

Curtis Frost Interview  
Interviewed by Cathy Wisor  
April 16, 2016  
Sonoma Nature Preserves Project - Galbreath Preserve

Note: The beginning of this interview was cut out on the recording device. Below are notes from the first few minutes of the interview.

*Curtis Frost (CF) is married to Nancy Armstrong. Nancy Armstrong's grandfather, Arthur Cooley, was born in Cloverdale in 1882. He graduated from high school, then went to Stanford and became a successful lawyer in San Francisco. According to CF, Arthur Cooley loved the mountains west of his hometown of Cloverdale and as he became successful financially, he began buying ranches in the area, eventually putting together what would become the Cooley Ranch. CF and Nancy were first met in high school in Palo Alto, then married after college. CF first visited the land in high school. CF is retired from the air force and about a year and a half ago, he and Nancy moved full time to home they built on the Sonoma side of the Cooley ranch.*

Curtis Frost (CF): (We were ) talking about the close ranching families.

Cathy Wisor (CW): Right.

CF: But now, since I've been back now, in the last two years, the demographics have changed dramatically. Now Elkhart road's got about, oh, twenty houses, you know little 40 acre places along here. So it's becoming much more, it's not as bad as, you know Napa was twenty years ago, then Sonoma Valley, and now Mendocino.

CW: So, People are starting to subdivide?

CF: People re starting to subdivide, and come up here. Bob Lawson is just going through breaking up his place.

CW: Are there limits to how small you break your parcels into?

CF: There are. You know, I don't know exactly what the rules are. But they're not like three thousand acres parcels anymore. No, No, no. They're down to 40 acre parcels and such.

CW: Okay. How's the relationship with those folks?

CF: That's where I was going with, that is that it's actually, very, you know cause we're all kinda kin out here. And just recently, we had the Yorkville Market built there and that really has become kind of a happy hour spot. I guess we had, there was the Oaks bar in Yorkville, there's only a couple of commercial structures in Yorkville. There's Oaks Bar, which is now still a bar but it's owned by Sandy and Rod who have a house behind it, so when they have parties there, I'm happy to go a party there where I get to hang out in the old Oaks Bar which was kinda cool.

CW: Wow

CF: But, And then there's the Yorkville Market. It's got a rounded roof. It looks kind of like a Safeway.

CW: Okay, I think I know which one you're talking about.

CF: And now there's people lining both sides of 128 now in these smaller places. You know, some of them a hundred acres, some of them forty acres, but it's all still very much a tight knit community where everybody knows each other, and we're starting to hang out at the Market on Friday afternoons like I was mentioning.

CW: That's great.

CF: So, I'm getting to know all, and there's millionaires up in here, there's retired doctors, there's pot growers, there's, shoot there's all kinds of people. A large gay community, there's a couple of houses on Elkhart Road.

CW: People are generally pretty accepting and tolerant?

CF: Very accepting

CW: That's awesome.

CF: And they party right along with everybody else and we swap, one person will have someone over and then they'll reciprocate, and they'll have you over to their place and we're going Lisa Bauer's tonight who lives on the other side of 128, because we had her over a month or two ago, we had her over for lunch.

CW: So the social scene is really on knowing people and going to people's houses.

CF: The social scene is, yes, and there's some associations, we've got the Anderson Valley Vintner's Association, which is a group that meets here regularly. And then we have our ice cream social which is priceless.

CW: That sounds just like something out of Norman Rockwell.

CF: Who has ice cream socials anymore, I don't know.

CW: Okay, let me make sure I ask all of Claudia's questions because I'm just so interested in this area... I could just keep listening. Where were the buildings and other structures located on your property?

CF: Well, ours, there was only one, there was a house and there were several barns. Sheep barns, etc. Primarily sheep barns. There was one house where the, he wasn't the caretaker, he leased the land from us and he ran a hunt club out of there. So there was one house, and a couple of other side buildings right down in the center of our property. That has since burned down. And, we've restored one of the sheep barns, we have a very nice sheep barn up there on the hillside, we've reclaimed that one, it's right where it's always been. The house burned down under suspicious, the caretaker, the leaser's house burned down under suspicious circumstances a couple of years ago, and so, now that place is gone, the other structures, we, Nancy and I built our house right from the, basically right from the middle of the property up the hill from where the old house was.

CW: Is there anything else you want to add that you know about the early history of the property?

CF: I think the only thing I'd like to add is about the nature of it, and the logging, how we got our property, was this originally, this side, was not the Bickels', it was still the Cooleys', this place we're sitting at right now (Tom Bickel's land) was the Cooley property. Grandfather Cooley sold to Tom's dad, sold this little piece, because it was on the other side. His (Grandfather Cooley) was Sonoma, more Cloverdale-centric, and this was too far away, he was happy to have someone living on it, so he sold it to him. Then the piece that we're on right now, which is the Mendocino part of the ranch, was originally a logging place where they would come through and they would cut all the trees out of there, all the redwoods they wanted, so Cooley got the land we live on now, on the Sonoma side, by giving them cutting rights on the other side to take some timber off the other side.

CW: So it was a trade?

CF: It was a trade deal more than anything else. It was always kind of any interesting deal. About 1,700 acres.

CW: I heard Nancy's brother Tom say that before they built Lake Sonoma, you used to be able to get to Cooley ranch straight down Rockville Road.

CF: We'd come in out of Cloverdale. I can't remember the name of the road, but you're just going down main street in Cloverdale, you take a right, right about where there's that storage unit,

CW: Yourty Creek? Cherry Creek?

CF: Yeah, that might be it. We could ask Nancy. You used to go through there, and go through property after property, and we would open gates, and come all the way up to the Cooley place. That's how we got there. When they built Lake Sonoma, that flooded the road we used to come in on. And then they gave us access in on around Rockville Road. So that's how we have to come in now. And the ranch expanded then, it was 18,000 acres at that time, to about 22,000 acres, because they had to give him access off of Rockville Road that would connect with the Cooley Place.

CW: I've ridden my bike down to the end of Rockville Road.

CF: Did you see the little sign at the end that says "Cooley"?

CW: I did, actually. I head that Kelly Road used to go through to Annapolis, too. Sounds like Lake Sonoma really shifted things for people out here.

CF: Yeah, it did.

CW: How have things changed since the early parts, history on the property? And what kinds of things have you done on the property since you moved in, since (Nancy's) family were here?

CF: The biggest thing since here family's been here is the shift from sheep ranching to finding other ways. Now there's there grapes, agriculture.

CW: Do you guys have any grapes?

CF: No, we don't have any grapes on this side. We have an apple orchard, though, that we are trying to reclaim right now. The second part of your question as well was what have I done since I've been here, and everything we are about now is about reclaiming because it really hasn't been taken care of for about the last 40 years, so since the sheep left and it's just been hunting, you know they have hunt clubs or lease the land for hunters. We're trying to bring the orchards back. They're all kinds of apples. Mixed and we need to have them studied so we can figure out what exactly they are, but they are very old trees, 80 year old trees. And the whole place hasn't really been taken care of so it's all reclaiming pasture land, reclaiming orchards, and working with the state, trying to, our roads aren't as good as they should be and they are running through the creeks and things like that. I was really impressed with the Galbreath (SSU Preserve) and how they're, all their culverts are nice and new.

CW: You mentioned watching earlier after a rain and all the creeks coming off Galbreath were clear and yours weren't.

CF: Exactly. Talk about it rushing down through here, but it's brown. Silty brown, you can't see through it at all. And it clears up after a day or two, but it's that initial silt. And now it's obvious to me why that is because their roads are taken care of so much better

than ours are. The culverts are so nice and such. So we are in the process of reclaiming that and working with the state and try to do that so ours look equally as clean.

CW: So retirement isn't really retirement?

CF: No. (Laughs). Think about your house, you've got a list of projects that you want to fix around your house, how long is that list, you're always seeing something, now imagine 1700 acres and a few structures. You just putter, do what you can. I've got a 10 year vision to turn it into a paradise. I really think it could be. We have the backbone to do it.

CW: And you guys will have grandkids by then...

CF: Yes, I hope in a hundred years from now there will be little Frosties running around.

CW: Fortunate family that you are leaving it for them in a really good place.

CF: Unless you can have friends come too, what's the point. We're glad to have you guys here today.

CW: Can you share a few of your favorite memories or stories about people and the land?

CF: I think it would certainly be Sam Johnson, who was the leaser of the place we are on now. Just an incredible gentleman. You talk to the barber, Jim Wirtz is the barber in Cloverdale, you'll see it right there on Main Street, but going into town and getting my hair cut, I started talking to him and come to find out he's good friends with Sam Johnson. Sam was a schoolteacher I guess but he retired up here and ran hunt clubs out of here and lived here until he died about 15 years ago.

CS: Where did he teach?

CF: I can't remember. Nancy could tell you. Somewhere between here and Sacramento. Avid fisherman and hunter, just a gentleman like you wouldn't believe. You could probably ask Tom Bickel about him, he knows quite a bit about him. I think that would something good to add to your report. He used to make gunstocks for people, carving them out of wood he would get off the ranch. He's gone now, as a matter of fact, my middle son is named Sam in his honor. He was a gentleman and a very nice person and had a very big impact on my early on in my life.

CW: Did he live out here by himself.

CF: With his wife. She passed on before him and then he lived for about another 10 years.

CW: There are a few questions now that have to do with ecological things. How has Rancheria Creek changed since you moved to the area? So for example, trees and logging. Are sandy banks more abundant?

CF: Yeah, sandy banks are definitely more abundant. More roads going in and out of it, like I mentioned before. Bridges are deteriorating and/or in need of repair, these are really nice bridges over here, Tom just had these re-done recently. But (others) are falling apart. And culverts, old steam kettles or whatever you used to cut off both ends and just stick it in the ground, nice big iron structures but a lot of silts worn away at it since we've had floods and things like that. My memories aren't that strong of Rancheria in the early days because I didn't come over here that often. But, just in general, I see where there's a lot of room for improvement and that's one of our priorities.

CW: Can you tell me anything about floods or rain events that were particularly memorable?

CF: No, I haven't see, well, the drought... Floods, no, well, this was a heck of a lot of rain this year, but it handled it all pretty well, we didn't have any big problems.

CW: So, on the other side (of the Cooley Ranch) towards Lake Sonoma, any difference over there since they have the lake?

CF: Oh, well, certainly the fish and things like that. That's changed. Used to be pictures again of Nancy's grandfather with strings of 18-20" trout that he pulled out of these creeks and things like that. I saw a picture of Nancy as a young girl with a big trout that her dad and her caught. And, they just aren't there anymore like they used to be. It's changed the whole personality of it on that side going down to, it's Dry Creek going down into that side.

CW: Did you guys lose any land with eminent domain with the lake?

CF: No, we actually gained land, we went from 18,000 acres to 22,000 acres.

CW: How did that happen?

CF: Because they had to give us a big piece of land coming down from Rockville Road to make up for the road that they took out.

CW: Got it, interesting, okay. So, pigs used to be abundant,

CF: Wolf was the ranch, he had to give up 2,000 acres, he's the one that got killed by eminent domain.

CW: And where was Wolf?

CF: He was right up on Rockpile Road.

CW: Did you guys used to have access down to the old Skaggs Springs Resort at all?

CF: I'm not sure.

CW: Right down at the bottom, where the base of the lake was built.

CF: Where the dam is or?

CW: You know, I can't even remember because I was in High School when that lake got filled up and I can't remember, I'm going off the reservation here. Okay, pigs used to be abundant on the mountain, do you remember when their numbers increased and have you seen any changes that you think are related to their activities?

CF: They certainly have increased, and actually it's a booming business, to have people, they want to pay a lot of money to come shoot a pig. But, especially on the other side of the ranch. I keep saying this side and the other side. There's a dividing line, there's the Sonoma County side, and the Mendocino County side, we live on the Mendocino County side. And, I've seen a lot of pigs but it goes in ebbs and flows. And, I haven't seen as many on our place since we started living there, and I think us being around, its nature and they've scattered to other people's places, the population is generally growing, it's just shifting around depending on who's hunting, and who's not.

CW: They're all over in the Sonoma State Property now.

CF: Yeah, I bet you there's a whole bunch of them in there now, "Hey nobody shot at me over here lately, I think i'm gonna stay here."

CW: Yeah, they can't have any guns. So, any significant ecological changes that you've seen?

CF: I really don't, well, the fir's are taking over. I've seen the, as you drive around you just look and all the old oaks are being taken over and out competed by fir, so that's a concern of mine but then again, I don't know how much I can do about that, its like trying to hold back the forest. And so I think the character of this is much more fir, you know a big part of our property now just looks like a forest. And, more, trying to clear out the valley and the pasture land from the scrub stuff. It was a good view of it from when we standing at that vista point, when you looked off behind towards Denny Bridge's property, all of it's just sage now, and low brush and things, where it used to be grass and hills, from where the sheep were grazing, we were burning, and killing all that scrub.

CW: So, do you guys worry about the fires now?

CF: We do, of course we do, but being a new house we've been able to keep it clear around it so we're in pretty good shape right now where we are. We've got lots of water, if we had to fight a fire,

CW: Oh good, so you do have lots of water. Does that vary around here?

CF: Yeah, this is a pretty watery place, the Bickel place is near lots of springs, and the Galbreath, they had to drill a well up on top of the hill, but it's just coming out of the mountains around here. Pretty much flows and we've got lots of tanks now to store it, we're getting a pool put in this summer.

CW: Do you guys have any equipment to put out your own fires if things were to happen?

CF: Yeah, backhoes, and shovels, and equipment. We do have a firehose by our house, and it's to a dedicated tank, up on the hill, so we would have a bit of water to fight a fire with, some piece of mind. And, we also have two ways to get out, we can either go that way or this way. Come down Elkhorn Road, or go out the back way of we had to.

CW: And the back way would take you down to where it says Cooley Ranch on the end of Rockville Road?

CF: Yes, exactly.

CW: How often do you guys go that way?

CF: Oh, we go there about three or four times a year, Nancy's cousins and there's a couple little lakes over there that are great fishing so.

CW: Oh wow, natural lakes or?

CF: No, they're man made.

CW: So, is the Cooley ranch an Open Space Preserve kind of thing?

CF: Yes. Sonoma County...

CW: But then they can live on it in perpetuity?

CF: Yup,

CW: Is there public access?

CF: Yeah, there's public access, twice a year, guided hikes, and they have trail rides over there a couple times a year and things like that where people bring their horses in

and ride around. And, I was going to tell you something else about that too though. Oh, yeah, it can never be developed too though. That was the stipulation, they got some money and development rights were sold to Sonoma County Open Space. I think Tom Bickel is in the Anderson Valley Open Space.

CW: So you guys used to do sheep, but now you do some cattle?

CF: Yup, we lease cattle, over there, a gentleman from the valley brings them in, they're very cute, it's nice to have cattle, they poop everywhere (laughs) but those are the rows.

CW: So you bring them in at a certain age?

CF: He brings a mom and babies in, and one bull, usually, then the mom's all give birth the next spring, so we've got a couple little calves running around, and it's really cute. So we enjoy that.

CW: You guys need some grandkids pretty soon to enjoy the little ones. When you guys were doing the sheep, was it the same thing, did someone come in and do it for you?

CF: No, that was actively being run. Whole crews of folks and foreman, and they would bring in folks from the community to do the shearing, during shearing time. It was a whole way of life that just doesn't exist anymore.

CW: Do you still have problems with coyotes?

CF: Oh, yeah. Not so much over here (Mendocino side) because we don't have that much for them to eat, but every now and then, they're very migratory, at least they seem to be. A couple times a year I'll hear them howling at night and actually they'll be really close to the house. I've never actually seen one, but I've heard them quite often and on the other side (Sonoma) when they were running sheep, I've seen the damage that they could do with the sheep.

CW: So, you must have seen some amazing things out here. Any stories about animals?

CF: The mountain lion quest is what I'll call it. 30 years on that side (Sonoma) I've never seen a mountain lion, you know, and 20 years ago that weren't actually that many, they were around I guess, but I finally found my first mountain lion, it was about three months ago, four months ago, it was right here as a matter of fact (Tom Bickel's property on Mendocino side), he killed a deer down in this creek bed and I was driving down the road and he comes running up out of this creek and right in front of the bridge in front of me then runs off the other way and I'd never seen a mountain lion in the wild before and so that was my first.

CW: Right across where your truck was going to go?

CF: Yeah, right across the road in front of me.

CW: Did he see you?

CF: Yeah he saw me. He had a deer back in here. He bolted of when he heard my car coming. Spooked him so he ran in front of me. So I'd always heard stories about mountain lions and we'd got pictures on game cameras but I'd never actually seen one.

CW: How about bears?

CF: We've had bears around, we've seen them on bear cameras but I've never actually seen one of those. I'm waiting for the day when I get so see my first bear. We do have a cool pair of nesting retail hawks, they're flying around our property right now, they actually call, and they land in the trees around us.

CW: So you actually recognize a specific pair?

CF: Yes, they haven't budged in the year and a half I've been up here. And actually now they have young, too, so there's actually now a third red tail hawk. I call them my red tail hawk birds.

CW: Any bald eagles?

CF: I have seen golden eagles all over this place, no bald eagles yet, but not actually all over this place, a couple times. They are beautiful birds. Actually on over on one of the lakes, there was a duck, we were out there sitting along the lake, and a duck comes screaming out of the, kind of like a hill like this (points to hills behind Tom Bickel's house) comes down to the lake and he's flying over the lake about 15 feet over the lake and here comes a golden eagle, chasing about 30 feet behind him, chasing his ass, then they go down like this (gestures with hands) the the duck just goes like "whoosh" and he dove down in to the water and the eagle swooped down and went up and around. It was really cool.

CW: I didn't know that they hunted ducks.

CF: I did not either. Until that day. That golden eagle was after that duck though.

CW: So do you think the kids of animals have changed in the time that you've been coming up here?

CF: I just thought of another interesting animal story and Tom Bickel would know who did this but I was over on the Cooley place, gosh, it must have been 20 years ago, and we were driving along in a jeep and we saw a bunch of white deer these white, completely white, much larger, they weren't albinos, they were a specific type of deer, that were brought in from someplace, and I talked to Tom Bickel, and he said they were brought in by one of the ranchers around here. It was one of the ranchers, one of the

original folks that Cooley bought out when expanding his ranch, they brought in some exotic deer and so that one time, we saw about four or five of these white deer, big ol' antlers, I'm sure they've all been hunted out a long time ago but I've never seen those again. The wildlife, I don't see that much of it changing, well the pigs certainly, I see a lot more of them than I used to, and the deer seem to be smaller, there used to be stories about these big ol' bucks with four or five points on a side, you don't see that many of them any more, so a lot more smaller, younger deer.

CW: Do you think it's human hunters or mountain lions increasing?

CF: Probably both. Actually, we weren't hunting that much, and the Galbreath, and Bickel isn't hunting on his place any more, but the Bridges are, and there are others, so it's probably a combination of both.

CW: The last formal question that I have is any other changes in the landscape that you've noticed over time?

CF: Just it's changing from pastures and oaks to firs and scrub. That's the biggest thing I've seen in the time I've been here. But even that is subtle, in its entirety.

CW: What would you say is your favorite thing about living up here on this property, with the land?

CF: The quiet, and the stars. I just like it. I love it up here.

CW: Do you guys grow your own vegetables? Do you have a garden?

CF: We've started one. We're learning how to do that. It is a little different living up here in that it's very cold. And a lot of plants that we put in that we thought were cold tolerant, were not enough cold tolerant.

CW: Like what?

CF: You'd have to ask Nancy. She's the gardener. And the vegetables, we've had a lot of hits and misses, this was our first year of growing vegetables up here so we're learning as we go. Some things worked out okay, some of them didn't. It's just a learning experience and we're getting better. We'll figure it out.

CW: Anything else that you want to add?

CF: No, I appreciate you guys showing us around today (Galbreath Preserve). It's great meeting new people. If you're ever in Yorkville on a Friday afternoon, gotta be sure to stop by the market. It's always about the people. I've lived in the air force, lived everywhere, and all over the place, and actually that's one thing about Yorkville that I like. I lived in Washington DC and Northern Virginia, a city of a hundred thousand people, and I knew less people than I know here in Yorkville, a lot smaller community

and less people; no matter where you go, the land and everything is important but it's all the people and the relationships that you develop and helping each other along the way is what it's all about.