

**Interviewee: Tom Armstrong**  
**Interviewer: Larry S. Levine**  
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**Larry Levine (LL):** Okay we are recording. So tell me your name and a little about yourself.

**Tom Armstrong (TA):** My name is Tom Armstrong. I was born raised in Palo Alto California. My mother was Florence Cooley, Florence Elizabeth Cooley; she was the daughter Arthur Edward Cooley, who was the founder along with his brother Charles Edward Cooley, of the Cooley Ranch. And so since I was born, which was in '53, I've coming to the Cooley ranch on weekends and every break...I've never been to Yosemite...

**LL:** Really?

**TA:** because we came to the ranch, we worked on the ranch all of our lives. And, so that's a little bit. So I live in Santa Rosa. I own a marketing communications company that I founded in 1979. I still own that. I am a graduate of Chico State, two degrees, one in business, one in...interdisciplinary degree in visual communications. And I landed in Sonoma County after college because I was working at the ranch pouring concrete around our swimming pool, and a fraternity brother called me a said do you want to go to work for Maherajah Water Skis, which was based in Healdsburg. And then I said "Well I didn't have anything better to do," and so in 1975, after college, I moved to Healdsburg, via the ranch...I lived at the ranch for a while. So, that's a little bit about me.

**LL:** So you still stayed in the area?

**TA:** Yeah. Yeah, I just never left.

**LL:** How would you say the ranch and the area has changed over time?

**TA:** Um, well, obviously the population has exponentially grown, and, you have to really believe in the concept of NIMBY, Not In My Back Yard. And I think that that applies to newcomers and old-timers at the same...we talked about burns, and we talked about a lot of things we used to do as common practice on the land that you can't really do that much anymore. So, from the impact on land that's there, the communities, people move, in California, in particular they move north. And so, we've...people that had a house that might have been worth say five-hundred thousand dollars in the Bay Area, they could buy one in Santa Rosa in those time for about a hundred and a quarter. So they'd move north, and then they'd establish roots there, and so...

**LL:** It just made economic sense.

**TA:** It made economic sense, and so the things continued to grow, but Sonoma County and Mendocino County were the poor siblings of the Bay Area in terms of politics. And the Bay Area was the poor sibling in terms of politics to southern California.

**LL:** What do you mean by that?

**TA:** Well, the legislature was controlled by southern California, and so tax revenues for infrastructure and everything else flowed to the south, that didn't flow to the north. And Sonoma County is part of the Metropolitan Transportation Authority, and yet we are barely a part of that area, but in terms of getting tax dollars for highway 101 expansion, building any other state highways or stuff, it took catastrophic failure of that infrastructure before we had a dime. And...

**LL:** There was nothing proactive that they were doing?

**TA:** What had happened is, is that you got enough people who moved up from those areas, to say, well they used leverage in their politics to make it happen.

**LL:** Okay.

**TA:** Okay. So that's what I've seen. One of my fraternity brothers who is a state assemblyman, and was a supervisor for Napa for four terms...he's running for state senate right now, was on the MTA, and he said, "Tom, this is the ways it works." You know, Santa Rosa is the fifth largest metropolitan population area in the Bay Area. But it might as well be the hundredth because of its importance to the revenue. So, it all... things flow from that in terms of quality of life changes and things like that, and yet Sonoma County in a lot of ways has been on the forefront of land use, green space, corridors...our Cooley ranch is the largest chunk of land that went into the open space district, funded by the quarter-cent tax on it, as well as a donation by my uncle...his, his share of that. He donated all of his value to the open space district to make the deal happen so that land could be preserved, and take a lot of the tax bite out of it. My sister and I are trying desperately to maintain this side of the ranch, but economically...

**LL:** I understand that could be a burden...a very large burden.

**TA:** It's a very large burden. And you also have, rightfully so or whatever, tremendously more regulation over the use of your own land, like what I was saying about, doing controlled burns, building bridges over...over a creek, where you run your roads, your animals...everything is pretty much regulated. And that's a whole other set of circumstances, and the county...Mendocino County, is a poor county and they're not inclined to... well they lost the Williamson Act...you know about the Williamson Act?

**LL:** I'm not familiar with the Williamson Act.

**TA:** The Williamson Act is the ability to have your agricultural-use land taxed at a lower rate...that it is large parcels. It's dependent upon tough economics of running an agricultural...

**LL:** So it benefits those engaged in agriculture to keep the land?

**TA:** That's right. And if taxes, even at one percent, go up a little bit over time, the county in essence becomes your profitable partner... is that they take the profit out of the thing, because you're, you're taxes basically eat it. That was the... that was the basis behind Prop 13 a long time ago, was that seniors...their taxes were going up, and their, their Social Security or their pensions were, everything were flat-lined.

**LL:** That was the property value tax, the one that leveled everything out?

**TA:** Right, right. Yeah, it leveled it out for a very brief point in time, and then it screwed it up because my taxes are less than my house in Santa Rosa, are less than half of the people right next door to me, because they bought it later.

**LL:** Depending on when you bought it.

**TA:** Yeah, yeah, so its not fool proof, but anyway, that's...those are some of the changes around here. Population...more people, more opinions about stuff. Claudia and Patty said pretty evidently is that there are a lot of kids...people who that...that ranching was something that they saw on television.

**LL:** It's not something that's real to them.

**TA:** Yeah, yeah, the complexity of anything is, is...it doesn't matter what it is, everything is complex, you can't simplify it.

**LL:** How do you see the Galbraith Preserve impacting the land here...your property, other people's property for that matter?

**TA:** Well I see it as leverage, okay. We are concerned about Elkhorn Road and the integrity of that road and the maintenance of that road and getting our voice heard at the county.

**LL:** So you're seeking to get that road paved?

**TA:** No, we're seeking to have it maintained in a better fashion than it is now. And it's challenging...in talking to Claudia about it they can't do a lot of the culvert work around it. The right of way for that road is very, very narrow. Okay so the right of way is the part that's governed...is controlled by the county or the institution, and if they want to dig trenches...drainage trenches they have to find a place to put that dirt or they have to haul it away. It's a very expensive proposition. So Galbraith, as a major property owner, who is a state institution, is in a position to advocate and knows about other...the ability to marshal other resources to possibly help that situation and to say that, you know, we need a better plan for this. We have students...Bill brought up a very important fact, is that...can be a lot more people on the road once that facility is even more engaged... do you know that you're supposed to stay on the right-hand side of the road on a unmarked road?

**LL:** So you have concerns about that?

**TA:** I have concerns about safety of your transportation, my transportation, and...bringing equipment out here to do the operations of the ranch, that we have a road that works for that. Those types of things. I see the Galbraith Preserve as helping that particular aspect of it. And maybe in a small way, perhaps teaching people about what it takes to manage property, and what it takes to make it a viable entity. But you guys don't have to make a profit. You don't have to pay your taxes... taxes are paid by me...and by you, and by anybody else...

**LL:** You on the other hand do have to pay your taxes.

**TA:** Yeah, so you don't have the same type of challenge...you have different challenges, but you don't have the same type of challenge that we have. You have a challenge in that you can't have firearms on your land and yet you have probably hundreds of wild pigs running loose that are tearing up the land, which is contrary to what some of your objectives are.

**LL:** Let me ask you about that specifically. While we were up there you could see the massive disturbance of those pigs. What would your solution be?

**TA:** Well you have to hunt them. It's what you have to have. They have three just gestations, typically, a year...nine to twelve at a time. They have natural predators when they're young. So an eagle will eat a little baby pig. A mountain lion might mess with a baby pig. A coyote definitely would. But after they get bigger, they won't touch them and so then they, they really rule the roost.

**LL:** So they have no natural predators, really, after that?

**TA:** Except for man. Yeah, that's right. And...they have to eat. But if there isn't anybody eating them, then they become very destructive.

**LL:** So you see the management, or the weak management policies for the feral pigs on the Galbraith Preserve impacting the other land. Obviously they don't know borders.

**TA:** Yeah, they could...they could contribute to ongoing problems. I mean we have...we have four hunters that have leased hunting rights here, and they also have the right to hunt pigs and game birds and things like that during the season, so they like to have something to hunt. And pigs will go quite a distance, but I don't, I don't know that they would have a pattern of leaving that area and really coming over here, unless they couldn't feed enough there, and then those young-uns would spread out further. And so it may come over here and rototill our land.

**LL:** Rototill!

**TA:** That's what they do. You know, they rototill. And they are...it's pretty hard to build a hog-proof fence. It's expensive to put in a hog-proof fence. I think that the Galbraith is more of an asset than it's a liability to our particular... I don't know that it increases our property values, but it might to somebody that says, "Well that's always going to be an open space area." But the zoning out here it is like that anyway. You know my sister's house from Tom's place is a mile and a half, two miles. And my house from my sister's house is a mile. So we're already pretty spread out. So I don't know about that. But anyway.

**LL:** Are you worried about the potential for too many people coming up, or do you think that will be managed by the, by the college?

**TA:** I don't foresee that being a problem. I don't foresee that being a problem. If we have a locked gate at the end of the road...that doesn't mean somebody couldn't trespass and say that they were lost...they couldn't get onto the Galbraith...they could walk around ours, and so they thought that they could climb over there, but I don't see that, unless it...they built permanent housing for a hundred and fifty people that it's going to be a really big deal. The road gets narrow places, as you've seen.

**LL:** It's difficult. It's not the easiest road to navigate.

**TA:** Yeah, yeah, and in the winter you pack a chainsaw 'cause there's always trees going down, limbs falling down. I really don't think that it's going to be a problem...the volume of people. But getting... getting the Preserve and the University engaged in maintenance issues of the, of that road, is it in everybody's best interest.

**LL:** Let me go back to earlier when you were saying that you're, when you were coming up here to family land and such. What was the primary business of the ranch?

**TA:** It was sheep. When I was being brought up, like they said is that, you did lumber activities and then you did some sort of livestock. There was an attempt at one point in time of the ranch next to us to grow grapes and that didn't work out until about eight years ago. In our family...our family had acquired that land and they had...now there's grapes on that land as water resources were developed for all these things. So, my grandfather logged a lot of it. A lot of redwood came out of Sonoma County. When San Francisco burned it was rebuilt...it was rebuilt with Sonoma County redwood and Mendocino County timber. So, there was logging that was done, and then our intention was to have a successful sheep ranch. And so we...we built fences as young people, hauled the materials of the hills, because we had strong legs...and all that other stuff, and built the fences, worked the control burns to keep the land so that the grass would grow for the sheep, help during shearing season, a little bit here and there...help them move the sheep through the chutes and give them what their...what we called 'goop,' which was their medicines and stuff, pounding down the wool bags and the sheep shearers would do all the other type of work. So the story was is that...as part of the family your job was to help try to make this thing work. And so that's what you did.

**LL:** Everybody pulled their weight.

**TA:** Everybody pulled their weight. Yeah, yeah. And we got free lamb out of the deal, and a dime a day as a kid to go to town and buy yourself a comic book or something. Sheep was the main thing when I was a kid. A little bit of...of lumber was being taken out at that point, but most of it was already gone.

**LL:** That was primarily the old growth even at that time? Or was it second growth by that time?

**TA:** Yeah, well, it was fir that was coming out more than Redwood. There'd be the occasional...and we also sold some madrone, burls, and things like that you'd find when a tree split, fell, or whatever, then you cut it up and make it into it, but Tom has a portable sawmill, we had a portable sawmill on our side so, some fir trees went down, or a redwood went down... it stayed on that property and we milled it into lumber and used it to build the barns and do other things like that.

**LL:** When would you say the economy changed, to pretty much, force out sheep ranching?

**TA:** The '70s. Yeah, for sure. Yeah, my sister said four thousand... my recollection was that the peak...there was six thousand sheep run on the ranch. And when I first started coming up, the ranch was right around fourteen-thousand acres and when I went off to

college there was about sixteen-five. And then that was the start of... so that was 1971... that was the start of a downslope for sure on the sheep. So much so that the people that... Sam Johnson who was over on this side and Chuck Johnson on the other... they really weren't sheep men anymore, 'cause there just wasn't that... that many, there was maybe a few hundred that were being run... and at one point in time you couldn't even sell the wool. You could give it away, but you couldn't sell it.

**LL:** Why was that?

**TA:** There was no market for it, because the market had been taken over by Australia and New Zealand and synthetic fibers. And like I said there wasn't a mandate to buy American wool to make American uniforms for our servicemen. So there was certain things that changed from that. My dad was from the Midwest... was from Indiana, and when he first met my mom, she wanted to cook a lamb meal for him. And he was scared to tell her that he didn't like lamb, because he had been used to eating mutton, which is old lamb, where the fat gets stinky, okay. And then he tasted Cooley Ranch lamb and he was shocked at how good it tasted. And I think... it's just my... partially my opinion is that too many people got served poor quality lamb, that had fell out of favor.

**LL:** That's what turned people off to it?

**TA:** Yeah, yeah, during World War II, and... you have a changing cuisine, you had a... freezing technology took off. You're too young to remember the instant meal days of the original Swanson TV dinners...

**LL:** Oh no, I'm not that young! I remember it.

**TA:** TV trays and the and the first, you know Jack-in-the-Box restaurant and McDonald's being expanded. There was a whole culinary change in a lot of things that happened, and lamb didn't participate... we didn't have enough Greeks living over here.

**LL:** Lamb is popular in that part of the world.

**TA:** Yes, well it's because that's what they raise, that's what they have, and everything like that. We have cows, chickens, turkeys, and that's what we eat. So, anyway, yeah... I don't know if I answered your question.

**LL:** I think so. What do you see the future is holding for the land here, your property, all the other properties? Or is that too broad of a question?

**TA:** Well, okay, so I'm nine years older than my sister. She has two boys, a daughter... I have two daughters... the land will pass to them. They all love the land. Each one of them spent... similar experiences to we did... they didn't have to work like we did, okay. They didn't have to build the place, build fences, but they've learned how to work, especially my niece and nephew.

**LL:** And that was primarily because the needs of the ranch had changed?

**TA:** Well it is... my dad didn't make very much money and my mom was I stay at home mom, and we had three boys and girl and raising a family and stuff like that... a Midwest work ethic from my dad... that's just what it was. It was practical and it did teach us a lot of stuff, and it did teach us about it, and there's a... there's a legacy thing here, there's a

pride where you have an ancestor who sacrificed so much to create this place. And you have an obligation to maintain it, so that's part of it, is that sense of...you're continuing that, that thing and so it'll be what ever it takes, whatever opportunity presents itself, and right now we're working on the orchard, ancient orchard. A pruner is to help restore it so we can sell the apples to the cider makers, which is the new thing. Kurt wants to put it in hops, and grow hops.

**LL:** What's old is new again.

**TA:** What's old is new again. And I would even consider doing a vineyard, but that's a very expensive operation to do, and the access here isn't conducive to a vineyard operation.

**LL:** Not to getting the type of vehicles that you need to get down here?

**TA:** Well, you need to have your farmworkers come in here, you got to haul the grapes out of the place; you've got to...other types of things. But yeah, that's true. So, it...it might be a place where you continue to sell hunting rights. I've even said well maybe we can offer experiences up here and build a bunch of little cabins and run some summer camp type of thing, and do that, but I don't know. It'll be...probably having a day job someplace else that earns you enough money so that you can fund of this thing, to keep it going, is probably what it's going to be. And it will make a little bit of money, but it will never pay for itself. I don't see it ever happening. When people...I don't know if you know about homesteading, but there was a lot of homesteading done. My grandfather and his brother bought a homestead from a man who didn't have anybody to leave it to, and that was the first parcel that formed the ranch... old man Hood. And people homesteaded because they didn't have any opportunity, and that's how they got land. And they were able to establish a root cellar and to grow a little bit...they kept it going for two years they got title.

**LL:** So it was subsistence and potential business opportunities later on.

**TA:** And then they could sell the land and move to another thing and do it all over again, and maybe start keeping a little land, building a farm or something like that, that's the way a lot of this was, and that's why there was schools all over the place...and people all over the place. Because there wasn't the industry of the east coast or the Midwest, it was natural resources driven...forests, "ooh, look at all these trees," really that's what it was all about. So, anyway, that's the future for us.

**LL:** You think it's going to hold on? It will change, but...you just don't know.

**TA:** I know that...I'm confident that my daughters and my niece and nephews will figure out a way to get along first of all, because you have to get along, and that they're all smart enough and understand the reality of the place that they will make some collective decisions about that and that they will have successful enough careers that they will pay attention to this place too. But passed that is anybody's guess, anybody's guess. There's very...there are places that's are multiple generations out there but I don't think there's very many of them. People... they move on. I don't have the skills that... well my grandfather wasn't a rancher. My grandfather was an attorney. His brother was the

rancher. My grandfather founded a very successful law firm, so he was the economics that helped make the place go, so that hasn't changed very much.

**LL:** So it still takes...

**TA:** It takes money to...it takes a fortune to make a small one.

**LL:** It makes sense.

**TA:** When you're dealing with land. Well, there is no loans on either ranch, okay so, if you're in debt, the only person you're in debt to, and I alluded to this, is the government, is your tax bill. That's your biggest debt load, is your tax bill. Other than that, if you get yourself in debt you're dead. Because you just can't...it doesn't, it really doesn't pan out very well. I don't know how some of these wineries do it, but I know a lot of wineries are for sale...and vineyard operators that are for sale, because they're underwater.

**LL:** You said the investment is huge, entered building a winery or vineyard.

**TA:** Yeah, yeah. We own...the Cooley family came to California from Ohio in, like 1850, and bought a piece of property in what's called the Oat Valley from a Spanish land grant and built the house, and that house is still there, and planted oats, and planted a family vineyard behind it...a market basket vineyard of different varietals. And over time it added some more orchards on it and still had some oats, and it became a more and more monoculture vineyard, and it still is in the family. It's owned by the four family channels that are the descendants of those original Cooleys, and we farm seventy-two acres of grapes. But we have a farmer farm them for us. None of us are the operating farmers on the thing, but we own the land, and some years it makes pretty decent money and some years it takes every bit of money it made to plow it back in to it. That part of it is still intact, but as it goes further down the ancestral thing, you have greater chances for discord amongst the...because different people have different interests and different things.

**LL:** Actually I think that's... you covered a lot in there...a lot of the questions I had written down, so, we did that.

**TA:** Well what do you think of all this place?

**LL:** I think it's amazing. I think it's...you know, I grew up in the Atlantic City area, and southern New Jersey, on the beach...a lot of people, and open space and such was not...it was there but you to drive for it, but there were never...there was never any ranches like this. And I think it's amazing that people can still live on the land here...I mean, it's beautiful, it's away from stuff...it's not totally away, but it's far enough.

**TA:** How many times have you...have you been out here are all the different seasons.

**LL:** Not all the different seasons, no. Not here...this is the first time I've been up here.

**TA:** Okay, okay. So we have extreme temperature changes from light snow on the hills, ground, back where I'm building a cabin...freezes, to...it can be a hundred and four, a hundred and five degrees.

**LL:** Major swings.



**TA:** Major swings. Yellow jackets, you know, to where it's oppressive if you're out in the sun. So it's, you know this is the best time of the year, frankly.

**LL:** Right now it's beautiful.

**TA:** Right now to the end of May it's really nice unless the bugs get bad. But yeah this is, this is...

**LL:** I've been here for 20 years, in the area, so I'm used to the swings. I did live in Lake County for a while, and that's a god-awful hot.

**TA:** So, what do you think are landowners that are around here, responsibilities to the greater...the greater good?

**LL:** The greater good? In some ways I would say keep doing what you're doing, but maybe I would like to see the...as far as the greater good, the government, maybe local government, easing up on taxes to make these ranches viable. To actually make it so people can continue a family tradition, and maintain land. They've been here a long time and I think they know how to, how to manage it better than a lot of people maybe coming in.

**TA:** Yeah, sometimes.

**LL:** Sometimes. But I guess that in some cases they can partner with people, like a SSU and at the Galbraith Preserve...you know, there can be a decent give-and-take.

**TA:** The Cooley Ranch, like I said, is in the open space district, and it's governed by a document that's about four inches thick. It took multi agencies...were involved in that because it is one of the largest lands that is watershed for Lake Sonoma...and if we didn't have Lake Sonoma we'd be toast as far as the county...and there was a lot of fighting...it took four elections to get Lake Sonoma built... four times it was voted on, and approved before it got... it kept on getting blocked, and blocked, and blocked. But...

**LL:** So it was the water storage that really made it possible for everybody to stay here.

**TA:** For everybody to stay...for Sonoma County to grow. The opponents to it were right in that, if we build this dam we're going to have population growth. Because it's a dry county. There's one lonely river that turns into a piddly stream during the summer, and if they didn't build the hole in the mountain up in Potter Valley, it wouldn't even have...

**LL:** Oh, from the Eel River.

**TA:** Yeah, to flow into Mendocino and into the Russian River...it still wouldn't have it.

**LL:** But you're right about that, I mean, no matter where they build a dam, wherever you put water storage, the population increases.

**TA:** Yeah, so it did change and that, the creation of that damn, was a plus and a minus for us as landowners. It brought more public scrutiny to our ranching operations. The government couldn't afford, or they had a change of mind, or they got lobbied against doing a perimeter road for that lake, and they told us as landowners that we were going to have to change our access. We were going to have to come in...and that road wasn't even there, it was right in front of Tom's house, and go over those ridges there, and to go

another seven miles to our main complex, to run our ranch, because other than taking a boat across Lake Sonoma, we weren't going to get to it. And they thought that that was fine. That was their answer. Tough luck, you have another access point. This is progress. So we sued them and we prevailed.

**LL:** How difficult was that?

**TA:** Well, I told you that my grandfather had a law firm. He was dead by then, but there's nobody more tenacious than my uncle, Crawford Cooley. It took twenty-five years, maybe thirty years, to get the last detail of the agreement settled. The last detail, which was a small fence line, but it took a major lawsuit, it took a big negotiation...we had to take on the responsibility to build our own road in. They gave us most of the funding for it. We had to acquire the ranch next to us as a part of this deal, so we had to take on more liability, because they only wanted one landowner. We had to take over the power poles...

**LL:** What does that mean takeover? Does that mean you had purchase them?

**TA:** We had to, we had to tell PG&E that we would pay for them in case anything went wrong with them, okay, because PG&E didn't want anything to do with... that infrastructure. And we did that to keep the place going, okay. And right or wrong that's what we did and then we went into the open space district basically for the same reason, which was to strip out the development rights from it and put it into this preserve, because that was the only way to save it from estate taxes, because it would've...dirt rich and cash poor, it would've wiped us out. For that, and the benefit is...is for everybody.

**LL:** And that's something you feel good about?

**TA:** Yeah, oh yeah. It's a little painful at times, but yeah.

**LL:** What do you mean by painful at times?

**TA:** Well, you don't know what the future holds and you still have to make the place work. So, the state of California...I don't remember where you live?

**LL:** Guerneville.

**TA:** Guerneville. Okay. So you know that the state of California got itself...the state of California is always in trouble because it relies on capital gains taxes. When capital gains taxes are poor, we lose out on a full twenty-five percent of our tax base, for the budget. That's why state parks were being shut down, because they couldn't afford the state parks anymore... well, what is this thing? This thing's a big park.

**LL:** It's technically a state park.

**TA:** They're just big parks and they're privately held. Tom doesn't have any cattle on this. Tom doesn't have any hunters on this place. He has this much source of income to maintain it. He does it all and he's bought every piece of equipment here, he knows how to work on every piece of equipment here, and that's what it takes to have it, so... that's where it's a double-edged sword. The work doesn't go away.

**LL:** So even though when your property is part of the open space district, it's still your property.

**TA:** Yes.

**LL:** Okay.

**TA:** Yeah. My sister and mine isn't, because of the open space we divided Florence's side of the family and Crawford's side of the family, okay. The Cooley side, that ranch, which is in the open space. Our ranch isn't, because we go into the Gualala watershed, so there was no value to Sonoma County. A large portion of that Cooley ranch is in Mendocino County, but it was paid for with Sonoma County tax dollars because of its importance to Lake Sonoma and to that population, that they saw the benefit of doing that. Ours is technically five divisible parcels that we could sell individually if we wanted to. If we got desperate and said, "Well we're going to sell off that to so-and-so," to raise capital, or something like that. But Tom's is in a...not an open space, but he's signed a conservation easement on it, so he's devalued his property by putting it into the...I think it's the Anderson Valley conservation...

**LL:** Is that similar to the open space?

**TA:** No, not really, in that I don't think that he was given any money for doing that. What he was given, was he was given a tax consideration that helped him there.

**LL:** Okay, I understand.

**TA:** And so that was helping keep things viable for him, where is open-space paid us a certain amount for, for the development rights to the Cooley side of the ranch.

**LL:** Okay, sounds good.