

CATHY CLAIRE

TAPE 1, Side 1

July 31, 1996

M.O'R.: This is Michael O'Rourke for the Washington County Historical Society interviewing Cathy Claire on July 31st, 1996. Today's interview is taking place at the Oregon Historical Society library.

I thought I'd just start by asking a little bit about your background. You came out here from New York; is that where you were born?

C.C.: I was born in New York, in Ossining, New York, which is the home of Sing Sing Prison, or was at one time, on the Hudson River, in 1949, and moved to Croton-on-Hudson, the next town up, when I was 10. Moved here via Salt Lake City, Utah, where I served as a VISTA volunteer in what was then known as free schools, and that would be 1969. Ended up getting tired of the bureaucracy involved with the federal government. Spent a month backpacking in Hawaii and ended up in Portland, Oregon, it being a better choice than Los Angeles or San Francisco.

M.O'R.: Where did you backpack in Hawaii?

C.C.: Oahu and Kauai. Whether you can do that anymore, I doubt it.

M.O'R.: I did one trip into the Haliakala Crater in Maui myself, a three-day back pack trip that was kind of interesting.

Anyway, let me bring you back to New York here just for a minute. What was your family like? Maybe start with your father; what did he do for a living?

C.C.: My father initially started out as a truck driver after the War, worked his way to manager of an oil company. Quit that. He and my mother purchased a liquor store, and they operated a

liquor store in Croton-on-Hudson for about seven years, when they lost their lease. When you lose a lease and you do not have a location for a store, you lose everything because you can't sell your business because you don't have a place to sell.

So they took the next five years off, and then my father now works and has since then worked at Indian Point Nuclear Power Complex, where Con Ed decided when they hired him he was too old to hire directly, so they have made it a part of their contract with every security agency that they have to hire my father, and he is the comptroller. He is the person that justifies the money that goes from Con Ed to the various contracts for security.

M.O'R.: What kind of person would you say he was? How would you describe him?

C.C.: He was an Irishman. I grew up sailing. Weather has always been an essential part of my life. I think we were in our first sailboat when we were four and five, my brother and I. And my father, during the Depression when he was a teenager, he and his brother built a raft and to earn money would ferry people across the Hudson River for 25 cents.

So I would say that he is a bright but quiet individual, who is extremely shy.

M.O'R.: Okay. And what about the other half, your mother?

C.C.: The other half, my mother. My mother is half Dutch. Let me back up: My father's father was a steamship captain, or steamship engineer on the Hudson, and his family came to an area called Sparta in Ossining, in the mid-1800's, coming from England and Ireland.

My mother is Dutch. Her last name was Hanken, and it's my understanding that her family on her father's side owned one of the largest shipbuilding industries in Europe, which was - I believe it was in Rotterdam, which was destroyed during World War II.

My mother always worked. She was involved in the banks, which was an acceptable profession for women at that point, and has always been employed outside the home.

M.O'R.: Including the period when she helped your father run the liquor store, then?

C.C.: No, then they ran it together. But that's being employed outside the home.

M.O'R.: Right. Sure. And how would you describe her?

C.C.: One of seven children, the youngest of seven. Very close knit, very close family ties, and not an activist in any sense, just involved with her family and that was it.

M.O'R.: You say not an activist in any sense. Was there activism on your father's part?

C.C.: Well, no, but I think simply by the fact that he was a man, he was more verbal on any issue that might interest him, where my mother would be less verbal, which would be typical for that period.

M.O'R.: Your mother and your father, what were their politics?

C.C.: Oh, straight-laced Republicans.

M.O'R.: Straight-laced Republicans. Okay.

C.C.: Absolutely. All the way down the line.

M.O'R.: And do they consider themselves political people? I mean, do they take an interest in politics?

C.C.: No.

M.O'R.: They just vote Republican.

C.C.: All politicians are crooks, that sort of thing, but they're Republicans.

M.O'R.: And you have brothers and sisters?

C.C.: I have one brother. He owns a chain of restaurants and lives in Los Angeles and travels to Hawaii and other places in the states where his restaurants are located.

The town that I grew up in, Croton-on-Hudson, was the site of the first communist party in the United States, and the politics in this town were extreme. I grew up in the 60's, when everyone - you know, it was the hippie era. Yet I grew up with cross burnings in New York and beatings of people because they happened to be Jewish and severe divisions between the non-Catholics and the Catholics. So it was a very interesting area, still is.

M.O'R.: Was your family Catholic?

C.C.: No. No, but many relatives were.

M.O'R.: What was your childhood like in New York? What kinds of experiences did you have?

C.C.: I spent my days sailing and my evenings working summer stock theater for a Shakespeare festival.

M.O'R.: And what did you do for the theater?

C.C.: Everything from build sets to act to - at least at that time there were two Shakespeare festivals: One was the Shakespeare in the park, and then Greenwich, of course - so I guess there were three. One, Shakespeare in the park in New York, one in Connecticut, and then ours. And even though ours was a smaller operation, it was listed in the area newspapers of New York City as a festival to go to.

M.O'R.: And how old were you when you were doing this?

C.C.: I think I probably started when I was 14 and ended when I was 17.

M.O'R.: So the high school years, it sounds like?

C.C.: Mm-hmm.

M.O'R.: What was school like for you, maybe starting with your grade school experience?

C.C.: [laughs] Good grief. Shared the same kindergarten teacher that my mother had. Went to Washington Grade School till I was 10. We moved to Croton-on-Hudson from Ossinging, and the teachers - up until I was 10, they wanted to put me in summer school every year because I was not learning as quickly as they thought I should. When we got to Croton-on-Hudson, the teachers there did not want to advance me. They were on a split school day because the schools were so crowded. You had a choice of going from 6:00 to noon or from noon to 6:00, and my parents begged off and said, "No, we do not want her left behind. She's capable of learning." My reading skills were not there, and so they made a deal with the school system, and I went both shifts in fifth grade, and I was put into a library and given a box and said, okay, learn how to read. And at the end of the year I was up to snuff with everyone else.

M.O'R.: You mean they just literally put you in the library and left you on your own?

C.C.: In the library they had - back then they had a special way of teaching kids to read, and you had books - or not books, but boxes, and each box was divided into categories, and you did your first lesson, then you did your second lesson, then you did your third lesson, and you did it quietly in the library by yourself.

M.O'R.: With no supervision from teachers?

C.C.: Well, I suppose there was some, but I don't recall a lot of it. There were other classes, of course, that were necessary that was pretty standard. When I was growing up the teachers would say, "Well, she does extraordinarily well when she has specific projects, but she lacks the attention span to ever be successful." One teacher told my parents that I would never graduate from college because I just wasn't capable of doing it.

So it was an odd growing up, I suppose.

M.O'R.: It sounds like it.

C.C.: Especially when my best friend from high school ended up getting into MIT, and she had never applied. Got a full scholarship.

M.O'R.: You mean it was just offered to her?

C.C.: Just offered to her. I asked questions of the administration, things that you were never supposed to ask. Asking the principal if the teachers were as divided on issues as the student body was, and the principal going, "Absolutely not; they stand together," instead of being honest and saying, "Well, sure, they have their differences."

M.O'R.: What kind of divisions are you talking about, now?

C.C.: Oh, the same sort of political, racial or ethical questions when, you know, you happen to be Jewish and somebody puts a bomb under your parents' car because they're Jewish. When someone threatens your mother and your siblings because you happen to be Jewish. Those sort of tensions tend to linger.

M.O'R.: And where were you in this political muddle?

C.C.: I think I had a lot of relatives that tended to be Republican, and I guess this town had a lot of people who had been damaged during the McCarthy period.

The town was unusual in that we had a lot of playwrights, a lot of people from New York City: actors, actresses, artists, a lot of theater people, a lot of scientists. Folks who had been destroyed during the McCarthy period, and that was a holdover into the 60's. So I found myself having a lot of relatives, most of my relatives being uneducated, Catholic, which was a major division line, and probably 99 percent of my friends being extremely educated and of other religions.

M.O'R.: So you found yourself sort of looking into two different worlds, then?

C.C.: Oh, yeah. One foot on either side of the line. A good education.

M.O'R.: Yeah. It sounds like it would be. And how did you feel about the unrest, the kinds of things that were happening to Jewish families and ...

C.C.: Well, I think in the 60's everybody was experiencing some unrest, and you always supported the people that were your friends in any way that you could. These were the days when the school on a regular basis instead of - you would give your lunch money on Wednesdays that would go to free schools in Arkansas, or you would bring books from home because there were book drives to go to schools that had less. So you know, lots of differences.

M.O'R.: So were you involved at all in some of the typical 60's movements such as civil rights or anti-Vietnam or ...

C.C.: I was not a leader in any of those. I was involved somewhat in collecting of things for the civil rights movements, but other than that, no. I guess I really wasn't touched by the Vietnam War. I didn't know anybody personally that was involved with it, and so for that reason it was something in the newspaper and all, but ...

M.O'R.: You mentioned earlier that a lot of your relatives are Catholic, but that your own family wasn't. Were they religious at all?

C.C.: I attended Sunday School at a First Baptist Church. You know, and you do the typical Christian religious things, but at the same time Wednesdays were Catechism days, so I would go to - I was raised First Baptist, but I would go to the Methodists for their Catechism, attend temple every now and then with somebody. It was sort of a rounded thing.

M.O'R.: You mentioned also the holdover of issues from the McCarthy era in that particular community. Did you have any personal acquaintance with people that were damaged by that?

C.C.: Oh, I had friends who - I wish I could remember their names, but I can't - who having guinea pigs for dinner was typical because their parents, both doctors who had been heavily involved with research, had been reduced to lab assistants, and the labs that they worked in had guinea pigs, and to make ends meet, to pay the bills, guinea pigs became the mainstay of their diet when they were growing up. So there were always rumors about other people in the community that this had affected.

M.O'R.: Did you have any grasp of what exactly had happened to these people in terms of the political issues around McCarthy?

C.C.: I think that the grasp is more one of hate. You know, when a kid walks onto a beach and somebody yells, "Here comes the commie Jew bastard," and other people leave. You know, I think the severity and the - it's left me with an extreme hate of people who hate. Does that make sense? A dislike of prejudice of any kind. A dislike of folks who don't at least try to understand.

M.O'R.: So you identified with those that were being persecuted at that time, or is that too strong?

C.C.: No. Sure.

M.O'R.: Yet on the other side you had your staunch Republican family and relatives. Were they aware of your feelings, and did you have debates within your own family, then?

C.C.: Oh, sure. Sure. I mean, that would be given. But ask me to remember anything specific, and I can't.

M.O'R.: Can you remember anyone specifically in your family that was particularly engaged in this with you?

C.C.: Oh, we'd always argue with my father, but the arguments didn't tend to be very long. I mean, let's face it, when you're a



teenager and your hormones are running wild, you tend to be, I think, overly dramatic half of the time, anyway, so when a parent's trying to deal with a teenager, and the teenager is trying to rediscover the Constitution, or reaffirm the Constitution, it can get a little silly, and so I wouldn't - I guess I would give credit to my father for perhaps having his points of view, and I would doubt some of mine at that time. I would reassess them at this point - or if not reassess the views, reassess the presentation of the views.

M.O'R.: Did you have friends, then, that were avowedly communist?

C.C.: I might have had. Well, yeah. I'll take that back. Yes. Because when I first came out here in the 70's, I was very surprised to be going to Portland State to see some movie, because at that point they were giving movies for free or for cheap and cheap was in my category, there were several fellows out in front handing out Communist Party information, one of whom I knew and had gone to high school with.

M.O'R.: Oh, really? Do you remember his name?

C.C.: Arthur Purlow.

M.O'R.: Did the idea of communism or socialism have any appeal to you at that point?

C.C.: Oh, I think I'm a socialist right now.

M.O'R.: And it started then?

C.C.: Yeah. I think medical care and education should be free, and there are some basic rights that all people deserve.

M.O'R.: How did you get involved in drama so heavily in high school?

C.C.: Well, when your entire community helps support a Shakespearean festival and is famous for doing so, and your entire community is only 5,000 people with only 400 in your high school,

you get involved. And I was good at it, and so you tend to get involved with things you're good at and continue on.

M.O'R.: Do you remember some of your roles from back then?

C.C.: A 90-year-old woman in one senior play. I remember in high school our one play was *The Wall*, and I was going to have the female lead. Then I threw it. I deliberately gave a bad audition, and it was sort of understood that I would have had it to begin with, because again my best friend who went to MIT, she was Jewish, and this was significant because she had lost family in the ghettos in Europe and in the concentration camps. So this was a serious play for her, and she got the role.

M.O'R.: And you knew that would happen if you threw it?

C.C.: Oh, yeah. It was prearranged.

M.O'R.: You talked a little bit about your grade school experience and catching up. What were your favorite subjects in school?

C.C.: Science.

M.O'R.: That's unusual.

C.C.: It is.

M.O'R.: A little bit.

C.C.: Science and math, my absolute favorites.

M.O'R.: And your least favorites?

C.C.: I don't think I had a least favorite.

M.O'R.: So generally you liked school?

C.C.: Yeah.

M.O'R.: Did you interact much with your brother when you were growing up?

C.C.: He was four years younger than I am, so I left high school when he was just entering high school, and I think then - and I never returned for a long period of time, so I think at that point we drifted, and we haven't been very close. He now is mar-

ried and has a daughter who was born at six months and who was seriously ill, and now at a year-and-a-half they discovered she was deaf. So he's beginning to develop closer family ties than he had before that. But no, we don't have a real close relationship.

M.O'R.: And did you at all as children?

C.C.: Oh, I suppose we did when we were small.

M.O'R.: So then you went on to college in Salt Lake?

C.C.: No. I went to a small two-year women's college called Casanovia, which is in the finger lake region outside of Syracuse in upstate New York. Went there for two years. Wanted to get a degree in art. My family said, "No, we're paying for it; you're going to get a degree in something else." So I got a degree in early childhood education, a two-year degree.

Went to apply for jobs, and one of them was Vista. I was accepted in Vista, moved to Denver, Colorado. Went through training with the migrant families, planning on being shipped out to do work with migrants. Was shipped to Salt Lake City, where we opened a free school. Left there - it must have been December or January of 1970, and ended up here in Portland February 15th of 1970.

M.O'R.: What was the Vista experience like in Salt Lake?

C.C.: I think that the district that was out of Greeley, Colorado was extremely corrupt. They did foolish things, so we arrived in Salt Lake City and they said, "Oh, by the way, we don't have any money for you." So here you have - maybe there were 20 of us, I can't recall, with no place to live and no money, and so they took us to an abandoned building and left us for a night. And Salt Lake City, I think we got there sometime in September, had very hot days and very, very cold nights.

So they had a lot of so-called tricks designed into their programs. I think that I was immature, I was young, that there wasn't enough supervision, that there was a lot more socializing.

I mean, it's no different than your first couple of years in college; unless you have some supervision or direction you tend to experience your first chance at freedom, and at least for me I didn't have a lot of really tight goals, and not a lot of structure.

One of the things that I was very good at was procuring supplies for school, and so I was capable of going into places where people said, "Absolutely not, we're not giving anything to another government handout," and after a half hour leaving with new desks or supplies. So that was one of my major roles.

Then I turned into the school secretary. So I managed the schedules, made sure everyone knew when and where they were supposed to be and that sort of stuff. I also led art classes for kids. We gave an art show and taught them that they could create; they didn't have to have what other kids had, and they didn't have to create other people's way, that they could do things of creation their own way.

M.O'R.: With respect to being able to get the equipment out of people, how did you do that exactly?

C.C.: Well, you know a lot of people were - one fellow in particular ...

M.O'R.: Actually, yeah, can you give an example?

C.C.: Yeah. The guy with all of the desks. Walked in there, and there was another fellow with me, and said, "We're Vista volunteers. We're trying to get together some equipment for a free school."

And he said, you know, "I'll be damned if I'm going to give." You know, "I'm already paying for welfare, and these people are soaking me for this and that."

I said, "Wait a minute. That's not what this is. This is a school. This is to teach these people so we can get them off of the welfare. This is a way to change them."

And he started looking at it from a different angle. So it's just a matter of presenting the right angle to the right person in the right way. We gave him a different point of view, and he was willing to give us the desks.

M.O'R.: This was a businessman in Salt Lake somewhere?

C.C.: This was a businessman somewhere in Salt Lake. We tried getting art supplies. Well, they were expensive. So instead our canvas turned into wallpaper, and we found that we could get all the wallpaper we wanted from one store, so the kids would paint with wallpaper as their canvas, the back side, and house paint. Works just as well as anything else.

M.O'R.: So you had to be inventive and resourceful, it sounds like, too?

C.C.: Oh, sure.

M.O'R.: Did this come out of, do you think, your background in high school of helping stage these productions? Where do you think you got these skills?

C.C.: I haven't a clue. Perhaps it's ingrown. Who knows.

M.O'R.: You said that you thought the organization was corrupt, the Vista organization?

C.C.: Oh, they did lots of things. One fellow was put with a family that had living quarters that was overrun with rats, and he was actually bitten by a rat. And when he went to get some help from the - this is when we were in training - from the people who were training us ...

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

CATHY CLAIRE

TAPE 1, Side 2

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C.C.: So during training you were sent for one weekend to spend time with the migrant families. The migrant family I spent time with was great. There were eight children and two adults in a 16-foot trailer. There were bunk beds built everywhere so you had a bathroom and the kitchen area, and then everything else in the 16-foot trailer was bunk beds.

I watched the first landing of a human on the moon, the first step that somebody made on the moon, from one of the absolute poorest family situations in America, with a migrant family that had nothing out in the corner of a farm in a 16-foot [trailer], you know, that was housing 10 people, with one kid having to run outside and hold the antenna so the reception would be good on a black-and-white portable television.

M.O'R.: A small one.

C.C.: A very small one. My weekend was rather successful. They were wonderfully kind people.

One fellow, however, was sent to a family where the house was overrun with rats, and when he was bitten by a rat, the administration of the school that we were attending basically ignored it, and he ended up hospitalized with a severe infection.

M.O'R.: This was one of your fellow volunteers, then?

C.C.: One of my fellow volunteers.

I was in a situation where it was the Fourth of July and I was standing on a wall, talking to several people, and a fellow came up and he was black, and I must have been 18 and I'd had a couple of beers - in New York 18 was the legal drinking age; I doubt it was that in Colorado, though. A fellow came up, and he was one of the

instructors, and he was quite tall, and he thought that he would be fooling around, and he grabbed me below the knees on my legs to throw me over his shoulder. Well, he had had some alcohol, and he missed, and I landed head first on the concrete and was knocked out.

The administration - he freaked out. He was a Vietnam veteran - he freaked out and went through a plate glass window, similar to the windows here. We're talking about at a college student building, so you had plate glass windows that were the entire wall of a building.

M.O'R.: This is the fellow that tackled you?

C.C.: That dropped me, that inadvertently dropped me. So he ran through a plate glass window. When I finally came to, one instructor escorted me up to the administration floor and tried to rape me on the way, but someone came down the hall and he was interrupted. I had a severe concussion, and I was going in and out of consciousness.

They locked me in a room, a dark room, so I wouldn't be disturbed. A female instructor came in, and I tried to explain to her what was happening, and she goes, "Oh, no, dear. He was just making sure you weren't hemorrhaging." Well, you know you don't hemorrhage from below the waist when you've had a head injury.

Someone else broke into that room and took my hand and sat with me. And there was a battle that went on amongst the students that had seen what happened and some of the administration, demanding that I be taken to a hospital, where was I. And meanwhile I was just in a back room, and I must have stayed in that back room for probably an hour. They finally did take me to a hospital. I had a severe concussion. They took me back to the dorm, and someone had to stay with me at all times for the first 24 hours.

The fellow that ran through the plate glass window was not cut at all. Your basic miracle: He wasn't injured.

The next morning, the administration when classes started said that this was a lover's quarrel. I didn't even know the fellow's name other than that he was an instructor. We had been there a week. You don't really - I don't know about you, but I don't have lovers, you know, when I've only known them a week.

So it's a corrupt administration that can't say, "Hey, well, this was an accident," that never asked any questions.

Later on, after I had left Vista and I went back to visit some of the volunteers about six months after I had left, that particular group was being investigated for numerous problems, and they had asked me to write down what had happened and be part of the records, and I did that.

M.O'R.: With respect to the Vista experience, too, it sounds like you had some remarkable encounters with the migrant families themselves, and I'm wondering how that affected you and whether that was any kind of a new world for you to see this kind of poverty?

C.C.: It was a new world, but I think I went into it - when I went to college, when I got this degree in early childhood education, one of the things that they made you do was take a class where you could start observing things without prejudices. They would want you to have a totally neutral recording of what you saw - probably similar to what you do. You have to take down the information without passing judgment. So when I went into Vista, I had had some training in taking down information without passing judgment, and so I managed to learn a lot.

Some of the things that surprised me were the families that would take silver needles and stick them through the skin at babies' collarbones because it was supposed to ward off evil. The



one family where the father refused to let his daughter, who had just had a baby, take birth control pills because as he would tell the social workers that kept trying to push him to let her take the pill, was that a miracle may happen once, but a miracle probably won't happen twice. In other words, he wasn't going to supply his daughter with the pill and allow her to go out and become promiscuous. She had one mistake, and if she did not have the pill she wouldn't be able to make the same mistake twice.

I found the people that I knew that had grown up on the streets, both the instructors - at that point I was 18 or 19 - only one percent of all Vista volunteers that were accepted for service were under 19, and of those, most of them went back to the communities they came from because they were so young. So it was extremely unusual for them to take me and not send me back to the community I had come from.

So I ran into lots of 19-year-olds, the same age I was, but from very different cultures, who were being sent back to their own ghettos or their own communities to help bring their own neighborhoods up.

M.O'R.: So were these largely Hispanic?

C.C.: Largely Hispanic, yes. There were a few blacks from Omaha and Kansas City. The rest I think were Hispanic.

M.O'R.: And they tended to be farm workers for the most part?

C.C.: No. Some of them were city-bred as well. But the Hispanic culture back then - you know, it was the Brown Power, and you were Chicanos. You weren't Hispanic back then. The new thing was being called Chicano.

[interruption]

M.O'R.: The other dimension, of course, that immediately comes to mind when you mention Salt Lake City would be the Mormon culture. Did you ...

C.C.: You had things like if there was a Catholic Church dance, the police would be there, but if there was a Mormon Church dance the police were nowhere in sight. So yeah, I mean, they're second-rate citizens, and it was obvious there.

M.O'R.: Non-Mormons?

C.C.: Yeah.

M.O'R.: And I imagine the migrant population was third rate?

C.C.: Oh, sure. I remember meeting a prostitute who was the daughter of a Mormon bishop, which I guess - I don't know a lot about the Mormons, but the Mormon - each person takes a turn at being a bishop in their particular district, so being a bishop of the church is not that big a deal, but that's where I learned about Jack Mormons, and it was very interesting.

M.O'R.: And then from the Vista experience you came to Portland; is that right?

C.C.: Yes, from Vista I went to Hawaii for a month and then came back here. I was traveling with a fellow that I knew, had met from Vista whose parents were here.

M.O'R.: I see.

C.C.: This is where he grew up.

M.O'R.: And that's what brought you to this area?

C.C.: And that's basically what brought me here.

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]