

MICHAEL HOUCK

TAPE 1, Side 1

January 18, 1996

M.O'R.: This is Michael O'Rourke from the Washington County Historical Society beginning an oral history with Mike Houck. Today's interview is taking place in his home, and it's January 18th, I guess, 1996.

Let me just start by asking you a little bit about your background, where you were born and who your parents were, and when you were born?

M.H.: Well, I was born in Portland in 1947. My mom, who died about a year and a half ago, Charlotte, met a sailor - I don't know if it was at the Rose Festival or what the story was behind that. They separated probably before I was a year old, so I've met him once in my life. He's back in Tennessee. I haven't seen him - I saw him once about 12, 15 years ago. So that's sort of the end of the family connection, other than the fact that I was born in Portland.

And then my stepfather was in the Navy, and we lived all over. I went to 13 schools in 12 years: Pensacola, Long Beach, San Pedro, San Clemente, Bremerton, Philadelphia, all over the country.

But we did wind up back in Portland off an on during my youth. In fact, some of my early memories of nature, such as they were - I really never was into natural history till graduate school - was on Johnson Creek in Southeast Portland, catching crawdads on Johnson Creek. Then I wound up back here in high school in Estacada, and of course the Clackamas River was quite an influence - subtly,

because again I wasn't really into nature, but the river was always there, and we floated in inner tubes and stuff like that. So it sort of, I think, was in my subconscious, if nothing else.

I graduated in 1965 from Estacada Union High School, got a track scholarship and went back to Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa. Ran track and cross country there for four years and studied zoology. Graduated in '69, moved back to Portland, and I've been in Portland ever since. Went to graduate school at Portland State University. Ran into Dick Forbes, who was my major prof.; turns out he ran track at Iowa State as well and was - majored in zoology at Iowa State, and so we struck up a friendship, both professional and, you know, personal friendship.

I got my start, my first introduction to natural history via a trip down the John Day River, so I'm just trying to mention, I think, rivers have always sort of been there one way or another. In this case it was very explicit, though. Mike Uhtoff, U-h-t-o-f-f is how you spell his name, now owns a book store, nature store in Ashland, Oregon, pestered me for several weeks to do a backpack trip with him with Portland's - then the Portland Zoo did nature trips all over the Northwest. And I told him I had never been out hiking or camping in my life, and I was not a good candidate to help him out, and he was convinced I was. He said, "Well, you'll learn."

He prevailed, and I bought a pair of boots and a sleeping bag, and we did the John Day river from Twingenham to Clarno, near OMSI's Camp Hancock. It was a miserable time weather-wise, but I was so taken with hiking on the river and seeing golden eagles and all the life that occurs along the river that I was - it changed my

life, totally. I just went 180 degrees from where I was headed, and I wound up volunteering out at OMSI's Camp Hancock that spring, and then getting on staff that summer, and then I was hired - this is 1972 - hired by OMSI to direct their student research center.

M.O'R.: Let me - so the backpack trip, was that really - did it sort of awaken an interest in wildlife in your case, then?

M.H.: That was the epiphany of my life, I would say, the single most important event in my life, literally.

M.O'R.: So you don't recall being particularly interested in wildlife and nature before that except for some of these, you know, associations that came just naturally as a part of living in the Northwest?

M.H.: Yeah. No, I had none, at all. I was going to go teach high school biology and coach track and football.

M.O'R.: Well, I guess you were at least thinking about biology ...

M.H.: Yeah.

M.O'R.: ... as a major, and not business, eh?

M.H.: Yeah. No, I had no idea.

I mean, when I selected my major, even, at Iowa State, my advisor came up, and he happened to be a physiology professor, but he was a football player from Missouri, and he asked what I was going to major in. I didn't have a clue. All I knew was I got a track scholarship, and I was going to go run, and I was going to go to school at Iowa State. I just pulled biology out of thin air. In fact, you can't major in biology; I had to select a specific field. I picked zoology.

So that was pretty serendipitous, and I think it was only because I was so busy running and studying that I never had time to change my major. I almost did several times to sociology or literature, English literature, which I enjoyed a lot more. I'm glad I - I mean, personally, in retrospect I'm really glad I stuck with this. That laid the technical framework for what I'm doing now because I feel I have a very good grounding in the sciences. But I've added to it, layered over that, the natural history, sort of the gestalt of what's out there in nature. I think it's a nice combination of having a good science background with those visceral experiences out in the field. And the John Day was it for me. It got me launched in that direction.

M.O'R.: So despite the rain you were able to appreciate ...

M.H.: Rained every day. Rained - and all I had with me was instant soup.

M.O'R.: For a lot of people that would ruin them for backpacking for life.

M.H.: It could have easily done me in, but it was so fantastic that, you know, the natural history experience overwhelmed the negative weather related experiences.

M.O'R.: Well, that's great. Let me just back you up a little bit here and ask you - now, your mother was a housewife for the most part?

M.H.: She was actually a CPA.

M.O'R.: Oh, okay. So she worked ...

M.H.: She worked, yeah.

M.O'R.: ... as well as raising you and taking care of the house.

M.H.: Yeah.

M.O'R.: And your father - or stepfather, rather, in the Navy, did he have any particular specialty there or ...

M.H.: He was a chief - he wound up being a chief hospital corpsman, so he was a medical person.

M.O'R.: And what about you as you were growing up, what were your interests as a kid, would you say? What things did you like to do?

M.H.: Hmm. Well, to be perfectly honest, I spent most of my youth just coping with new living ...

M.O'R.: New situations.

M.H.: ... situations, and again, my mother and father were - my family has never been very close, and they were separated more than they were together, so I spent most of my time moving from place to place and just sort of adapting to my new circumstances.

I would say that after sixth grade, which was another one of those wonderful moments you always remember for the rest of your life, I had a teacher at Hector Campbell Elementary in Southeast Portland, again, in the Johnson Creek watershed - actually, maybe just outside of the Johnson Creek watershed, and he got us into classical music and painting with oils and reading. He read to us a lot. And so I'd say sort of the next three years of my life were kind of into introspective music and painting and a lot of reading and that sort of thing.

I always resisted, actually, athletics. I wasn't interested. In fact, I had very horrible experiences with my father, which I'm sure a lot of kids have had, where he'd take me out and try to get me to play baseball, and he'd throw the baseball and hit me in the

face and make me pick it up and throw it back. And I hated it. I hated athletics.

Finally, though, when I lived in Philadelphia the peer pressure and the community pressure to become involved somehow in athletics was pretty great, and I finally - just because all my friends played football - went out for football. And I went to the first practice, and the coach took me, asked my name, said, "Houck, stand here. You are now a right defensive end."

I said, "Okay. What am I supposed to do?"

And he said, "Don't let anyone get around you."

And I didn't. And I wound up playing varsity football as a freshman, which is a big deal in Pennsylvania, at a school that we had almost 3,000 kids in the school. It was huge. That was when I was in ninth grade.

So the bottom line was I was a gifted athlete. I couldn't explain why; I didn't know why, I just was. And I went full bore into being a jock. I mean, that's what I did. When we moved to Estacada, same thing happened. They said, "Well, what position do you play?"

And I said, "Well, I guess I play right end."

They said, "Okay." And the first practice, no one got around me, and I wound up being - I eventually was an all-state defensive end.

Then the first or second time I ran the mile I qualified for state, so it was obvious that track was going to be an important sport, as well. And that actually - when I - by the time I was a senior I had to make a decision, was I going to take a football

scholarship or a track scholarship, and I think I made a very wise decision based on my size and various things to go for track.

So I wound up running against Jim Ryan for four years back - he was at Kansas, and I was at Iowa State, only I was much slower. I was running 4.06's, and he was running 3.51, so I guess the bottom line is from the time I was a freshman in high school through graduating through college, so for that eight-year period, all I was doing was competing athletically and studying. That was it. That was my life.

It was only after this experience with Mike in graduate school that I took off on this other course.

M.O'R.: It sounded like you had an okay relationship, then, with your stepdad?

M.H.: No, it was horrible.

M.O'R.: Oh, really. Okay.

~~M.H.~~ M.O'R.: No, I can't - I've never even heard from him since '67. No, I'm sorry, '77. I don't even know where he is. I don't even know if he's alive. We did not have a close family. In fact, I think that does relate to what I'm doing right now in the sense that most of my work - my work is my life, and you know, people talk about having a balance between family and work, well, my work is my family. When I think of all the people I work with at Audubon and sort of the larger conservation community in the Portland metropolitan region, those are extended family. This is my adopted family.

M.O'R.: But your mother, then, must have been the dominant influence for you when you were growing up?

M.H.: Yeah, she was a dominant influence, all right!
[laughs]

M.O'R.: A strict disciplinarian or something?

M.H.: No, no. She was a really hard core - I don't know how much of this - some of this is pretty personal, so I'll just - we'll - I'll leave it to you to - we can chat about it later - but she was a very hard core alcoholic, and in fact I lived with probably four different families by the time I was three or four years old, so I was never - I was always being farmed out someplace.

In fact, when I lived on Johnson Creek, I lived with wonderful people. They were hard-core winos. They loved me very much, and they took care of me, and I had a great time there, but it was always a pretty unstable living situation. And that's why I said earlier when you said, "Well, when you were growing up, you know, kind of things did you like," basically it was just coping.

M.O'R.: Right. Trying to survive, eh?

M.H.: Yeah. It was - I was in survival mode up until high school, really. It wasn't until high school - and the interesting thing, of course, which is why I've never been terribly anti-athletics, because for me personally - and I think about this in terms of Blacks in inner city areas and so forth, and disadvantaged youth or whatever, in reality athletics can frequently be the only way out of a situation. In my case, we lived in a housing project in Philadelphia that was god awful - two of my best friends were in jail for murder by the time I moved back to Estacada, that I hung out with every day.

We lived - we had - there were gangs. And it wasn't until I made it in football - it was totally, again, serendipitous; I never

intended to do that - that there was any inkling that you could have any control over your life at all. A very powerful experience.

M.O'R.: Did you - when you were exposed to all the gang activity and, you know, conditions in the projects in Philadelphia, did you get involved in it yourself?

M.H.: No. I tried - I was simply trying to be able to walk from A to B without getting beat up, which is what happened frequently. I had to be rescued one night off a roof by my uncle who was a cop. Turns out he lives in Gresham now, but he was a cop in a suburb of Philadelphia near our community.

We lived in a housing project in the middle of - if you can imagine picking up Columbia Villa in North Portland and putting it in Dunthorpe, that was kind of the situation. You lived in this island of poverty.

And the interesting thing was there were no African-Americans, not one African-American, no people of color that I can recall in that entire housing project, which I find intriguing, and it's why I make the point that those who are concerned about poverty sometimes get so focused in on it always being associated with people of color. I look at outer Southeast Portland, and I see a lot of poverty out there, and there aren't many Black folks out in Southeast Portland. So it's both an ethnic-racial thing and simply the fact that there are a lot of people out there who are poor.

M.O'R.: Right. The class thing, I guess.

M.H.: And it's a matter of concentration of poverty that's so evil. That's why I'm involved with the Coalition for a Livable Future now, and one reason I got very excited about it was the

Coalition is working not only on environmental issues, but land use, transportation, and the socioeconomic equity sorts of questions associated with a growing metropolitan region.

The problem is a lot of our policies wind up creating pockets of poverty, and that's where you find high crime rates. It's where people feel totally disenfranchised and like there's no future for them, there's no hope. I don't care whether you're Black, Asian, American Indian or white, if you live in those conditions, there is going to be - there are going to be very negative consequences for yourself and for society.

M.O'R.: Yeah.

M.H.: I was very fortunate in that my father retired from the Navy and moved to Estacada. If we hadn't moved at that time - although I believe I was on a track out of that because of football. I had my identity then, and I had respect from teachers and my peers, and I was - I think I was headed out of that via football, which when I think back, and it just boggles my mind, really. I mean, literally I moved here, and these kids' father left their mother and, you know, came through Oregon and looked us up - his name was O'Neill, and the two closest friends that I had were in jail, one for murder and the other for armed robbery. This is like six months after I moved.

So it's all speculation, but it's not - I don't think it's much of a leap for me, anyway, remembering back to those times because in eighth grade, ninth grade, we would go to a street corner and wait for the most vulnerable-looking person to stop at a stoplight, and get in their car and basically hijack them, because we knew we could intimidate them, and we'd say, "We want to

go to ..." You know, we didn't take any bus. And that sort of stuff happened all the time.

M.O'R.: So you would actually hijack the car just for a ride?

M.H.: Well, to go wherever we wanted to go.

M.O'R.: Not to snatch a purse or anything like that?

M.H.: No, no. It was - yeah.

M.O'R.: It sounds like definitely a rough situation.

M.H.: Yeah. It's a bit of an aside from where we were, but you asked. I mean, it's ...

M.O'R.: No, that's - I think it's a valuable thing to talk about. It will shed some light probably later on on some of these other activities you're involved in. I think, you know, all of these things are connected one way or another, anyway.

M.H.: Right. Oh, yeah. I agree.

M.O'R.: What - it sounds like the two people you described living with over on Johnson Creek, that that was a good time for you?

M.H.: Well, yeah, it was. As I said, they were pretty hardcore winos. She wound up dying of cirrhosis of the liver when I was living in Philadelphia, and during that same period he got shot at the Kendall - what was the Kendall Tavern, now it's the hamburger joint on Southeast 82nd near the drive-in - 82nd Drive-in on 82nd street, but north of the drive-in by about probably a mile and a half or two miles. He made some move on a friend's woman, and the guy pulled a gun out and shot him. So this was like a year after I lived with them. So -.

M.O'R.: And that was back in a time period when these sorts of things didn't happen quite so often in Portland, too - or at least we didn't hear about them, anyway.

M.O'R.: Right. But as I said, I felt very much cared for. Just because they were hard-core winos didn't detract from my sense of basically well-being in that situation.

And the interesting thing is I've gone back recently to where we lived, and it has not changed one iota. The streets are still unpaved. There are still potholes. Southeast 75th Place on Johnson Creek.

That's the area where I think of poverty. I look at the homes out there and think about potential for displacement of low-income folks, that looks like a pretty prime area for me that we need to be concerned about what are they going to do. Because when I look at that neighborhood, I don't see a lot of wealth out there.

M.O'R.: What were their names?

M.H.: Auntie Pat and Uncle Whitey, and seriously that's - her name was Gertrude, and his name was Bill, and he was known as Whitey, I suppose because he - he looked - he was the spitting image of Wild - Buffalo Bill Cody, actually. And he had white hair, just pure white hair.

M.O'R.: And what were your parents' names?

M.H.: Well, my mom's name is Charlotte.

M.O'R.: Oh, that's right. You said that already.

M.H.: And my father's name, my biological father's name was Charles, Charles Eugene Houck. And my stepfather's name was David Shalot.

M.O'R.: Okay. Well, that's quite a story about your childhood and growing up.

M.H.: That's why I've thought about writing. I really do have an urge to put it down in writing because it was - that was the tip of the iceberg, sort of. Have you ever read *This Boy's Life*?

M.O'R.: No.

M.H.: By Tobias Wolfe?

M.O'R.: No.

M.H.: Well, if you ever see the book, read it. That's a pretty good rendition.

M.O'R.: A pretty good description of your situation?

M.H.: Yeah.

M.O'R.: So I take it your stepfather, then, never made a particularly great living in the Navy?

M.H.: No. I remember hitchhiking with him in Bremerton to borrow 20 bucks because they were out of money. But, you know, through my high school years and so forth, with both of them working, we were comfortable. I mean, I don't recall ever - we certainly never went hungry. I remember my mom did make some home-made clothes because there wasn't money to go buy clothes. I remember that, but I don't - I certainly never felt economically deprived.

M.O'R.: Well, so you took the backpack trip?

M.H.: Yes.

M.O'R.: It changed you life?

M.H.: Yep.

M.O'R.: Now, you said you went back to the John Day - that summer, was it? - to participate in OMSI's program there?

M.H.: Yeah, well, Mike was very - Mike's a very persuasive individual and can get people to do things that he wants them to do. He's pretty good at that, and I hope I picked up some of that from him. I think I picked up some of his techniques. And he convinced me to go volunteer at Camp Hancock - now it's called the Hancock Field Station; then it was just Camp Hancock - which is near Clarno, near Antelope, that area of North Central Oregon.

So I volunteered there all spring. I was in - I had enough credits to graduate with my master's from Portland State, and I was getting kind of - I was a teaching assistant there, and they kept dumping undesirable projects on me because I wasn't doing a thesis. It was a master's of science in teaching because I wanted to teach high school, and I decided that I didn't want to write a thesis because I didn't see what I would get out of that, and I felt I would benefit more by taking more class work and getting a broader education.

So I finally got tired of getting dumped on and said, "I'm out of here," and left and went for three months to Camp Hancock, and then they - every summer they've got summer sessions. Those are the intense ones, and I would end up being on staff then. And the kids - well, some of the kids I know talked to the Director, Rusty Whitney, whose wife actually directs Gail - that's when I met Gail, too. Gail Whitney directs the Saturday Academy program at the Oregon Graduate Institute. I don't know if you're familiar with that?

M.O'R.: No.

M.H.: But they also have the student watershed research project that does a lot of monitoring of the Tualatin - and elsewhere, actually, in the region.

At any rate, the kids talked to Rusty and said that I was pretty cool and that he ought to consider hiring me as the new Director of the Research Center at OMSI, which was set up for high school students, primarily - some grade school, mainly high school students, to have a place to conduct their own independent research projects.

That was the most significant and most important five years of my life. The trip was the epiphany; the five years at OMSI gave me an amazing opportunity to explore about natural history and work with kids and get involved in the community. So that was kind of my - that was my second graduate school experience - practicum.

M.O'R.: During those five years, what kind of things stand out as memorable projects or people you worked with?

M.H.: Well, the most significant thing was I got funding from National Science Foundation to fund a field ecology and archeology and paleontology programs in Eastern Oregon at Camp Hancock, based at Camp Hancock. That was the archeology and the paleontology program, and then at what we called Utopia, which was an old SCS camp between Prineville and Madras.

And so I worked with high school aged kids from throughout the country who had to apply to our program. We selected them, and there were some amazing kids in that group, and you were with them for eight weeks. So two months intensive field ecology, field paleontology or archeological program. That was far and away the

most amazing experience I've ever had as far as informal educational experience.

At the museum itself during the academic year, I think just being associated with kids that were really excited about science, and trying to provide them with the tools to pursue their interest. Probably the most classic example being Steve Manchester, who as a sophomore in high school published a paleontological article in a journal, scientific journal in Europe. He had decided obviously when he was in sixth or seventh grade he was going to be a paleobotanist, which meant looking at old plants from the Camp Hancock area, from the John Day fossil beds - or Clarno, actually, the Clarno fossil beds.

So my task was to make sure Steve got tools that he needed to do his work, and probably the most - I guess if I had to think of one experience that stood out it was I borrowed Mike Uhtoff's bus. Mike comes in and out of the story from grad school on till present. And he had an old bus called "Old Blue." It was a blue Air Force bus that he'd bought for field trips. And I loaded the bus up with about 20 high school kids and a couple college students and went to Berkeley - or we called it Berserkley - for almost two weeks over Christmas vacation and hung out in the Bay area just running around, exploring science museums and whatever.

Steve Manchester, the same kid, the paleo-botanist - now he's a junior in high school, I think - went over on his own to U.C. Berkeley, ran down the person in charge of their herbarium collections, got his key, persuaded this guy to give him his key to the herbarium, and I didn't see Steve for two weeks. Not a minute. He was in the herbarium taking photographs, and what he was doing was

comparing modern tropical plants to the fossil specimens he was getting from Clarno because they were comparable. That level of intensity.

M.O'R.: That's pretty amazing.

M.H.: Then I left OMSI and went to work at Oregon Episcopal School for two years teaching biology, and I actually did - I did teach biology, which I had set out to do some time before, and I coached track and cross country, which was a great experience. In fact, one of my former students was just in town. He's out doing natural history stuff in Arizona and Mexico and ...

M.O'R.: Just as an aside, how did Steve wind up with such a focus at such an early age? I mean, not just a general focus, but a rather specific one.

M.H.: No. That's about as specific as you get. Beats me. He just had a passion for it, and that's one of the wonderful things about OMSI in those days. Today, I don't know. I actually was kind of PO'ed when OMSI moved from the hill across the river to a larger, more expensive - and now they're paying the price for it - facility, and the attitude of the director really upset me. Basically her philosophy was, "We need to be bigger to be better." And OMSI was damn good in the olden days - in the good old days, as far as I'm concerned.

M.O'R.: Well, I wondered about that myself, to tell you the truth.

M.H.: Yeah. Well, I called her up at one point and said I'd like to come in and chat because I really cared about the place, and she just blew me off - which she did a lot of people. And I

think she brought a lot of that on that museum, and I'm very upset about it. I have never stepped foot in the new OMSI.

M.O'R.: Nor have I, actually.

M.H.: I refuse to.

At any rate, OMSI provided this incredible opportunity for kids to go out and experience nature and get turned on to archeology or paleontology or field ecology, and Steve just took to it. And I can't - you know, I don't know why, but he did, and he was very directed.

M.O'R.: So it wasn't that his father was a botanist or anything like that?

M.H.: No, I don't think there was - there was certainly support at home, I presume, but I don't know. To my knowledge, there wasn't anything at home that directed him to that.

M.O'R.: Did you ever reflect when you were ...

M.H.: He's now, by the way, a paleo-botanist at the University of Indiana and doing major stuff around the world.

M.O'R.: So he stuck with it?

M.H.: Yeah. Yeah.

M.O'R.: Did you ever reflect when you were working with these kids at OMSI about the differences ...

[end of side one]

MICHAEL HOUCK

TAPE 1, Side 2

January 18, 1996

M.O'R.: ... reflect on, you know, these kids and their background and interests compared to your own situation of coping when you were at OMSI?

M.H.: Well, some of the kids, of course, came from totally sound, functional families, and other kids came from - one of the reasons they were at OMSI, I think, to some extent, at any rate, was they felt out of place either at school because they were weird because they were a paleo-botanist, you know, in the eighth grade - I don't know if Steve ever felt that way, but some of the kids, either through their home or at school, felt like they needed someplace to go away. So I guess in that sense I related to some of the kids in that regard.

M.O'R.: Roughly what period of time was this that you were at OMSI?

M.H.: '72 to '77.

M.O'R.: Okay. And then your trip down the John Day must have been a year or so earlier?

M.H.: Yeah. That was '70, '71.

M.O'R.: I'm wondering, especially given your history since and the - you know, sort of really active role you've taken in sort of helping - you know, helping us make public policy vis-a-vis wild spaces and just generally kind of your activist activities over the years, was that expressed at this point, or was it just an interest in the natural world?

M.H.: No, I actually had very little - if you want to call it activism - at all, other than a little bit in college.

That's actually an important question, though, because it's a question of feeling of powerlessness or whether you have power over your life and over your circumstances. And there actually were - I was as goody-two-shoes as they come in high school, but a coach got fired inappropriately, in our opinion, and I wound up being part of a sit-down strike in Estacada, which you can imagine, Estacada in 1963 or -4, that was pretty far out. That was pretty radical.

And I got called in to the office by the principal, who was my football coach, and I had to look him in the eye and tell him no, we were not going to go back to class, which was one of the most significant decisions of my life, because this guy was God. He was my head football coach, after all, and the principal. I just - and I had to look him in the eye and say, "No. You have made a mistake here. We do not agree with it. We're not going to class," and continued the sit-down strike and refused to go back to class.

And then in college, then I got of course - what radicalized me in terms of feeling that I had to do something about what was going on in the community, the larger community, the national community in this case, was Chicago. The Democratic convention in Chicago did it for me.

And I was - I mean, I really was - I guess I'd portray myself at that point as pro-war, you know. My dad was in the Navy, my uncle was in the Marines, my biological father was in the Navy, I'd lived on bases a lot of my life, and we were by god right. And I looked at what was going on in Chicago and thought about Vietnam -

and of course for me that was becoming a very real issue, being a very eligible male, and I got involved in writing letters - or articles for an underground newspaper on campus, and I wrote a letter to the editor protesting the dismissal of Tommy Smith and Lee Jones - remember, from - Lee Evans - from the - the two Black guys who raised their fists at the Olympics?

M.O'R.: Oh, yeah.

M.H.: And I would get phone calls from my coach threatening to take my scholarship away from me if I didn't stop doing that. And that - then that became a test of wills, and I said, "No way. I'm going to continue. You go ahead and take my ..." You know, I was a top point-getter for the team, so I knew he wasn't going to do that. I knew what was important - where his priorities were.

And so getting into that struggle, I realized that I could make - I could effect change, or at least I believed that, and then I guess the first activist thing I did in Portland was this guy across the hall, Al Miller, who I share this four-plex with, came to Portland State and talked to Dick Forbes, my major prof, and said, "We are interested in knowing whether any students here would like to get involved in protecting Oaks Bottom."

Oaks Bottom now - Oaks Bottom Wildlife Refuge is in Southeast Portland. I don't know if you've been there or not, but the City of Portland, Frank Ivancie in particular, wanted to fill it. This is 1970, so this is 25 years ago. And I started writing letters about how important Oaks Bottom was. I hadn't even been to Oaks Bottom yet, but I knew it was based on what I'd ...

M.O'R.: What you'd heard, yeah.

M.H.: ... talked to other folks. But eventually, of course, I've been there hundreds, if not a thousand times, and I was right. And it's now a - it was proclaimed as Portland's first official wildlife refuge. That was like about a 20-year process, getting that to happen.

And so then I could see, well, if you're willing to put the time and energy in, and you're willing to persevere, be - you know, be persistent and be credible - in other words, not just opposing something for the sake of opposing it, but understand the issue and bring my science background, along with what I was - what was becoming my emerging, I guess, public persona in activism in the community, you can have an impact. That was very exciting, and that's sort of where I've been ever since, in one form or another. That was 1970.

M.O'R.: Just a footnote: Did your Estacada action result in helping the fellow hold onto his job?

M.H.: No. Well, he stayed in teaching, but he left shortly thereafter. They accused him of being a communist, and I think - you know, I think he did drink. I really don't - we never found out.

Well, that's not true. What happened was - my understanding of the story was the chairman of the school board, who was the town physician, who shall remain unnamed [was there when] he showed up at one of his games - he coached JV football - one of his games drunk. Dennis O'Halloran is the guy's name. He's a good Irishman. I used to spend every Friday night over at his house just talking, till 1:00 in the morning about life. The guy was incredible. He was a great teacher.

Anyway, he kicked this guy off the field, the chairman of the school board, and subsequently he was fired. That's the story I understand.

M.O'R.: And he was drunk at the time when he did this?

M.H.: Yeah. Well, and I remember waking up from a concussion on the field, and this guy was breathing on me ...

M.O'R.: And you could smell alcohol?

M.H.: Oh, yeah. Absolutely. So I don't know all the ins and outs, but no, he didn't get his - he maintained his teaching job, and then he eventually left and went into construction. I don't know where he is. I saw him at Fred Meyer, Stadium, 10 years ago, and it was a sad - from my perspective a very sad situation - you know, this great teacher, and there he is building bridges or whatever.

M.O'R.: Now, you described your father and stepfather's Navy backgrounds and this was a factor in your being pro-war during the Vietnam era ...

M.H.: Early.

M.O'R.: Or at least you had the background, pro war background.

M.H.: Early on.

M.O'R.: Was there any actual political life in your family when you were growing up?

M.H.: No.

M.O'R.: No one felt too strongly about politics one way or another?

M.H.: No. Zip.

M.O'R.: What was it about Chicago, if you did have sort of vague pro-war leanings, what was it about Chicago that ...

M.H.: I'm not sure pro-war would be as accurate as, you know, "my country right or wrong" sort of, you know, patriotic stance. "Pro-war" is like - what am I trying to say? - abortion rights activists are not pro-abortion. They're pro-choice.

M.O'R.: Right. Pro-choice, exactly.

M.H.: I think it's that distinction. It's like we weren't running around wanting to get into a war someplace, but it was like support your country, sort of. The patriotic stuff.

M.O'R.: Sure.

M.H.: Well, Chicago, what did it for me in Chicago is it just exposed the country - exposed me to what the country really is in terms of the power structure and that there wasn't a terribly democratic air to that convention. I was just shocked, you know. My bubble was burst, basically.

M.O'R.: Did you get involved in the anti-Vietnam effort at all, then, after that?

M.H.: Well, on campus, yeah. Ames was pretty mild, you know. A march here, a march there, an article. We started our underground newspaper called *Brief Candle* and, you know, those sorts of things. I was busy running and studying. I didn't have a whole lot of time for that.

M.O'R.: Uh-huh.

M.H.: I mean, literally. We worked out - every day for four years worked out at 6:00 in the morning and 3:00 in the afternoon, and every weekend. And a zoology curriculum, which is damn tough. It's a pre-med, pre-vet curriculum. You don't have a lot of time

for extracurricular activities. I think I went to one party when I was a freshman.

M.O'R.: One party all year long, eh?

M.H.: For four years. Of course, I got - actually, I got married when I was a sophomore, so I was in married student housing at that point.

M.O'R.: So you had a relationship with someone at Ames, then that ...

M.H.: Estacada.

M.O'R.: In Estacada? Oh. What was her name?

M.H.: We dated when we were freshman. So we were high school sweeties. Sandra Collins. We were married for 12 years.

M.O'R.: And she came to Ames with you, then?

M.H.: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

M.O'R.: What was she studying there?

M.H.: She was an executive secretary for the admissions office.

M.O'R.: Okay. So she wasn't enrolled?

M.H.: No.

M.O'R.: And so you married in '72, you said?

M.H.: '67.

M.O'R.: Oh, '67. That's right. Second year at Ames. What kind of person was she?

M.H.: Well, she was wonderful. Her mother was English. Her father was in the Navy - or I'm sorry - the Army. Subsequently worked, relocated to Estacada and worked at Meier & Frank downtown. I think they still live somewhere in the region, as does she. But we divorced in 1979 - is when I came to live in the four-plex.

M.O'R.: What was her - did you know her parents at all?

M.H.: Yeah, well, we were - when I started running at Estacada, what I'd do is run from school to her house, which is quite a long ways. To me, anyway. It was probably a 10-mile round trip, which at that point in my life - first of all, not many people were running. In fact, no one was ever on the roads. I remember having people throw things like cans and stuff at me and swerve to try to hit me when I was running, out training. I ran in the Oregon Indoor Invitational and had to do a lot of roadwork in the fall and that winter, and in fact that's how I got my track scholarship was that race. It was one very important race. You know, they have it at the Coliseum every year in January.

And so I'd run to her house, probably to impress her, I suppose. So I wound up getting in shape trying to impress Sandra. I don't think I ever admitted that to her.

M.O'R.: And when you married, was it a big wedding?

M.H.: No. No. Sandra, me, her friend, Janice, my brother, my mom and dad and her father and brother, down in Visalia, California, 118 degrees every day, in August.

M.O'R.: How did it happen to take place in Visalia?

M.H.: Well, my dad was stationed down there. He'd re-enlisted, because he had a tough time making it on the outside. He was candling eggs at Fred Meyer out in Clackamas and wasn't happy, and just wanted back in. So he went back in the military, in the Navy. And I think that Sandra didn't have much of a family here. Her mother was in England at the time, back in England. They were separated for a while. Got back together eventually.

And so we decided it was probably just as - I mean, we didn't have much family here, and my parents were in Visalia, so we went down there. So it was very small.

M.O'R.: Well, you were talking about your early political involvements or your emerging political identity. Right about the period of time that you were getting involved in OMSI and right around the time of your, you know, epiphany on the backpacking trip, I guess - I'm trying to remember the dates of Tom McCall's tenure, because that was also a period when Oregon sort of was in the forefront of the nation in terms of its environmental reputation. Maybe it still is, but that certainly was a period that - I mean, people back in New York who never lived here remember Tom McCall.

M.H.: Sure.

M.O'R.: Well, did you have any sense of McCall and his role at that time, or were you kind of watching what was going on?

M.H.: You know, I was still new to it, I'm sorry to say, because I would have enjoyed - I mean, of course I remember the proclamations of every other day - or odd-evens for gas lines, and turning out lights at Christmas and things like that, just by virtue of having lived in Oregon.

The only indirect experience I had with McCall was again Mike Uhtoff, this guy that keeps coming in and out of my life. I remember he took a bunch of kids down to Salem with pop-tops and cans during the bottle bill - during the time they were trying to pass the bottle bill, and he was very actively involved in that, but I was not. I wasn't involved in anything at that point, other than,

you know, the Oaks Bottom issue. My sights were very focused at the local level.

M.O'R.: In terms of the Oaks Bottom issue, then, you said it was a long struggle to finally get it done, but apparently Ivancie's plans were frustrated at that time?

M.H.: Yeah. He wanted a motocross course down there and a bunch of other things that were absurd, and so Portland Audubon joined with the local neighborhood association, Sellwood-Moreland Improvement League, SMILE, and other groups and fought off Ivancie's plans, and actually Al was the ringleader of that. Al Miller, the guy next door. I was kind of a foot soldier. I was fodder in that particular one, at that point in time.

And then actually it was only later when I created this urban naturalist position at Portland Audubon Society that I jumped on Oaks Bottom in a big way and spent a lot of time and energy, and Portland Audubon took a major lead role. And really what that involved was working with sympathetic employees, staff people within the Parks Bureau to change their mission, in a sense, to embrace the notion that going - and this is actually revisiting John Charles Olmsted's park master plan for Portland parks in which he advocated a comprehensive park system which would include natural areas.

Well, at the time that we got involved Portland parks were much more focused on soccer fields, active recreation facilities, and had lost their way, in my opinion, and had forgotten their heritage. Even though most of the lands they owned vis-a-vis Forest Park and areas like that were natural, their programmatic approach was soccer fields, baseball fields. Oaks Bottom was nice

and flat; why can't we convert it to something we really need in this city, which is 40 soccer fields or whatever. And our argument was, you need soccer fields, you need baseball fields, you need a comprehensive park system, we agree. And you also need -.

I hadn't even heard of Olmsted at this point. That came a few years later, and that's why I was so blown away when I read his master plan that included scenic reservations and natural areas. You also need nature in the city, and that's what - that was about 1982 when I really cranked up on the urban stuff and created the urban naturalist position, and that's when we really went to work full-court press on the Parks Bureau.

Fortunately over time we got a new superintendent of parks, and a commissioner who was Mike Lindberg, who was inclined to share that philosophy. And that's when we got it adopted officially as a wildlife refuge, through the work of a lot of people. It wasn't me. It was a lot of Auduboners, people like Ralph Rogers, who's an ecologist for EPA, and the neighborhood association, and lots of people.

And that was - actually that was a very important experience for me because I learned the value of grassroots organizing, and you do not accomplish anything alone. There are very few lone rangers out there and silver bullets that make something happen. It's a cooperative group effort. Usually somebody winds up - and in my case it happened to me - getting thrust to the forefront as the leader, which I resisted even in - like in that high school experience, I was the one dragged into the principal's office. I couldn't figure out why. Why do they want to talk to me? I'm just here. For some reason they - you know.

And actually, that was the very first inkling that I might have leadership qualities. I didn't know what they were, and I didn't even know what that was, but I was perplexed. Why am I being singled out here? And the same thing happened at Iowa State with the track team. Why am I the one being called on the carpet by the coach? Well, I was the top point-getter, and maybe I have a personality that is such that I appear to be a leader even when I don't perceive myself to be that, at all.

And it was through those early experiences, including Oaks Bottom, where I looked around and went, "Huh. For some reason people think that I'm a leader." I don't get it, because I don't. I really don't. In fact, I prefer not to. Even today I get nervous as hell when I testify before a city council or have to go on TV or do an interview or whatever. I get incredibly nervous, and I don't like it. I mean, I feel very uncomfortable. But I think I've mastered those emotions enough to try to channel them and do ...

M.O'R.: And take advantage of this trait that others had had to find in you.

M.H.: Yeah, right. For better or worse.

M.O'R.: Now, you said that you worked at OMSI for five years and then moved on to a teaching position at Oregon Episcopal School?

M.H.: Mm-hmm.

M.O'R.: How did that come about?

M.H.: Well, that was pretty funny, actually, because I was really burned out. One reason I left OMSI was I was a crispy

critter. I just had gone seven days a week nonstop for four years, and I was just toast.

I actually went to PGE and interviewed for a meter reader position, which is what my preference was: low stress, on my own. I went in for the job interview, and I said, "I only want to be here for maybe a year, two at the most, but probably a year. And I realize this is an odd request, but I'd really appreciate it if you would just hire me understanding that I just need a break."

And PGE actually was a big supporter of OMSI, and Sandra worked for Helman Ludeman, and you know, sort of the mucky mucks, and I thought, well, maybe they'd be willing to let me do that, just as a service to me and the community. But Sandra was totally freaked out because - then this was one of the stresses in our relationship - she grew up in a financially unstable situation herself, and she was concerned about whether I had a job or not. And in reality we were pretty - you know, we had - we were doing all right.

At any rate, so there was that tension there, and so there was a lot of pressure for me to interview for a job at OES. And I went into the interview planning not to be hired. I mean, I was a jerk. I made all these demands on the headmaster. I said, "I won't do this, and I won't do this," and da da da da da. And I set down all these demands that I figured, "There's no way they're going to hire me."

So I'll be damned if two days later they called and said, "Well, we'd like you to come and work here." And I hadn't heard from PGE yet. So there was a lot of pressure for me to sign a contract and make a commitment so I would have some income coming

in. So I did, I signed a contract with OES. Three days later, PGE called and said, "Well, your request was rather unusual, but we think we'd like to go with you. I mean, we'll do it. We'll do that for you."

M.O'R.: That's kind of amazing in itself.

M.H.: Yeah. I was blown away. Well, unfortunately I had already signed this contract with OES, and I felt obligated having signed a contract to honor it, so I stayed. I'm glad I did, but that was the last thing I needed at that point in my life because I was so burned out - well, you can imagine teaching is not a low-stress situation.

M.O'R.: No. Right. Exactly.

M.H.: So I only lasted two years. That was as much as I could take, even though it was really wonderful. I mean, from a teaching perspective, an ideal situation. I had 13 kids per class, you know. I'd do things like take some of them and say, "I'm leaving for a week and going to the desert with Mike Uhtoff on a trip, and get a substitute to take care of my classes."

Plus the coaching experience there was incredible. I had four guys and four girls, and we would win meets. And people would say, "Who are these guys?" Because they were so dedicated, they would do anything I said, and train hard. Chris Cutler, this kid who's now in natural history, won the state mile, won the state cross country. Rhett Fulweider, who's now in Vancouver, I think, we went to a meet at Catlin, and I said, "Well, try the javelin." He picked up the javelin and broke the school record the first time he threw it. You know, stuff like that. I mean, it was a lot of fun.

So I had a great time there, but it was still very high energy, very high stress, and I left after two years just because I needed a break, and that's when I went to work with Al cutting insulation for wood stoves for a while. Went on unemployment for a while, first time in my life. I have to admit I enjoyed it. It was for, you know, like maybe three weeks, or two months at the most. And then I started doing programs at Audubon through the Talented and Gifted Student Program, TAG, Portland Public Schools, called "Urban Wildlife; Woods in Your Own Back Yard."

That was the other epiphany I had that I think relates to sort of where I'm at now is one of the OMSI trips. I was driving a school bus full of junior high kids - I don't know if I mentioned this in the last interview we did - but it was about The Dalles, and I was starting to gnash my teeth and resent the fact that I was coming back into the city, the horrible city, having come from the wonderful country, the desert, the high desert. And then I - and I always - when I tell this story I explain that anybody who's driving a busful of junior high kids is going to do a lot of soul-searching. "What am I doing with my life?" And I got in this conversation with myself. I said, "Now, wait a minute, Mike. Think about it for a second. You love going to the movies. You love going out to eat. You love the theater. You love music. We didn't have micro-breweries then, but if we did, you would have loved micro-breweries. You love Forest Park. You love Oaks Bottom. You've put a lot of energy into Oaks Bottom. Why do you hate the city, really? Is that city really that bad?"

And I went, "No, that's bullshit, this dichotomy between, you know, nature out there in the country and the city is artificial,

schizophrenic and I think sick, and I think really detrimental to the environmental movement and detrimental to how we view our society. And from that moment on - and that, coupled with another friend who - I'm not sure where he works now. He worked at the Corps of Engineers at the time - handed me an orange publication, which I found recently, about the Forest Service during studies on urban wildlife - of all people, Jack Ward Thomas, who is the guru on spotted owls and ancient forests, right?

M.O'R.: Right.

M.H.: They were doing work on urban wildlife in the late 60's. And I went, "Holy shit," you know, "we need to be doing more. We need to focus more attention on the city, wildlife in the city, nature close to people." Eighty percent of the people live in cities, and this was '82. And that was it. Full bore, full speed ahead, urban wildlife, and that's what I've done ever since, in one sense or another.

[end of tape]