Neal Coonerty and Bookshop Santa Cruz

Neal Coonerty and Bookshop Santa Cruz:

Forty-Six Years of Independent Bookselling

Current location of Bookshop Santa Cruz, 1520 Pacific Avenue

An Oral History by Irene Reti
University of California, Santa Cruz
University Library

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Neal and Candy Coonerty celebrating their twenty-five years at Bookshop Santa Cruz, November 1998

Introduction

The Descent (excerpt)
by Morton Marcus

Feeling more like a diver
going down into a sunken ship
than an anonymous volunteer
entering a half-demolished store,
I donned the yellow hard hat
and descended to the basement
of a building that had toppled
in the recent earthquake.
A bitter, smoky dust
stung my throat and nostrils,
and overhead, electrical wires
dangled like tentacles
in the mildewed mist
pierced by my flashlight beam

The treasure was everywhere,
strewn on the wet linoleum
or still on shelves—books
of every size and shape,
books on every subject,
for the building
had been a bookshop
until the week before,
and contained a cargo
more valuable than bullion
or any jewels or ingots
that might have sunk
in wooden ships
beneath the Spanish Main…

On October 17, 1989, Santa Cruz almost lost a beloved independent bookstore. A 7.1 earthquake centered only fifteen miles away hit this coastal California university town, damaging many of its historic buildings. One wall of the 1895 unreinforced masonry building that housed Bookshop Santa Cruz peeled off and collapsed into the Coffee Roasting Company next door, killing two employees. The city red-tagged the building with all the inventory trapped inside and scheduled the building demolition. The story Marcus tells in the poem above, of how four hundred brave volunteers showed up to pull books out of the crumbling building and saved Santa Cruz's independent bookstore, is only one chapter in Bookshop Santa Cruz's extraordinary forty-six years of history.[1]

In this series of oral history interviews, Neal Coonerty, Bookshop Santa Cruz's owner, tells a story of creativity, resilience, humor, and persistence. It's the tale of how one independent bookstore survived competition from two different superstores, the rise of Amazon.com and other online booksellers, e-books, a devastating natural disaster, and personal tragedy, to remain a vibrant community business and institution.

But Neal Coonerty is more than a local independent bookstore owner. An activist, Coonerty is well known for his political work through both the Northern California Booksellers Association and the American Booksellers Association on behalf of the independent bookselling business. In "The Revolt of the Retailers," a chapter of *Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption,* Laura Miller argues that competition from the major chains fostered a "collective identity among independent booksellers."[2] While booksellers in the past cultivated an image of conservative gentility, a rapidly changing economy called for a new, savvy political bookstore owner, one who "sought to be a savior of community life by standing up to those powerful organizations that appeared to threaten local autonomy." According to Miller, political activism by independent bookstore owners took three related forms:

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[1] This poem is reprinted with permission from the estate of Morton Marcus and originally appeared in the *Bookshop Santa Cruz Readers Newsletter* in summer of 2006.

[2] Laura J. Miller, *Reluctant Capitalists: Bookselling and the Culture of Consumption,* (University of Chicago Press, 2007) pp. 162-63.

First, independents agitated to make their trade organizations a base from which to organize. Second, they tried to use antitrust laws to equalize the terms publishers and wholesalers grant to chains and independents. Finally, booksellers engaged in educational campaigns aimed at convincing the public to patronize independents. These campaigns mixed the kind of public relations common to any consumer industry with an effort at consciousness-raising and an attempt to politicize the chain-independent issue.

Neal Coonerty has engaged in all three of these forms of activism. A member of the Northern California Booksellers Association (NCBA) beginning in the 1970s, Coonerty forged links among his bookseller colleagues and helped NCBA bring an antitrust lawsuit against the chains for unfair discount policies. During his two terms as president of the American Booksellers Association, he participated in a federal antitrust lawsuit against Borders and Barnes and Noble for alleged illegal monopolistic practices. The ABA settled the case in 2001 for $4.7 million. Finally, through his strong community base and his media savvy, Coonerty has continued to inspire customer loyalty. Bookshop Santa Cruz can now celebrate outlasting the Borders store in downtown Santa Cruz, which closed in 2011.

Despite this recent victory, the future of Bookshop Santa Cruz is still fragile, as burgeoning online book sales and ebook readers significantly cut into sales and the future of print books and brick and mortar bookstores is uncertain. Neal has now moved into full-time work as a Santa Cruz County Supervisor, and his daughter, Casey Coonerty Protti, became the primary operator of Bookshop in 2006, although Neal still retains an interest and involvement in the family business. Protti is implementing many innovative ideas to help Bookshop navigate this turbulent time in the book business.

This oral history captures a prominent independent bookseller's reflections on the rapidly changing state of the book business. It is a valuable contribution to the literature on independent bookstores and is therefore of both local and national interest.

Neal Coonerty was born in Santa Maria, California in 1946 and grew up in Van Nuys, California. He graduated from UC Berkeley in English in 1969. In 1973 he and his wife, Candy, bought Bookshop

Santa Cruz from its former owner, Ron Lau. Candy spent many years building Bookshop's excellence, until her tragic death from a stroke in 1999, at age 49.

Besides running Bookshop Santa Cruz, Coonerty served on the Santa Cruz City Council from 1990 to 1994, including a term as mayor of Santa Cruz in 1993. In June 2006, Coonerty was elected to the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors and was re-elected for another four-year term in June 2010. This oral history focuses almost entirely on Coonerty's career as owner and operator of Bookshop Santa Cruz from 1973, until 2006, when his daughter took over the reins. Neal's son, Ryan, has also had a successful political career. He has been elected to two four-year terms on the Santa Cruz City Council, beginning in 2004, and served as mayor of Santa Cruz from November 2007 to November 2008. Ryan has also worked part-time at Bookshop Santa Cruz. In 2002, Neal married Lucie Rossi. She is a retired elementary school teacher. Neal is also very close to his grandchildren and proudly pointed out their pictures to me in his office overlooking Santa Cruz.

I conducted these interviews on November 17, December 2, and December 22, 2011 in Coonerty's office at the Santa Cruz County Building. For the past three decades I have been the publisher of HerBooks/Juniper Lake Press, a feminist and literary press in Santa Cruz. I have weathered many of the same storms that have affected Bookshop Santa Cruz, albeit from a publisher's rather than a bookstore's vantage point. Bookshop's steadfast support of mine and other small local presses has been a key factor in nurturing a strong literary culture on the Central Coast of California. Wearing the hat of small press publisher in addition to oral historian, I brought somewhat of an insider's perspective to these interviews, although Neal and I did not know each other personally before this project began. It was my pleasure and honor to witness Neal's inspiring oral history. Neal was a generous narrator, taking time out of his busy schedule as a Santa Cruz County Supervisor to do these interviews, warmly welcoming me into his office each time, and lending me his personal collection of Bookshop Santa Cruz newsletters for background research. He also reviewed this transcript for accuracy, as did his daughter, Casey, and his wife, Lucie.

Copies of this oral history are on deposit in Special Collections and the stacks at McHenry Library at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and in full text on the UCSC Library's Website. The Project is supported administratively by Christine Bunting, Head of Special Collections and Archives, and University Librarian Virginia Steel.

—Irene Reti
Director, Regional History Project,
University Library, UC Santa Cruz
August 2012

Early Life

Reti: This is Irene Reti, and I'm here with Neal Coonerty in the [Santa Cruz] Board of Supervisors office on the fifth floor of the county building. Today is November 17, 2011 and we're starting our oral history about Bookshop Santa Cruz. But of course we want to go back much earlier, to really the beginning of your life. Can you tell me where you were born and where you grew up?

Coonerty: Sure. I was born in Santa Maria [California]. My mom and my maternal grandparents lived in Orcutt, a little town outside of Santa Maria. So I was one of the baby boomers. I was born in 1946 right after the war. My mom went back to be with her parents when she was going to give birth. My father was an Irish immigrant—at seventeen he emigrated from Ireland—and I was born on St. Patrick's Day.

Reti: Oh my goodness, how perfect.

Coonerty: My mother was a girl with six brothers, and the oldest brother had had children that were all girls. So my father and this uncle had made a bet, and he had said he was going to have a son on St. Patrick's Day. So quite by accident, because usually Irish Catholics don't plan these things, I was born on St. Patrick's Day. The tale was that my father made a phone call to my uncle collect saying that it was Superman calling and that he was there to collect this bet. [laughs]

So anyway, I was born in Santa Maria. In fact, the hospital where I was born is now an old people's home, so I can go back there to end my days [laughs], I suppose, where I was born.

But then I was primarily raised in Van Nuys, in the San Fernando Valley, in Los Angeles. Originally, the first four years, we were in Quonset huts at Roger Young Village near Griffith Park, they set up for returning G.I.'s. My dad, who had come over at seventeen, had worked in New York for Coty's Cosmetics and had worked his way up; then World War

II came along and he was drafted and sent to the South Pacific. When he came back, my mother, who had graduated from Cal Berkeley, had convinced him that he should take advantage of the G.I. Bill because he'd always wanted to be an engineer, so he went back to college. We lived in these Quonset huts for about four years. I have two sisters, one older, one younger. Then we moved to Van Nuys, in a sort of suburban—it used to be a walnut grove that had turned into a suburban area of newly built houses post-World War II. And that's where I grew up, primarily.

Reti: So your father worked as an engineer?

Coonerty: Yes, he went to work as an aerospace engineer with a company called Rocketdyne. It was part of North American Aviation and they worked on building the Saturn, the engine of the rocket that lifted it off the earth, the big, huge rocket. He worked up at Rocketdyne, which is in the Santa Susana Mountains just outside of the San Fernando Valley. They'd turn the engines into the earth and would fire them to test them, and the whole valley would rattle; it was like almost a man-made earthquake. We always knew when they were testing a rocket because you could hear the roar and the ground would actually shake a bit, not at the level of an earthquake, but you could feel it. [My father] ended up from being raised in Ireland, a very rural existence, to working on the rocket that sent the people to the moon.

Reti: Wow. And what about your mom?

Coonerty: My mom, she was a girl in the middle of a family with six brothers. She was raised in Orcutt. Her parents were immigrants from Ireland, from a different part of Ireland. My dad was from Limerick, Ireland. My maternal grandparents were from Donegal, which is in the northwest part of Ireland. They had come over to Philadelphia, had met there. They didn't know each other. They came from the same small town but didn't know each other in Ireland, and then got married in Philadelphia, and then took a train out to California. My grandfather

had a sister, who had married somebody who was living in Lompoc. So they came out. Word was when they crossed the California border, my grandfather took his overcoat and tossed it out the train window, saying, "I'll never need this. I'm in California." [laughs] I don't think he was ready for the foggy coast of California.

But, anyway, they settled in Lompoc, in the hills there. He went to work for the Union Oil Company, going around all those wells that they had and maintaining the wells, and as he went around, he set out traps to catch animals. He'd skin them and sell furs and do things to raise extra money for his family.

Then at some point, the Union Oil Company moved them. They were up on a hill, on a little encampment set up for the workers. They moved them down to this little town of Orcutt, which now is just a suburb of Santa Maria, but it was a separate little town then. And that's where I really knew them, because we would go up, it was about a three-hour drive from Van Nuys to Orcutt and we'd go up there and visit my grandparents. I'd go spend summers there and roam around the hills around Orcutt and Santa Maria. But primarily I was in Van Nuys. It was a very *Leave it to Beaver*, middle-class existence in the fifties. I think we moved in there at Christmas time 1950. And then I left there to go to college, so—

Reti: Yes, so it was a pretty classic, postwar boom, suburban place to grow up.

Coonerty: A very suburban world, which was not a bad place to grow up in. It was all neat lawns and occasional playgrounds. I remember there was a Crystal Plunge swimming pool that was nearby. It was very easygoing. Los Angeles is very warm. You could almost see the smog, though, marching across the valley. When I first got there, we were primarily in the middle of orchards, and like I said, we were in a walnut grove. But you could see every year the smog coming closer and closer until we became part of the Los Angeles smog, too. That was

unfortunate. All the groves and the empty fields and farm areas got covered up by housing. But that was 1950s Los Angeles.

Reti: What was your relationship to books at that point in your life?

Coonerty: My mom was a teacher. She came from that family that really believed in education. They were immigrants from Ireland. They hadn't had an education. They were actually fairly poorly educated. My grandmother, in particular, came from a very, very poor family up in Donegal. My mom had gone to the University of California. One brother had played football at USC [University of Southern California]. She had another brother that went to Cal Berkeley. So she was a great believer in education. She talked my dad into going back to school when he was in his late thirties after he got out of the army.

So books were around the house and reading was a part of what we did, although I was a slow reader and I wasn't a voracious reader. I had a sister, Sheila, who was thirteen months younger than I was. I remember distinctly going to the library at the beginning of summertime. They'd always have a program of how many books could you read in the summer. We'd each check out like ten books. Three days later, Sheila will have finished her ten books. And meanwhile I'm out swinging from walnut trees or playing baseball or something like that, and maybe gotten through one book. So I was discouraged in this competition. And I was a slow reader. I wrote an article about that in the [Bookshop Santa Cruz] newsletter once. I'd read something and then I'd get interested in something else. We had a *World Book Encyclopedia,* and one of the things I did like to do, it was a little quirky, was to sit on the couch and grab a volume of the encyclopedia and start reading the entries, just little snippets, something like Wikipedia is today. They give you a little information. I'd just start going through an encyclopedia. But I was slow. I was good in school so I read all that sort of stuff. I wasn't a big

reader up until I hit high school, sort of midway through high school I started reading a lot more.

Reti: What made you start reading a lot more?

Coonerty: I don't know. I think it was one of those things where you have an English teacher that inspires you. I went to Catholic schools, both grade school up until eighth grade and then a Catholic high school, Alemany. I remember, particularly, my tenth and my eleventh grade teachers were really good. One of them was a layman and one of them was a priest. The discussion about literature, what role it played, I think it really sparked an interest in me. I started picking up books and realizing that I wanted to find out more about this. A lot of it was novels. It was the time of *On the Road* and *Catcher in the Rye*. I was still sporadic at reading but I enjoyed books and I enjoyed getting information. I was also big, as an adolescent male, on being outdoors and doing sports, so the time was somewhat constricted, but I was always a good student, and I enjoyed it.

UC Berkeley

In fact, when I finally ended up going to college, I first went in as a political science major because I was interested in politics. When you're a lowly freshman you sort of have to take what's available, you don't get your choice of classes—my first political science class was administrative politics. It was basically how the bureaucracy would function. If you were a city manager, how would you implement policy? It was so boring. I was at Cal Berkeley during the exciting times, so all this exciting stuff was going on about the Vietnam War and everything on the outside, and I was taking this class on bureaucracy. [laughs]

I was working in a place where a guy had just won an award for undergraduate work in English literature. I was talking to him and I was saying how much I thought that was great. I said, "But I'm a slow reader. I really couldn't probably keep up," and he said, "Look, I'm a slow reader. I just persist. I just read continually." A little light went

off in my head and said, I can get through college reading novels and poetry and drama and that's not a bad way to go. [laughs] It's better than taking classes on how a bureaucracy works. So I switched and became an English major and sort of picked up the pace. I felt like I had to start reading classics, particularly American literature. So high school sort of started it but then when I hit college and decided I'd be an English major that upped my level of reading and enjoyment of reading.

Reti: What year did you go to Berkeley?

Coonerty: I went to [UC] Berkeley from 1964 to 1969. I took extra time. It was the time of the Vietnam War. It wasn't bad to go slow. So I graduated in 1969.

Reti: Were you part of the antiwar movement?

Coonerty: I was. I tell my kids, "Don't pay attention to what my GPA was. I was busy saving the world at the same time." [laughs] So I was. The Vietnam Day Committee was going on. It was an interesting time because on the Berkeley side of the bay there was very intense political stuff. It started out with the Free Speech Movement. Then it evolved into basically antiwar and antidraft and anti-Vietnam. But on the San Francisco side the whole hippie culture was developing, which was more cultural and less overtly political than it was lifestyle. It was interesting watching these two things happen at the same time. And at the same time, things were happening that were making the evening news, whether it was People's Park or other sorts of things. We felt like our voice was being heard. I wasn't a leader in it. I did end up on the front cover of a *Berkeley Barb* newspaper when one time we were going into Sproul Hall to take it over and do a sit-in. They happened to catch me just as I was walking in the door, so I have proof that I was there. So I would participate at that level. It was exciting. It was interesting times.

It was interesting to watch to see how it played out. But I wasn't in the leadership. I didn't really have time for that.

Reti: You were more part of the Berkeley political group and less so of the San Francisco lifestyle.

Coonerty: Right. We'd go over to rock shows that were over in San Francisco and do a little of that. I never was hanging out at the Panhandle or in Haight-Ashbury or that sort of thing. But there was a certain amount of flowing back and forth. It was fun. To be twenty years old and have all that stuff going on plus taking classes and everything—it was a fun time. Although hanging over you was the Vietnam War and the draft, and that was always a very sobering thing, because it was not only the fact that you could end up going into this war, but there was the moral decision that was very much a part of the Berkeley scene. Would you cooperate? Would you refuse to step forward and risk going to jail? Or would you go to Canada or someplace else and try to avoid it?

And it was heavily debated. But also you saw examples. One of my roommates was one of the people that went to the draft board, refused to step forward, and was indicted. [He] ended up getting off because they accelerated a whole bunch of cases and the court said, "You aren't allowed to do that." So he never ended up having to go to jail or anything. But we knew people that were doing that. I had a cousin that was in Vietnam. And my girlfriend, soon to be my wife, was from Canada and she knew people who were over in Canada. So it was very much hanging over you all the time. I think I ended up getting what they call a 1-Y, which is one step up from a 4-F. Basically it meant that they wouldn't draft me except in the most extreme things. I got that right

near when I graduated. The question was, was it more of an excitement to graduate from college or to get out of the draft? [laughs]

Reti: How did you end up with that classification?

Coonerty: Oh, I just had a medical condition—atopic dermatitis—that happened to be on the list of things that would disqualify you, particularly in a tropical area. As an undergraduate, I worked at Boalt Hall Law Library. At that time, the University went to a quarter system. The law school stayed on their semester system, so for one time they hired a bunch of undergrads to work in the law library because they used to lose their student workers during finals and when things got intense. So they hired undergrads. Then right after we got hired they complained they were losing jobs, so they went back to hiring [law] students. I used to sit at the reference desk at the law library studying draft law. I had shifted my draft board from Van Nuys up to Berkeley. I had gone through a pre-induction physical already and gotten passed, so I had to find a doctor that specialized in this atopic dermatitis and got him to write a letter. So it was back-and-forth. I'd go to the draft board and say, "I would like to submit this in order to support this," and they'd say, "Well, according to regulation such and such, you had to do that within sixty days," and I'd go, "Well, according to regulation such and such I have a window now to do this." It was studying the draft law those hours when I was working the reference desk that enabled me to get to the point where I finally got this 1-Y. That was an experience of the times, I think.

Reti: And what do you remember about the bookstores in Berkeley at that time?

Coonerty: There were great bookstores there. Cody's Bookstore was the great new bookstore. Moe's Books and Shakespeare & Company were used bookstores. And they were right on Telegraph [Avenue] there. Most of the time I lived on that side of the campus, the south end of campus. I didn't have enough money to really shop at Cody's much,

although I'd go there and browse. The used bookstores, you'd go in and almost stop daily on your way home to check out what new had come in. I was studying a lot of poetry so I was looking for slim volumes of poetry that came in used. I was haunting bookstores almost all the time. In fact, my celebration, I guess, for getting the 1-Y and knowing that I wouldn't get drafted for Vietnam was I went and bought a new book at Cody's. That was [laughs] how I was going to celebrate, get a book that I always wanted. It was a Sierra Club book, I remember, and a splurge because I was sure that I wasn't going to go to Vietnam.

So I was constantly in those bookstores and really liked them. It was exciting. There was a lot of interesting stuff coming out. Berkeley was—being Berkeley they had a wide variety. It wasn't like a suburban bookstore. I had grown up down in Los Angeles. Pickwick was a very good bookstore—

Reti: I remember Pickwick.

Coonerty: They were in Hollywood. I think at one point before they sold out to B. Dalton, they were out in the San Fernando Valley in Thousand Oaks, they had a little bookstore, too. There was a little, tiny bookstore in the town next to Van Nuys, which was Reseda, and it was more of a teacher's bookstore. But my mom was a teacher [and] used to go in there. I remember they had a very small room. I've been there since. It was Lewis for Books and I would just poke around. It was really more of a teacher's store than a new bookstore, but they had one room that was devoted to new paperbacks and a few new hardbacks. I remember poking around there. Those were, they were good—particularly Pickwick was a good store. But Berkeley and the used bookstore[s] which made it more accessible to me [were] Moe's and Shakespeare & Company. Who knows what kind of treasures you'd find? It really made it exciting.

Cody's was a great place because anything you wanted they'd have there. And they took a political stand. During People's Park, they used

to let people who were fleeing the police in through the door. So the police actually shot tear gas in through their window. [You'd] walk in there and your eyes would start watering. I particularly liked the fact that they were taking a political stand with everything else going on, too. They really educated me as far as what good bookstores were and how they could play a role in the community. It was good. It was a good place to learn about bookstores.

Reti: Did you have any thought at the time that you might want to run a bookstore?

Coonerty: You know, I didn't too much. I worked at a library. I worked at the law library, so I was around books and things. And I love books. Partway through my junior year, I think, I met my future wife, Candy. Her dad ran a lighting factory. He actually created fixtures and that sort of thing. I came from a family of teachers. My dad was an engineer but everybody else around me were teachers. It was the first time I met someone who was actually running his own business. It was one of those things where a light goes off in your head again and you say, well, that's what you can do. You can run your own business.

Meeting Candy Coonerty

When we got married, I had just graduated. We got married and my wife was back in Boston going to school, and she still had some time to go. So I went back with the idea of learning the book business, going to work for a bookstore so I could learn what it was like, on the idea that possibly I could learn and open a bookstore. Or work in a bookstore, something like that. So while she was finishing up her school that's what I did. We lived in Cambridge, and Harvard Square was very much like Berkeley, filled with bookstores. We got married in Montreal. Candy was from Montreal. We lived in Boston because that's where she was going to school. We were heading up to get married—

Reti: Do you want to tell me about how you met?

Coonerty: Sure. In ’67, I had taken the summer off and I went back to Kentucky to do some work for VISTA. In ’68, I decided to take a trip and spend the summer basically hitchhiking and staying in youth hostels around Ireland and England. I had gone over to Europe before and did a tour through youth hostels, through Scandinavia and down through Germany and Switzerland and up through England. So this time I decided I’d spend two months in England and Ireland. My family was from Ireland. I had met the relatives in Donegal that were still there on the farm my grandfather emigrated from. I had met my father’s family in Limerick. So I wanted to go back there.

There was a certain point where I was tired of hitchhiking every day and staying at yet another youth hostel. I was in Sligo, which is on the west coast of Ireland. This is Yeats country. I was studying poetry. William Butler Yeats was a particular favorite of mine. So I was walking down the street in Sligo and noticed there was a Yeats Society. And they had a poster up; they had a Yeats Summer School that went on for two weeks. It was going to come up in two weeks hence. So I went up to the door and I knocked on the door and went inside. There was a woman receptionist there, opening mail. I said, “I just noticed this. Is there a possibility I can sign up for the summer school?” and she said, “No, honestly, we sell out all the places in the summer school usually by April, and there’s no more places left.” And at that point she opened up an envelope and the envelope was somebody cancelling. She said, “Well, I just have a cancellation here. Would you like to take their place?” So, it’s very serendipitous. I said, “Yes, sign me up.” I came back in about two weeks.

It was [a] very multinational thing. People were coming from all over. There were professors that were going to lecture on different aspects of Yeats. Some of it was very basic background Irish literature. Some of it was very esoteric. But I was an English major, you know, and sort of knew what was going on. There were students from all over the world.

We were housed in houses around Sligo. Then they'd do social events. I think on the second night they had a gathering on a second floor of a social hall in Sligo for all the students. I happened to be up there. One of my roommates was a kid from Belgium. He took me over. He said, "Oh, you should meet somebody. There's somebody from Canada here." So he brought me over and introduced me to Candy, who he had just met. We started talking and I found out that her cousin was Leonard Cohen, who is the songwriter, and at that point, an author. I had read his book *Beautiful Losers*, which was a very, sort of, hallucinogenic book but it was really well written and very poetic. I liked it a lot. So I started talking to her about Leonard Cohen. This was a big interest, plus she was pretty and I was interested. [laughs] Anyway, we clicked almost immediately. I remember that she didn't like Leonard because in an earlier book, sort of a coming of age book called *The Favourite Game*, he had a scene where he had—and Candy was Jewish—he had a scene where he got into a fight with his Jewish mother and he took a chicken and threw it at his mother. And Candy said, "You know, a good Jewish boy should never throw a chicken at his mother," and I said, "Well, I can sort of agree with that. [laughs] But I still think the work that he did was interesting plus the music that he did." But I was bemused that she took this personal affront at this scene in this book.

So we started talking a lot. Over the next couple days, she actually asked me out. She said, "How about if we skip a class and we'll get a bicycle and ride out there and have a picnic lunch?" I said, "Great." But I was charmed because we rented these bicycles and it was pretty clear from the outset that she had a real hard time riding a bicycle. So here she invited me out to ride this bicycle, a real romantic thing, and she was sort of a klutz. [laughs] We rode out to this area near Strand Hill, which is where a lot of Yeats poetry takes place. There's a mountain called Knocknarea and there's a queen's cairn up on top of this mountain. But we were out on these Strands and we sat down to have lunch. I figured, "Great, she brought a lunch along," and she opened it up and she had a bag of raw peas. That was lunch. And I thought, Man alive! I just had this vision of eating these raw peas and watching them rattle

down to my empty stomach. But I will say we had done this uphill and fallen off bicycles but we were getting along famously.

Then we got to the point where we were coming back into town, and there's this long glide into town where you didn't have to do anything, and we just rode together and the Irish countryside was pouring by us and all these historical areas. I must say, that's the point where we fell in love. We just rode in and we didn't see much of the summer school from that point on. [laughs]

We decided that we were going to hitchhike to every site near Sligo where Yeats did a poem. So we'd take a boat out to the Lake Isle of Innisfree where he wrote his poem. We went to these falls up by Glencar Lake, Glencar Falls, that was the scene of a poem, a really early poem:"Come away with me, O human child out of the woods and the wild, With a faery, hand in hand, For the world's more full of sorrow than you can yet understand." The whole setting is on this waterfall. We would hitchhike out and go to all these places and skipped almost all of the lectures about Yeats. So I didn't learn much about Yeats but I met the woman I loved.

However she was from Montreal; I was from Berkeley. After we got done, we had about another three or four days and we hitchhiked around the Lakes of Killarney in the southern part of Ireland. But then she had to fly back to Montreal and I was still going around. But that started the romance. It started in a literary situation with Yeats' poetry and Leonard Cohen.

Reti: That's a beautiful story.

Coonerty: Yes, it was fun. It was a very romantic story. It was a good way to start, because being that far in distance there were lots of ups and downs. There were a lot of phone calls back and forth. She would come out to meet my folks. I went back to Montreal to meet her folks. The distance, it was difficult at times, but within a couple years we

decided to get married. We got married in 1971. We met in '68. Then she was finishing school, and that's when I went to work in Cambridge with a bookstore there.

Reti: Okay. So you're in Cambridge, and where did you work in Cambridge, what bookstore?

Coonerty: Well, a lot of people know, right in the center of Harvard Square is the Out of Town Newsstand, which is a famous newsstand. That guy, Sheldon Cohen, decided to open a bookstore that was on Brattle Street, right around the corner from Harvard Square. He opened this bookstore called Reading International. It had a lot of magazines, which I think is part of why Bookshop Santa Cruz has a lot of magazines and newspapers. He had a lot of new books. It was a fairly small store, probably two thousand square feet. And he also had a lot of remainders, which are the sale books. Again, you can see it at Bookshop, it's always been part of our thing. I had gone in there right when we were ready to go up to Montreal to get married, and my pitch to all the people that I went to talk to was, "I'm coming back in September. Is there any chance that I can get a job?" I'd gotten turned down by a number of bookstores in Harvard Square. But in this particular one, the guy, Fred Harris, who was the manager, just took a liking to me and said, "Sure. If you come back, we'll give you a job."

So, it was great. I went and got married. I spent the summer in California. Then we were coming back for her to finish school in Boston and for me to work in this bookstore. When I got back, he was a little less sure that there was a job, but within a week or two I started in on this job. It was starting as a book clerk and learning the trade. Part of what I had pitched to him is that at some point I wanted to own a bookstore, so I really wanted to learn a trade. I wasn't just there to put in hours and take home a salary. I wanted to learn about the business. It was a good place to do it. Cambridge, again, was a very busy area at the time and an area for bookstores, so there were a lot of people coming in and asking for books. There was a lot of activity going on. It wasn't

a slow store. And it was fun. So I started learning there, worked there for about a year.

There was a store in Boston, Laureat's. It was a standard store and they had a number of branches. And they had an opening for an assistant manager. I applied for that. I felt it was the next step up. Then I'd have some management responsibilities. It didn't turn out to be much, although there were certain skills that I picked up. I had to help the person who counted the cash in the morning in order to make a bank deposit, so I learned a little bit about that. It had a big stationary department, so I learned a little bit about that. It was a different clientele. It was in the financial part of Boston. So I went and worked there. I had these two years of experience, one in Cambridge in a university town bookstore and then one in a big city financial district. They had ambitions to grow into a chain. And there was a certain point where they wanted me to move to some obscure suburb somewhere [laughs] north of Boston and run a little branch store. That was the point where I said, I'm done. It's time to move to California and find out [what] you're gonna do. My sister, Sheila, my younger sister, had gone to UC Santa Cruz. She was in the first class at the university here when I was at Berkeley.

The Pre-History of Bookshop Santa Cruz

We were just a year apart. She was working here as a teacher, a high school teacher. She had heard a rumor that Bookshop Santa Cruz was for sale. It turned out to be a completely false rumor. But during a break, my wife and I had come out here and I inquired, "Is this store for sale?" He said, "Well, no. It's not for sale." Ron Lau and Sharon Lau were running it. But I think it piqued something in his interest. Sharon had had a couple of babies and she had worked at a bookstore in New York City. Ron had been a publisher's sales rep. The store at that point was about six years old. He was gradually sort of getting ousted from the store as Sharon took over more and more of the operation of the store. And I think there were some financial difficulties because they

were great booksellers but they weren't so great at running a business. It was getting a little out of hand.

I got a call back pretty quickly, saying, "Well, let's sit down and talk about selling the bookstore." Ron was [a] very secretive guy. Like his attorney was an attorney from Monterey because he didn't want anybody in town to know that he was contemplating selling the bookstore, which actually I felt helped me because I think if people had known Bookshop was for sale it would have had other bidders and it would have bid up the price. But it took a long, long time. It was a long negotiation. I learned patience. [laughs] I figured that there'd be one item a day that I'd have to get settled with him. He is a very charismatic person but he'd go from subject to subject, and back and forth. At times it was frustrating. I think a lot of people would have walked away. But I really loved Bookshop Santa Cruz. And I really loved Santa Cruz itself. And the idea that we'd be able to come back and be in California was great. So I was just immensely patient with him. We did get to the point where we finally—I was back East actually—the family in Montreal had a house in Vermont, a country house—and I wrote him a letter from there saying, "Look, this thing is not getting settled. It's not working. It's just not going to work. Sorry, thanks for negotiating, but it's not going to work."

Candy was pregnant with Ryan. As a couple, young and dumb, we were out of jobs. We didn't have a prospect of owning a business. We were writing a letter to say, "Okay that's it." We were pregnant with our first child. It was just sort of where angels fear to tread. And we were planning to figure out what we could do. Do we move to San Francisco? We'll work in a bookstore and just keep trying to move towards our dream. But with that, I got a call and Ron had—this idea that it was going to go away brought him together.

That was starting in July. By November 1st we were ready to take over the store. It worked its way through. We moved into the town and took over the store. I think I was twenty-eight years old, something like that,

fairly young. Candy was twenty-five. We took over in November, and in March, Ryan was born. So it was a very busy time but very exciting. It was a great store to take over. I think Ron and Sharon had brought it as far as they could bring it, so it was good that I had a little more of a business viewpoint and could bring those skills to the business. Plus, my background was the bookstore in Cambridge, bookstores in Berkeley. I had the model of what I wanted to do and Bookshop Santa Cruz fell into that. But it also just needed tweaking to make it stable and to make it be able to grow.

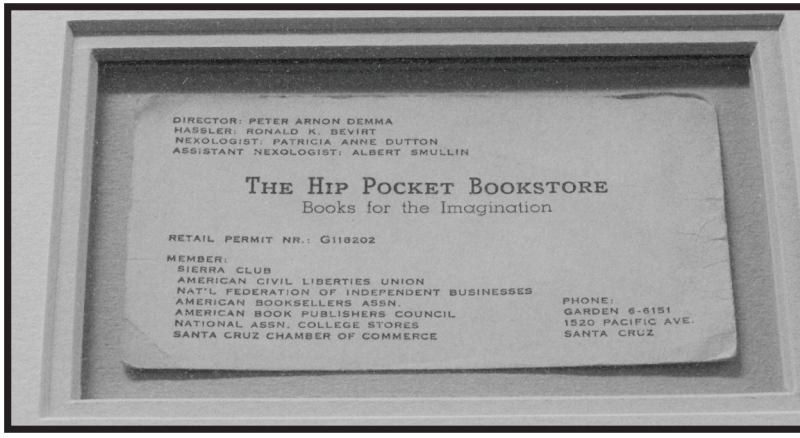
Reti: Can we talk a little about the pre-history of Bookshop Santa Cruz?

Coonerty: Sure.

Reti: With Hip Pocket? I know this has come down to you, probably, but what did you know at the time about the history of the bookstore [before it was Bookshop Santa Cruz]?

Coonerty: Well, my sister went to the university here. The bookstore started in 1966 and she started in the fall of '65. So pretty early on in my visits to her—and she was a year younger than I was—I was up at Berkeley and so consequently her roommates, her friends, were girls that were a year younger than I was, I was down here visiting a lot, if for nothing else but to meet them, and also to see this campus. I remember distinctly visiting Logos, which at that time was located on Cooper Street. It was one of those buildings that fell down in the earthquake. But it was a good used bookstore that was modeled after Moe's. [I remember] visiting Bookshop Santa Cruz, which initially was over in the location where it is now. The Catalyst was behind it, where we have our back door [now], our paperbacks. So I remember visiting a lot and seeing the bookstore there.

Before Bookshop Santa Cruz came along, which was in November of '66, there was about an eighteen-month period that ended in early '66, [when it was] the Hip Pocket Bookstore. One of the people who was



On the wall of Bookshop Santa Cruz today

associated with Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters [had] started a bookstore. Santa Cruz was quite a different place at that time. There was a cannery going in town. There was a lot of seasonal work; it was a lot of retirees. There were something like thirty-six or thirty-seven empty storefronts on Pacific Avenue. It was pre-university. He was starting this very hip bookstore before anything else was here, and it ran into problems. He was a Merry Prankster, so he had sort of, no limitations. He was running a bookstore that was a very hip sort of place, but to pay the bills he would have things like—in those days, nudist magazines, which was people in the nude playing volleyball, was the big thrill. So he would have those to sell to local guys and that was a way of paying the bills.

It was also a time, and this was a rumor, so I'm not sure if it is absolutely true, but Kesey and all those people were very much into LSD. LSD had not yet been put on the list of controlled substances. It was a brand new substance that was under development and then people started formulating it themselves. So actually he was selling LSD, legally, over the counter. You could come in and get your nudist magazine, get a copy of *On the Road*, and ask for a hit of LSD, and it was all legal. It was a very short-lived time.

Well, you can see how this played with the townspeople. For a while, a church in Scotts Valley made a point of picketing Hip Pocket Bookstore. I've gone up [to the UCSC Library] and Special Collections has a really interesting notebook that has all his memories, that guy that started it, who I think was Ron Bevirt, and Peter Demma was part of that, too. It has his letters back and forth. He was always being challenged on First Amendment stuff and people were defending him. People were defending him, but at the same time he was sort of cranky. He would say, "You're not defending me enough." So he wasn't making any friends.

And he was in this business and was constantly being harassed, whether it was by church people, or the authorities.

And then he had this construct of these big sheet metal statues that this guy fabricated. Nowadays, it's very mild stuff, but in those days— It was based on the Kamasutra, so it's these male and female figures in all these sexual poses. [I heard this story from James Houston and other people.] He put one of them right above the front door, outside. He had this unveiling. He asked the mayor, who was Norm Lezin, who used to run Salz Tannery, to come down for the unveiling. And he invited Ken Kesey. So Ken Kesey arrived with the bus that they're all on, that they're broadcasting from the top of, and filming. People were tripping out on LSD and stuff. There's this scene of unveiling the statue, which nobody knew was underneath.

Reti: Ken Kesey didn't know either?

Coonerty: No, he didn't know either. It was downtown, and, of course, people had gathered. They unveiled this statue and it's these people in this sexual pose out in the middle of the street. I mean, this was literally out front, right at the entry of the door. Kesey running around with all his stuff. Neal Cassady, who was the model for the *On the Road* guy, started working at the Hip Pocket Bookstore. It was just too much for the town to take. Bevirt, I don't think was a particularly skilled businessman. He was part of the Merry Pranksters. So after about eighteen months it failed. It was closed down.

It was in the same location that Bookshop Santa Cruz opened up in, probably about nine months later. And Ron Lau, in opening up, wanted to make sure that people knew that this was not the Hip Pocket.

Reti: Ah.

Coonerty: So he had everybody dress in suits and he had bibles right at the entryway to the store. He wanted to differentiate. One of the

first employees he had was Jon Scoville, who has always been the music person with Tandy Beal. And Tandy Beal worked there, the dancer.

Reti: That's amazing.

Coonerty: They were the first employees. They opened the store and it was slow going. The first day they did like a hundred and sixty dollars worth of business. But it was launched November 6, 1966. By the time I came along, they had moved across the street. They moved across the street when the mall was put in, the Pacific Garden Mall, and they moved in to where we were at the earthquake, in this old building, an 1895 building right across the street from the post office. The bookkeeper that was working for them, a woman named Ann McKay, had discovered that there was a way of getting a loan and being able to buy the building. In those days, just as the mall was going in, the Pacific Garden Mall, there *were* a lot of empty storefronts. It wasn't a very prosperous place. So the price of the building was quite reasonable.

He started buying the building and I think part of the pressure from buying the building and financing that was what led him to be willing to sell the business to me. He still owned the building; I became his lessee. He could use the rent that he gathered from me to pay for the building. He also then built the courtyard that was behind the Bookshop. Then the first café opened up, Café Pergolesi opened up there. We sold textbooks out of an old tin shed back there for UCSC. Eventually, he built the courtyard up. Kelly's Bakery was there and there was a mountain shop that sold backpacking equipment and that sort of stuff.

Reti: I remember that.

Coonerty: Yes. It was a great place. He took the money that he got from selling the store to me and invested it in creating this courtyard, which benefitted the bookstore greatly. So it really worked well for us at the Bookshop. It was a great little civic plaza area. I don't know if you remember but on Sundays they'd do Gregorian Chants in the café.

Ryan, Neal, and Candy Coonerty, Early 1970s

It was a great little little time. We were muddling along and trying to make the Bookshop work. He had a basement in the Bookshop that was just a storage area. When I first came into the store, I put a stairwell down and opened up the basement. We had more books down there and we moved our textbook operation to the back of the basement. So I expanded the store a bit. And we were there until the earthquake.

Bookshop Santa Cruz in the 1970s

Reti: So okay, taking you back to, November 1973, [when] you and Candy took over and there was a reading with Jeanne and Jim Houston?

Coonerty: Yes, the first day, Ron, because he was very secretive, told nobody he was selling the store. Jim and Jeannie Houston had a book-signing for the book, *Farewell to Manzanar*, which is [now] a California classic. But it had just come out. And of course, they are beloved in this community, plus it was a significant book, so they're going to have this big book-signing. Ron decided part of the book-signing would be he would announce the change in ownership. So he did that. I was immediately introduced to a lot of people in Santa Cruz.

One of my early memories of Bookshop was, Ron had had an old mechanical register at the front register. I changed it to an electronic register. People were upset. People were like—you're changing Bookshop, you're bringing in all this modern stuff? What are you doing? And at first, you're taken aback, but then I realized the sense of ownership that people had in the store was a real positive thing. Of course, they had an opinion about what kind of a register we had or what we did with our shelves here and all our stuff. That was good. That wasn't a bad thing.

So I was introduced to the whole community. A number of them were taken aback. I was young. They weren't sure who I was. Ron had introduced me as the most normal person he'd ever met. Candy was obviously pregnant with Ryan at that point. I love books. I loved the sense that I owned a bookstore, particularly Bookshop Santa Cruz, so I was having a great time. [But] I think a number of people were anxious.

For the first six months, Ron was still hanging around because he was the building owner and he was planning the courtyard. And a lot of people thought that I was too young and dumb to really run the store, that Ron was still running it and I had just come up with the money. A lot of people were of the opinion that I was a native of Boston because we had just come from there. I said, "No, I went to Berkeley and I came from Van Nuys."

But none of that stuff bothered me because here was my store, my dream. I had a young family. It was an exciting adventure. It was hard running a business. A bookstore is a tough business to be in, but you have a lot of energy in your twenties, so it worked well. It was a great fit right from the beginning. Early on, I realized when you're running your own business you can spend a lot of hours. You can almost constantly be there. So fairly early on, after we got through the first Christmas, which was very intense, and Ryan was born in March, we realized that we had to get ourselves down to five days a week, take two days off and be rational about it, because otherwise we'd do something similar to what Ron and Sharon had done, which was burn out on the business. I intended to be there for the long haul, so we disciplined ourselves. There were times of the year when you worked seven days a week. But we tried to make it reasonable.

Plus, one thing we'd inherited from Ron and Sharon was a great staff. They had a number of people there. There was a man named Ron Taylor, who was a dancer with Tandy Beal's dance company, who was tremendous. His customer service was fabulous and he always liked to keep things very neat and clean. He had an artistic view and he made the store very nice. We had another woman, who now sells real estate in town, and she loved plants. So the store was filled with plants. It was the time of fern bars. We had plants all over the store and it was a very nice atmosphere. We had a lot of very talented people that stayed with me as I took over ownership. It made it a lot easier. They were open to new ideas. I brought some new ideas, particularly with the bookkeeper, who had gotten overwhelmed as the business grew. I think

when I bought it, the business was doing about $400,000 a year. We grew it quite a bit over the years.

It was a wonderful business to be in. The university was growing. The town had a lot of artists. It was still a reasonably affordable town. I remember my wife and I started looking for houses to move into and to buy. The first house we looked at was up near the entry to the university, and it was for $33,000, and it was out of our price range. We couldn't afford $33,000. We finally found a house for $30,000 on King Street. Looking back on it, our better investment probably would have [been] to buy a bunch of houses in Santa Cruz, rather than a bookstore, [laughs] but the bookstore, with all of its ups and downs, difficulties and challenges, gave us a living. It put the kids through college. And it was a good place to be.

The community had a lot of writers. There's a famous photograph outside the Cooper House. It has Jim and Jeannie Houston. It has George Hitchcock, who was here, who ran a magazine called *Kayak*. Brother Antoninus [William Everson] was here writing poetry. Peter Beagle. There was a colony of writers that was also going strong. It was great. Plus, we were almost part of the Bay Area, [near] bookstores like Cody's in Berkeley, Kepler's Books in Menlo Park. There were other bookstores around, City Lights in San Francisco. There was No Name Bookstore up in Sausalito. So there was a lot of excitement. Thunderbird Bookstore down in Carmel Valley. It was a very vibrant time for bookstores, independent bookstores in particular. It was a lot of fun. It was a good town to be a bookseller in.

Reti: So you were riding the wave of [cultural] change that was coming through Santa Cruz at that time.

Coonerty: Yes, and the whole change which happened in 1969, which was the development of the downtown street and the Pacific Garden Mall, was great. There was always the problem of the undesirable transient element, UTEs they called them. Basically, kids hanging out.

When the city fathers saw and worked to bring the university here, it was the early sixties. They saw a very conventional university. They saw football fields and teams and, you know, the typical thing a university had. This university was established in 1965 when cultural changes were just exploding, and had its own idea of what it wanted to be. It modeled itself after English universities with colleges. It was not going to fit into the civic, chamber of commerce boosters' idea of what the university was going to be. Suddenly these people were here. These cultural changes were happening. And they were voting in local elections. It caused this town-gown split.

I knew a lot of business people and spoke to them. I knew their anxieties. I was also part of the university crowd, because it was a bookstore and we sold textbooks to the university at that time. And a lot of the professors were customers of mine. So I was a go-between these two worlds that were clashing. To a large extent, I didn't see the need in them clashing. The university was a good economic part of the town. I wasn't as upset about seeing hippie kids hanging around. It was an interesting time. [laughs]

Reti: I bet. I can remember. I came here in '78. I was buying my textbooks downstairs. It might have been in the shed in the back.

Coonerty: I forget when we did that. In those days, Ron Lau would get an enthusiasm for a particular book. He got very, very enthusiastic about Carlos Castaneda, who was studying [with a] shaman down in Central America and Mexico. Once he got enthusiastic, I mean, he got really enthusiastic. He was recommending the book to everybody and their second cousin. He was a publisher's rep, so he knew how the publishing industry worked. He'd call Castaneda, who was down at UCLA at that time, and invite him up. In the late sixties, early seventies, primarily the early seventies, Carlos Castaneda was a big name. People were exploring and taking peyote and what this meant, so it was a big part of the cultural scene in Santa Cruz. Castaneda was an interesting guy. He wouldn't announce that he was going to show up.

He would just show up. Literally, he would show up at about seven o'clock. Nobody had ever taken a photograph of him. Nobody knew quite who he was. He would show up with his wife, who was sort of this prim South American housewife, but he was an anthropology graduate student at UCLA. So, we'd start phoning people and saying, "Carlos Castaneda's here. He's going to give a talk in an hour. Come on down." And they would phone people. The store would fill up. Then he would start talking, and he wouldn't stop talking until about one or two o'clock in the morning. We'd just keep the store open. He would just rattle on and people loved him. Then he would come back. But it was always these sort of unannounced visits. Rumors would go around that he was here. Then other people would say, no, he wasn't here. He was a fake. He isn't a real person. It would go back and forth, and back and forth. The question was, did he really have this experience with the shaman, or was that all just anthropology made up? I don't think it was ever cleared up. Then he would come over afterwards at one a.m. to my house with, again, about a dozen people and stay for another two or three hours, while his long-suffering wife just sort of sat there and sipped tea while he went on and on and on. But it was exciting seeing authors, having authors come and do things with us. It was a fun time.

Reti: Some of the other people I remember reading about—Frank Herbert?

Coonerty: Yes. Who lived in the area, or no, Robert Heinlein lived in the area.

Reti: Oh, yes. Did Robert Heinlein come down and do a reading?

Coonerty: Robert Heinlein would occasionally come down but he had very controlled visits. His wife was very protective of him. Typically, he would have people show up at his door, and you know, they were not altogether here. There were people who were fascinated by his science fiction and wanted to have a deep discussion, but some of them were mentally unstable, so he was very protective. We had him. And Frank

Herbert came early into the *Dune* series. We had a lot of different visitors, authors who would arrive. There were tours around. They'd send out many authors on tours. It was great. We'd do a lot of things with them. Great crowds would turn out. It was fun. People liked it. It didn't always translate into book sales.

Early on in the bookstore there was this thing with a waterbed in the middle of the store. Ron Lau, before my time, somebody had convinced him that waterbeds were the great thing. They were a new thing. So he decided would install a waterbed in the middle of the store and sell waterbeds. But of course, he never really made a sale of waterbeds [laughs] but the waterbed took over. And so, you'd have people laying on the waterbed reading a book. We had chairs all over the store and this waterbed was there. Of course, waterbeds undulate as people are in them. There'd be three or four people in this bed together. Some people would get uneasy about this. But it was there. Just when I was coming to take over the store, they took it down because they had to make room for a Christmas display, calendars and Christmas cards. So they took it down and we never put it back up. But the waterbed was a big thing.

And we had a ton of chairs around the store. People would ask us why. Usually stores would put up these signs saying, "This is not a library and if you aren't going to purchase it, go to the library." We got into the idea—give them benches, give them seats to sit down. This was confirmed at Christmas time when I would see these people who were constantly sitting and reading but never buying anything, but they'd come in on December 20th and they'd go around the store and pick out twenty books and come up to the register. So they eventually turned into sales and that was fine.

We had a bathroom in the back of the bookstore. There weren't really any public bathrooms downtown. And the same sort of sort of thing, a lot of [stores] had signs, "These are for customers only." You had to buy something to get in the bathroom. Ours were open. Our sense was if

it took a full bladder to get people to walk through your store [laughs] and get familiar with your store—you know, we'd spend a lot of money trying to get people into our store, that would do it, too. It was fine to have a bathroom. So we've always had a big bathroom in the back of Bookshop and made it available to people, because it's a human necessity. And the fact is that it worked well for the business. So, the idea that you could have people hang around the store and take care of things and not get upset about whether you're going to make that immediate sale was seen as something different, but it was basic common sense. Of course, nowadays it's the basic thing. You try to keep people in the store as long as possible. You aren't telling them to leave, get out.

Reti: So, was that an idea that you came up with?

Coonerty: Well, it was an idea that was floating around. I think Ron Lau was the first one to put chairs—we had these director's chairs all over the store. There were a few people who'd come in with a bench and tried to sell it to Ron. He would buy a bench and install it. And the Thunderbird Bookstore, which was out in Carmel Valley, was famous for bringing in a café. They brought in coffee and they had a cheesecake they were famous for. At this point, they were way down in the Carmel Valley; they weren't near the entry of the valley. They had to get people down there. So they had that. A lot of people saw that worked well. So Ron took the money that I gave him to buy the store and built the courtyard for the Café Pergolesi. Frank and Judy Foreman came in and built the Pergolesi there. It was the first café in Santa Cruz. So it was that blending. We were taking ideas from here and there. But I think we were definitely one of the first ones to have chairs in the store and let people just hang out. It worked well. We were happy to have them. We've had them ever since. A lot of other people have adopted them since then. For us, it worked well.

The Paperback Revolution

Even paperbacks in the store. For a long time, before Bookshop, in the sixties, carriage trade bookstores were hardbacks only. There was

a bookstore, Shirley Cobb's bookstore in Palo Alto, that was a children's bookstore. She would only sell hardbacks. She refused to sell paperbacks; they were an inferior product. Her father was Ty Cobb, the famous baseball player. But she ran this children's bookstore. There was another bookstore there which I'm forgetting the name of, but they primarily had hardbacks. Paperbacks were seen as second cousins. You bought those at a drugstore. They had a these lurid covers—you know, there'd be *Sound and Fury* by William Faulkner, but they'd have this lurid cover. Paperbacks were drugstore books. Real bookstores only had hardbacks.

Fred Cody in Berkeley and Lawrence Ferlinghetti with City Lights Bookstore got the idea that you can get books out to a lot more people if you carried paperbacks. They started carrying paperbacks. At first there was a battle over it, because drugstores were supplied by these jobbers that would go in and put the books there [and] take them out. It was magazine people that were really handling them. They wouldn't fulfill an order. If you said you wanted *The Sound and the Fury*, or wanted *Huck Finn*, they wouldn't have it. They'd just have what was the new thing to put out and they didn't want to back order stuff. It was all magazine oriented. There's nothing worse than an old magazine, so who needed it?

So actually, Fred Cody had to go to court to win the right to order directly from the publishers. "We're not part of this jobber's territory. We can order what we want." He won the court case and was able to do it. So they started going, and Kepler's in Menlo Park started carrying paperbacks. We came right at the tail of that. Ten years earlier there were very few bookstores that carried a full line of hardbacks and a full line of paperbacks. There were these carriage trade stores that were almost like libraries. You'd lower your voice when you went inside. Paperbacks were drugstore books. This was like the first time, and the Bay Area played this role, particularly those three bookstores, of the new type of bookstore. Bookshop Santa Cruz got founded right after that, and so it became part of that. We wanted hardbacks. We wanted the paperbacks. We had posters up, and magazines—and all sorts of

things. Independent bookstores exploded with these ideas. A lot of it was [happening in] Northern California, the Bay Area. It was an exciting time. Everybody was stealing ideas from everybody else because they were working well. We were all helping each other.

Reti: So, did the Northern California Booksellers Association exist at that time?

Coonerty: It existed at that time and was really run by a lot of the people in the Bay Area. There was a co-op, a Berkeley co-op that was a bookstore. The manager was the president of NCBA. Fairly early on, somebody put my name up to be on the board of directors, but I was fairly new and not known. And Santa Cruz was a little far. They weren't sure anybody from Santa Cruz would drive up regularly to the Bay Area for their monthly meetings. So I didn't get elected.

Another person was on a list and didn't get elected. That was Andy Ross. He was running a little bookstore called Eeyore's Books in Rohnert Park, near Sonoma State. We got to know each other because we both lost on this ballot to be on the Northern California Booksellers Association. He came down to visit me in Santa Cruz. I had just heard that Fred Cody and Pat Cody had decided to put Cody's Books up for sale. So he was sleeping on my couch, and one night late at night I said, "Andy, you've got to buy it. You have to sell the bookstore in Rohnert Park. You're the person to run Cody's Books." It was an institution. I felt strongly about it. Andy always said that his father had worked for Neiman Marcus and had invented the striped towel. His father had passed away, but his uncle was a New York financier. Andy went back to his uncle and said, "Will you help me buy the store?" So Andy became owner of Cody's and I was running Bookshop Santa Cruz. We were good friends. From that point, Andy got elected as the new owner of

Cody's onto the board of the Northern California Booksellers and then he brought me on board.

Northern California Booksellers Association

Things were roiling at that time because we found out that the chain bookstores that were just starting, B. Dalton and Waldenbooks, were getting secret discounts. Like, [for] all the small paperbacks we would get—if it was a five-dollar book, we'd pay three dollars for it. We'd pay 60 percent and our margin was 40 percent. But that was it. You could buy a hundred copies or ten copies, it was the same thing. We found out that the chains were getting an additional ten percent off. We said, "How can we qualify? Do you want us to be a buyer's group and buy more?" "No, you don't qualify." So, the Northern California Booksellers were trying to get the national organization to say, "This is unfair. This is unfair trade practice. Go to court and protect us." We had a very raucous general membership meeting at the American Booksellers Association Convention, didn't do it, but we brought a lot of attention to ourselves. They wouldn't sue. They were very cozy with the publishers. They didn't want to cut that off. They were running the convention that publishers went to. They were afraid that—

Reti: Wait, I'm sorry—the American Booksellers Association did not want to take this on?

Coonerty: Right, the ABA did not want to take it on because they made their money by selling convention space to publishers. If they were going to sue publishers, what would happen? So the Northern California Booksellers Association decided that we would raise money. We would sue. We would take on this issue, which was crazy. I mean, we were taking on the two largest book chains in the country, a number

of publishers, and everything. And we were literally having bake sales to raise money to do this.

Reti: This was in the early eighties?

Coonerty: In the early eighties, yes. I was on the board, and Andy was on the board, and the person from Kepler's, Clark Kepler, was on the board. So we had the core of booksellers. We moved it along and actually got some concessions so that we got the same discount that the chains got. But then we broadened the case. We found out there was a lot of dealing going on under the table. We felt every extra dollar that the chains were getting, they were opening stores to put us out of business. So we ended up with this anti-trust lawsuit. It didn't come out great, but it did change a lot of the terms of the industry and made it a lot more fair. We didn't win a lawsuit but I think we won a lot of victories for the independent bookstores and got a lot of the terms changed. The publishers started changing terms to make them available to everybody and applied the same terms to everybody. The chains still got better discounts but they had to qualify. You had to show that by ordering ten thousand copies there was this much savings and therefore they could earn that extra discount, than it was if you were ordering a thousand copies as an independent. So it was done on a more equitable basis.

So it worked well, but it was a long, hard slog because they hired the best attorneys. We got a good judge for one of our cases. We got a bad judge for another case. So it was quite a long journey, but I think in the long run we did sort of even the playing field for independent booksellers, which was critical at that time because the chains were expanding like mad. It was the first challenge we had. At that time, it was indoor shopping malls that were the big retail engine. No independent bookstores were ever offered a place in that. The chains were always offered [it]. So we felt like, here all these B. Daltons and Waldens were opening up. We were excluded. In one sense, it was a blessing because they were not competing in our territory. We were in downtown; Cody's was in

downtown Berkeley; City Lights was in San Francisco. So they were not competing against us but we could still feel the pressure.

Right after that, they started rolling out their superstores. Then they were coming right after us. That was closing independent bookstores. So it was a long, hard battle. Northern Californians took it on first and then at a certain point we decided we needed the national organization, the ABA to come in. We had gotten shut down at this annual meeting where we tried to put a proposition up to get them involved.I decided that the best way to do it, since I was interested in politics, was to have write-in candidates for the board of directors. A third of the board of directors was elected every year. So the next election I started phoning bookseller friends I had around the country and saying, "Would you run on a write-in ticket with the idea that you would be in favor of standing up for our rights, against anti-trade practices?" I got a number of booksellers from all over the country. Some of them turned me down, but I got enough of them, I think there were seven of them that we got nominated. There was a slate of seven of the traditional booksellers that the ABA put in. Usually the vote was, these seven people we recommend and that was the end of the vote. So I sent out a postcard. I did other stuff. We had phone trees.

And quite to the surprise of the ABA we ended up taking six out of the seven seats. That sort of freaked them out, because suddenly we were taking over their organization. The executive director resigned. Their attorney, who was saying we can't participate in any of these lawsuits, he quit. They, on their next round, nominated Andy Ross from Cody's to be part of—he was one of the leaders in the Northern California Booksellers—and they nominated a couple of other people. So they sort of conceded that this was the way of the future and this was what the membership wanted.

The following year I was brought in on the board. Then the ABA took over the litigation. Strategically, we [the Northern California Booksellers Association] had sued the publishers to stop them from

doing the practice. When it got to the ABA, again, because the convention was their thing, they sued the two booksellers. They sued Barnes and Noble, who owned B. Dalton. And they sued Borders, who owned Waldenbooks. We sued them, as they were getting these discounts. We went after them so we wouldn't be suing the publishers. And we sold the convention so that couldn't be used against us, the publishers shutting down the convention in order to get us to back off legally.

Reti: Is that when it became BEA?

Coonerty: Yes, that's when it became Book Expo America [BEA]. We owned an interest for a while, a minority interest, but there was a deal where we sold that. For a number of years, we sort of had a say in the programming and they've included us in the program because they want booksellers to come. But it's much more of a rights fair at this point because the number of independent bookstores is smaller. I think at the peak there were six thousand members of the ABA. When I left the board, it was down to about a thousand members. So there was a lot of carnage going on, particularly when the superstores were rolling out. And that's now changed again. [laughs]

Reti: We'll talk more about that later, but going back to the eighties—did you have support from independent publishers for this lawsuit, battle, whatever you want to call it?

Coonerty: Not overtly, because they were dependent on getting their books into the chains. The chains were able to set their own terms. One of the things that was always a problem was we could return books to the publishers, and you could also delay how fast you could pay your bills. Bookstores were notorious for waiting ninety days to pay their bills. It was almost like the books were on consignment. There were a couple of publishers who had gotten fed up with being dictated to by the chains. They declared, "We're not going to sell to chains. We're an independent publisher." But they were very few and far between. Most of the independent publishers were cheering us on because they wanted

something to balance the power of the chains. But they were doing it very quietly because they were dependent on getting their books in the chains. That was a big part of their sales, too. So we didn't get a lot of support from them. We got a lot of pats on the back, and you know, "We hope that you accomplish something." And honestly, for them, they were giving additional discounts; they were giving better discounts to the chains than they were to us, and there was no way that they were going to be able to drop the chains' discount down to us as a way to solve this problem. So it meant that they were going to have to start giving us equivalent discounts to the chains, or at least higher discounts and get us closer to the chains, so it meant more money out of their pocket, too. Our argument was, if you come down to where you are only going to have two vendors, the two chains, they're going to dictate what they do. You need us in order to be able to maintain a marketplace that's going to be able to give you some leverage, so you should support us. They, on the one hand, understood that argument, but oftentimes independent bookstores were shoestring operations that weren't very well financed or very well organized, and the chains had big buying power. So it was really a difficult place for them to be at. It was understood. We never really pressed them that hard to support us because we wanted them to prosper. We were selling a lot of their books, too. A lot of the independent presses [published] the types of books that we would sell. The chains at that time, before the superstores it was B. Dalton and Waldenbooks; it was basically a bestseller list that they were selling. We understood that we were all trying to get good things going but they were constrained in supporting us. We figured this was our fight.

Reti: What about the independent distributors like Bookpeople?

Coonerty: Bookpeople and Ingram were supporters, but again, it wasn't overt, because there was awhile when the book chains were rolling out their superstores, where it was quicker for them to order a store full of books from Ingram and just get them all to arrive on a particular day, rather than order from all these publishers and have to check them in and do all that stuff. It was a big part of their business too, being able

to get a book quickly. In those days, the publishers would take six weeks to fulfill an order. You'd put in an order and it would take six weeks before it came. Ingram could get you books within a week. And then it became even quicker. Chains were re-ordering; something would hit hot. You know, Jane Fonda's book on exercise would suddenly hit, and you'd go back to the publisher but it'd take six weeks. You could go to Ingram and get it in a week. So while you were waiting for the publisher's order to come, you'd get it from these distributors. Bookpeople was very much in the same spirit as the Bay Area independent bookstores. Their business [had] even a thinner margin and it was hard for them to make a go at it. So they were in our camp, but again, sort of quietly.

Nixon's Memoirs for the Price of Bologna

Reti: I have a question about Richard Nixon's memoirs.

Coonerty: Oh, yes. [laughs]

Reti: Why don't you talk about that and that will be our last topic for today.

Coonerty: Nixon was going to come out with his memoirs. I think it was just called *RN*. We were trying to figure out what we could do. We were going to carry the book. It was not going to sell a lot. Santa Cruz is a very Democratic and liberal town. So we wanted to have fun with it. I thought, okay, and I don't know how this came up, but I just decided. I grabbed the book and I walked down to Zoccoli's Deli downtown and I said, "How much is the price of bologna?" They said it was *X*-amount per pound. I said, "Will you weigh this book?" So they weighed the book. I said, "If that was bologna, how much would it cost?" They told me a price. At that point, [you read] Herb Caen every day in the *San Francisco Chronicle.* I had shot him several items over the years. He had published them. So we wrote a little thing to Herb Caen and said, "Okay, Bookshop Santa Cruz is selling Richard Nixon's memoirs at the price of bologna." I think the book was probably twenty dollars, and we were selling it for, like, $16.75 or something. We were

taking a slight loss, but who cared? We got this enormous amount of publicity. He mentioned it in his column and then it got repeated over and over and over again. It was the pattern that you'd get mentioned in his column, and the next day the news cameras would arrive and they'd want to take a picture of it. Then you'd get mentioned; then it ended up in some paper in Topeka, Kansas. Then you get a couple of hate letters from them. It was sort of a pattern but it was great fun. And nobody really got upset. That started it. But selling it for the price of bologna, for some reason it popped into my head and it worked well with Nixon and this town.

Part of that, we always wanted to have fun with the books. We didn't take it too seriously, particularly political books. Over the years we'd also get hit up by people who wanted to censor certain books. It wasn't just [from the] right wing. They had a number of books that they didn't want to have in the store. But the feminist movement was also quite upset by a number of books and authors. The general attitude of an independent bookseller is very much rooted in the First Amendment. You don't end speech by eliminating a book. You surround it with the other arguments that overwhelm it. You allow that argument to be made, but you surround it. So if there'd be a book out that would be seen as anti-woman, you'd also have a display that would point out: this is the way this book is seen, but here are other books that have a different point of view, so as to be inclusive instead of exclusive. We always carried the Nixon books. We were often accused of refusing to carry all the right-wing authors. We always carried them. They didn't sell well here. That's why we didn't have big stacks of them, because this is not a Republican town.

It carries through to today. We now have the *Wit and Wisdom of Sarah Palin* that we published as a book. It's a blank book inside, and we have it right at the register. People come up and get outraged that we're promoting Sarah Palin, and we say, "Look inside." Then they open it up and laugh. Although the other day I was working the register and I had my first woman who looked at it and then got angry. She said, "Sarah Palin is the most intelligent woman I've ever seen and this is an insult

to her." I said, "Well, it's done with a sense of humor." She got angry, but that was the first time I've seen somebody get really angry at these things. Yes, it started out with the Nixon book. It was an easy target. It was like shooting fish in a barrel. [laughs]

Reti: Okay, that's great, Neal. I think we'll stop for today.

Bookshop Santa Cruz in the 1980s

Reti: So, today is Friday, December 2, 2011. This is Irene Reti, and I'm here with Neal Coonerty at the county building for our second interview about the history of Bookshop Santa Cruz. So, let's start out by talking about why you chose Walt Whitman to be Bookshop Santa Cruz's literary mascot.

Coonerty: Well, I came to town and the logo for the Bookshop [depicted] very plain arches. The windows in the front of the old bookshop were curved at the top. I was an English major at Cal. I felt like Walt Whitman was the first authentic American voice in literature. [James] Fenimore Cooper and a number of other people were famous authors but they really were following a European style and voice. Whitman was such an original voice, the way he put the things, the way the lines would scan. He was, I felt, the first American voice that was out there. I decided the bookstore should be named after or be associated with him, so we incorporated him. There's a little woodcut at the beginning of *Leaves of Grass* that showed Walt Whitman as a young man, so we made that our logo and used Whitman.

Subsequently, a bookstore in San Francisco, a gay men's bookstore, used Whitman because Whitman was gay. They used the same image, but it was after we started using it for our purposes. So anyway, that's why it shows Whitman as our first identifiable logo for the store. It was an

English major's attempt at infusing that into a business. [laughs] So it was good.

Reti: Very appropriate. And then you ended up with Walt the Cat.

Coonerty: I'm sure it has something to do with the fact that we were using Whitman. Somebody on the staff named Walter. Walter and Walt. It just seemed like one of those little odd cat names. He was an orange cat, that tabby type. There are these great photographs of Whitman when he was older where he has a white beard and this white mane. I think somehow Walter the Cat became part of that. I think it was associated with Walt Whitman but I don't remember exactly why, how we came up with the name, except that what I recall is that people on the staff just starting calling him Walter. That turned into Walt and that's what he became. We had a number of cats over the years because their life span is limited, or they'd run off, or somebody would decide they wanted to adopt him and take him off. I think we just continued to name them Walt. It was a successor cat, sort of like Lassie. There was always a new Lassie but it was the same name. I think Walt became [it]. Although there was another cat that was named Marilyn. I'm not quite sure why that cat became Marilyn, except that probably it was a female cat so they gave it a female name. But [those are] the only two names of cats that I remember: Walt and Marilyn. Then after a number of years we had too many staff members that were getting flea bites all around their ankles, and so we decided that once whatever cat we had at that time went away that we wouldn't replace them. The cats were a great draw and they were fun to have around. It was a nice part of the Bookshop for a long while.

Reti: And then Penny University. What was the story there? What was the connection with the Bookshop? Or was there one?

Coonerty: We were sort of associated. Mainly, when I bought the Bookshop it gave Ron Lau some money and he developed the courtyard. There used to be, as you walked out our back door into the courtyard,

Bookshop Santa Cruz in the 1980s, 1547 Pacific Avenue, Santa Cruz

on the right-hand side there was an old brick building that was attached to the store. That was where they used to put produce. Originally the main store was a grocery store. It was a long, long time ago and, in fact, in some of the rafters you'd still find little books of receipts from the grocery store. I think it was called Deluxe Grocers, or something like that. This was where they had produce; it was sort of a drying shed. Ron converted that and Frank and Judy Foreman came along and they wanted to have the café. They had Gregorian chants on Sunday because all they allowed was classical music in the café. They had both lived in North Beach in San Francisco and they were modeling it after the Italian cafes up there. Then Paul Lee came along and Page Smith. They had this idea. Sometime in English history there were things called the Penny University, where people would gather in coffee shops. They'd get together and discuss scholarly things and everybody would throw a penny in, in order to pay the professor that was there.

So it was named after that and it was much the same thing. They would invite scholars or visiting friends of theirs—they both had a lot of academic connections—to come and they'd give a lecture and whoever sat there would participate. It was very much a grassroots educational thing. The spirit of the Penny University is from England. It was a great little addition. They eventually devolved to issues of the day, or issues in Santa Cruz, and they moved away from an academic orientation to more, people getting together to talk about current issues. I think it still exists at times. Paul Lee, I know is still occasionally involved in it. It floats around town. But it was going great guns there for a while behind the Bookshop.

Cafés and bookshops, although for a long while they weren't together, they have the same common root and history. They are places of academia and great thoughts. It fit well. The Thunderbird Bookstore down in Carmel Valley started selling cheesecake and coffee in their store and so it was thought that a café and a bookshop would go well together. Then eventually those migrated into Barnes and Noble opening up cafés

in bookstores. We felt that it came out of particularly the Monterey Bay area because of the Thunderbird connection and Bookshop.

The courtyard was a wonderful little place to go into. It was very vibrant and lots of activity going on. It was one of those third places that really creates community. You have your job and you have your home. We need these places where we come together. Maybe it's sidelines on a kids' soccer game; it may be a bookstore; it may be the downtown main street—but it's places where people come together and catch up with friends. They run into people they don't normally run into day-by-day in their daily activity. [They are] able to catch up, maybe with somebody that they [stood] on the sidelines with their kids in soccer for years, haven't seen them for ten years. So they get together and they meet and catch up on news. It creates community. I think the courtyard and the Bookshop were part of that. If you worked there, particularly on the weekends, in the Bookshop you would constantly see people coming in and greeting someone they hadn't seen for five years and there'd be a conversation and everybody catching up. It was a nice part of the store. It was a nice role that we played there. It was good.

Reti: Then somehow you ended up getting the [1985] movie *The Creator* starring Peter O'Toole and Mariel Hemmingway filmed [at the Bookshop].

Coonerty: Yes, they suddenly came to town. It was this odd story starring Peter O'Toole as this professor that rode around on a bicycle. Mariel Hemmingway played a lab assistant. He was a scientist and she was part of the plot. They wanted to use the bookstore. They wanted to use two places. One is there's a scene where he rolls on his bicycle in front of the Bookshop and posts something. If you were facing the Bookshop before the earthquake, on the right-hand side there was a community bulletin board where people would pin stuff up. There was a very brief scene where he rolls up there and pins it on the store. Then they wanted to use the courtyard. They had a couple of scenes in the old Pergolesi in the courtyard. In order to do the filming, they had to

close the Bookshop. They didn't want people walking in and out and disrupting it. Filmmaking is a long process. It's not instantly done. It takes two hours to set up and then they walked through it. Then they wanted to close the back door and so they started talking to us about this. They'd asked me about closing it and I'd throw out a number like the average number of sales that we did in a day and say, that's what it's going to cost you. Amazingly enough, they just said, okay, and wrote a check for that amount. It was like, "Wow, this is great. You can film all week long!" [laughs]

When they filmed the front scene and the front door of the Bookshop we still could keep the back door open and people could come in; we just couldn't go up against the window and press our faces against the window. Then the same thing when they were filming the courtyard—we had to close that door but we could open the front door. So we actually didn't lose that much business but I think we charged them like $4,000 or something like that to film. And they were happy. The producer was happy to write a check and take care of it. The scenes were very brief. It's fun to see the courtyard scene, which is a little more timely. Although the bicycle scene, if I remember it correctly, where he's riding in front of the bookstore—it's a nice scene of the front of the store at that time. But that was sort of an odd thing that [happened] and it was nice. It was good for business. It was fun to see how the movie was put together. And the fact that Mariel Hemmingway is related to Ernest Hemmingway, I guess had a connection—granddaughter. [laughs]

The Loma Prieta Earthquake

Reti: I think that brings us to the fall of 1989, October 17th and a rather difficult chapter in Santa Cruz's history. I know Bookshop Santa

Cruz was right at the center of that. I remember it well. Do you want to start by talking about where you were when the earthquake happened?[1]

Coonerty: Sure. I had worked that day at the store. I had a doctor's appointment over the hill in San Jose. I had just driven over there, and got out of my car and started to walk into the building, and the earthquake hit. I'm a California boy so I've been through a lot of earthquakes. You sort of hang on to see what size it's going to be—it's that moment that you stop and go, "How serious is this earthquake going to be?" It was obvious to me that this was a major earthquake. Now, the fact that I was in San Jose and it was so strong, I felt, this must be the epicenter. I didn't know what was going on. I went around and found a pay phone. In those days, phones were less dependent on electrical power. They had their own source of power. I was actually able to call over and find out that my family was all right. I got through to the house and found out that they were okay. It was in the afternoon. I think my son was at football practice at Santa Cruz High. My daughter, who went to Mission Hill Junior High, which is nearly right across the street from where I live, was okay. My wife was in the house.

I had to find my way back from San Jose. Highway 17 was closed with landslides. I had an older sister that lived in Los Altos. I went over to her house and hung out there for a short while. There were a lot of blackouts because electrical power was out all over the place. I decided I really should try to make my way over the hill one way or another. There was one gas station that had power so I filled up my car and started out on Highway 9. It was slow going because there were a lot of mini-slides that would block a lane or something. There wasn't much traffic and it was pitch black because there was no electricity. I started listening to KSCO on the way over, so I started getting reports from

[1] On October 17, 1989 at 5:05 pm a 6.9 earthquake centered approximately nine miles from Santa Cruz in the Santa Cruz Mountains hit Santa Cruz County and the neighboring San Francisco Bay Area, causing extensive damage. See Irene Reti, *The Loma Prieta Earthquake: A UCSC Student Oral History Documentary Project* (UCSC Library, Regional History Project, 2006) for much more documentation of the earthquake. http://library.ucsc.edu/reg-hist/quake..

Santa Cruz. I remember one report was a guy who had worked—we had a store in Aptos for a short while—Bookworks in Aptos.

Reti: Oh, I didn't know that was yours.

Coonerty: Yes. He had worked there and he got on the radio station. He was reporting. One of the things he reported was, "I walked down in front of Bookshop and Bookshop's intact. It looks like they just locked the door and walked away and there doesn't seem to be any problem." He had seen the façade, and in fact the façade was pretty much intact. It was the other three sides of the building that were torn up. The report was that Bookshop survived and it was okay.

So, I made my way over that night and by the time I got over here it was dark. My family was at the house. The house was like any other house. Things were all on the floor and shook up, and our chimney, the brick had sort of blown apart. But no big damage. The next morning I went down bright and early to see [how] the Bookshop was. I parked the car and started walking in near the back door through the courtyard.

It was apparent that the Bookshop was not intact, because there were big cracks in the brick. It was an 1895 brick building, unreinforced masonry. There was a rescue going on next door, where the [Santa Cruz] Coffee Roasting Company had been. I started to walk in and I was stopped by a police officer who said, "This place is closed off. You can't get in at all." I said, "Well, this is my business. Is it okay if I go in and inspect it?" He goes, "No, you can't. This is it. It's closed off." They hadn't yet put up all the fences around the place, but that was it.

So then it was like, let's find out what's going on here. I started walking around town. It was one of those things where you run into somebody and they have half a story to tell. You don't know how much is true or not true. You're just walking around town trying to assess what's going

on. Obviously the town was torn up and there were places that were bad.

At that point, I didn't realize that one of the walls of the Bookshop had collapsed on the Coffee Roasting Company. There were two people that were missing that were thought to be under the rubble. There was a rescue operation going on. Meanwhile, there were thousands of aftershocks—I mean, they were literally going on all the time. The rescue workers would go in and start trying to unpile the bricks but there was still this giant wall. Then it'd start to shake and they'd leave because you didn't want other people to get hurt. It took almost three days and they finally found that the people had been instantly killed. The bricks had collapsed on top of them and instantly killed them. But at that point their friends [who] had gathered around were very, very emotional, as you can imagine, and felt that they were trapped under there and they wanted to rescue them. So every time the official rescue workers would back away from the pile of bricks, the friends would try to leap over the fence and keep trying to deal with the bricks. Then there'd actually be fights going back and forth. "You can't do this because we can't endanger more people in trying to do the rescue." People were emotionally distraught because of the earthquake and their friends were in there. It was a very messy situation.

I remember I got ahold of Mardi Wormhoudt, who was mayor at the time, and who had been a friend of mine. It was the second or third day, and I asked her to call a meeting where everybody could ask questions and city officials would be there. It was understandable that not everybody had a complete answer to everything but we could get accurate information. So we did that at city hall. She invited me actually to sit on the dais although I knew about as much as anybody else. It was a very difficult time because everything was so unknown.

But at the same time there was a huge amount of cooperation that was going on. People were helping each other out. I remember, I called my staff members together and we met on the front lawn of my house

because there were a number of people who didn't want to go inside a structure. They were just too scared. So, we were meeting on the front lawn [sharing] information about what was happening with the Bookshop and what was going to happen. Mike Rotkin, whom I knew through political things, came by. His son was living across the street from us. Mike goes, "Look at your bricks from your chimney. They're all over your roof. Do you want me to go up?" Mike strung a rope up there, went up on the roof and threw down the bricks. It was that type of thing, where people were just driving around town and helping each other out.

But they were very difficult days. The city did had to ascertain which buildings were safe and which weren't safe. They had a number of engineering teams that would come in from out of town. I think the teams were made up of three individuals. They asked teams to visit buildings downtown. They each had to visit multiple buildings and they saw how the reports lined up. You were either green, which meant your building was safe and it was okay to get in—there were a number of buildings like that, like where The Gap was. A lot of them were one-story buildings. Then there were yellow tags, which meant there was a structural defect, but it could be fixed. Then there were red-tagged [buildings] which meant they were going to tear them down immediately in place. We heard that the Bookshop was red tagged which meant that it was going to just be bulldozed down with everything in it—

Reti: Books and all.

Coonerty: Books and all. And it would mean the end of it.

Reti: Because there was no earthquake insurance.

Coonerty: There was no earthquake insurance. It was October. There was nothing we could do. Because the Bookshop was in a building that had already killed two people, I felt like, well, maybe the feeling about the Bookshop is an easy one to assess because it had already killed two

people so it was obviously dangerous, so we shouldn't even give us a special consideration. We should just knock it down. I really wasn't sure what to do. A friend of mine, Sam Leask, whose family had owned Leask Department Store, [and had] the good fortune to sell the department store to Gottschalks about nine months before the earthquake, I was talking to him, and the city had hired, I think it was Granite Construction to be the firm to knock down eight or nine buildings downtown that were too dangerous. They hired a structural engineer to oversee the demolition, particularly to see that when they knocked down a building, a good building next to it would not be affected. There was one building that ended up getting too damaged as the one next to it was demolished. It ended up that Sam Leask's father had been close friends with the father of this structural engineer for Granite Construction. Again, a small town.

So, I got the phone number of the structural engineer that was going to oversee the Granite Construction demolition. I called him and I said, "I understand Bookshop is one of the nine buildings that is going to be knocked down, but I want to ask you a favor. This is my whole livelihood." [I had] loans out on [my] business that were guaranteed by my house. So it was my livelihood; it was everything I owned, plus it was my house. I said, "I just have two favors. One is, will you have the demolition of the Bookshop be one of the last buildings you knock down? Two is, will you do me a favor of going in as a structural engineer and looking at the building? If you tell me that this building should be knocked down in place because it is too dangerous for anybody to go in, I'll accept my fate. I want an independent second opinion. If you say that something can be done to allow us to at least get the books out, can I take that to the city manager and plead my case?" He said sure.

He agreed to those two things. Then I was waiting to see what would happen. This was like your entire fate's up in the air.

Reti: Oh my god, how could you even sleep?

Coonerty: It was amazing. It was about twenty-four hours later and I hadn't gotten a call from him. So I decided I'd call him. He said, "Okay, the Bookshop is going to be the last one demolished." That's fine, it didn't make any difference what order things were in. He said, "I went into your store. I think you probably can get stuff out." I said, "Well, what do you mean?" He said, "It's a post and beam construction. It's basically these huge redwood beams that are all plumb. The bricks are like a skin, so they are not holding up the roof, but they are dangerous because they could peel away." Which in fact they did on both sides of the building. On the side where Lulu Carpenter's was, Lulu Carpenter's had just done some retrofitting and did a diaphragm on the roof of big thick plywood, and it held the bricks. Whereas on the other side, the Coffee Roasting Company, they just had a tin roof and the bricks fell right through and killed two people.

He said, "You have to stabilize the roof some. You have to build a tunnel of railroad ties so people going in and out of the building, if another earthquake hits, then they won't be hurt. If you do that, then I think you can get your books out." I said, "Well, can I go tell the city manager that the posts and beams are still plumb, that they have not shaken off?" He said, "Sure."

I went over to the city manager's office. I think the director of public works and the city manager were at that point given the authority to do whatever they did with downtown. They were making the decisions. They had the responsibility and there was no appeal process. It was just them. So I made this pitch particularly to Dick Wilson, the city manager, who I knew a bit. I said, "If you are going to rebuild downtown and you're going to have property owners building new buildings, they're going to want to have tenants. We're a tenant and if we can save

our store, we'll be there to fill up the buildings that get built and make the downtown work again."

Reti: You were thinking ahead. Right then everything was in such a crisis.

Coonerty: Personally, I felt like I was in a situation where I could not make a mistake, where everything I had to do—if I wanted to get to the point where I saved the business and saved my house and saved everything—and I had two kids, one in high school and one in junior high, that were thinking about college funds—I really had to just do day-by-day and try to solve the problem that was immediately in front of me. I had no room for mistakes. Anyway, I talked to them and, I think against their better judgment, they relented and said okay. They said, "What we're going to do is we're going to give you two days. There's no electricity downtown, so it has to be daylight hours, that you're going to be able to go in and get your fixtures and your inventory out. You'll have to do this propping up of the roof and stabilize it and you're going to have to build these tunnels in and out of the front."

Reti: This was before the two days or during the two days?

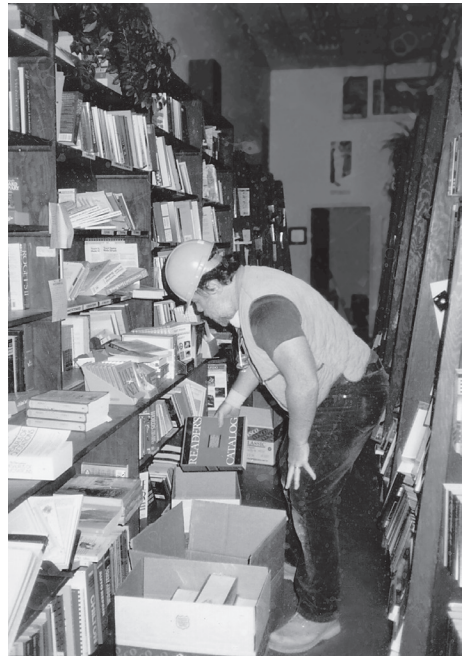
Coonerty: This was before the two days. Actually, I forgot this part, before I even got this far they had given me fifteen minutes. They said, "We're going to demolish the Bookshop. We'll give you fifteen minutes to go in and get whatever you want out of the Bookshop." They had people that went around and monitored to make sure you went in there [for fifteen minutes only]. I had two things. One is, a lot of my staff had just fled the Bookshop when the earthquake hit. They had left purses and coats and stuff inside. Usually people would take their stuff and leave it in the basement and then go to work upstairs. So I sort of had a map of where people had thought they'd left their personal stuff. And the bookkeeping office was in the basement and I wanted to get some records just so that I'd know what publishers I still owed money to, financial records of the Bookshop. I thought, that's all I can get out of

the store at this point. I got two flashlights and I actually taped them to my forearms so that I could carry stuff but still be able to see.

I went in and the floor was littered with books because they all shook off the top of the shelves. So you're running across books. I had fifteen minutes. I had to run to the back of the store. They were initially going to let me in the back of the store but at the last minute they changed their minds and said, "You have fifteen minutes. You have to go in through the front door." So I had to run the length of the store, down the steps, because the steps to the right were next to the wall that had collapsed in the earthquake and killed two people, then run all the way to the front again, which is where the bookkeeping office was. I finally said it was taking too long and I started running down the steps next to the wall that had collapsed and killed the two people. I was running. Some of the people accurately remembered where their purses and their coats and their personal belongings were, and I grabbed those. But some of them, I was frustrated because it wouldn't be where they said they were. You're trying to look around and it's pitch black. So I'm coming up the stairs, and again, this person outside who was my enforcer that I was going to be there fifteen minutes was pretty generous. It was really twenty to twenty-five minutes. I would drag stuff out the door and leave it on the sidewalk and run back and try to get more.

Well, the last few trips I was sort of like, this is my last few moments in Bookshop Santa Cruz. It was a dream of mine. It was my business. This thing is going away. I'm not going to be able to save it. What do I want to do? And there were two things. There was an old English Arts and Crafts desk that had a quote carved in it, that actually we still have in the store. That was right by the front door so I dragged that out. Then I was standing there and I was thinking, what else would I really want? If I was going to start over, what would I want? I decided what I really wanted was the rocking horse. We had had the rocking horse in the play area for the Bookshop for years. It was almost to the point at that point where people who had rocked on it when they were kids were bringing their children to rock on it. So I grabbed the rocking horse, and my last trip outside the store was carrying the rocking horse in one hand and a

Coonerty retrieving books from the rubble of Bookshop Santa Cruz after the Loma Prieta Earthquake (above). Steve Turner working in the rubble (below).



box of financial records in the other, and got out. That was the end. At that point, I thought that was the end of the Bookshop. It is what it is. We can't do anything about it.

Reti: Were you really scared when you were in there?

Coonerty: You know, not really. At that point, I figured, okay, what are the chances that a major earthquake will hit in the next twenty minutes? You're just sort of running. It was a very emotional time because I had had this dream. This is what I'd wanted to do and suddenly it was gone. I mean, I hadn't resolved this thing with the city.

Then, at the same time, that's when I started talking to the city about, "Can I get in?" So they decided, "Okay, you can do this." They said, "But everybody that goes in to take books out on the two days that you have, they will have to sign a waiver." I said, "What kind of waiver?" They said, "Well, we don't want to be liable." Because of the earthquake, it was a dangerous building. Really, when you looked at the waiver, it said two things. One is, you're probably going to be killed if you do this. [laughs] The second thing is, if there's an earthquake and the building starts to come down we will not rescue you. We're not going to throw bad money after good." [laughs] I had told somebody the story about hauling out the rocking horse, so the night before we were going to go in there, KUSP had heard about the story and wanted to put this on the radio. We wanted to find volunteers to help rescue the store, so they started to talk to me about this. I told the story about pulling out the rocking horse. At that point, you want whatever help you can get. I also said, "We need volunteers the next morning." And I said, "But you're going to sign this waiver. They're going to have people in hard hats. You're going to have to sign a piece of paper that says that

you will probably die and if it starts to fall down and you get trapped they are not going to rescue you."

Reti: You are either going to die or be buried alive.

Coonerty: Yes. Exactly. We had talked to the staff. Most of them were willing to come down and help us. Some of them were just too traumatized by the whole thing. We had talked to a few other friends that were going to come and help us, but we really had no idea of what we could get out in two days, how much we could rescue. Whatever. This was a store where a lot of the fixtures were built in and they weren't movable. So my wife and I went down there early in the morning to start the rescue thing. We ended up coming down the hill, I remember from Mission Hill, and there were four hundred people lined up all to sign the waiver and go into the store. The next two days were just unbelievable. We had gone to Salz Tannery and they had some extra rollers, stand up rollers, so we set up a roller so people could go into the store and roll boxes out on the rollers. And a vegetable packer from down in Watsonville had called and said, "Do you need cardboard boxes, because when we pack vegetables we can't reuse the cardboard because there may be disease stuff, so we have lots of cardboard boxes." Then a trucking company said, "If you have to store things out of the weather, why don't we just park a semi on your property and you can pack things in there and have that for a month or so."

Reti: Wow.

Coonerty: Then we had tables from the Bookshop. A lot of people from Capitola Book Café came to help. People from the Santa Cruz Public Library came to help. Customers. We had this thing where we would go in and people would go to a section for books and pile books

as much as they could into a carton and put them on these rollers and they'd be rolled out to the parking lot.

Reti: So it was like a conveyor belt?

Coonerty: It was like a conveyer belt on rollers. Then when the boxes arrived in the parking lot, we had tables set up. People would take the boxes; they'd repack them because it was dark inside and you couldn't see what you were packing. If it was cookbooks, they'd pack them all in, they'd seal them, and they'd write "cookbooks" on there. Each section was like that. We had a forklift that was borrowed from the *Santa Cruz Sentinel*. We'd pack them onto a pallet. Then they'd be lifted up and be put on this truck. We had this fantastic thing set up, people dusting the books, packing them, and all that stuff. This went on all day long and we got out a lot of those books that were on the main floor. In fact, at one point, my friend Sam Leask was there and a professor who lived in Santa Cruz but taught at Stanford Business School came along. He started watching how this operation was going. It was all ad hoc. It was all made up as we went. And he goes, "Well, this is the most fantastic organization I've ever seen. [laughs] This should be a business model for how things could be done."

The second day we went down to the basement and got a lot of the stuff out of the basement. We then started moving fixtures out. The main floor's fixtures were built in 1966, and this was 1989, so they were quite old. They were always sort of falling apart anyway. But we managed to get almost all the main floor out, except for the cash register things because there was electrical conduit going through those. But we got all the bookshelves out. We couldn't get the bookshelves out of the basement because they were actually built into the basement and you couldn't get them up the stairs and that stairwell was still dangerous. We got almost all the books out. We got the fixtures from the main floor out. But we had to leave a lot in there. We had all sorts of other

stuff that had to be left in. [We] piled all the fixtures in a big pile in the parking lot, covered them with tarps. The books were in the semi van.

Reti: Wasn't it raining by then?

Coonerty: Because it started raining. Yes. But literally, in two days the community saved Bookshop Santa Cruz. For years, when I would train people to work in the Bookshop, I'd say, "You have to understand the story. We were literally saved by our customers. You have to treat customers like who they are—which came together and for no reason, it didn't make any sense, they went in there." At the same time—

Reti: "For no reason." What do you really think was motivating people?

Coonerty: Well, I think there were several things. One is, people liked the Bookshop. They felt it was an important place downtown. But the other thing is there were a lot of people in the town whose houses had cracks in them, that had minor damage and things fell off—you know, plates or glassware, or whatever fell off and broke, but they didn't have any major damage in their house. They wanted to help. We provided a place for them to help. Plus, the sense of community. When

Block party for Bookshop Santa Cruz to raise money to save the store after the Loma Prieta Earthquake.

everybody was there running in and out of the Bookshop, and packing boxes, and this sort of organization was going on, people could feel they were a part of it. I think it was all that and the fact that we're in a small town and everybody knows us.

We had no money. We owed a bunch of publishers money because all our Christmas inventory had come in.

Reti: Oh, no.

Coonerty: We were going to miss at least a month's worth of sales. So we had no money, and at that point the city had come up with the idea of putting these big pavilions, these tents, in the parking lots. Well, the parking lot of the Bookshop was uneven. It had a big slope to it. One of the things you need with bookshelves is you need a level surface.

We finally negotiated that we would get a tent. One of the tents was 50x100, which was exactly the dimensions of the main floor of the Bookshop. I said, "I would like that tent." Then there was a little, small tent on the side, which would be a place where we would receive books and [have] our office space. I said, "Give me that because I've got all the fixtures. I'll just set them up exactly like the Bookshop was and they'll all fit." It would give us something familiar. But we had to put a floor in, unlike a lot of the other pavilions where they just laid carpet on the asphalt. And we had to put lights in, because they had one main light in the middle of the store and with our tall shelves it would be way too dark. So we had to put in a trellis structure that had lights on it. We didn't have any money for that.

So I came up with an idea when we were meeting with the staff on my lawn. I said, "Here's what we're going to do. We're going to have a block party next to my house. We're going to ask everybody in town if they would bring five good books to save Bookshop Santa Cruz." The idea is we'd set up all these tables and hopefully people would bring five used books. We'd put them out on the table and we'd sell them and

that would give us the money to continue the Bookshop. I remember, we were so naïve we didn't get a permit to do this. Mardi Wormhoudt, the mayor, said, "You're in big trouble. You haven't gone through the permit process to close the street down."

Reti: How are you going to go through the permit process in the middle of the earthquake?

Coonerty: We went down and begged. The neighbors agreed that it wouldn't be an imposition. At the last minute we sort of got this. We pulled up a flatbed truck across the street. Bruce Bratton volunteered to be an emcee. It was the time of—every first week in November we'd have a birthday party for Bookshop because it originally opened on November 6th in 1966. So we decided, okay, we're going to have a birthday celebration, and it's going to be the sale of these books. Bring five books. We'll have a band. Bob Brozman, who plays the steel guitar, he came and played, and a number of other people. We had a cake. We set this up and people started pouring in from all over. People would bring, not five books—they'd bring fifty books. Or people would bring their favorite five books, donate them to us and then buy them back, and it was a way of donating to the Bookshop—

Reti: Amazing.

Coonerty: The staff worked the tables all day long and it was just wonderful. We had this nice celebration and everybody sang Happy Birthday to Bookshop. Blew out the candles—the wish was that we survive and get back into business. We had a whole bunch of used books left over. We started a used book shed next to the tent in order to enable us to have more money. From that, we had enough money

to put in the floor and to put in the lighting in the tent. It really was a great moment. So we were saved twice by our community.

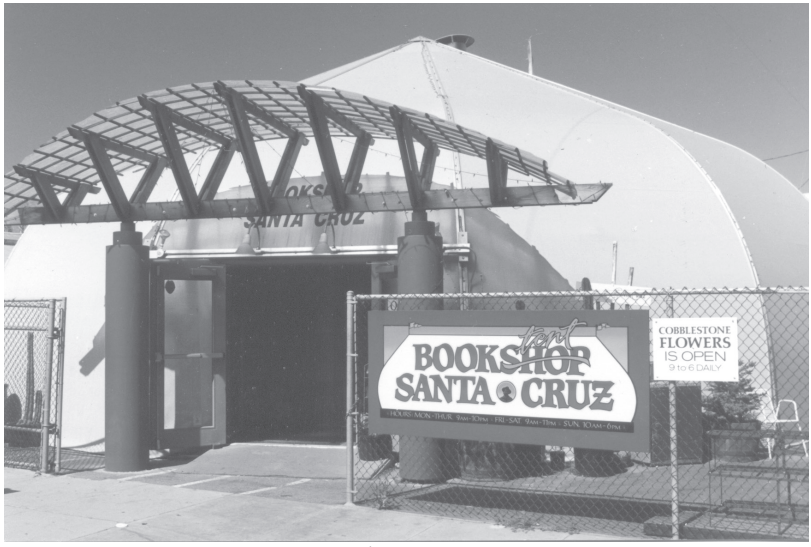
Reti: Wow, that's such a moving story.

Coonerty: Yes. It was just wonderful. It was those things that sustain you in the midst of chaos and uncertainty. These things were going on for a number of different stores. I remember one day I was a volunteer to go in—there was a dress shop that was down by where United Cigar was. They were able to go in and get their inventory out. I helped them with that. Everybody was helping everybody else. The downtown played a certain role in the community and people wanted it back. They wanted to figure out a way to make it survive. So we did that and it was great. It was wonderful.

Reti: So, then you were in the Booktent for—was it a couple of years?

Coonerty: It was three years. The idea was that they were going to open Highway 17 the day after Thanksgiving, which is Black Friday, which is the big shopping day. Santa Cruz was sort of isolated from October 17th to the day after Thanksgiving. Once we got the tent, we started setting up. We suddenly had all these boxes of books and we had to get them into their sections. We had to organize them. We had to alphabetize all these books. And the lights weren't quite up yet. We could do it during the sunshine, but there were times when we'd take a bunch of the staff cars and point them at the doors and turn on the headlights and let the cars run so we could keep working at night to get these things done. And again, a lot of volunteers would come in and say, "I have time to do three shelves. Give me three shelves of books." They'd alphabetize them and get them on [the shelves].

Initially, the whole thrust of coverage of the earthquake [media coverage] was what happened in San Francisco with the Cypress Freeway and Pacific [Heights] where the houses fell down. Santa Cruz wasn't thought of. Then they found out that the center of the earthquake, the



Booktent Santa Cruz: Temporary quarters after the earthquake

epicenter, was actually in Santa Cruz and all this damage was done to Santa Cruz. A lot of people [who] visited Santa Cruz had memories of visiting Santa Cruz and the Boardwalk. So when we opened up the Friday after Thanksgiving, with [Highway] 17 open, and we opened the doors to the Bookshop, we had this amazing flood of people. Townspeople wanted to see what all these shops in tents looked like. All the visitors from out of town wanted to see what downtown looked like and were coming into the stores. People sort of breathed a sigh of relief because they'd walk into this tent and it looked familiar, because Bookshop—we set it up exactly like it was on the main floor of the old store. The walls were a little curved, so it was a little bit different but suddenly it was something familiar at a time when everything had changed. We got a lot of people. In fact, it was so busy that day that we were running the register and the line of people was clogging the store. So we asked people if they would line up out the front door and along the front. People would go in and pick up their books [and then] they'd walk outside. Of course they could just keep walking but they'd go get in line and wait a half hour until they got to the register to pay for them. I don't think anybody stole any books that day. It was just this spirit of, we want to help you survive and make it through.

We had a tremendous Christmas—through that Christmas season. We decided that we would take advantage of the fact that we were in this place that wasn't great. So we said, "Okay let's just change the [name of the] bookstore to Booktent Santa Cruz. We'll take advantage of it. This will become our identity. It's unique." We even had mugs printed up with Booktent on them. When it was cold outside or a little cool, it would be cold inside the tent.

Reti: I remember that.

Coonerty: When it was warm outside, it would be hot inside the tent. All the paperback covers of books that were laying flat would curl. You couldn't have heat on during the night because of the fire hazards. We had a Xerox machine for us to use, but it was also one customers could

come in and use. There weren't that many Xerox machines around at that time. One morning we came in and we opened up, and right below the glass where there was a little heating element that stayed on at night a mother mouse had given birth to a dozen little mice. You opened up and looked at the glass and there was this little mouse down there. We immediately thought, you know, we need publicity. We're in this sort of crippled state and we need to keep in the mind's eye. So I immediately called the *Sentinel* and said, "We have a human interest story for you. Come over and take a look at the little baby mice at the Bookshop." [laughs] So they came over and did a story on how these little baby mice were born in the Xerox machine. We had a sign, "Do Not Disturb." You try to take any advantage that you have to keep going.

And in those days, with a razor blade you could slice the plastic side of the pavilion and walk inside the store and we never had anybody, during the three years we were there that did any damage. Year One was great in the store because people were very supportive. They wanted to support all the businesses that were in the pavilions. For us it was like, we survived. It's a miracle we're here. We still have jobs. We can do this.

The Northern California Booksellers Association did a national fundraiser. There were, I think, seven bookstores that were involved—us, Logos, a bookstore in Los Gatos, a couple others that were downtown. They raised money. We used our money to pay for all our staff's wages between the 17th of October and when we reopened, so no one missed a paycheck.

Reti: I was wondering about that.

Coonerty: Basically to keep our staff, our team together. So the first year went fine. The second year there was much more starting of construction downtown. They were starting to build the parking lot that was

on the corner of Cedar and Church Street. They did it by pounding—

Reti: Oh, the parking garage.

Coonerty: The parking garage. They pounded piles to get to bedrock. So all day long there was this pounding noise, but also the ground was shaking, which everybody was a little jumpy about.

The people that owned the Coffee Roasting Company decided to sue us as responsible for the deaths of the two people who were there.

Reti: Sue Bookshop?

Coonerty: We didn't own the building. Ron Lau owned the building. But you get caught up in it and you have to go through the process. We eventually got eliminated from the lawsuit. It was a difficult thing to deal with.

By the third year, the pavilions had run out of steam. They were old hat. Because of the construction then going on downtown, there were days when traffic would be one way up Cedar [Street] and then three days later it would be the other way on Cedar. Nobody could plan on how they were doing it. A lot of the construction was taking out parking. I remember for six months in the third year the closest parking lot was two blocks away from us. It was very difficult for people to get there. It was getting dirtier and dirtier and more discouraging.

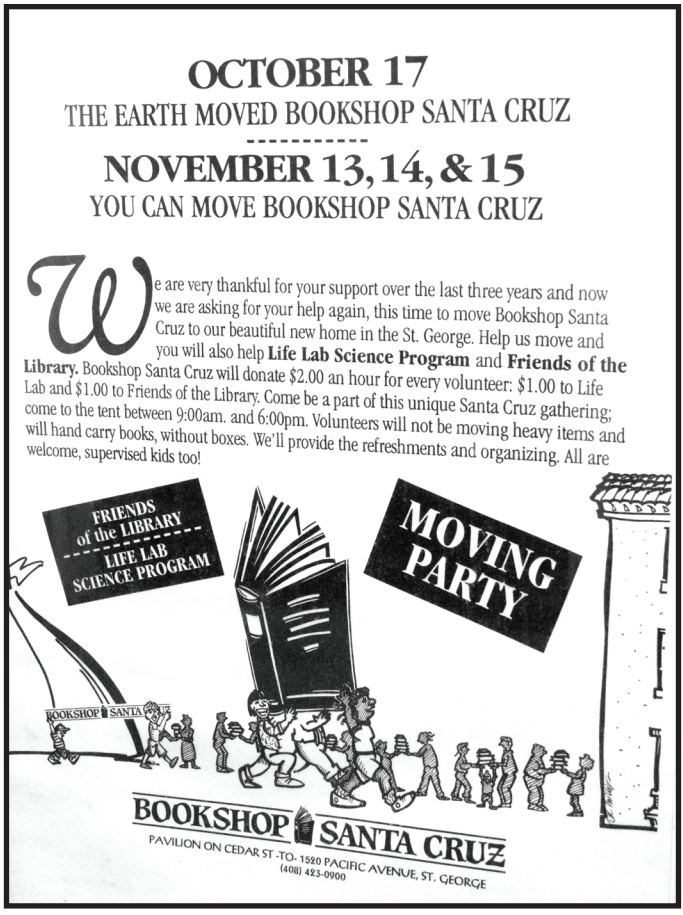
In fact, we had gone through FEMA [Federal Emergency Management Agency] to borrow money for the losses that we incurred during the earthquake. FEMA was the only game in town. Nobody else would loan us money. They would, so we had to play with them. We had a file that was probably four inches thick. FEMA lost the file three times. After the second time we said okay, Xerox everything because we are going to have to supply it [again]. Sure enough they would lose it. Somebody would take over the file, they would quit and it got lost. We

finally got some money. It was a loan. People had the idea that FEMA comes along and makes you whole, like an insurance policy. But in fact, what they do is loan you money at a lower interest rate, which is 4 percent. In those days 8 percent was the going rate. But you'd have to pay back everything. So we got a FEMA loan and that was what we were going to use to open the new store.

The last year in the tent we were rapidly running out of money. Sales were off. Expenses were high. We were just running out of money. So we took all the used books that we had, that we had gotten from that Bring Five Books to Save Bookshop [campaign], and we just basically liquidated our used books. That was the money we used for the last six months in the tent to survive and get through that so that we could get into the new store.

The three years in the tent were incredibly difficult. I was happy I was the age I was at that time because I think if that all happened now, I don't think I'd have the energy to do it. It was that sort of thing where you just had to deal with what was in front of you, that moment, that day. You couldn't make long-term plans. You couldn't do anything other than deal with the problems of that day and count on the cooperation of a lot of people that were around you. And we got that.

When we moved from the tent to the new building, we had the same thing, where we ran off t-shirts that said: "October 17th the Earth Moved Bookshop Santa Cruz. November 1, 1991, I moved Bookshop Santa Cruz." We gave these away to anybody that would help us move. We figured it would be three days to move the books from the tent to where we are now in the St. George building. We did it all the first day. Women with kids in backpacks would carry a handful of books. People who had shopping carts would come over and move books. The idea was that they would take one shelf of mystery books, keep them in order, walk them over, and put them on the shelf of the mystery books.



Poster recruiting people to help with the move to the new location

So we didn't have to reorganize all the books. We got all the books moved over in one day, which was great.

At that point, the fixtures inside the tent that we'd had since 1966—between their age and the fact that they weren't that well built in the first place, and then we had to move them around the parking lot several times when they were outside and then into the tent, and that service in the tent for three years—they weren't really useful anymore. So we had built new fixtures for the new store. It was a completely differently designed store. One of the anxieties we had was that people liked the old Bookshop. They liked it when they walked into the tent and it looked like the old Bookshop. Suddenly we were going to have something completely different. We were out there enough in debt that we had to pretty much within three years double the sales of the Bookshop or we'd go under. We didn't know how people were going to receive this new store.

But when we opened the doors and people walked in, they really liked the new store. Sales started to go up, climb. That's when we felt like, okay, we're going to make our way through this earthquake. Now, the loans didn't get paid off for another fifteen years, so we were still in an earthquake mode, but [we had gotten] through three years in the tent. We got through the earthquake and we were into the new store, which felt great. It felt like okay, we'll make our way through this.

Then once we got ourselves stabilized, then who locates across the street but a big book chain comes in that hadn't been through the earthquake, hadn't been through all the hard times. Next to the movie theater, Crown Books opens up and they are a discount bookstore. That's what they do.

Reti: I really want to talk about Crown, but let's just hold off for a few minutes. How did you end up at the St. George in particular? There's

an amazing kind of symmetry to that since that's where the original Hip Pocket was located.

Coonerty: In fact, our address—well, actually the Hip Pocket was there but the Bookshop opened up there [originally]. The Bookshop opened in '66 and moved across the street in '69. The Bookshop's address when it opened at the St. George was 1520 Pacific Avenue. Then we moved over to 1547, which is where the empty lot is now. Then we moved back and it was 1520. So we moved back to our original location. It's also where the Hip Pocket was.

I was due to become president of the American Booksellers Association when the earthquake hit. I called them and said, "I can't do it. My store is in crisis." They said, "Well, we want to keep you." We were involved with these publisher lawsuits over the fact that independent stores weren't getting the same deal or access to the same deal that the chains were getting. They said, "You come and stay on the executive committee. We'll make you the secretary of the organization. You won't be president but that way you'll stay involved instead. There will be four meetings a year." I said, "Okay, I'll do that much."

At that point we were in the tent and I also knew what kind of debt we were in. I thought, what's coming down the pike are these big superstores. Barnes and Noble was building them. Borders was building them.

Reti: That was already happening?

Coonerty: That was starting to happen. It had gone from Waldenbooks, and B. Dalton, the mall stores, into these Barnes and Noble and Borders stores. I thought, at some point we are going to have to face these people, so what I'm going to do is try to open a store that's fifteen thousand square feet. At the old store we were five thousand square feet on the main floor and then a five thousand foot basement of which we used about half for retail. I said, I'm going to try to get fifteen thousand

square feet. I *never* want to be in a place where you have to walk up the stairs or down the stairs. I want it all on one floor. I have to be ready for these big chains to come in. So I knew I wanted about fifteen thousand square feet. It was going to be a plunge into the unknown because I didn't know if this town would support a store that size. But these superstores from Barnes and Noble and Borders were proving that these stores were viable.

Reti: That was about the size that they were.

Coonerty: That was about the size, fifteen to twenty thousand square feet. Anyway, I started looking around. I liked the idea that the design of the St. George was going to be similar to what the building was. The location was good. At that time, the 100 percent block, sort of the core center of downtown was the Cooper House and what was going to be the movie theater across the street. The closer you could get to that, the more you were in the action. Interestingly enough, the main person for Barry Swenson in town was a man called Jesse Nickel. He ran this operation. He was the guy that built the buildings for Barry. His wife, Christine, had gone to work for Bookshop right after the earthquake. She was hired in our receiving department when we were in the tent. She worked there for a couple years. I knew Jesse and I knew Barry Swenson. I knew that they were going to get involved in the St. George. We were a large tenant. There weren't that many large tenants. I went to them and said, "If you give us fifteen thousand square feet— You're going to have a big building here. You're building the St. George. Give us a good deal and we'll sign up. And we'll sign again—" I was in favor of long leases, which have their pluses. They also have their minuses. At that point they had their pluses.

I went shopping around, and for the location and the size I liked the character of the store. They were going to put that big skylight room in the middle, which was part of the old St. George. [That] is where we hold our events now. We could take a lot of space. We negotiated a good deal with them. I said, "We're going to take this big space. If we're

going to gamble and we've got everything on the line, we could lose. Let's at least gamble and insure that we can survive if a big chain comes in." That's why we took the bigger space. We had to get out of the debt. We saw it coming. That was what our competition was going to be like.

Reti: Oh, that's prescient.

Coonerty: It was a good gamble. From the moment the earthquake hit, we had all our chips on the table anyway. If I was going to lose, I was going to lose everything. I was in such a position in the town that if I was going to lose, it was going to end up on the front page of the *Sentinel*. [laughs] It was a motivator not to lose but it was a good decade of just pure risk. It wasn't something where you could risk and sit back and say, "I own a store and it's doing well. I can enjoy the fruits of my labor." It was a constant fight. But I still love bookselling. I love Bookshop. I love the town. That was the good part.

Reti: There was an interview that you did with [NPR radio producer] Nikki Silva at that time.[2] You said, "This is an exciting time in publishing in this country because there's more of a global market." Do you remember what you meant by that? You didn't talk about the chain bookstores. That's what surprised me.

Coonerty: I think this was immediately after—I think, in fact, within weeks of the earthquake.

Reti: Within weeks of the earthquake. In fact, I think it was at the block party that she interviewed you. I'm pretty sure. It sounded like it was going on in the background.

Coonerty: Oh, is that right? Well, I think one thing is for a long while Americans basically bought books in the English language. Basically,

[2] *Loma Prieta Earthquake Interviews and Events* [sound recording] volume 2. Interviewed and recorded by Nikki Silva, 1989. Available in the UCSC Library Special Collections Department.

it was British or it was American. Even British books sometimes had a hard time translating, hopping the Atlantic. At that point, there were a number of writers from Eastern Europe, from even Asia, and we were starting to get nice translations. They were starting to be read by a lot of people. I think that that was probably it. We were suddenly getting literature from around the world and paying attention to Nobel Prize winners that were not American or British. It wasn't just English language books. We were seeing a much broader selection of books, particularly in fiction. Some nonfiction things, too, that were important books. We started to see that sort of globalization.

One time I went to the Frankfurt Book Fair, which is a rights fair, really. But there it's really a global marketplace. The American Booksellers Association, the Book Expo now, there's a lot of rights being sold, but it's basically English language books. Here, the Frankfurt Book Fair is massive. It's really a rights fair where somebody, the Swedish author, Larsen, who has all the *Girl with the Tattoo* books, would bring a small Swedish publication like that and start selling rights to the English language, Britain, selling rights to Brazil, selling rights all over the world. Americans, I think, were very provincial up to that point but they were starting to reach out and see all those authors. I suspect that's what I meant, because we started seeing that.

Reti: That makes sense. Okay. We're almost out of time. We're actually over time.

Coonerty: I've got a few things before I go so, how about if we schedule for the next time.

Reti: Let's do that.

Competition from Crown Books

Reti: Okay, today is December 22, 2011. This is Irene Reti, and I'm here with Neal Coonerty in his office on the fifth floor of the county building. We're about to do our third interview focused on Bookshop

Santa Cruz. So, Neal, last time we talked about the Loma Prieta Earthquake and that took us up through about 19—when did you say you reopened?

Coonerty: I think it was November of '92.

Reti: So then how long was it before you started having to deal with competition from Crown Books opening, across the street, wasn't it?

Coonerty: Yes. When we first went in '92 at the St. George building, the Cinema Nine building had not yet been built. It was under construction. We had a chain competition-free window. There were other booksellers downtown. Logos was there and Literary Guillotine and what was left of Plaza Books, now it's the card shop, Paper Vision. So there were other types of businesses but we were able to have this great growth. We had opened the new store with new fixtures, new layout. We didn't know how we were going to be received. We were received very well. People were very happy. So we had a lot of growth.

Then I think it was about '94, '95—Super Crown moved in across the street. I had been involved in national bookseller politics for quite a while. We had had an initial lawsuit over mass market paperbacks, those small paperbacks that sometimes you see in grocery stores. Independent booksellers would get them at a 40 percent discount. If the book was $9.95, we'd pay $6.00 for it, whereas all the chains were getting them at a much lower price. I think they were getting them at five dollars. So they were making a dollar extra on each book. We went together as the independents and said, "If we buy as a group, will you give us this discount?" They said, "No, it's only available to certain customers," and those were the chains. There's a little known law that says that if you can prove that your competitor that's the same size as you is

getting this, you can ask for it and get it, so Crown was very aggressive in getting this.

Crown was [from] the Robert Haft family who ran some drugstores back East, auto parts stores back East. Then the son went to business school somewhere, some prestigious business school, and came up with a plan to open up a bookstore chain. Since they had already deliveries to all these other chains that the family ran, he figured he would just piggyback on that. His whole thing was discounting. He was part of the lawsuit where we said, either stop giving the extra discount to the chains like Crown Books or make it available to us, one or the other. We were somewhat successful. We went before a U.S. judge in San Francisco, I think his name was Thornton Henderson, and he actually ruled in our favor. It was one of those cases where we went up there and there would be all these corporate lawyers on one side and we'd have this bookseller spouse, who was a lawyer, on our side. But we prevailed. We ended up getting the discount.

Super Crown came in and what they were known for was discounting heavily. In retail, your worst competitor is a stupid competitor, somebody who does something that they really can't afford to do and can't sustain. But they do it. You have to match it in order to survive. Crown was a case in point, where there's really not enough margin in the book business to discount at the level they were discounting. I think they discounted 40 percent on all their bestsellers. They discounted 30 percent on everything else. There is just not enough margin to run a business that way. They had hoped they could piggyback on these other businesses that they had, but that really wasn't working out either. They expanded quite rapidly. So they came in here with a fairly large store right next to the Cinema Nine, almost kitty-corner from us. It caused us to discount bestsellers. We couldn't discount all the books in the

store because we just couldn't survive. But they took a certain amount of business for a certain while.

The whole company, it was sort of a Shakespearean play almost. The whole company had this very bizarre collapse. The father, the patriarch of the family, Herbert Haft, was this very bizarre guy who had this windswept gray hair. He was a very small man, but he was very, very egotistical. His son, Robert, who started the bookstores, had an interview in *The Wall Street Journal*. In the interview in *The Wall Street Journal,* he assumed that he was going to be running the whole company in a little while—Dart Drugs and the auto parts and the bookstores. His father took umbrage at this, sort of said, what are you doing? So his father, within days of the whole article showing up in *The Wall Street Journal,* went to his son and said, you're out of the business. I disown you. I'm writing you out of the will, and the mother came and said, this is our son. You shouldn't do this. He said, I'm divorcing you. You're out. Goodbye. And a sister, I think, got caught up in it, too. There was one other son who had decided that he was an actor in Hollywood and he had gone out to Hollywood, so the father called him back to be the heir-apparent for this thing. From that point on, everybody in the family started suing everybody else. It was just this Shakespearean drama of this family falling apart. All the businesses started to collapse. In fact, all of them collapsed into nothing, including Crown Books. So we had them here for about three years. I get a lot of credit for having driven Crown out of town but I had little to do with it. It was really this family drama that had gone on. They went away after that.

But it was hard. We still had a huge amount of debt from the earthquake. We had gotten FEMA loans. We were paying those back. We had good sales, and our sales were increasing, but it was a struggle, and then to start reducing your margin was another little struggle. So it wasn't easy to get through it. They were around about for, I think, about three to four years and we got through that. Like I said, people

still congratulate me for driving Crown out of town and I had little to do with driving Crown out of town but I'm glad they went. [laughs]

Reti: There were a couple of things I noticed when I went through the *Bookshop Santa Cruz Reader*, the newsletter. One was that 6,400 people signed a petition against Super Crown's garish, plastic sign. What was this sign?

Coonerty: That's true. When we heard they were coming into town and we knew what we were going to face—it's an attitude that I have, it's like when we were in the pavilions, I decided let's make it a strength and call it Booktent Santa Cruz. It's unique. So when Crown was coming in, we had no way to illustrate that it was going to be us versus them except for the fact that we found out that they were asking for a variance in their sign. They had a big plastic sign. They had to go to the city in order to get a variance because the sign was going to be bigger than what would be allowed under the ordinances. So we decided, okay, this would be a way to show they are outsiders. We are here; we got through the earthquake. They are coming in now poaching on us. We're genuine. They are the plastic. We figured, let's wage a little battle. It's a little political gamesmanship. Let's be able to define them before they got to town. That way people would understand that they should support the local operation because we were facing these competitors who were able to undercut us on price and were going to have a big selection, although they weren't very good at stocking their stores. They had a lousy selection of books but they had a big selection of books. So we used this, and we started getting petitions going. It's all my political community activism work. It was really meant to define them before they got to town, lay it all out. The fact that their sign was ten square feet bigger than what was allowed, who cares? It was a way of us getting an edge in a battle where we were the little guys and didn't have the same resources they had.

I remember I got a phone call from their attorney. He was angry that we were pressing this and it was causing them to have to go through a

few loops to get it. I was annoying him. I was talking to him over the phone and telling how he was doing something that was wrong and we were going to hold him to the ordinance. He finally started screaming. He said, "We're going to crush you. We're going to crush you like you are a little ant. Within six months, Bookshop Santa Cruz will be dead and we'll be there." Of course, then I turned around and told that story to everybody because that was a good story to tell. [laughs] So it was a little political gamesmanship, but it's what you have to do when you are the small guy and you are up against a big corporation that can swing their weight around. We weren't past doing a little bit of political work to educate the public as to who they were and who we are.

Reti: And they did not have a very diverse inventory, like they wouldn't do special orders—

Coonerty: Right, they were sort of on the cheap. They had bestsellers. They had some backlist, the books in the sections. They had a lot of sale books, but particularly bad ones. We'd try to get, when books go into paperback, there's hardcover copies that are left over and we'd buy them for our sale tables and then you say, "Was $24.95, now it is $10.00." You can also get people who manufacture sale books, who'll manufacture them and sell them for cheap. They had bad sale books. They are imitation kids books or imitation Disney-type books instead of real children's books. That's the sort of operation they were. Whether it was drugstores, or auto parts, or bookstores, they were just retailers that tried to capture a certain segment of the market.

Reti: They're just selling widgets.

Coonerty: Yes. And they dealt on price. I mean, that was their idea is that they could outlast the competition. It wasn't just us he was in competition with. He was also in national competition with Barnes and Noble, and Borders. He was the low price guy. That's what he did. His selection was not very good at all. As far as people who would think it was a good bookstore, Super Crown was not considered a good

bookstore. But they [took] their share of sales. When somebody creams off your bestsellers and that sort of thing, it hurts.

Reti: Sure. The earthquake propelled you into Santa Cruz City politics and now you are talking about needing to use some political savvy to build a community base to educate people about the difference between Bookshop and Crown Books. [Let's] talk a little bit about your political career.

Coonerty: I had been active in the American Booksellers Association. I had been secretary. I'd been treasurer. I'd been vice president. I was due in 1990 to become president of the ABA. It was something that I had worked on long and hard because of all these issues. I was really ready to go. When the earthquake hit at the end of '89 it was clear I couldn't do that. They kept me on in an officer capacity because that was the executive committee that really ran it.

I had always been interested in local politics. I had been involved in a number of campaigns at a low level. I had played a role of the businessperson downtown that had progressive values but was also a businessperson and dealt with the business community who typically were not on the progressive side, the people like Gary Patton, Mardi Wormhoudt, and John Laird, those people that were coming into office. At that point, I decided I had to switch, and rebuilding downtown to me was a critical issue. A lot of people were saying downtown is the community's living room space. A main street is more than just an exchange of money for goods. It really plays a lot of roles in a community. Pacific Avenue had been that organically since it started. This was the main street that had been there forever. After World War II, it had gone into a depression and there were a lot of empty storefronts, but since the Pacific Garden Mall had gone in '69, it had revived and was doing fairly well.

I felt like, okay, I'm going to lend my political effort into getting the downtown rebuilt. So in November of 1990, a year after the earthquake,

I ran for city council. I figured it was a four-year term. We were in the tent at that time. Being on the city council is part time. It meets Tuesday afternoons and evenings. Anyway, I ran basically on the issue of rebuilding the downtown, plus I had the progressive values of—the environment was important and social programs were important and supporting the nonprofits was important. Building a greenbelt around the city was important. But [I ran] mainly on the rebuilding of the downtown, the process of which was going on with Vision Santa Cruz.

Fortunately, I came in first and spent four years on the city council. They have a way of rotating in to be mayor. You have a four-year term. If you finish first in your election cycle, year three you became mayor. The person who finishes second in year four becomes mayor. So I became mayor in 1993. The nice thing is the ribbon opening for the reopening of downtown was when I was mayor. It was very, very nice. We reopened the Bookshop at the end of '92, and in April of '93 there was the grand opening of downtown and I presided over that. So it was a very nice time. I enjoyed being on the city council, however, when it got near the end it was clear to me that the business needed my full-time attention.

We had gotten through a crisis period; a lot of people pitched in. But a business needs someone there and attentive. It's very easy to get out of hand. Getting out of hand usually means you start losing money. We were carrying this debt and, of course, being a small business, the debt was being guaranteed by my home so there was a lot of pressure. After the four years was over, then I went back to just bookselling full time. I ended up staying on the American Booksellers Association board and I think it was the year 2000 to 2002 I became president, so I finally ended up doing that, too. But '90 to '94, I was on the city council. It

was great. I loved doing it. It's a great community with lots of good things, lots of good people on the city staff. I had a good time.

Competition from Borders Books

Reti: Great. Thank you. Okay, so now, we need to talk about Borders Books. When did that start to happen?

Coonerty: [sighs] Boy, Borders Books was difficult. After Crown went out, we had about a little three-year period or so when we had good sales. We were able to recover because we had growth in sales. We were able to retire a lot of the debt that we were in from the earthquake, not all of it, but at least a big chunk of it. It took a lot of the pressure off the store.

But in 1999 my wife passed away. She had had lupus and was battling it. In 1993, when I was mayor, in fact, right at the end of the time that I was mayor, she had had a stroke. In fact, I was back East at an ABA board meeting and flew back. She recovered from that stroke pretty well. But the lupus is incurable and progressive. We didn't have any idea of how it would go but she worked in the store with me. She ran the whole non-book section. She bought the calendars, the cards, the gift items, all the rest of that stuff. But in 1999 she had a major stroke. She had it in the evening and by the next morning they had operated but she was in a vegetative state. She was in a coma for two months and then she passed away. It was devastating for myself and my two kids, Ryan and Casey. After we got through with the memorial service and that sort of thing, we have a family house in Vermont, and we all went to Vermont to just get away together for a couple weeks. The last day we were there we got a phone call telling us that Borders was coming into town.

Reti: God, Neal, that's terrible.

Coonerty: I know. In the year 2000 I had taken over as president of the ABA. We were in this major lawsuit with Borders and Barnes and

Noble. Borders had attempted to open up a store out the [freeway] exit near where Gayle's Bakery is, Bay Avenue there, right on that corner there. It was owned by Redtree Properties. The women who ran Capitola Book Café, who had helped us during the earthquake, helped us get our stuff out after the earthquake, helped us get into the new store, who were friends of ours, were panicked that they were going to be driven out of business by Borders. I helped talk them through what they should do with the Capitola City Council, all along expecting the Capitola City Council would allow Borders to go in there. There was a riparian corridor, all sorts of other issues. I did get up and testify for the Capitola City Council. Quite to our surprise, the city council turned down Borders; they didn't turn them down but they put such restrictions on them that they really could not get the size and the space that they wanted. So coming out of that, I was accused by the Redtree people and the Borders people of being the mastermind that kept Borders out of town. Meanwhile, Redtree had a building right downtown, a block from my business.

Reti: Oh, gosh.

Coonerty: They then decided to move the Borders location from there to downtown.

Reti: This is a dramatic business you are in. [laughs]

Coonerty: It is. Either that, or I make it more dramatic than it needs to be. [laughs] I could have run a nice quiet business. Anyway, given the fact that I was the president of the ABA, at that point it had sued Borders and Barnes and Noble—given the fact that they had seen me

as the mastermind, which actually wasn't true, there were some other people that worked much harder on it, to keep them out of Capitola—

Reti: So wait, the lawsuit through the ABA, was that about unfair discount policies?

Coonerty: That was about unfair discount policies. After we won the initial one with Crown about the small books, now we were going after all the books that they were getting an extra discount [for] and using the extra discount to open stores that would drive independents out of business. We were much less successful in that lawsuit, but in any event—and that really is up to what judge you get. So anyway, Borders opened up a block away. Borders is an interesting business. They come out of Ann Arbor, Michigan. They are run by two brothers, Louis Borders, and I forget his brother's name. Very smart guys who opened a great independent bookstore.

Reti: Their name was Borders?

Coonerty: Yes, their name was Borders. [laughs] He ended up, right at the beginning of the Internet, starting a business that would deliver groceries to your house when you ordered over the Internet, that failed, Louis Borders did. But he earlier developed Borders, and in developing Borders, he developed the first computer inventory system for his store. At which point, he started expanding. It was mostly franchises. Someone would buy a Borders franchise and he would outfit them with inventory. They'd buy through his computer system and do it. Then it morphed into other things. For a while, they were bought out by Kmart. They were owned and run by Kmart. Then Kmart was doing poorly and the shareholders of Kmart basically told Kmart management, "Get rid of all your associated businesses and concentrate on

your core business." A fund got money together and spun off Borders separately, so the Borders brothers didn't own it at that point.

It started growing. Waldenbooks was a chain for shopping malls and they were the ones that put together the Borders' package. They had the Waldenbooks part and then they had the superstores, the Borders stores. So they opened up. And their whole reason for being, from the time that the Borders brothers were in it, was deep, deep inventory. In other words, they carried academic books; they carried everything. They had a great magazine section. It was like, whatever book you might want they would have on their shelves.

One of the things when you are running a bookstore is your turnover—how much inventory you carry and how much you are selling. Typically, a healthy bookstore, if you do a million dollars worth of sales, your inventory should be about $250,000. In other words, you should turn over four times during the year. That's a healthy way to carry your inventory. Borders, typically, would maybe have turnover one and a half times a year. They would carry a huge amount of inventory. Again, it didn't make any financial sense, but it gave them the [image] that if you wanted a book, you'd go to them first because you are more likely to find it there than any other place. They were a great bookstore. They became a chain but they still maintained this identity of deep, deep backlists. And they discounted bestsellers but not as deep as Crown. It was just basically the bestsellers. So they were a formidable opponent to have, very difficult.

Now, eventually, that whole identity they had is what sunk them. When the Internet came along and could provide a deeper inventory, a complete inventory, and their sales, they never adjusted to that. Then having a deep inventory wasn't what drove people to bookstores any-

more. They got themselves in financial trouble because they weren't able to adjust when the Internet changed the game.

But at that point when they came into Santa Cruz, they were difficult. They opened up a store about the same size as we did. It had a café like we had, the café attached to us. And they were a block away. So it was really hard. We worked hard to try and figure out how to hold onto our customers. I think we did a fairly good job. It was when we started our frequent buyers club. It's when we started the newsletter. We wanted to communicate one-on-one with our customers. We wanted to reward people that were loyal to us. The only mistake we really made is in the summertime we started seeing sales slipping much more than other times of the year. Our notion was that people would come to town, to Santa Cruz, and they'd want to see what's unique in Santa Cruz. But in fact they do like chains. Whether it is McDonalds or whatever, they go to what's familiar. So the people who came into town and saw a Borders there, they knew Borders. They respected Borders and they'd go to Borders. So our summer business, which was pretty good, our August and July were almost as big as November. August, July, and November were the top three months other than December. We started seeing a big slide in July and August that hurt us. The other thing were students. We had assumed, again, that we could attract the student trade, that they would want to shop at a store that's local and more hip than a chain.

Reti: You would think.

Coonerty: But, in fact, a lot of them come from towns where Borders is the intellectual center of the town. It is the oasis in a town. If you come from Stockton or wherever in the Central Valley, Borders was probably the best thing you had as far as an intellectual place to go. So they didn't see Borders in a negative light. They didn't see them as a chain. They saw them as something good that was different than the rest of the

town they came from. So those were two groups that we weren't able quite to match.

But in general, the "buy local, support your local store," that thing, and, again, the political angle we took—we highlighted the fact that we were in a lawsuit with them, that they were getting an unfair advantage, that they were going to drive us out of business by getting an unfair advantage—we used that to try again to define them as the chain, the outsider. We were the local people and playing by the rules. We were playing a game and it was an unlevel playing field. We were in court trying to address that unlevel playing field. Borders—this was a tactic by Borders, again using their money to come in and try to drive us out of business by being a block away.

They hurt us a lot. It's hard to tell because a number of different factors happened at the same time. Borders came into town. The Internet and Amazon started up about that time. Recessions were happening in Santa Cruz. In 1990 was the savings and loan recession. So trying to say, okay, we lost so much business because Borders came was hard to do. They definitely hurt us, but it's hard to define exactly how much they hurt us.

Reti: Now, there was a point where they served Bookshop Santa Cruz with a subpoena, in December of 2000?

Coonerty: Right.

Reti: What was that about?

Coonerty: That was because I was president of the ABA. So I went through a deposition. Also, because they were here in town they had this half a dozen attorneys show up. They put me through questions and answers. It was important to me, because not only were they a competitor in town, I saw them putting people out of business all over the country. Borders just left Seaside and virtually every bookstore in

Monterey had been wiped out, every independent. So we had customers coming to us this Christmas saying, "Why don't you open a store there? There are no stores. There're no stores in the Monterey Peninsula and that area." They wipe out independents and now they've been bankrupt, and so there are a lot of communities that don't have bookstores, which is what our fear was initially. When I first started at the ABA there were about six thousand members. When I left office we were down to about a thousand. It was a devastating period of time.

Reti: What time period are we talking about?

Coonerty: Probably mid-80s to mid-2000s. We had lost five out of six independent bookstores around the country. There's no doubt that there're a number of bookstores that were badly run businesses or hobby businesses but there were always enough stores opening to replace [those] that were closing. There was growth there. And then what had happened was stores started closing and were impacted by competition but nobody was opening up a bookstore because of the presence of these superstores. It was no longer that you could open a thousand square foot bookstore. If you are going to compete against a twenty thousand square foot store, that's what you have to open up. And that takes a lot more money. So a lot of smaller guys who used to go into the book business and grow, they couldn't get in the door to grow. It was hard and it was not a pleasant time.

But personally, here, they opened up a block away and it was very, very difficult to survive that. We had a bank loan out. It was just sort of an operating loan. The bank didn't want it anymore. They basically told us that the only thing I could do at that point was again borrow against my house and then I personally loan it. The Bookshop is still paying me back for that loan.

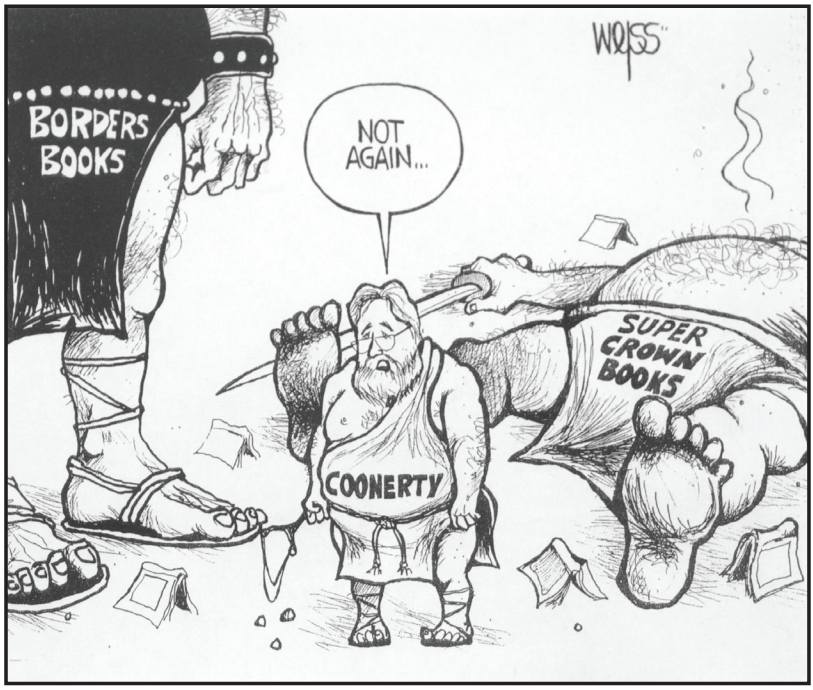
We got through eleven years of Borders here. We got through that by basically hawking my house and then paying it back. You do what you have to do. I'm stubborn. A lot of people would have said, okay, and

probably a lot of good advice is, close up shop. It's hard to compete against this sort of thing. It's like getting through the earthquake, getting through all that stuff. Having the number of customers in Santa Cruz who have been supportive over the years—I always taught my kids, "When you are trying to accomplish something, if you just are persistent at it, there're a number of people that drop away and you rise to the top. You have to be stubborn. You can't be stupid stubborn, but you can be stubborn and just say, I'm going to keep making sacrifices, and keep trying to do what I have to do in order to keep it going." And that's what we did with Borders. It took eleven years but we survived them. Now we're in Christmas 2011 and we're getting some nice sales because Borders is closed.

Reti: I was going to ask you about that. So you have definitely noticed a difference?

Coonerty: Yes, it's doing very well. We won't go back up to the peak that we were at when Borders came in. But like I said, there were a number of other things: a) we're in a third year of a great recession and b) Amazon and the Internet. It's not only Amazon and the fact that people can get books through the Internet, very easily get books, but it is the information available on the Internet. If somebody in the family got a sickness, got leukemia or something, we'd find family members who would come in and buy two or three books that they'd want to read in order to find out information. Now they Google it and get information. So the Internet changed a lot too. But definitely, battling with Borders—I mean, honestly, a town the size of Santa Cruz can only support one large bookstore. We just felt like, okay, we're just going to try to outlast them as long as we can and hope that we can outlast them.

Barnes and Noble was much more adept at adjusting to the Internet, adjusting to the marketplace, doing all the rest of that stuff. Borders was not. From about five years ago, you could see that Borders was just starting to go into a spiral and making bad management decisions that would eventually end up—I'd never expected them to close down


WEISS
BORDERS BOOKS
NOT AGAIN...
COONERTY
SUPER CROWN BOOKS

everything, but I was hoping— When they opened, we assumed that they had a ten-year lease. I think I had read in the newspaper that they had a ten-year lease. Since we had peaked at sales when they came in and were slowly going down over eleven years and they were sort of sticking to us, our assumption was their sales were the same thing. They were not a growing store. They were a store that was losing sales because of this competition. Our hope was that after ten years they would decide not to renew the lease. That was our aim, to survive ten years. Maybe they wouldn't renew the lease. We weren't obviously not going to go away and then they'd have to deal with that, make a hard decision. But ten years came along and they didn't go away.

Then we heard that at some point there had been a partial renewal of the lease. Sometimes, like with us, we'd ask the landlord—at one point our bathrooms, which are a big part of Bookshop Santa Cruz, were getting a lot of use and they were built out to not get so much use, so we said, "We really need to go in there and tile the whole place, tile up the walls, really make it a little more industrial use type of thing." We asked the landlord to do that for us. They agreed if we'd extend our lease three more years. Sometimes that sort of thing happens.

At some point, for whatever reason, Borders had extended a little longer. We were a little bit disappointed when ten years passed and the lease wasn't up at that point. We were mistaken in thinking that it was a ten-year lease. But then, Borders started really collapsing. Even though they weren't going to go away in ten years, within a year they had gone away. Then we started seeing this collapse around the country, because they had really bungled an Internet presence. Barnes and Noble started their own site, started their own e-reader, did all sorts of things. And Borders—for a company who had been an innovator at bringing the first computer in—they were inept. They started to do a website like Amazon, failed at it. They then went into partnership with Amazon, let Amazon fulfill their books but had Amazon and their name on it. That was a bad idea. It helped Amazon but it really didn't help them. Then they pulled out of that partnership and tried to establish it, but it was after Barnes and Noble and Amazon had already established themselves.

They couldn't break into the market. They never got an e-reader that worked very well. Barnes and Noble had the Nook and Kindle was Amazon's. They made a bunch of errors that just accumulated. Plus, they had this model of a big bookstore with deep back stock that was no longer needed. That just sort of sunk them. Again, I'm getting, somewhat, credit for driving Borders out of town and I had nothing to do with it. [laughs] But we're happy they went.

Reti: But you survived. I can't imagine Santa Cruz without Bookshop Santa Cruz. I mean, that would just be devastating, beyond imagination really.

Coonerty: Well, that's the nice thing, now I'll go in and I work on Friday from eleven to one on the register. I just do the register and I ring up sales. I do a little bit more during Christmas time; tomorrow and the next day I'll be working four hours on the register each. It's nice because I come in touch with customers. I also see what new books are in. We get a lot of people that are very complimentary about the Bookshop and they feel that Bookshop is important. This year, for the first time, we're getting out-of-town people who no longer have a bookstore in their community. They come to Santa Cruz, or people who used to live here come back. Like, there was one woman that came back and bought a ton of books. Her husband graduated from UCSC, and for his birthday every year they come and spend a weekend in Santa Cruz. They come to Bookshop first thing. We had another woman who was from Santa Cruz but works at a scientific station in Antarctica. She's there eleven months of the year and they give her a month off. She orders all her books through our website, both physical books and e-books through our website, so she's our Bookshop Santa Cruz customer in Antarctica. [laughs]

Reti: One on every continent.

Coonerty: Exactly. So we're conquering the world continent by continent. Anyway, it's nice to hear customers. It's everything from, "Thank

goodness you have a bathroom." I remember one time I was standing in line at Noah's to get a bagel, across the street, and somebody came up just in front of me and was asking the clerk, "Do you have a bathroom?" They go, "No, but you can go over to Bookshop." I was about to go into the standard, "That's for our customers. You shouldn't send people over there." Then I thought, we work so hard to get people to walk through the store. If a full bladder causes them to walk through the store and introduces the store to them, that's great. That's the way it is. The bathrooms cost us a lot of money but they are very appreciated and they introduce the store to a lot of people. It works out in our favor, too. Somebody the other day stopped me on the street and wanted to compliment us about our do-it-yourself gift-wrap. They thought that was great and wonderful. It's nice to hear good things about the store. Sometimes you hear complaints and you have to deal with complaints. I've gotten a number of compliments, which is nice because it is a lot of hard work. It's the Perils of Pauline. We've been up, we've [been] down, we've been barely hanging on. We've been doing okay. So it's nice when people talk about how much they appreciate the store.

The Impact of Amazon.com on Independent Bookstores

Reti: I noticed that there was a Facebook page asking people to take a vow that they would buy their books at Bookshop online and not through Amazon, or come to the store and buy books.

Coonerty: I think the thing that's hurting bookstores more than anything else right now is Amazon. Independent bookstores—we're losing a lot to things. Amazon is a great site. There's no doubt about it. But they did something particularly predatory this Christmas that I think backfired on them, and not just [with] books, but all the products they carry. They had a program where they told you to go into a store, find the product that you wanted, whether it was a book or a chainsaw or whatever they sell on Amazon. To price it, they'd have an App where you could go and they would tell you the price that they had on their website. They had a way to do it. If you were in a bookstore, you did the scan of the little code and could show that you were in a bookstore or

a hardware store or whatever, they would give you five dollars off your purchase at Amazon. So they were going into a physical store, use their facilities, see the book, all the rest of the stuff—buy it from us.

We've had that a number of times. We have a woman who has worked in our children's section for well over thirty-five years, who is an expert in children's books. I mean, she really knows. Gá Lombard knows the books and will spend a lot of time on customers. You tell her, "I have a ten year old boy who is interested in bats." She'll give you a novel about bats. She'll give you nonfiction about bats. She'll give you a how-to-build a bat house. She will literally spend forty minutes with people showing them all the books. And then they start to walk away. She says, "Well, aren't you going to buy anything?" They go, "No, we'll buy them online. It's cheaper." She has just spent forty-five minutes in that connection. We're not going to be here to offer these services unless you buy them through us. So, I think they started a program of saying, "If I'm going to buy online I can get it through Bookshop Santa Cruz." All the independents went together and put together a website that's really co-owned but [here] it's branded as Bookshop Santa Cruz and we can fulfill it.

Reti: That's interesting.

Coonerty: Ingram Book Company, which is a big distributor, really fulfills them but will fill them with our name on them. So we've worked out this partnership.

Reti: So you can get any book that's in the Ingram database?

Coonerty: Right, exactly, which is a lot.

Reti: That's a huge amount.

Coonerty: They added our database for what's in the store, if we need to fulfill it from there. What we're saying is, if you want to order online,

we have the ability to order stuff. But if you want to keep a physical store in your community you have to pay attention to this. This is an issue. Again, it's defining them and defining us.

Then, in the meanwhile, a lot of work has been done by independent stores for the shop locally [idea]. About ten years ago, we identified that shop locally was a powerful message to get across, so we started doing it. Then we saw it in other things. You saw farmers' markets using it. It's become much, much bigger. In Santa Cruz, fortunately, an organization started that got well defined and it has hundreds of people now. You'll see editorials in the *Sentinel* about shopping locally and how important it is. And it is. All the studies that have been done, so much more of the money stays in the community, and particularly at a time of recession, with people out of work and all the rest of the stuff, it's important that we do this. It's like when Borders was here, I told my staff if somebody walks in with a Borders bag, they're walking into our store—the fact that they are shopping at both stores is better than them just shopping at Borders. We're not going to demonize people who shop at Borders. We're happy that they are in our store. The people that we don't get any benefit from are the ones that exclusively shop at Borders. As long as we can get part of their business, hopefully over time, they'll appreciate us more and start giving us more of their business, but we'll have earned it. Of course, the people who were perfectly loyal, I still have people who come up to me and say, "You know, I never set foot in Borders." Which is great. That's really the part of the community that really helped us survive.

I only went in Borders once and it was on 9/11. Borders was the bookstore that was at the bottom of the World Trade Center [building]. Fortunately, it was in the [tower] that went down later and they had emptied out the store and the employees. But it was traumatic. It was their store. So we signed a card saying that we're sympathetic with them and sorry for their loss and the traumatized employees they had. I got a

plant and took it down [the street] and gave it to the employees of the Borders. That was the only time I was ever in the Borders store.

Reti: What was their reaction?

Coonerty: They were happy to get it. They were positive about it. They didn't have any animosity. The employees who were here didn't have any animosity for us. Soon after they opened, I don't know if you remember, but there were a couple of demonstrations.

Reti: Yes, I do remember.

Coonerty: One was bare-breasted women for some reason decided to picket Borders, which in my mind wasn't that effective because it probably would have drawn attention to them rather than away. Then also at some point somebody had stuck in a hose into the Borders [store] and water came in. There were people that accused me of masterminding this thing, which of course that's the last thing I wanted to do. It created sympathy with them plus the fact is you don't destroy, that's not how you compete. I took a lot of heat for that, if nothing else for creating an atmosphere where that would [be done]. I have a feeling it was a vandal that would have done that to any store. I don't think they were aiming at Borders. It was just probably an idiot that was just vandalizing a business no matter what. The amount of water that we've had come through in our store with pipes bursting upstairs and everything is just amazing. Anyway we're glad Borders is gone. [laughs] Good riddance.

Building Community

Reti: Yes. So, there are some other things that you've done to build community in Santa Cruz through Bookshop, like donating to local

community organizations such as the Santa Cruz AIDS Project and the Homeless Garden Project.

Coonerty: Yes. Well, our biggest one was Stephen King, who is one of *the* biggest authors in the world. He had a book *Insomnia* that came out a number of years ago. We were in the new store. Quite by random drawing he picked out, I think, twenty bookstores across the country he was going to visit. He decided that he was going to start in Maine, where he comes from, and he was going to ride his motorcycle to each one of these [stores] and end up on the West Coast, where his motorcycle would be crated up and then he would be off. We got picked to be the venue, basically on the West Coast. There might have been one down in Los Angeles, but we were the last venue on his trip. And he is a gigantic author.

So we did it. We were very, very happy because it brought a lot of attention. We booked the Civic Auditorium. We sold tickets for six dollars, I think it was. We had this enormous signing. The place was packed. All the money went to Friends of Santa Cruz Public Library. I think we raised about twelve thousand dollars for them. We got book sales out of it, but all the ticket sales and I think a portion of the book sales also went to them. They helped us out. They provided volunteers who would help us [staff] the table where he was signing books. He was a delightful guy. His wife, [Tabitha] met him here. She's an author. He was just a nice guy.

My sister, who is a teacher, had a junior high school kid who worshipped Stephen King. So we said, "Why don't you come over? In the back room he will sign books ahead of time and you can hand him the books." I must say it was great because this kid had an encyclopedic knowledge of every Stephen King book. For the hour that Stephen King was signing books he was having a great conversation with this kid, and this kid was in seventh heaven. Stephen King was very nice to him and very accommodating. They had about four or five special editions of this book, where it was printed separately. It was in a different

binding. It was in a slipcase and very nice. At the end of all the signing, because this kid helped, Stephen King grabbed a copy, and told the publisher, "Charge this to me," He signed it and gave it to this kid. The kid was in seventh heaven. It was very nice. He was a great guy.

Reti: Life-changing experience.

Coonerty: He was very good. He filled the Civic. People were very appreciative and he stayed as long as he needed to in order to sign copies of books. That was our biggest sort of thing. Over the years we've done a number of things because we wanted to connect with the community. The community was good to us when we were in crisis. We wanted to help other parts of the community.

I've served on a number of boards. I was on the Cabrillo Music Festival board for a year. I was an ill fit at the time [for] one year on the chamber of commerce board. The Family Service Association, I was on their board for a while. So I was on [the boards of] a number of different organizations around town. Community is important. It's important to me and it's important to what we do as Bookshop. So it seemed to fit right.

Plus, the fact is, I've seen people burn out. They go into business and it's so intense to try to run a business. Over a number of years, you start to burn out. I felt like if I did these other things, whether it was the American Booksellers Association, or the city council, or serving on boards, or getting involved with this, that it would keep my interests up and I wouldn't just burn out on doing one thing for thirty-some years. It refreshes you. I think it was healthy to do that. It probably kept me out from micro-managing the store. I got a lot of good people in that knew what they were doing, and that gave them a little leeway to be able to take pride in their work by running the floor or running

the children's section or being the buyer for the store. So it probably worked well for me to not be 100 percent intense. [laughs]

Key Staff Members at Bookshop Santa Cruz

Reti: Let's talk about some of those key staff people at Bookshop. I know you mentioned Gá Lombard.

Coonerty: Yes, Gá Lombard. She came early on. For a while we had a little store in the Rancho Del Mar Shopping Center, Bookworks. She actually started there. My wife hired her. Candy, my wife, was running that store.

Reti: So that was thirty years ago?

Coonerty: Yes, I think we opened it up in '75. Eventually we sold it off, but for six or seven years she ran it. She hired Gá. When I came into the store, there was somebody who was doing children's books, and she was quite good but she was leaving. She had something else she was going to do. I'd heard from my wife that Gá had a special interest in children's books, so we approached her and said, "Why don't you come to Bookshop and you can run the children's section?" which means buying the children's books, too. She wasn't sure she wanted to do it. She liked the idea of a small store, intimate time with customers. Bookshop at that time, even though it was much smaller than is today, seemed a little overwhelming for her. But eventually we talked her into it. She came and I think it has been almost thirty-five years that she's been at the Bookshop.

Reti: Wow.

Coonerty: She runs a tremendous section. She's really, really knowledgeable. She's very opinionated. Sometimes people decide that they are going to be a children's book author and they ask Gá to come and look at a manuscript. She always warns them, and when they come through me I always warn them that, "She's going to be very candid.

She has very strong opinions. If she doesn't like it or there's something wrong with it she will tell you." She does that. Some people feel like writing a children's book is straightforward and easy to do. It's not. It takes a lot of knowledge. There are people who have told me that they grew up with Gá, their kids grew up with Gá. There're estranged dads who use her to be able to know what their kids should be interested in, or what they are interested in, and find the right book for them. She comes alive during the Christmas season because so many people are in the store. She loves hand-selling. It's a lost art of sitting with a customer, finding out what they really want. She is so knowledgeable. I know that she's read every book in that section, and it's a big section. You say, "My kid is interested in ladybugs and fire trucks" and she'll find the right book for them at the right age. There are adults that come back and say, "I just loved it. When I was a kid I could go in and she would always steer me to the right book." She's a real key part of the store.

She's got a partner, Judith Milton, who is our buyer for adult books. She's almost been with us that long. She's Canadian so she didn't start right away because she didn't have her papers and stuff. She started working in the store maybe two or three years after Gá started working, just working on the floor and doing the usual cashier and shelving and all that stuff, but worked her way to becoming the buyer. So she's the buyer for all the hardcover books and most of the paperbacks.

We have a couple other people that buy the mysteries, the small paperback books. There's another buyer for sale books. We have a gift buyer [position] that my wife, Candy, did for a long while, my wife, and a number of people have done.

There was another woman who no longer works at Bookshop, Lori Fukuda, who now works for the City of Santa Cruz, but up until about five or six years ago—she was there for twenty-five years—she was what

we call the backlist buyer. She made sure that we kept everything in stock that we could over a period of time.

The other person that has been there for well over thirty years is Patrick, who goes by the name Tatsat. He spent a number of years in India in a religious community there and he came back and we hired him. He runs the floor. He does the hiring and the training of everybody that works on the floor, customer service. He also runs the magazine section with help from a few people. He's been there forever.

So those are the key people that have been there and have been a part of the Bookshop for a long, long time. A lot of the personality of the Bookshop is really due to their efforts, what they did. They've been through the same ups and downs and anxieties about whether they'd have a job or not have a job. We went through a period of time when we were losing sales, particularly with Borders, where we weren't able to give any sort of pay increases at all. We were barely able to hold onto medical plans and all the rest of the stuff. Unfortunately, in the United States your access to medical coverage is through your work, so I felt a responsibility to do that. They've been through a lot of ups and downs, too, but have stuck with it.

Reti: So full-time employees do get health benefits.

Coonerty: Yes, they get health benefits and we've always had vacation plans. We try to run it—it's not been easy at times—medical plan increases have just been onerous. We'll have years where we get a 25 percent increase, 30 percent increase, because we had largely had a young staff, a young and healthy staff. Small business is a tough way to earn a living. [laughs] It's rewarding in a lot of ways.

Reti: No kidding.

Coonerty: But it's still tough. So we've been blessed with having a lot of key people who have given us a lot of stability over the years. We've

had a number of people who have come back to work. They went away for a while. Then they end up coming back and working for us again. It's great.

Casey Coonerty Protti

Reti: Now your daughter, Casey, is managing the store, owns the store—

Coonerty: Well, it's really Ryan and Casey and I own the store together. But because my house is guaranteeing it, I don't want them—if the bookstore was going to go under and we were going to lose something, I wanted it to be my loss. They were starting their lives. They were starting to buy their own houses and stuff and I wanted to keep it separate from that. She grew up in the store. Casey went to Cal, the same place I went. Then she did graduate school. She got a business degree from Northwestern. Kellogg School of Northwestern, which is a prestigious, very good business school.

Reti: Nice.

Coonerty: And she got a public policy degree from Harvard, the JFK School of Government. They had this thing where basically your electives for each program were the core courses for the other school, so her electives for the JFK School of Public Policy was taking business courses, and vice versa. So instead of taking whatever it is, two or three years of business school—I think it's two years of business school and two years of public policy—she combined them into three years. She went one year to Evanston for business school. Then she went one year to Harvard for public policy and then she finished half a year at Evanston and half a year at Harvard. The best part about it is at Evanston she met her future husband, Michel, who is Canadian. And her mom, Candy, my wife was Canadian. So it was a good connection. I was an English major and had to learn business. But she actually learned how to do spreadsheets and how to do all the rest of the stuff. The thought was at some point she had an interest in taking over the

Bookshop. But after she finished business school she and her husband lived in New York City for a while, while he worked at McKinsey and she worked at a nonprofit in New York doing management type of stuff out of business school.

At a certain point, I had gotten approached by a number of people when Mardi Wormhoudt's term was coming up. I'd always supported Mardi when she ran for city council, when she was on the board of supervisors. People wanted me to run against Mardi. I said "No. I feel that Mardi is a great public servant."

So actually at a certain point—from Ryan's suggestion actually—I was interested in public office and I had done it. I sort of knew that Casey was coming in and could take over the Bookshop at some point. So I went to Mardi and visited her, actually in this very office, and said, "You know, people have approached me. I want you to know that I would never do that. I support you. I hope that you're in office for a long, long time. I think you are doing a great job. But if you ever decide not to run for board of supervisors, I'd like you to let me know, because I'm interested in running."

About a year later she made a decision not to run again. She'd had a very difficult reelection against Mark Primack the time before, where it was a razor thin victory. But it was in doubt right up until the last day. She had lost her husband a few years before that. I think she just figured it was time to retire. So suddenly I got a call from Mardi saying, "I've decided I'm not going to re-file." If the incumbent doesn't re-file you have an extra week to file and say you are going to run for office.

Reti: [laughs]

Coonerty: So I was like, okay. I called Ryan. I called Casey and my wife, Lucie, and said, "Let's sit down if we're going to do this." Over twenty-four hours we put together a campaign and started calling people to get endorsements and money, and went and filed papers. Suddenly, I was

caught up in a campaign and another job. So I called Casey and said, "Time to come out and take over the store. The good news is that if I win this I'll be out of your hair. [laughs] You'll be able to do whatever you want with it."

I won in June. That was March that I found out that I could run for it. The primary was in June and if you took over 50 percent you didn't have to run in November. If you got under 50 percent, then the top two vote getters would run off in November. You don't take office until January. I won in June, and I got over 50 percent, and I didn't take office until January. So we had about six months where Casey and I could work together on what we were going to do. I came and sat through budget hearings at the county and started paying attention to the county business but I had six months to turn it over to Casey.

She's been doing a great job. She's smarter than I am. She's much better academically trained. She's lived with it. A lot of it she sees as the legacy of her mom. Her mom worked in the store. She lost her mom when she was in college and it was a hard loss for her, so she sees it as her mom worked there and now she's working there.

The last five years have been some hard times but the great thing is, like over the next couple of days, we're going to have a time where we have four registers in the front of the store. We work it so that I'm on one register, Casey's on another register. We've trained her husband, Michel Protti, who is now a vice president at Yahoo and director of Yahoo Canada, but he comes in and he runs a register. And Ryan runs the register. So we have the whole family at all the registers running. That's really fun. I'll work from ten to noon and then from one to three. So at some point we'll all be on the register. But it'll be fun, because with retail you have a certain attitude—the customer is the person that you

are there to serve. You enjoy it. The thing about a bookstore is it's a little more passive than a hard sell. It's not like an auto salesman.

Reti: [laughs]

Coonerty: Our idea is we lay out a store, we lay out a place that people can feel comfortable and want to spend time at, find books that they are interested in. We make it an interesting, welcoming place. So it's less hard-sell, than it is providing the space. But then at the register, particularly at Christmas time, particularly on the 23rd and 24th, [we focus on] just getting people through the line but doing it in a way that you're still looking the people in the eye and you are relating to them. You are making them understand that you really appreciate their business. It goes back to that story of, these are the people that saved us when we needed it. They got us out of the building when it was dangerous after the earthquake. They carried the books across the street from the tent to the new location. For three years in the tent they're the ones that kept us in business. Through Super Crown and Borders they kept us in business. So we owe these people something and we have to show our appreciation. And you do it by having that interaction at the register in the best way possible. All of us in the family, Ryan and Casey and I, particularly understand that. You've got retail in the blood. That's what you do. Then we try to hire and train to make people feel that way. It's good because we all know how to do it and how to work quickly and process people but do it in a meaningful way. We enjoy it, all of us lined up and pumping out and trying to see if we can keep the line going.

Candy started a thing where, when we have long lines like at Christmas time, she always has a basket with candies in it. We go and actually apologize to people for them having to wait in line and offer them a chocolate kiss or something like that. People are so appreciative of that and it's such a simple act of acknowledging that people are having to stand in line and wait there. And then giving them a little treat and it's just one of the things, that attention to detail. You put yourself in the

other person's boots that helped us survive this long. I think a couple days ago my wife, Lucie, baked some little cookies at home and brought them in, and [with] Claire, Casey's daughter, who is four years old and they were passing them out to people in line. The next generation is already in place. [laughs]

Reti: She's adorable. I remember at the Bookshop Santa Cruz birthday party this year she was really quite something. A very articulate girl.

Coonerty: Yes. And you know, near the register we have the little shrine to Candy. It's very personal for us, in our family. She had a lot to do with the bookstore and supporting it right from the beginning and helping us manage to get into it. It's important to have her memory there. It's part of the whole thing, too.

The Future of Bookstores

Reti: That's a beautiful memorial. So where do you think this is all going, the book business? I know that's a big question, but now your daughter is in the business—

Coonerty: [sighs] You know, my daughter is sort of naturally pessimistic whereas I'm sort [of] stupidly optimistic all the time. But she is not pessimistic in the sense of doom and gloom, but realism. She feels like e-books are going to eat away at business, and e-books are going to keep getting better and better. I mean, it's true that there are continual improvements and the price is coming down. It's a real challenge. My feeling is ink on paper is still a pretty effective, inexpensive way to get information across, particularly when it comes to fiction, mysteries, science fiction. Even though you can get travel guidebooks on e-books, carrying a guide book around, spending fifteen dollars, and you are overseas. Does the plug work? You are going to spend a couple thousand dollars on a trip to Europe. Why not spend twenty dollars on a good guidebook that you are going to be able to plan with and carry around as a back-up if nothing else? And art books and that sort of thing, and of course, children's books—they are not really going to be

replaced by e-readers. They are lavishly illustrated; they are wonderful books. They tend to be less expensive than regular books. It has been said that independent booksellers are relentlessly following baby boomers to the grave. Those people are becoming grandparents and buying children's books for their grandchildren.

My feeling is we're going to find a place where we are going to exist. We have to make sure that in running the business that our expenses are at a certain place. [When] we were at our peak, the rent made a certain amount of sense for the size that we are. We probably need to shrink down. And some of the back room operations where we would store a lot of books, we probably don't need as much room [now]. We're paying rent on that. So we're working with the landlord and saying, "We want to give you back space that you can rent to somebody else." We gave the café some of our space and that way reduced our rent a bit. The landlord, given the recession, knows that extra space on Front Street, which is the back of the store, is going to be hard to rent. At some point, we are probably going to have to shrink a bit just because that's the kind of bookstore you have to be. We have to find our right size, and we have to find and make sure that the expenses are in line. But I think that we can survive as a bookstore.

Now, we have a lease that goes to 2020. Our goal when we had Borders to face was always survive until 2020, because again the lease is guaranteed on me personally. Although, honestly, I don't think Barry Swenson, who is our landlord, would go after us if we went out of business. He would find someone else to rent to. At some point, probably by 2015, we have to decide, are we going to keep it? Are we going to resize it to a different size? Are we going to move in 2020? Are we going to sell the business? We'd have five years left on the lease and you have to give people enough time to earn back what they paid for the business. Probably in the next three years as a family we'll make a decision. I sus-

pect we'll probably hold on to it. You have to go with the marketplace and there're big changes coming.

Unfortunately, the first retailer using the Internet was a book retailer, Amazon. Why books? I don't know. [laughs] It could have been a hardware store or something, but we got it first. There's no doubt that part of the business will go there. Part of the books is going to go to e-books. I think we are the alternative to sitting in front of a screen all day. A lot of us do that at work.

Reti: No kidding.

Coonerty: Maybe holding a book or reading it on the beach is pleasurable. And you actually own something. We started buying and selling used books. If you have an e-book, you really can't do that. But if you have a physical book you can sell it or give it to a charity for fundraising purposes.

Santa Cruz is still a good market. We have a good size. Maybe if nothing else we become a museum piece—this is what bookstores used to be. [laughs] We'll be more of a museum than we are a retail store. But I love the book business. I love the fact that I've been able to make a career out of it. I've been able to put two kids through college and get them educated. It has provided a living for myself, and a number of members of the staff. For some of the staff it has been a career. For a lot of the other staff in retail it's a temporary job. And we've been part of a community that we really enjoy being part of. It's good. Now, what's the store going to look like, or is there going to be a store in 2021? I'm not really sure. I've already rolled with a number of punches. We've invested a lot in the store emotionally. We'll just have to see when that time comes as to what it looks like. It was a different store twenty years ago. We were in a brick building; then we were in a tent; now we're in the space we are in now. It might be a different configuration but I still like bookselling. I like creating that space for books and inviting the community in and saying, "There're books here that you have no

idea—" There's an interest that you may have, like I have an interest in period pieces, like medieval times, and so suddenly somebody will bring up to the register a book on—a sale book that we had, *A Guide to Life in Medieval Times*. It talks about the institutions in medieval times. It's an obscure book. I wouldn't have ever come across it except a customer happened to bring it up to buy. Then I go back and I grab that book. When you are reading a book about England, Medieval England, or whatever, suddenly you've got this book. I'm going to take that trip to England. Or we were in France a couple of years ago and there's a medieval town in place in Southern France that we visited. You find this stuff in books. You come across it.

I think even if I was searching on Amazon, you can't really pick up the book and leaf through it and see if this is what is interesting to me, I'm interested in this. Sometimes books will have great titles, great things and they have the wrong book. You can't get past that experience of actually going in the store and picking them up. We just have to guard against the people who come in the store, pick them up, and then buy them online. We can keep providing a space where people can find the right book and connect with the right book. You know, like I said, ink on paper is still a pretty good way of doing it. One of the big innovations that we're about to do, that Casey is bringing in, is print on demand. We're going to have a machine in the store—

Reti: You are going to have one of those Espresso machines—

Coonerty: Yes. Espresso machines, where there will be a book that's out of print, or on print by demand, or a local author's book. Actually our book, our Sarah Palin, *Wit and Wisdom of Sarah Palin,* that's a blank book. We've done that on an instant press at other stores that had them, where we just print them up and we need an extra fifty copies so we print up fifty copies. We need five copies, we print up five copies. In the early part of the year, we're going to have this machine. Somebody will come in the store and say, "There's this book on Watsonville history that's out of print." We'll have it on a database and we'll be able to

actually create a book. It's like this huge complicated Xerox machine [and] actually you end up with a book that pretty much looks like every other book on your shelf.

Reti: I've seen those machines. I also am a print on demand publisher of small press books, so I'm really interested. And so you are going to have to train staff to run this thing and it's quite a bit of capital to invest in something like that.

Coonerty: Well, that's the interesting thing. Casey and her smarts—there's a company that has a machine that's proven enough, but they want to put it in a few key stores in the country at no cost. And we're fairly high profile because of the work I've done. Then they can point to us as, here's an experience. People can come and see and be trained by us and then decide whether they want it at their own store. So we're going to be getting that, I think, sometime in the early spring.

The other thing that's happened is we got a distress call from Cabrillo College that their bookstore was falling apart. Their manager was leaving. Casey, in the last four months went in there and has been helping run that store, and I think doing an assessment of what they should do. College bookstores are changing. Kids are buying books online, not so much in the college bookstore anymore, so they can't depend on that kind of business as much. In fact, one of their plans was they were going to have this print on demand machine. But textbooks aren't on print on demand. And now, there're professors who talk about only having e-books as textbooks as a way to save money because textbooks are enormously expensive.

Casey's suddenly gone out there and started helping out and getting paid [to help] out Cabrillo Bookstore figure out what their future is.

That's where her training at business school helps out a lot. She knows how to write a business report.

So it's hard to know exactly how the future will come down. But I feel like I have some experience. It's true that because I've been through a lot and saw a lot [of] things happen I tend to [say], "Let's not rock the boat too much." Casey wants to try new things like the print on demand, so she'll do that. A lot of the innovations about Facebook, she's much more capable of doing that. Electronic coupons that we've sent out to customers. It's a good transition to have her running the store. I'm sure she'll end up taking it where it needs to go. If we have a little flexibility from our landlord, I think we'll survive. Who knows? Like I said, if nothing else we'll become a museum piece. [laughs] It's a good business to be in, the book business. It's a good town to be in the book business in. It has seen us through a lot but we've been rewarded a lot, too.

Reti: Well, that seems like a great place to stop, Neal.

Coonerty: This has been a pleasure, doing this.

Reti: Thank you so much. I really enjoyed this. Bookshop Santa Cruz is close to my heart.

The Next Generation: Casey Coonerty Protti and her daughter, Claire, at Bookshop Santa Cruz Birthday Party, 2011. Photo by Irene Reti.

About the Interviewer and Editor

Oral historian, writer, and photographer Irene Reti is the director of the Regional History Project at the University of California, Santa Cruz library, where she has worked since 1989. She holds a B.A. in Environmental Studies and a Master's in History from UC Santa Cruz. She is also a writer and the publisher of HerBooks/Juniper Lake Press.