agent. They have them on file there and they submit them. When people want pictures they contact the agent.

That box is full of them. Nothing more that pertains to here there or anywhere. I just kept these for old-time's sake. [Putting away pictures.]

Richards: Here, you forgot the picture with the teeth.

Abbott: Oh yeah. That shocks everybody, including me. I'll tell you, it's been very interesting. If you talk to anybody my age, or younger, from fifty [years old] on, they'll tell you it's not the same world. It's a different world. Everything is different. All of our mechanical things… It seems odd, but in my life my mother never had a refrigerator. She had an icebox. We called it an icebox because there was a block of ice in it. It doesn't seem possible now. When I was a child we had a buttonhook in every bedroom so that you didn't have to go and hunt for a buttonhook, you could button your shoes. Now does that seem odd? You couldn't buy a buttonhook nowadays. If you had a thousand dollars it'd be pretty hard to find one. My kids, they could go anywhere on their bike…We didn't have any restrictions just as long as we knew where they were going and when they were coming back. But Leslie, my daughter-in-law, when my grandsons were little she would stand out here and nurse maid 'em. You know, watch in case anybody would try to pick them up or something. It's just terrible. You go in the Mall and these young girls, not only girls but boys too, are sitting around wanting a hand-out. That's terrible. Lying across the street, you know? You're used to that but I'm not used to that. My husband Chuck would have a fit. It won't last that way forever. The pendulum swings both ways. When this passes it'll be back to be more normal… Now, nobody is responsible. It's a whole new attitude—me first. That doesn't sit well with somebody who…joined Salvation Army.

Richards: Do you feel like Salvation Army has kind of kept you—even though you said you're not necessarily a people person so much, but you prefer to do things by yourself because you can do them faster and better…

Abbott: The [Salvation] Army is great because it gives me a chance to do a lot of things. With the Army I have had children… I had a bell group [that collects donations in front of stores during Christmas time]. I've always had a bell group, for years. I don't anymore, but I did for a long time. Through the Army I was able to do all kinds of things. Play at the rest homes for instance. That doesn't seem much to you, but it's the thing that I can do, and to be able to do it, to have a place to do it in is really, especially at my age, is nice. Most people at my age, there isn't very much you can do. You can garden or you can play cards, but you can't do very much.

Richards: Are you glad you're still in Santa Cruz?

Abbott: Oh yes, I'm glad. I think this is a very choice place to live; a wonderful climate, never too cold, never too hot—all the more reason why we shouldn't have bums. We're too good to have a bunch of bums around.

Richards: What do you think some of the major turning points have been with Santa Cruz, good and bad, with how the town has gone?

Abbott: The bad things are just a reflection of the times. It's just in general, a lack of responsibility, a lack of discipline, there's no discipline anymore, generally—not in the home, not in school. I don't blame the schools because teachers have a job, to teach, but they can't teach with a bunch of kids that have no discipline at home. We know what

that is [at the Salvation Army] because we've got the same kinds of kids in Sunday school. I don't teach Sunday school anymore. I used to, but I don't anymore. I did for forty years but I stopped because I couldn't get through to them. They were just impossible. You can lead a horse to water, but you know, you can't make 'em drink. Can't make them pay attention. I made big drawings of all kinds of things, bible stories and stories from life, experiences of different people, but they didn't pay any attention. They would just mess around. [Gets up to get drawing in other room] I'd have the picture up there and it wouldn't mean anything to them. When you do the best you can and you don't receive any…nobody even knows you did it, it's hardly conducive to continuing. [Comes back into front room where we're interviewing] Let me see… [Takes out picture.]

Richards: So this is one of the pictures you drew for the Sunday school?

Abbott: They were like this. This is one I drew for Chuck's…for our show.

Richards: How'd you learn how to draw?

Abbott: Oh, I never 'learned,' I just figured—I know what it looks like, why can't I draw it? I just picked it up and drew it.

Richards: [looking at drawing similar to Carmel pictures of storefronts] Oh, beautiful.

Abbott: Well, it gets the point across. It shows what it *could* be. It's just an old enlargement. This was something Chuck had made—"PROD: Private Rehabilitation Of Downtown." That was kind of an organization that Chuck founded to rehab downtown;

privately, not with government money. Everything else is using government money. This gives you the idea. I had forty years' [worth of drawings]. I sent them off to Salvation Army Corps in Alaska, where I know they can use them. And I gave all of my photo equipment—I only did this this year, because as I grow older…I'm not going to live forever, probably you thought I was… [laughter] but even I know I'm not. So I gave it all to the Mormon Church, because I know the Mormons will use it. I didn't give it to the Salvation Army because they would just sell it and I could sell it if I wanted to, but I don't want to do that. I want to give it to somebody who will use it.

Richards: How do you know the Mormons will use it?

Abbott: Mormons use everything. Our partner in the color lab—we had a color lab for years—was a Mormon. We've known a lot of Mormons, doing photographing in Utah and Colorado, too. They have a funny religion, but they live by their religion; I greatly respect them for that. Which is more than I can say for a lot of church people. Not Salvationists because they live pretty much their religion, but Mormons do especially, you know? No coffee, no tea, no liquor, no coke, no nothing, you know? There will be some jack Mormons who'll break all the rules, but I mean in general, they're very, very thrifty people; very active people. I knew that they would do that, use the [photography] stuff, and I wanted it used because it was beautiful equipment. Two cameras. One of them was never used, but I had an extra camera…and big cameras, not little cameras, big cameras. One was never used, but I had to carry it for fear of having an accident on the road with the other one. I was going to show you something else. You'll get a kick out of this. I'll bring it out. [Goes into other room]

You know, I feel like I've lived ten different lives and every lifetime has been about ten years. Ten years I was in school; ten years—fifteen years really—in the color lab; ten, no, fifteen years in the corporate business. Boy, I could tell you. When color was just coming… In my time you couldn't buy color, you had to paint it. You know what the old pictures looked like when they were painted—didn't look like much. Before this [new color technology] was developed, that's the way they were. [Takes out long roll of pictures of people dressed in colorful representations of Native American clothing]. I kept this as a reminder of my roots, where I came from in the color business. It's a test strip of [American] Indian portraits I made. Almost all of the portraits are gone. They've either been sold or given away. But before I made the prints [of these photos], I took a test because some of them, the color wouldn't come out good.

Richards: Did these people commission the portraits?

Abbott: Oh no, they were taken for magazines. So, it doesn't come easy [to create color pictures]. This is just the test and if this works out right then you go on and make the regular print.

Richards: Got it. They're very colorful.

Abbott: They are. They were beautiful, beautiful prints. I couldn't keep the print, but I kept this to remember them by. Oh, we had a hard time when color was first developed and we didn't know what was wrong when everything would come out wrong one day. Come to find out there was algae in the water. How algae could grow in that kind of water… But then still, algae is growing in Yellowstone Park in the hot springs. Algae

grows everywhere. So it wasn't so hard to figure that out, but I never thought they'd grow here, and I never thought the termites would eat the color film.

Richards: What were some of the other transitions or changes that happened when you switched to color film?

Abbott: The demand. When we first started out, when Chuck and I were first married, we took one box of color film to ten of black and white film. By the time we finished and came here [to Santa Cruz] it was just the opposite. We took one black and white to every ten colors.

Richards: That was twenty-three years later, 1940 to 1963, right?

Abbott: Yeah.

Richards: I have a question about some of the photos up at UC Santa Cruz that Chuck took during the war. Half of those photos are from Chuck's perspective and half are from the German perspective, and we thought maybe Chuck's business partner in New York took those during the war and gave them to Chuck.

Abbott: I don't know about those pictures, but Chuck was in the [U.S.] Army. I have a little book of his. He hung around [in Europe] after the war and took snapshots, and he would take orders for them. They were just little snapshots. They weren't anything special, but he would take orders and sell them to Americans who wanted souvenirs. They were different things than you could normally get…skulls, getting skulls in the picture or something like that. But he did have friends in Germany and he imported

fancy birds into New York when the war ended. He sold enough pictures to go into business, and the business he went into was importing fancy birds. He opened a shop on Fifth Avenue. Of course, this is long before my time; I never saw it, but I've seen pictures of it. Chuck has spats and a straw hat and a cane, and he was livin' the life of Riley. A German friend sent these birds over, but eventually… Then Chuck married a New York Junior Leaguer. And they went down to Florida and they opened up a casino, not a gambling casino but a dancing casino. There was no prohibition…I don't know whether there was prohibition or not…I guess there was still then. Anyway, a tornado came along about 1926, and I've heard of it since then. It wiped them out, completely. They had a baby daughter at that time, she was about six months old, and he told his wife…now they didn't have anything, but her people were pretty well off…so he told his wife to take the baby and go back to her folks, which she did.

Richards: Why did they decide she should leave?

Abbott: Well, they were separated by that time, and Chuck went west. He didn't have anything then, either. So he went home to Oregon and got going again and his wife at that time went back to her folks. Chuck had a sister that was living in Carmel. Chuck opened up a pie shop. He served pie and coffee and ice cream, light stuff like that, in the middle of Carmel. He had a sister who was married to a man who was a drinker and they had a lot of trouble. She wanted Chuck to come to Carmel and stay a while and protect her because this fellow, when he was drunk he'd be wild. They were divorced, she got free of him, and Chuck got out on his own. He left that place there, and he went to work for the Desert Inn in Palm Springs. At that time there was only one hotel there

and that was it. Otherwise there were just Ma & Pa little places, but Desert Inn was a wonderful place. Chuck worked there giving these cowboy parties. Of course, this is during the depression. Same reason he came to Tucson. He got free publicity from the cowboy parties that he gave.

Richards: You both did so much.

Abbott: Yeah. And I did my best to not beat him. I want to tell you. This friend that I worked for [in Tucson] that wanted everything done in town, I called him up, you know, and said—here you brought this photographer from California of all places. He said to Chuck later, "Why don't you go see Esther Henderson? She's a nice girl, she's all alone." He used those very words. So, that's why Chuck came to see me [that first time]. That fellow just died this year, a few months ago. I think he's one year older than me. I heard from him last year, as a matter of fact. We were still going strong.

Richards: He really got you and Chuck together.

Abbott: He really did. He said to Chuck, "Why don't you go and see Esther? She's a nice girl and she's all alone."

Richards: So he's the one you called to complain that they hired Chuck, an out-of-towner for a job, while they wouldn't let you, a local, just take an engraving to a shop out of town to make it bigger.

Abbott: Yes, yes, he was the president of the Tucson Sunshine Climate Club.

Richards: So he had Chuck visit you, even though he knew you were mad about the Club hiring Chuck?

Abbott: Well, I was famous in Arizona and he always knew me, and he knew about Chuck, so… And he outlived everybody, but he didn't outlive me…yet! Everybody else that I used to know, they're all gone. There isn't a single photographer. I could tell you all kinds of horror tales. One photographer we were good friends with, his wife is still living, but she's about eighty-eight and she has Parkinson's disease. She can't write me or anything, but she's still living. Her mind is perfectly good. She's in Mesa, Arizona. Different photographers that I've known have died over the years. Everybody that I knew, including the editor of *Arizona Highways* is dead. I have a plaque from them—fifty-year anniversary.

Richards: Seems like you and Chuck really made a lot of friends in a lot of places.

Abbott: We did. They're all gone now. It's just a question of time.

Richards: Are your son and his wife active in the community at all?

Abbott: No, not in this [kind of] scheme, no. They're not like that at all, neither one of them is like that. Carl is basically sort of a shy person, I think. He's just not interested in civic things. He wants to live right and do right, but not civic. Chuck was very remarkable that way. It takes a certain type of person, and Chuck was that person. I'm not, but he was; very friendly. Now, Leslie, Carl's wife does that in this property here, but she's not *civic*. When they have a clean-up or something, naturally we participate, but nothing like Chuck—face to face with everybody. Another enemy that he had here—

an enemy in the sense that he was never a friend—was…well known family here, but the name escapes me. You would know the name. They own a lot of stuff. His son-in-law wanted to do something down here at the corner of Chestnut and Laurel Streets. He wanted to put in a mall there and Cynthia Matthews and I, and other people in this neighborhood group foiled him. He didn't get to do it. We each put up a thousand dollars to hire a lawyer and they got him so that he couldn't do that. They put up the housing, which we need. We need housing, we don't need another mall sucking the business out of the mall that we've got, and that's what he wanted to do. He was another person that said, "Chuck, I won't oppose you, but I won't agree."

Richards: Is there anything else you want to have on tape about your life or Chuck's life, what brought you to Santa Cruz, or about Santa Cruz itself?

Abbott: The thing that brought us to Santa Cruz really was we were fed up with the desert. We had seen the desert go downhill. All the towns, places that we knew…nobody was doing what we thought should be done. I don't know whether they've changed or not. Arizona was great for tearing things town. Santa Cruz is pretty good at that, too; if something is fifty years old, might as well get rid of it, you know? So we were anxious to move to a wetter climate. We were tired of the heat. Arizona only has two seasons: hot and cold. We went to the fall in Colorado—just beautiful in the fall. Anyplace…Northern Arizona is beautiful in the fall. But we lived on the desert and the desert was robbed of water—everybody's got a swimming pool. The land has sunk at least twenty feet in some places from the water table being lowered. We first saw that happening when… Santa Cruz River runs from North to South, from Tucson to Nogales, Mexico. It's not

much a river in general, but it can flood and do damage. There were great big poplars all along the course and in the fall you could see this line of gorgeous, yellow trees all the way to Mexico, sixty miles. And they all died. We couldn't imagine what they died of, you know, what attacked them. Water, they didn't have any water. The water table went down so low their roots didn't get it. That was our first experience with the water table being so low.

Abbott's House and Garden

Richards: I'd love for you to talk a little about what your own house looks like and so forth. When I walked up I noticed your house is set back a little from the street, it has a beautiful white fence and all these lovely flowers. What kind of flowers are those out there?

Abbott: Iceland poppies. They just love cold weather; the only good flower to have in this area in the wintertime. They are gorgeous. I feed them with Miracle-Gro. I should own the company by now. They make the blossoms so big they look like they were made of silk. They look like silk flowers. That's because they've been fed.

Richards: When I came in your house I noticed everything is so colorful. You've got all these glass jars and the stained glass parrot…

Abbott: I've given away all my favorite antique things, antique lamps and things like that. I'd rather give them away when I'm alive than to have my son and daughter do it when I'm dead. The things that I have now I live with. That mirror was Chuck's

Christmas present to me at our first Christmas, and that one was our second Christmas. [Pointing to mirrors in carved, wooden frames.]

Richards: Where did they come from?

Abbott: Oh, I don't know. Somebody's old house. They had a garage sale.

Richards: [Reading a plaque on the side table]: "God Bless This Home As Much As Possible."

Abbott: That came from a dear friend. She's gone. She had pancreatic cancer. A funny thing happened the other day. I sent a bunch of these pictures back to our former partner in the lab. He still has a lab and he owns it all now. His business has changed quite a bit; they've had their troubles changing things over. I sent him some of these pictures—maybe he could use them for display, if nothing else. I could remember some of the people, so I put the names on of the people I could remember. I didn't mean for him to do it, but he did it—he took him around to the houses where the people still live and gave them to them. He said, it was nice of him, he might get another customer for the color business, you know. So those people wrote me back. One family, my son's best playmate when [we were in Tucson] lived right in back of us on another street. They had three or four children and they all were at our house all the time. The boy and Carl and another girl were about the same age. The boy died fifteen years ago of cancer, the girl also died of cancer, and the mother now has cancer. The person who wrote me the letter was the baby at that time. It's kind of sad when you think of it. So many things have happened to so many people, you know.

Richards: What color would you call your walls?

Abbott: Red.

Richards: Cinnamon.

Abbott: Tomato soup. Just red. I like red, because it's a warm color. Red, and a red carpet. You can't get any redder than that.

Richards: And a lot of beautiful wood colors in this room.

Abbott: Yes, yes. I like wood. That old sideboard was in a fishing shack that my dad had. I mean shack—no bathroom, no plumbing, no nothing. No electric light or anything, in Minnesota. That was there with a marble top and everything when we bought the place. I don't know what my dad paid for it, probably very little, maybe under a thousand dollars for the place and the land around it and so forth. But I've hung onto that all these years because…I thought it was the ugliest thing I ever saw, but my mother thought it was just beautiful. Well, I think it's beautiful now. But I hung onto it because it was my mother's favorite thing. And it really is a beautiful old thing. I don't know what you'd have to pay for it now. Plenty.

Richards: Where did that picture of Chuck come from? Did you take it?

Abbott: No, I didn't. That was taken by my best photographer friend and I like it better than any picture that I've taken of Chuck.

Richards: What's your best photographer friend's name?

Abbott: Well, he's gone now. He died of Alzheimer's and his wife is the one who has Parkinson's.

Richards: Do you and she get a chance to talk on the phone much?

Abbott: No, no. She's in a rest home. I don't like to telephone. I always forget what I'm going to say or what I wish I had said, you know. I always think better afterwards. I like letters because I can enclose things.

Richards: Where did that hand come from, with the blood coming off it?

Abbott: Yeah, how about that? It came from a neighbor. I think it was a Halloween joke, but I like things like that. I like funny things like that. This thing here [holds up a lighthouse figurine] Split Rock lighthouse. The light turns on. A friend gave it to me. She knew that I like lighthouses. [Holds up another lighthouse.] This is overlooking Lake Superior, not fifty miles maybe from Duluth [Minnesota]. From where this lighthouse is you can see sunken ships because of the iron ore in Minnesota because of the Masabi Range. It threw the compasses off. That's why they have the light there, and the ships are sunk there. It's on a high cliff and I photographed it when I was alone. I walked down the cliff you know, I wanted to get that picture of the lighthouse down below the lighthouse, you know? I thought I'd never get up again. I had to take two trips; leave some stuff there while I took half of it back up. Nobody else was idiot enough to go down there.

Richards: Did you get to sell that picture since it was a unique view?

Abbott: Oh, yeah. Yes. This here is like a little store Papa [Chuck] and I had lunch in every time we went to Telluride, which is near Ouray. I've seen those towns disappear the way they were. Now it's a ski resort. It's ruined. As far as I'm concerned it's ruined. But when you live too long, that's the way you feel. It really is too bad. It helps to preserve it. And that's an apron [hanging on the wall]. I thought that owl peeking out there was the cutest thing. All these paintings are mine, but I've given most of them away. This painting isn't [mine], but I like it so much because it looks so much like Daly City. It's very clever. Do you know what it is? It's pieces of cardboard cut out, it's a negative relief, a lot of work, very clever. I made the frames too [for my paintings]. I got fed up with the portrait business, but we still had quite a business there—portraits and picture frames and other stuff, photo finishing…so I turned my attention to picture framing and I made beautiful frames. But I've given most of the best of them away. Different things [in this room] came from different places.

Richards: Do you ever get any of this stuff from the Salvation Army?

Abbott: The things that people give the Army are usually clothing and stuff like that. I never take anything. I'm going to last longer than any of this stuff, maybe—maybe not. Maybe it'll be here when I'm gone. But I never get anything anymore. I have to throw something out in order to bring something back in. You can see that yourself. I got those [wooden figurine] animals when Carl and Leslie got married. They bought me the piano before they got married, before that I had a little tinhorn piano. When I was a child I had a Steinway, but I gave that away years ago when I was in show business. I didn't have the room or any reason for a piano. But anyway, I took them on their honeymoon. I went

with them. I paid for their honeymoon. Well, you know, we were separate at night, but I went with them. Carl wanted to go to Arizona, wanted to go back to where he grew up and Leslie had never been there, so from here we went to Silver City, [New Mexico]…. Leslie's sister lived in Silver City, so we went there and then we went to Arizona. We went places that Carl remembered, and we went back to Tucson and so forth. Many changes, not welcome, but a lot of them.

Richards: Can you tell me the history of the house here and how it changed over the years? What year was it built?

Abbott: We don't know that, but when they put the new part on—it began with just two rooms—and when they put the new part on, they papered the wall with newspaper, and the date on that paper is 1869. So we figured that the house was maybe ten years old before they put the new part on, what they call the new part. And then we put on two bedrooms, and we made a bath. Before that there was no bath. In the back we took three truckloads of trash out of the back. It was one big mess. You couldn't even get in it. You couldn't even get in there it was so much trash. If it had been desirable, we wouldn't have been able to buy it; it would've already been bought by somebody, no doubt. Although, it truly started I think…we were among the first fixer-upoers, at least on a big scale.

Richards: It's a beautiful garden now that your son keeps up in the back.

Abbott: That back garden is all his. They eat all their vegetables [from there] and got about twenty fruit trees. All their citrus and everything comes off their garden. They

even grow wheat and thresh the wheat, make bread out of it. It's nice for the kids to see something happen like that.

Richards: Do they do any Farmer's Market stuff?

Abbott: No, they never have enough left over, just enough to give to friends or something. They really eat it up pretty much themselves. They're busy. They're always rehearsing their music. Their bluegrass is quite important to them and they like the people they meet doing that. It's an awful nice pursuit for the boys. They're wholesome people and not in a nightclub or something.

Richards: [laughs] Which is what you did, right?

Abbott: Which is what I did, that's right. The air was blue with smoke, you could have cut it with a knife. And you know, we took a few days' vacation two weeks ago. We went to Las Vegas. That was my idea. I wanted to go there, I wanted to see it before I die, because they show it you know? It's so fantastic. The money, what they've made there, you wouldn't believe it. Fantasyland. Absolutely fantasyland. I was there when Bugsy Seagull was still living, so you know how long ago that was, you weren't even born then, when I was in Las Vegas. Well, you can look out. There's a place on the strip, what they call the strip, where the buildings either fell down or they tore 'em down and you can look out over the desert—looked just like a dead den fifty years ago, litter, dirty, dusty and desert vegetation such as a little bunch grass here there and the other place. But the rest of it is so beautiful, you wouldn't believe. There are two places especially, if you hear of them… The water fountain. It's a wonderful show of spray. It doesn't sound like

much, but it is and there's some sound equipment that goes with it. And Venice, if you visit Venice there, that is really something. A gondola, and they've got a canal. Not just one gondola and one little piece of water, it goes on and on and on around—here's a square here, a square there, a square some other place. The time of day is twilight, the lamps are lighted, but it's twilight. You can see the buildings, you can see the architecture and the architecture is pure all the way—it's just like the Dogis Palace. I've been in Venice years ago, and it's just like that. And the sky. You look up and the sky is blue with white clouds; you sort of feel that they're moving, but they're not, it's just you that are moving. There's indirect lighting, but I don't know how they do it. Most indirect lighting, you can see the source of the light, but there you can't see the source of the light; it's just all over glow, it's marvelous. And it's not just one place; it's all over, and each room, each portion or each square—St. Mark's Square, another square over here—must have a sky of its own. In other words, it isn't one vast sky, but it looks like one vast sky. If you ever go [to Las Vegas], be sure you go to Venice because that's worth seeing, that's worth the whole trip.

Otherwise, I felt terrible the whole time. My eyes ran from cigarette smoke and I couldn't see good because it's real dark. My son had to take me by the hand. He had to let my hand go because I had to blow my nose all the time; my nose ran, my eyes ran, and my mouth was so dry I couldn't spit if you gave me a hundred dollars. It was agony, but it was very nice. I'm glad we went. It's wonderful what they've done, but it's Never-Neverland. We were all glad to get away. To me, it's a terrible put-down. I'm used to opening the door and closing the door, going up the stairs, down the stairs, not being led by the hand. And the doors open, the doors close, you don't touch anything. I can't

believe it. You feel like they're making you…you can't do anything for yourself there. But it's an experience.

Richards: Thank you so much, Esther. This has been a wonderful interview.

Abbott: Well, it's been a great life. It has, it really has. God's been good to me, gave me so much. Gave me all the years, all the days of all the years and all the places. The most beautiful things, nature, to see and savor, and I hope to pass onto somebody else through pictures. That was our thoughts. Mt. St. Helens, we were there many times before the eruption. I couldn't believe it when it happened, just couldn't believe it. But, it's been something to see, been a life to live.