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SBOH-9, Kermit Tarke
Interviewer: Cora Stryker
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Cora Stryker: This Cora Stryker interviewing Kermit Tarke on March 3, 2006. First of all, thank-you very much for agreeing to participate in this study. When and where were you born?

Kermit Tarke: I was born in Marysville, California, March 12, 1937.

Cs: And when did your – but your family lived here in the Buttes, right?

Kt: Yes, right here.

Cs: Okay. And were you living in this house? [Interview is taking place in the living room of the old Tarke Victorian on West Butte Road]

Kt: Yes.

Cs: Okay. So your father – Eldon is your father's name, right?

Kt: Yep.

Cs: And did he build this house?

Kt: No. Original house was built here in 1856 by my great-grandfather, was taken down and this house replaced it in 1885. My great-grandfather went on a trip to Germany and his three children built the house while he was gone.

Cs: And that was Fredrick Lewis Tarke?

Kt: Lewis Frederick.

Cs: Lewis Frederick.

Kt: My grandfather.

Cs: Your grandfather, okay.

Kt: He has two sisters.

Cs: Got it. And that 1885 house is this one, right?

Kt: Yeah.

Cs: Okay. And um, when did it come to pass that you moved out of this house?

Kt: When I was 26 years old, 1963.

Cs: Is that when you were up here at Davis?

Kt: No. I went to Davis in 1955 and 56. I got married in '63 and built the house adjacent to this one.

Cs: Where you live now?

Kt: Yeah.

Cs: And who was living in this house when you moved out?

Kt: My mother was still living here. Anna Tarke.

Cs: And she was Norwegian, right?

Kt: Yeah.

Cs: And how did she – I know the story of Frederick Lewis Tarke coming over – what is the story of how your mother came over – because she was born in Norway, right?

Kt: Yeah. She was born in Norway and she came to the states when she was three years old with her mother and father. And I think they were in Staton Island, New York for a number of years and then they moved to Stanley, North Dakota. And were there until she was 20 years old and then they came to California. I don't know what year that was. She was born in 1897. So she was about nineteen, seventeen I guess when [inaudible].

Cs: And um, how long has this land been in the family?

Kt: This is a hundred and fifty years this year.

Cs: A hundred-and-fifty?

Kt: Hundred and fifty years.

Cs: Is there a birthday cake?

Kt: [laughing] Not yet.

Cs: And, so, I know a little bit of the story of how, it was your great-great grandfather who first –

Kt: Great-grandfather.

Cs: Great-grandfather. And he purchased it with Hoke? Is that correct?

Kt: No, he, he got his own place here, 2,000 acres. Hoke had the next ranch up the road here. They were buddies. Peter Frederick Tarke and Frederick Hoke. They were buddies in the [inaudible] field, and before that on the Mississippi River they were on a steamboat, working. And they came here and started the ranches. It was mainly a horse ranch. My great-grandfather raised working horses. It was all – everything was horses in those days. There was no almond fields or tractors or any kind of [inaudible]. He had the three children and then my grandfather, Lewis Frederick, had five children. My dad had two brothers and two sisters. They all lived in this house. And, of course the two sisters got married and moved out. And the two brothers got married and moved out. My dad was here until he was 33 years old, when he married my mother and they lived here with my grandmother until she passed away.

Cs: Did you know your grandmother?

Kt: No, it was before I was born. In the early thirties, nineteen thirties.

Cs: And when did her husband pass away?

Kt: My grandfather? 1925.

Cs: And how did the land get passed down through your father to you? Was it split equally between the brothers and then passed down that way?

Kt: Yeah, my father had a will and left a hundred [inaudible] acres between me and the – or one thirty – me, my brother and my mother. He died in 1957 and then we split it up according to whichever one wanted which property.

Cs: Was that both the flatlands and butte lands?

Kt: Yeah. Yeah, 300 acres down in what you call the Meridian Basin. Some of the best farming land in Sutter County. And then he had just 2,000 acres in the Buttes, some it's tillable, and the rest of it's the hill land.

Cs: What did you grow in the Meridian Basin?

Kt: Oh, my brother took that part of the ranch. He grew rice, tomatoes, wheat, sac flour, just about anything he wanted.

Cs: Is it so rich because of the floods?

Kt: Well, no, it's a heavy soil. It was reclaimed in 1910. Before that it was a swamp area. And they built the levees here on Sutter Bypass and Sacramento River to contain the water and then they reclaimed it – called Reclamation District 70. 30,000 acres of

reclaimed land. And they put in ditches and a pumping station to pump out the rainwater in the wintertime. And that pumps it back into the Sacramento River.

Cs: And that's how they reclaim it, they just keep it dry?

Kt: Yeah.

Cs: And so, when the land came down through your grandfather and was split between your father and his siblings, how did that work?

Kt: Well, I said he had 300 acres but he had more land than that down there in the Meridian Basin. He actually had 1,000 acres down there.

Cs: You grandfather?

Kt: Yeah. And that thousand acres was divided among the five siblings. [Inaudible.]

Cs: And that was flat land?

Kt: Oh yeah.

Cs: And what about the range land?

Kt: Well my grandmother still had that until she died and she willed it to my dad.

Cs: Not your uncle?

Kt: No.

Cs: Do you know why that was?

Kt: Well, I guess they weren't interested in this Butte land or, I don't know. And my dad stayed here and took care of his mother for a lot of years, so she left it to him.

Cs: So growing up here in the Buttes, what sort of community activities were there? Did you see your uncle and your cousins very often?

Kt: Oh yeah, we did a lot of visiting in those days. Aunts and Uncles. Christmas, Thanksgiving, Easter, all the holidays. We got together. We had – they would come here for dinner and we would go to their house for dinner. Quite often. Lot different today cause we have television and computers, have destroyed that part of family life. Everyone's got their own thing nowadays.

Cs: So you guys don't do that anymore on the holidays? Or just less often?

Kt: Well at Christmas we still get together. That's about it.

Cs: When you were a kid did you go out into the Buttes much for recreation?

Kt: Oh yeah, we used to, we used to take hikes back here, my brother and I. All the time. Then we went up in there in the high Buttes. I've been to the top of the tallest Butte about four times, I think. Before they built the roads there. Now you drive there.

Cs: [laughing] Makes it too easy, huh?

Kt: Yeah. Before we'd do our hike out along Pass road here. Sometimes on your hands and knees.

Cs: [laughing] [pause] Do you know any folklore or myths about the Sutter Buttes, either Native American or related to the settlers?

Kt: Oh, just John Fremont supposedly camped up here on Pass Road. There's a monument up there. Back in 1800 sometime. And I guess he was a friend of John Sutter. That's about all I know.

Cs: So how much maintenance did the land require when you were working it, in terms of fire protection or fire damage or keeping an open water source, things like that?

Kt: Well we didn't have [inaudible] protection from the fire. In those years when I was a child we had one small fire truck over here in Meridian and [laughing] one man. If a fire comes, I mean –

Cs: You pray. [laughter]

Kt: You can try to put it out by hand but, sometimes you could but other times it just burned until it gets to the county road. Now they have about six fire trucks in Meridian and about four or five in Sutter.

Cs: When you had to put it out by hand, where did the water come from?

Kt: Oh, we had these five gallon tanks that strapped onto our backs. And a pump. Or else we had a five gallon bucket with a wet sack.

Cs: Wow. Takes a while, huh?

Kt: [laughing] Yeah. But you had a lot of men doing the same thing.

Cs: Do you remember any big fires?

Kt: Yeah. One back in the late 50s early 60s burned 10,000 acres in the Buttes. That's about the biggest one I can think of.

Cs: Were you part of putting that one out?

Kt: Well, I helped some. It burned for several days.

Cs: Wow. Have you ever seen – I've heard stories about the natural gas leaks in the Buttes – I've heard stories about lightning hitting the Buttes and, you know, the land torching up.

Kt: [laughing]

Cs: Is that a myth?

Kt: No, no, that's never happened.

Cs: It does sound a little too Disneyworld, doesn't it?

Kt: Yeah. [laughing]. I've never heard that or seen it.

Cs: What about floods? Do you have any memories of floods in the area? Big ones?

Kt: Oh yeah. We lived right here on the edge of the Sutter Bypass and it backs up here right around all the houses. I don't know if you noticed the berm out here around this house. In fact they raised this house about two feet. In 1940 the water filled up the area, came over the top of the berm, filled all this area right around the barns and it was right underneath the floor of this house. Never got on the floor. You could put your finger or your hand right about the top of these vents and touch the water. And then 1983, high water again. And 1986 it was really high. I think it got, up the road here 700 feet, right in my garage in 1986. And then 1997, really high then too. I had about six inches in my garage. But it never has gotten in this house.

Cs: [knocks wood]

Kt: [laughing] But it never has got inside my house neither.

Cs: Is there a basement underneath here?

Kt: Oh yeah, the basement. Yeah, they had a pump to keep the basement pumped out.

Cs: So all this is the original 1885 construction?

Kt: Yeah.

Cs: Maureen was telling me they're doing some work on the foundation. [pause] This room is gorgeous – this wallpaper, I love it.

Kt: My mother had most of this wallpaper done.

Cs: So her family lived in California, right?

Kt: Yep.

Cs: Where did they live in the state?

Kt: They lived over here in Sutter.

Cs: Oh, really close.

Kt: Yeah.

Cs: Okay. Got it. So you never went back with them to Europe?

Kt: Yeah, I went to Norway with my mother in 1960. Six week visit over there.

Cs: Did you meet some relatives?

Kt: Yeah. Met a lot of relatives. Here, last month two of the people I met 45 years ago came here for a visit. First time they'd been to the United States was here in California.

Cs: Wow. They didn't forget!

Kt: No. [laughing]. Really interesting. They're second cousins, actually.

Cs: Are they farmers as well?

Kt: No, no, [name] yeah, he's a farmer. Raises turkeys. And his sister was a missionary in Nepal for twelve years.

Cs: Christian missionary?

Kt: Yeah. In Nepal in a mud shack for twelve years. Now she's back in Norway and retired now.

Cs: What role did church play in your life growing up?

Kt: Mine?

Cs: Yeah.

Kt: My mother was quite religious. Methodist. And uh, she took us to Sunday school. I got a pin for five years straight attendance at Sunday School, without missing a Sunday for five years.

Cs: Congratulations.

Kt: [laughing] I'm still a Methodist. I go to Trinity Methodist Church in Colusa. My brother was baptized a Methodist but then later in life he got baptized a Baptist.

Cs: Born again?

Kt: I guess that's what they call it. He's happy with the Baptist church.

Cs: Did the other landowners in the Buttes get together very often?

Kt: No. Course we don't have no close neighbors here. You go another quarter of a mile up here is the Hoke place.

Cs: Are they the descendants of –

Kt: Well, no they didn't have any descendants ... well they did too. But they sold to a guy by the name of Pauley. He bought the ranch in, I don't know, 1935 or something like that. '35 or '40. And we uh [laughing] yeah. He got a television early on in 1949 or something like that and we didn't have a television. My brother and I used to go over there and watch the wrestling matches [laughing]. And [] on TV. Pauley was inducted into the army in 1942, I think, and some other people lived on his ranch while he was gone. He was in France and his army outfit was 100% casualties. Everybody dead or wounded. He got shot through the mouth but he survived and came back here to be a turkey raiser. 5,000 turkeys over there.

Cs: Must have been loud.

Kt: [laughing] Yeah.

Cs: Do they still ranch or farm over there?

Kt: No, Pauleys sold the ranch out to my brother and myself in 1961. My brother lives there now.

Cs: So that's the new parcel of Tarke land, then?

Kt: Yeah.

Cs: Not part of the original?

Kt: 1400 acres of it.

Cs: And does your brother – what did you farm here?

Kt: I raised sheep mainly. Some cow, but mainly I had 1800 sheep. Mother sheep. About 35 or 40 mother cows. And then I farmed some wheat and that's about it.

Cs: Did your brother also have Butte land?

Kt: He didn't have any Butte land.

Cs: And were the sheep raised for wool or for meat?

Kt: Both. We sheared them once a year and then they had lambs they were born in November, December and then we sold them April. For meat.

Cs: I wanted to ask you a little about the Buttes in general. What do you know about the rock walls?

Kt: We talked about that over at the Middle Mountain meeting. There's really nothing recorded about who built those rock walls. Lot of people seem to think it was the Chinese but then these German immigrants like my great-grandfather brought, I guess, well there were a lot of German immigrants and my dad said that during the winter time when it was cooler they worked on the rock walls. In summertime it was too hot. But as you probably know there's miles of these rock walls. And those rocks are heavy! [laughing]. It's amazing how they got them piled up like that. Must've taken them years to do that work.

Cs: Or a lot of people.

Kt: Yeah. But even with a lot of people ... takes a long time.

Cs: But they had to do that before they started ranching, right?

Kt: Yeah, to have fences to contain the animals they needed some kind of fences and they didn't have wire or anything like that.

Cs: Oh, it was fences? I thought it was because the rocks would break the animals hooves?

Lt: Oh, no. That's a myth! [laughing]

Cs: Sorry, I ...

Kt: And then they took the rocks out of some of the flatland to clear it so they could cultivate it.

Cs: It remains a mystery. [pause] What kind of wildlife did you see around the Buttes when you were a kid?

Kt: Oh, let me see. Coyotes, skunks, raccoons, deer, [wolves?]. That's about it. Saw a few [fox?] too. [Red fox?]

Cs: No grizzly bears.

Kt: No. No bears.

Cs: What about birds?

Kt: Oh, there was pheasants and doves, oh there still is. And ducks. Course all kinds of songbirds.

Cs: Has it changed much since you were a kid?

Kt: Well, yeah, you got hunting season now. Doves, pheasants and ducks have really decreased because they're hunted so much. Very few pheasants around here. Not too many doves anymore and not too many ducks. And geese. When I was a boy the geese would land in these fields here where we had wheat planted or something. Thousands of geese. They mostly all disappeared now.

Cs: Is that better for farming?

Kt: Not to have the geese? Oh, I don't know they didn't really do that much damage. It was nice to see them. [chuckles]

Cs: Do you remember when the pigs were introduced?

Kt: Pigs? Oh, I'd say about 1960 around that time. They were just domestic pigs that got loose and you know –

Cs: It was an accident?

Kt: Well, yeah, more or less, or they let them loose, I don't know the real story but uh ... Then they multiplied and multiplied then people started hunting them. Oh I don't know, they're not too many of them left now, I think they killed them off.

Cs: What about rattlesnakes?

Kt: There's quite a few of em at times. Varies from one year to the next. One year I killed eight rattlesnakes right around my house. Next year I only killed two. You always have to be on the lookout for one. I have a dog that finds them and just stand back barks at em and doesn't get bitten by em. So I've had them in my garage and my breezeway. Yeah, they still scare me every time I hear one or see one. I just take my shotgun and shoot them, mostly.

Cs: That's a good shot.

Kt: [chuckles].

Cs: I couldn't do that. [laughing] I'd shoot something else, probably. Do you know of any, in your time here, disputes over property lines or water rights?

Kt: Yeah. We had a dispute with the State of California's reclamation board over the water here in this Butte slough which runs through our property. We pump water out of that to grow rice and other crops. And about ten years ago they uh – no, about twenty years ago – they said that we didn't have the right to pump water out of there. And we had to prove that we were riparian to that slough, I mean, ever since we've been here you know, and so they finally dismissed the case against us. We got our riparian right to the water.

Cs: That's called riparian right?

Kt: Riparian.

Cs: What about among property owners, like disputed territories?

Kt: No, never had anything disputed. Not really.

Cs: Where did you get your water from?

Kt: Oh, we had wells here. My dad – well they always had water here. My dad built a new well when I was a child in back of the barn here. Always had plenty of water.

Cs: And is it a problem now, the water situation?

Kt: No. You can find water most anyplace around here. We have a new well at my house over there. Just built over three years ago.

Cs: I was wondering what your thoughts are about the new state park that they're planning on the other side.

Kt: [chuckles] I really don't think it's necessary. I think we got enough state parks in California without having one in the Buttes but [chuckles] I don't know, with the influx of all the people maybe it's necessary, I don't know. I guess it's a good place on the north side of the Buttes. There's a lot of trees and places for people to have picnics. I'm not really against it.

Cs: Do you worry that the land – I know some property owners are worried the land might get more degraded with all the people coming.

Kt: Yeah, that's always a possibility. Some people don't respect anything, you know they tear it down or dump their garbage. You can see it every week here on this road.

People dumping their garbage. [chuckles] I don't know why you have to do that. There's a garbage dump over in Yuba City.

Cs: People seem to do it everywhere. Human beings are messy creatures.

Kt: Oh yeah. [chuckles]

Cs: Have you had problems on this property with trespassers?

Kt: Oh yeah. We've had a lot of trespassers. Not so much now. We had about 25 years ago we have a patrol man hired to patrol the Pass Road and this West Butte Road to keep the trespassers out. They were here for several years and the word kinda got around to the public, this is private property. You better stay out.

Cs: How did you enforce that?

Kt: Well, we never arrested anybody but this patrol man would just talk to them and tell them it's private. They had to have our permission to go on the property. So that pretty well got solved. [8 second pause] A lot of people don't know there is such a thing as private property, I guess. Even if you've got signs up.

Cs: It seems to me the problem is people don't respect the property, you know? If people didn't trash it, they could share it. But if you're inconsiderate and leave garbage and whatever else ...

Kt: Oh yeah, we used to have a big problem up here on the [inaudible] this slough here. I mean, go out there and leave all their garbage, you know. Build fires. Do all kinds of stuff. We don't have too much of that anymore.

Cs: Would you ever consider selling the land?

Kt: No. [chuckles]

Cs: So it's in the family for good, then?

Kt: Well I hope so. My son and daughter keep it and their children keep it too I mean, of course you never know what's going to happen if you get a [inaudible] you might have to sell it off. I've been sick a lot of the last five years and if I didn't have good health insurance, I don't know, I might have had to sell something. I had a heart attack and hospitals and doctors were over \$200,000.

Cs: You didn't have to pay for it though, did you?

Kt: No, my insurance paid for all of it.

Cs: God, that's an incredible amount of money. [pause] Does your son ranch sheep as well?

Kt: No, he didn't go too much for the sheep. We had em for about four years together and then he sold out the sheep and rented out all the pastureland. He's got a few cows. All the pastureland we had the sheep on we rented out to our neighbors.

Cs: Did you ever think about leaving the Buttes at any point? Doing something totally different?

Kt: No. [chuckles] I think I'll be here the rest of my time.

Cs: [laughing] I mean when you were younger, before, did you ever think, 'I don't know about this farming stuff, maybe I want to try acting or -' I don't know ...

Kt: No, it's a pretty good way of life. Always had plenty to eat and a good place to sleep. My dad got us interested in it and we did a lot of work with him too over the years. We used to haul hay, my brother and I and our cousins, I mean, in the summertime we'd haul hay for weeks at a time, put it in the barn, wintertime for the sheep and the cows.

Cs: What about your grandchildren? Are they interested in farming too?

Kt: I only have these two here, little girls, and they're too young to get interested in it anyway. Well, they're in 4H now and they're going to have goat projects somewhere next year I guess. They're getting started! [laughing]

Cs: How old are they?

Kt: Nine and five.

Cs: Oh yeah, they're pretty young. [laughter] Don't want to put the pressure on yet. Well, that's all the questions I have. Is there anything I didn't cover that you think would be interesting for the record?

Kt: [long pause] Well, you mentioned the natural gasses. Wells. We have quite a few wells on our property and they've helped a lot as far as the income ever since 1961 when they started drilling. Now, the gas prices are really up high, the revenue's doubled. Tripled. So, that's another blessing.

Cs: I didn't know that. Someone told me some of the landowners here don't have the rights to their own oil.

Kt: Well, during the Depression the banks loaned money to the owner and then they repossessed the property and they kept the mineral rights. Forever!

Cs: That's a bad deal.

Kt: Yeah.

Cs: But not your –

Kt: Not this place, no.

Cs: You guys never lost –

Kt: Never lost no mineral rights, no. Yeah, it happened to a lot of people.

Cs: Do you know of any other landowners who still have the mineral rights?

Kt: Oh yeah, most of these people in the Buttes here do. [Miners?] down here. And the McPherans [?] is a big owner over on the East Side.

Cs: Miners and the [Cains?]

Kt: Yeah.

Cs: So what percentage of your revenue would you say comes from the natural gas?

Kt: Well, [chuckles], right now about 80% of my income, I guess.

Cs: Wow. That's amazing.

Kt: Oh yeah. Kinda hard to believe it.

Cs: And how much is in there? Have they done surveys?

Kt: The gas you mean?

Cs: Yeah, how long's it going to last?

Kt: It'll be here forever. Some of the first gas wells were drilled in the 1940s. And they're still producing gas. So it'll be here, I don't know. Forever.

Cs: Well that's lucky, cause I know a lot of families here are having trouble making ends meet these days farming and ranching. I mean the property taxes alone –

Kt: Oh yeah, property values are always going up. Some of these farmers get overextended. Buying too much new equipment. Getting into trouble that way.

Cs: Cause there are some landowners I know who are doing what's called a Conservation Easement

(...)

Kt: They have to warm [the natural gas] up to keep it flowing and then they put it into the pipelines and it goes to the metropolitan areas.

Cs: It makes you wonder how much the banks are making on other people's property.

Kt: [chuckles] Yeah, probably millions.

Cs: Wow, I mean that might be. Just because a lot of people are having trouble holding onto their land, you know, that might be a way to ... if we could somehow restore those mineral rights, people would have a way to make money on their land again. I mean, I don't know if that's possible ...

Kt: I don't know, that's a ... [chuckles] technical ...

Cs: Well thank-you so much, Kermit. It's been a pleasure. And I just wanted to ask, how did you get your name?

Kt: Oh, my mother named me. She a ... [inaudible] one of the Roosevelt cousins was named Kermit.

Cs: Oh. Which Roosevelt?

Kt: Franklin. Don't hear that name very often, I tell ya.

Cs: No, you don't. Except Kermit the Frog.

Kt: Yeah. [laughter]

Cs: Well thank-you again. It's been a pleasure spending this time with you.

Kt: Okay.