

Argonaut High School  
Oral History Interview  
Biographical Sketch

Subjects full name: Francis Vaira

Address: 430 Sargent Ave.  
Jackson, CA. 95642

Telephone: Home: 229-0646 Work: N/A

Date of birth: 6-22-24 Place of birth: Plymouth, CA

Date of marriage: 1950 Place of marriage: Fone, CA

Name of spouse: June Vaira

date of birth: 6/26/28 Place of birth: Fone, CA

Subject occupation: Retired now, was rancher, school administrator

Spouse occupation: Kindergarten teacher

Name of mother: Marion Vaira

Date of birth: 1900 Place of birth: Fair Flat

Occupation: Housewife

Name of father: Antone Vaira

Date of birth: 1892 Place of birth: Drytown

Occupation: Rancher/ worked on highways

Subject's children and dates of birth: Dale Vaira - Aug. 14, 1951

James Vaira - 1953

Karen Vaira - 1956

Subject's brothers and sisters and dates of birth: not sure.

4 brothers and 3 sisters

Subject's primary and secondary education: (Schools attended and dates) Drytown elementary school - 8 years,  
Sutter Creek High School

Subject's higher education: (Schools attended, graduation date, majors, degrees) San Jose State

Subject's profession or occupations: (Job, dates, where) teacher, principal, superintendant

Military service: (Branch, rank, dates of service) 4 years  
in the Marines. December 1942 to April  
1946

Civic and community activities: (Offices held, activities, etc.) superintendant, Lions club, quarterback  
club

Miscellaneous information: \_\_\_\_\_

Prepared by: Emily Bohl and Anissa Michell

Date: March 18, 1997

Project: \_\_\_\_\_

V: The mine worked seven days a week, at least the hoist people, they had to run it to keep the water out. Three hoist operators worked 2 weeks day shift, 2 weeks afternoon, 2 weeks night shift, 7 days a week. Only day they let water fill was Christmas.

I worked at a mine in Amador City, just on the top, kind of like a "gopher", go for this and go for that, but only when they were short on manpower.

B: How many hours/day did miners work?

V: It depends. At first they worked long shifts, but then the union came in and they could only work 8 hour days. I remember the union coming in and what big strikes they had. There was a big upset between laborers and the management. They had a lot of incidents when the strikers would put sugar in scabs' gas tanks, then they could go only for 6 miles until their motor was shot. Most of this stuff was done at the Argonaut and Kennedy.

B: How many days/week did miners work.

V: Well, again in the early part they were expected to work 6 or 7 days. At least 6, then in the end when the union came in, it was only 5 days. That's what I remember. I was only a teen in those days.

B: What were working conditions like?

V: I don't think it was too good because they used to blast every day and if you lived around any of these towns, in fact I lived in Drytown, and I could tell at the end of a shift they'd blast with dynamite. Then the next crew would come in and shovel it out and then they'd blast again for the next crew to handle the rock. They didn't really have the air to

then remove the powder and gas fumes and there wasn't much time for the fumes to clear out and it was pretty dusty and dirty down there. This is why we have so much mining consumption in their lungs.

B: Could you describe a typical working day at the Kennedy Mine?

V: I really couldn't.

B: What was it like to live in a mining county?

V: Well, there were only very few rich people in the county, the rest were laborers. It's been assumed that a lot of laborers made their money by stealing hygrade and selling it to places around here. They subsidized their income with what they took out. And how they try to answer that is in the change room. Well, when the miners came to work they have what you call a change house. You took your clothes off here that you wore to work and you walked through the shower area into another place where you put on your work clothes. O.K. When you came back up then you went through, took a shower and put your street clothes on. So because of the place there it was a hard way to transfer, but they learned how to do it. They had a lot of ways of getting the gold.

B: Yes. I remember that when we toured the Kennedy Mine we were told stories about people stealing gold and we also got to see the change room.

V: Well, that's what it was for. To separate it from that and you know this story went around and maybe you've heard it. Have you ever gotten to see the Cedric Klute that he talks about the mother load and things like that? He tells this story about 2 or 3 times a year how this one miner had a gold watch, have you heard this story? I don't want to repeat if you've heard this story.

B: I don't think I have.

V: O.K. Well, he had this gold watch you see and it really never ran. He had all the insides out. He'd go in there and put his gold in there and when he'd come across he'd carry his watch across and he had his hygrade in his watch. And that's how he got it out. There were many stories of how they got it. You see, this is really only hear-say that I'm telling you because this is a story I have heard.

B: O.K. could you describe how it was for you as a teenager living here?

V: Well, it was completely different than it is today, obviously. That's my first statement. First thing the transportation was completely different, we're talking if a family had one car they were doing very good. I still remember the horse and buggy days. In fact, I can remember walking. I lived out at Vaira Ranch and I used to walk every day to school and that was a mile back and forth. There used to be one guy who lived down below us he had an old cart and we'd hope that he would come by and give us a ride in his cart and horse. That's what they had for transportation then. So it was a little different than it is today.

B: (laugh) What was it like to travel from one town to the next?

V: First thing the roads weren't anything like they are today. And they were in different areas than they are now. The roads, let's take it from Plymouth to Jackson. At that time, the roads, they came through Drytown, went up by the school, up over the hill to the left of the Vaira Ranch turnoff and it wound over and came over to Bunker Hill. Instead of coming into Amador City by the hotel like you do now, you take a right and go back up over the hill and that was the old road. Then Sutter Creek came over and you probably know where that road is. It's called String Bean Alley now. You know, that was the road there. To see what kind of roads they were, if you did 20 mph that was the speed limit on

those types of roads. They were mainly one car roads. If you passed some people would back up, some would pass side by side. It sounds like a different era doesn't it?

B: Yes. Do you know how long it would take to get from Jackson to Sutter Creek?

V: Yes, it would take over an hour.

B: Wow!

V: Even more than that sometimes. The tires weren't very good then. It was common to have a flat tire.

B: How about from Jackson to Sacramento?

V: We used to go to Sacramento. It was we would go down one day and come back the next. It took probably 4 or 5 hours to get there. You could go 20 or 25 mph. Sometimes the roads weren't blacktop either.

B: What about Stockton or San Francisco?

V: You know, most everybody went to Sacramento from here. The trend is still that way. The people from Ione go to Lodi and Stockton and most of these people here go to Sacramento. I don't know why, that's kind of the way it is.

B: And that was when you were a teenager?

V: Yes.

B: What kind of entertainment was there in Amador County?

V: Well, the thing that I remember when I went to high school was the dance every Saturday night. And then one time it would be like in Sutter Creek, and one time, the next Saturday night it would be at least it rotated around a little bit, Jackson, Plymouth, or even Drytown used to have some of them, you know where the Claypipers are?

B: Yes.

V: That's the dance hall, in Drytown and see every place, now the dance hall in Plymouth is the city hall there. In Sutter Creek it was the auditorium where it is now. You know, Ione is where the parking lot is, you know?

B: yes.

V: Where you hit that turn. It burned down right there, but this, and then you see Jackson used to be the capital building, you know when I say that, O.K. - you come down, you know where the stop, flashing light is, and you either go through Main Street or go to the highway just as you pull in right at the 2 story building there, 3 story.

B: Oh, o.k., yes.

V: There's a dance hall right at the top, and that's where the dances used to be here.

B: What were the other main amusements?

V: Well, we had the theater in Jackson.

B: Oh, theater -about how much did that cost?

V: Oh -I think it was around a quarter or so.

B: A quarter?

V: Yes, it wasn't very much, just, money then was completely different than it is today.

B: What were other main industries?

V: Well, we had the theater in Jackson.

B: How much did that cost?

V: About a quarter.

B: Besides the mine, what other main industries?

V: Preston School has always been there and that's what put Ione differently. They had a really good source of income. Then there were county jobs, but not like they are today.

People working on the highway crews and forestry crews. They were just a dribble of what we have now, which is multiplied many times.

B: What different ethnic groups were there?

V: I happen to be of Italian descent and it was Italians and Slavonians. the Chinese were gone before my day. We had a big influx of Chinese here in 1849, 1850. They really worked the gold mines. They worked the placer, they didn't work the gold mines. When I say placer, do you know what I mean by that?

B: You mean gold panning?

V: It wasn't gold panning. If you notice on a lot of these ranches, the piles of rock here and there. Well, they brought the water in and they put a sluice box there and with wheelbarrows they brought the dirt into the sluice box and the water runs through it and they threw the rocks out. That's how they got these piles of rocks around here. Well, if you go down Sutter Creek or Jackson Creek, not so much here, but if you go down like Dry Creek there were a lot of them there, there were a lot of them around there at that time. Do you want a cookie young lady, I don't want you to starve, that's why she put them out here.

B: Sure. Where did most of the different ethnic groups live?

V: Well, it was, actually it was just like when I was in school, they weren't in groups they were just all the same, they were just mixed up all over. There were a lot of Mexican kids when I was living in Jackson, they didn't even know they were Mexican. No one ever said ethnic or anything like that, or Italian, they were all just kids who went to school. There was never any, maybe there were different classes because of income but that would be the only thing.

B: Would you say that most everybody worked in the mines?

V: Yes, either that or they had agriculture. There were a lot of ranches around here. People had small ranches, they still do, or large ranches. They had income from that. You see, income in those days wasn't like income today. You just had the staple foods and that's what you lived with. We didn't have the stuff like this.

B: Do you remember the gambling halls and other businesses in Jackson?

V: Yes, I just remember them when I was a kid. I remember the Louver, when I say Louver, does that recall anything? It's where Wells Fargo Bank is now. It used to be down under. What we used to do, I'm getting back to my teenage times now, we used to have dances and at midnight they'd have an hour off for a dinner break. So if it was in Jackson, we'd go down to the Louver and then we'd come back and dance until 3 o'clock in the morning, we'd dance until that time.

B: Was that the only hall you remember?

V: No, there was the same thing all the communities around. Mainly, the only places if you wanted to eat you had to come to Jackson, they were the only ones that stayed open and they stayed open because, I'm sure, partly because of the gambling.

B: Did you know anyone who worked in the gambling places?

V: Well, I did at that time but most of them are gone now, you know, we're talking about quite a while now.

B: Did the mining industry keep them in business?

V: Well, I don't know if that did. I think more outsiders coming here for the gambling, you know, it's just like Indian Bingo, it's not the local people that support it, it's the outsiders that come in and that's what it was at that time, too.

B: Where did you buy your groceries?

V: Most of ours, I'm back to my family, were bought at the Drytown store. Each little community had a general store and they sold everything from Levi pants to meat and it was sort of, well, markets do that today too, well a general store. A couple times a month my mother would come to Jackson. At that time there was a Safeway in Sutter Creek. You know where Amador Motors has their vehicles on the left hand side, well, that was originally a Safeway store. And they used to go into Safeway shopping and maybe sometimes into Jackson.

B: Where did you buy your gasoline?

V: We didn't live like today where the environmentalists shut everything down. Each little store had a pump. There were old pumps you pumped up like this and there was a 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 and you'd let it down till the bubble broke on the bottom and that was a gallon. For instance, if you wanted 2 gallons, you'd let it down until the bubble broke on number 2 and on down there was a round cylinder, have you seen them?

B: Yes, I've seen them.

V: When you got through they'd pump it back up. Most you could buy was ten gallons then it would run out and you'd pump it back up again you see.

B: Who was your doctor?

V: Our family doctor was Dr. Lynch, and he lived in Amador City. In fact, his son lives in the house right now. I had him as a student. But that time they came right out to the house, you didn't have too many doctors, there were only one or two doctors in the whole county. One in Jackson and one in Ione and Dr. Lynch.

B: Do you remember any boarding houses?

V: Yes, I do. In fact I could go back to the day again when I was a senior in high school. There used to be a bakery in Sutter Creek and I used to deliver to the boarding house in Plymouth and, what other one did I deliver to? John Begovich's mother had it, the supervisor, and I guess that's the only boarding house I delivered to. I can remember the boarding house that was here, the Kovasovich's on Broadway going out there. They moved it, his mother moved it out to the Buena Vista area, you know Paul's Boarding House? It used to be here in Jackson.

B: It went way out there? I go by there on my way home.

V: Well, they owned that land, they grew a lot of vegetables and they were right there with it.

B: Do you know how much they charged there, do you have any idea?

V: No, I really can't, you know nothing was much over 75 cents or a dollar for a meal and that was a lot of money. It's just throw away money now. You're talking about quite a different economy than what we're talking about today.

B: Did most families have cars?

V: What I can remember, most families had one car. It was for everything. It was a family car.

B: Was ranching and farming big, obviously it was.

V: Yes, it was. Actually it was income for a lot of people. There used to be cattle buyers come through and buy the cattle. I can remember seeing them down at the ranch and they'd come to look at our cattle and give you so much as one cent a pound.

B: Wow! Was the timber industry large in Amador County?

V: It really wasn't. It didn't become that until after the war.

B: Did you know any of the main loggers?

V: Do you mean after the war or during the time of the mines?

B: During the time of the mines.

V: You see, they had timber, but I really didn't know anything about the timber. There was a completely different kind of timber than what they have today. More in the rough.

B: Do you remember the Argonaut Mine fire?

V: No, I don't

B: What can you remember about the labor strikes against the mines?

V: We already covered that, I don't know if you want me to cover it again.

B: That's right. Is there anything else you can remember about the Kennedy Mine?

V: I told you, you had the wrong one. I probably gave you more than I thought but your questions were good, you know, you probably need someone just a few years older than myself.

B: We interviewed a woman, Mrs. Garbarini.

V: She probably could give you a lot of stuff, she was one, see her husband was a mining engineer wasn't he?

B: He was a carpenter.

V: I was going to tell you what Dorothy told me this morning. Do you know Jim Nettle here in town? He's at the post office, he lives out in North Main.

B: Someone is interviewing him. We have several groups.

V: How did you get a hold of me?

B: Somebody recommended you to us.

V: I hope I didn't disappoint you.

B: Oh, no way!