

Oral History Interview with Shirley Huffman – August 5, 2014

Shirley Huffman (former mayor from 1985-1993)

AA: Today is Tuesday, August 5, 2014. This interview is with Shirley Huffman. It is being conducted by Amber Ames, City Recorder at the home of Shirley Huffman in Hillsboro, Oregon for the Oral History Program of Washington County Museum and the City of Hillsboro. Present at the interview is Beth Dehn of the Washington County Museum.

Shirley, can you please introduce yourself. Please spell your name and give us some general information about yourself as well as your professional background.

SH: I am Shirley Huffman, I am a resident of Avamere Senior Center. I was born in South Dakota. My family came to Oregon in 1934 and went to a small town in Yamhill County, Dayton, Oregon. We lived there until I was married and Tom and I, after finishing law school moved to Hillsboro in 1954 and I have lived here ever since. I am the former Mayor of Hillsboro. I worked at my husband's law office as a paralegal and office manager for all the years that he practiced law in Hillsboro.

AA: Shirley, were you appointed to the Council or elected?

SH: I was appointed to fill out the term of a City Councilor who had to move away. I was appointed to fill out his two-year term and then I decided I better run for a regular term so I did stand for election and I was elected to a regular four-year term.

AA: In your years as an elected official, what accomplishments do you feel were the most important to the City, and can you tell us a little bit about each?

SH: Well, I think Economic Development - we accomplished a great deal during those years - was very important to the community. The extension of the light rail into Hillsboro was very important, and the growth the City experienced because of the development and opportunities within the City.

AA: Can you describe your experiences with early companies such as, NEC America, Epson, Fujitsu and Dynic USA and how important were these companies to the local economy and were they also important in other ways?

SH: They were very important toward the economic development of the community of course but also very important to give residents of Hillsboro and people of Washington County the understanding that this was a busy thriving community and could support the businesses and, all of the businesses were helpful. They were caring about the community which is a particular plus of Japanese people. They

really care about their atmosphere and we appreciated that very much. My husband and I did take a trip to Japan and were able to meet first-hand the companies. We had met important people that had come here to develop the companies, of course, but that was an exciting thing for us and I think a very stabilizing thing for the community as well, to know that we had that kind of a working relationship with all of the companies.

AA: And then, speaking of Japan, in 1987, the City formed a panel to look at possible benefits of forming a sister city relationship. What was that process like? Why Fukuroi?

SH: We chose Fukuroi because they had sent a delegation to see us a year earlier, to visit Hillsboro because one of their companies that was in Fukuroi was coming to Hillsboro or by that time was established in Hillsboro, and so we had met some of the folks and liked them very much and when they went back to Japan they made the gesture to us, "Are you interested in a sister city relationship?" We hadn't even talked about that, but there we did and everyone seemed very receptive of that and very encouraged to do that, so we did start the sister city association with Fukuroi, because of the commonality between the two towns.

AA: And that relationship still exists today?

SH: Yes, as far as I know it still exists.

AA: How did you lead the effort in getting light rail to continue past 185th to downtown Hillsboro? What obstacles did you encounter in supporting the extension?

SH: The obstacle I encountered was that Congress said it was going to stop it at 185th, period, and to me that was ridiculous - to stop out on what was then out in the middle of nowhere. It did take it through Beaverton and stop it at 185th. So I decided - with the support of the Council - that we had to fight that and in order to do that I was required to go to Washington, D.C. with a committee and encourage them and try to convince them that the line absolutely had to come clear through Washington County. Then we had the obstacle that Forest Grove decided they did not want the light rail to come to their town. I did go to Forest Grove and begged and pleaded with them to reconsider and join us in the effort to bring the light rail clear through the county, but Forest Grove was not interested. Until the decision had been made and construction had started on light rail and it was going to stop in Hillsboro, then Forest Grove felt they had made a mistake and so they came to me and said, "Please, Shirley won't you go to Congress?" and I said, "No. I will try, but no, they are not going to approve it. I know, because they were so firm about the decision in the first place." So, I did join the effort with Forest Grove and I did it wholeheartedly, knowing full well though that it wasn't going to be approved, and it

wasn't. It hasn't been, of course and I don't know if Forest Grove... I think is too bad that we didn't... that we weren't able to carry the light rail course through Washington County.

AA: How did the community receive you as Hillsboro's first woman mayor?

SH: (Laugh)... Well, at the very first, when I decided to run for Mayor, I talked to a lot of people because we had never had a woman Mayor and I didn't know how the community would feel about that. So I talked to a lot of people and I got such support, really encouragement from people. And then, there was this group of people who that absolutely laughed at me; one man just absolutely howled, he said "Oh Shirley, who do you think you are?" But I did get encouragement and I felt very strongly that it was time for a woman to be involved. And so I decided to do that, and it went very well. I was very fortunate, people were - when push came to shove - people were so very supportive. I was truly humbled by all the support.

AA: How effective did you feel when working with businesses internationally when you became Mayor?

SH: We worked beautifully with our international companies. We had no terrible disagreements. There were things that we wanted to do that they would not do or didn't want to do, and they had things they wanted to do in Hillsboro that we were not able to permit them to do, but we worked beautifully with them. And it was interesting with a woman Mayor with Japanese companies, because of course at that time women were second class citizens still in Japan and at first they were a little nonplussed because Hillsboro's Mayor was a woman, but then we got well acquainted and we got along just very, very well. They were very good to work with.

AA: You changed City Managers from Eldon Mills to Tim Erwert in your last term as mayor. Was that a difficult transition?

SH: Oh no because... It was not difficult because Tim, because of the person Tim is. And of course he had been at the City for a considerable period of time and he had been taught by the master teacher with Eldon, so it was not a difficult transition for us at all. Now it might have been for Tim, he didn't ever indicate it was difficult but it was a smooth transition and of course Eldon was still in the community and was available for advice and recommendations when needed.

AA: Why did the length of the term of office for Mayor change from two to four years in 1986?

SH: Because the first three months I was Mayor, I realized I don't have the slightest idea of what I'm doing and I realized in two years it's up. I just felt that was ridiculous; I realized that a two year term was not long enough to accomplish the things that a Mayor would want to accomplish. And the things that were happening in Oregon and Washington County then, with companies coming in all over the State of Oregon and in Washington County, and businesses that we had never had before; the types of businesses. I just felt very strongly that the continuity was important, so I...the Council agreed with me and we took a charter amendment to the voters and it was passed. Overwhelmingly, as I recall.

AA: You took the position of the Hillsboro Chamber of Commerce Economic Development Coordinator after your service as Mayor. What was your role in the continued economic success of the City?

SH: Well, I was responsible then for responding to companies and businesses that may be looking at Hillsboro to expand their own business and I had the opportunity to, and with my background, I was able to give them lots of information and recommendations and that sort of thing. So that role worked out I think very well. The Chamber kept me on for a few years so they must have been all right.

AA: Shirley, you came to Hillsboro in 1954. How does 1954 Hillsboro compare to 1985 when you became Mayor? And how does 1985 compare to today?

SH: When Tom and I came to Hillsboro to live, the population was 7,600 I think, I know it was 7,000 something, and by 1955 the population was well over 20,000. I mean by 1985 it was well over 20,000. And by the time I retired as Mayor it was 80,000. So the growth it's been - or was - exciting and troubling too sometimes, a real challenge to meet, but we did it.

AA: And Shirley, you've lived in some different areas of Hillsboro too, you were close to the downtown and then Orenco right?

SH: Well, I lived out on Jackson School Road for most of our years. When we first came to Hillsboro we bought a little house on the corner of Sunrise Lane and Jackson School Road, and we lived there until June 1962 and then we bought another house on Jackson School Road, and there I lived until I left to move out to Orenco Station in 1999.

AA: So do you have any good stories for us?

SH: Well (Laugh). Well, a story that I still get teased a lot about; it is the ferret story and in one way is a terrible story and in another way ah... we had a family that through negligence allowed a little baby of several months old to be smothered by

a ferret, and of course I immediately got “ballistic,” as they say, and I decided that we would try and pass an ordinance that would not allow ferrets in the City of Hillsboro. And looking back I admit that was absolutely a very bad thought, I mean there was no sense to that idea at all, but I was so distressed about the death of that little baby, so I did try. And I remember Gordon Faber, who was a Councilor, said to me, “Shirley, I’ll support you but this is the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard,” and he was right. It was a dramatic reaction, an emotional reaction to a tragedy and I admit that, but that was a real tragedy, the only real tragedy that I experienced during all my years in City government.

AA: Well that concludes our interview, Shirley. We appreciate you taking the time with us today.

SH: Thank you, I appreciate the opportunity.

