SUSAN HENDERSON INTERVIEW  6/22/99

Madeleine Winter (MW):  I’m here with Susan Henderson. It’s June 21, 1999 and Susan could you just say a word or two so I can see if the tape is working?

Susan Henderson (SH):  Ok. My name is Susan W. Henderson. I was born in Calais, Maine, March 12, 1945 which I’m proud to say was in the administration of Franklin Roosevelt (laughter).

MW:  Okay let me just make sure. So, Calais, Maine, huh?

SH:  Yup. Born in Maine and grew up out of state which is why I don’t talk like I’m from around here. Came back to go to graduate school at the University of Maine and that’s where I came out. I got back from school Christmas vacation, it was January of 1974 and I found out a whole fracas had come out about the Wilde-Stein Club--

MW:  Oh yeah.

SH:  --which I had known existed. I got (someone coughs) back to school. The fundamentalist preachers were having a field day.

MW:  And so you went to Orono for graduate school?

SH:  Yeah.

MW:  Okay.

SH:  Yeah. So as a civil libertarian I thought, “this was dreadful the way they were treating the gay people.” So at the Houlton Symposium I thought I’d make an afghan, since I knit and crochet and we would raffle it. So I went to a meeting to make the
proposal and by the end of the meeting I realized, these are my people, and I feel just the way they do so I came out and joined up.

MW: That’s great. So you were involved with, you were there after the first symposium or during that time?

SH: I was there for Symposium I, I wasn’t one of the originators, I came a little late in the planning.

MW: But you were on the planning committee?

SH: Yes. We did raffle the afghan and made some money for us.

MW: That’s great. So, then after graduate school is that when you moved to Portland?

SH: Yes, I got a job down here at Social Security and I’ve been there ever since.

MW: And how did you hook up with Maine Gay Task Force people?

SH: Well, we had met the group, other groups in the state while we were working on the Symposium and after it was over we decided to form a coalition just to pursue rights for gay people. Generally it would be a clearinghouse. Lend our hands to whatever cause seemed appropriate. And we started a newsletter so that we could stay in communications. The biggest problem we faced was distance, because we’re all over the state. We used to drive for hours to get to meetings. Some of the women
hitchhiked which I thought was very dangerous but luckily none of them ever came to any harm.

MW: That’s good to hear.

SH: We thought nothing of driving for hours, then.

MW: Right. So that was a direct outgrowth of Symposium?

SH: Yeah, yes it was. ‘Cause we found there were groups in Brunswick and Portland, and I think some other places. There was a group in Bangor, besides the university group. So we started working together.

MW: So what was your role during that period of time?

SH: I, I think I was group secretary for one semester. Karen Bye was the treasurer. She was one of the people that founded it back then. She’s probably the instrumental person. We had a room in the student union where all the clubs had their office space. And the regulars kind of hung out together and I wrote part of my doctor’s dissertation in the Wilde-Stein office.

MW: That’s great. So then, let me make sure I get this right that ah, the Gay Tas—the Maine Gay Task Force came out of Symposium I?

SH: Yes.

MW: And you were still in graduate school at that time so part of Wilde-Stein?

SH: Right.

MW: And also helping to form the Task Force?
SH: Right, right. All of us who were interested would go to the meeting. And we got involved in newsletters. A couple of times they brought the text up to the university because we had access to a ditto machine. It seems like ancient history now, everything's desktop publishing.

MW: Right.

SH: But we used to cut the stencils on an electric typewriter, proof read them with that blue fluid that you used to do corrections with (laughs) I remember. We'd run off the newsletters on the ditto machine and mail them out. I did a lot of work on the publishing. A lot of us wrote columns.

MW: I know you wrote one.

SH: Mine was called the Penobscot County Curmudgeon until I moved to Bangor and—moved to Portland, sorry, and then it became the Cumberland County Curmudgeon (chuckles).

MW: Yeah. I read a few and I really enjoyed them.

SH: (laughs) They were fun writing them. I'm not sure what, how good some of the history in it was but I wrote two history columns too. Straight, gays and history. A few people probably wished were straight (laughs). It was good fun. We were all students, we lived on nothing.

MW: I understand the newsletter kind of came out of this house for a while?

SH: Yes, it did ah. A couple of fellows we knew and had once lived with. Stan was in a relationship with one at the time, bought the house. Peter Prizer and I rented the downstairs flat from him and then in late 1980 I bought the house. And we moved
upstairs. Soon after Peter got his own place. But, for about four years there we were publishing the newsletter downstairs. After a while it became Mainely Gay.

MW: Right.

SH: Because it was really more stuff than just for the Task Force newsletter.

MW: So the Task Force kept going but the newsletter became like it's own entity?

SH: Yes, we'd print all the Task Force stuff because that was our main purpose, but we had other things, we got news clips from all over. There was a man out in San Francisco for a while who sent us bales of clippings from the papers out there. And some of the stuff we were able to use. But, eventually we, our Unemployment ran out and we had to get jobs and let -- at the time the newsletter really depended on someone being unemployed.

MW: Right. Yeah it was a lot more work than it is today.

SH: Yeah, yeah all that hand cutting. Now you can type it right into a PC. But yeah, quite a bit of hand labor. We'd hand collate it with a big rack that we set all the pages in and all walk down the rack and pull one of each page and staple it together. So it was quite a group effort.

MW: I also understand that there were a lot of political activities and actions that you all were involved with?

SH: Yeah, it was the seventies, of course, and we made common cause for feminists and people calling. But anyone who basically was being discriminated against and needed some help. We worked for a while with an ex-prisoners group. And, we were on a couple of pickets. During the years I was at Wilde-Stein there were a couple of
very offensive TV shows portrayed gay people as criminals and psychopaths, so we’d all go out.

MW: That was the Welby --

SH: And so we’d all go out in our coats and boots and picket the TV station (laughs) Yeah, it was the Marcus Welby show was one of them. I wasn’t at the Stowe House picket, that was most of the people in the Brunswick group. The Stowe House Restaurant -- I think it’s now closed down. But they fired all their women waitstaff and hired men. So we went down and picketed. We, I shouldn’t say we, I wasn’t involved in that, Stan, Stan and Peter both were. Peter and Stan also worked on trying to get a gay rights law -- way back in the seventies. We’ve been at this a long time.

MW: I know, I know.

SH: When they repealed it last year it really hurt.

MW: Yup, it did.

SH: But, there will always be another day.

MW: There will and it’s coming already so (laughter).

SH: Yeah, good, good. So they worked on that. They were -- in fact they were, they were on a local talk show on TV once. So they, they did a lot of work. I was kind of behind the scene.

MW: What were you were doing behind the scenes?
SH: Mostly working on the newsletter. I was employed full time so I had a sure source of rent money coming in so we were, we were assured of a means of subsistence.

MW: Yes, so you were all basically kind of living like a collective?

SH: Well sort of. Kind of a collective extended family, I guess depending on how you feel because we were certainly at the end sisters and brothers.

MW: Yes.

SH: We kind of pooled our resources and be up and down the stairs in each others flats all the time. It was a good experience. I don’t know if I have the energy to do it now but. Yeah. In spite of all the pressures of and sometimes feeling like you were really taking risks, it was a good, it was a good thing. A good experience.

MW: Well, you know, if it wasn’t for people taking risks we wouldn’t be as far as they are now.

SH: That’s true. Someone’s got to do it.

MW: Yeah, and so what happened, the Task Force lasted six or eight years, something like that?

SH: I guess, I’m really not sure when, when it folded but again, it was a matter of people getting jobs, moving away. Some groups closed down and I, I guess as we went on to a new phase -- whatever we needed to do at the time. So I think I closed out, the newsletter finally it -- never officially ended it but I think around eighty-two or eighty-three or so I went through the correspondence and sent back equal checks and told them we’d closed down. We had a whole bunch of checks for subscriptions. So I sent those all back. This is [introduces cat]. So it just kind of, kind of died out in the winter
as it were. But I, I've really kind of, just kind of burned out. I sort of dropped out in the early eighties so I really don't know what's been going on since. The Symposia are still going on.

MW: Yeah, I just went to the 25th one.

SH: Oh.

MW: It was really _____

SH: Where did they have it this year?

MW: Presque Isle _____

SH: Oh, I remember Northern Lambda Nord was just starting. They're still going strong.

MW: Yeah, they're the ones who did it this year.

SH: It's great, it's great.

MW: Yeah, Dick Harrison is amazing.

SH: And they were always bicultural French and Anglo.

MW: Still are.

SH: Which is great.

MW: Yeah I'm really finding a lot of connections ... I interviewed Sturgis Haskins.
SH: Oh yes, he was one of the old Wilde-Steiners. Yeah.

MW: He was helpful in getting ... people ...

SH: Yes, he has to smell everything, this is my year old coon cat yeah. And I, you said you got Diane Elze.

MW: Yes.

SH: Karen Bye, I think is on the West Coast.

MW: Right.

SH: Send each other Christmas cards every year or so. And a couple of the men who were involved moved out to, moved out to the West Coast. Last I heard, John Frank is in San Francisco -- I haven't heard from him in a long time. He was one of the activists, Steve Bull who was one of the Wilde-Steinners is out, out in the L.A. area. He came back to visit his folks last summer so. Peter Prizer and Stan and a couple of the others and I got together. It was good to see him again.

MW: That must have been fun.

SH: I remember, Steve was in the History Department too, formed the chapter of history fraternity -- I forget what it was called. Before we had the meeting I saw half of the Wilde-Stein Club there (laughter). All right, we're taking over (laughter).

MW: That's great. I also came across a flyer for the New England Academic Union that you went down and spoke in Boston.

SH: Oh there was a, there was a gay academic union for, for a while. I gave a talk on Frederick DeVrees (?) that won the, who, oh was certainly one of our's.
MW: Yes.

SH: That was great fun -- I could use some of my history background on that. And we went to a conference in New York once, which I think was PAU. And we were shocked by the way the New Yorkers fought with one another. Oh, dreadful faction wars over ... shocked our little innocents from the farm [in a Maine accent] in Maine (laughs). We, we had our differences among us but we never fought like that.

MW: Yeah, can you talk a little bit about that?

SH: We had the university and also the Brunswick group were really new left.

MW: That would be Gay Woman's Group in Brunswick?

SH: The woman's group and there was a mixed group of both sexes. I don't remember what they, what their name was. Stan would know but -- of course most of the women were feminists before, including myself. All of us were really new left. And the Bangor group were -- I hate to use the expression -- stereotypical gay men. I hesitate to say queens but that's what they would have called themselves. So we ah, weren't quite sure how to deal with this -- kind of retrograde in our lives. And they probably thought we were definitely stuck up. But we managed to cooperate. And there was, was a male couple in the Bangor group who were into the leather look and, which was the first time some of us had seen it. They, they, they were great people. We found that we were all good cooks and could put on a terrific community supper. So we, we learned, we learned to respect them for -- they were great organizers. So, so an -- overcame some of our political righteousness (chuckles).

MW: But you did a lot of events that were really fundraisers?
SH: Yes and I’m trying to -- I don’t _____ -- we would have to get suppers now and then just to get together and have dances too. That was the only place that we’d give people of the same sex to dance together without getting harassed. There was a Unitarian church in Brunswick -- was very good about letting us use their space. Also the Unitarian church in Portland. We’d drive a couple of hours to get to a dance. I remember once, when I was doing research in Ottawa at the Canadian Archives. I drove from Ottawa to wherever on I-95, it was halfway between Bangor and Brunswick and I said there’s a dance tonight and -- what the heck (laughs) I’ll drive down to Brunswick to see my friends. I was dead tired, I would never do a thing like that now, it’s crazy. But I arrived in one piece. We were used to long distances then. In fact, I think we may have been the cause of a squabble in the Bangor Unitarian Church. There was a husband and wife couple were the ministers -- very progressive people -- and they were more conservative, in fact, if you can speak of Unitarians as ever being conservative (laughs) if you’re into that ‘cause I don’t think they liked us and the divorcees and the poor students who couldn’t pay into the parish. In fact I think one of the pastors was caught having an affair and there was a dreadful row at a parish meeting. (chuckles) So this was only the surface. The issue of -- Unitarians were just as faction-ridden as any other church I’ve had any experience with. But they, they were very good about letting us use the property. Like, we had the dances from Symposium I at the Bangor Unitarian parish hall. Which was pretty daring for a church in those days.

MW: Really, yeah. And I know the Symposium III, that was here in Portland, was organized by the Task Force people.

SH: Yeah.

MW: Were you involved with that?

SH: Yes, I don’t remember what I did except that we tried to organize a supper with no cooking equipment. Peter Prizer was working for a, a lobster packing company down on the wharf and he knew people in all the, the wholesale food businesses so we
got cold cuts and cheese, then probably veg for salads and prepared part of a dinner
and -- with two kitchens in this house, probably some down at the university and heard
complaints because it was un-organic food (laughter). But we, we did our best with
what we had. (laughter) We did try to have enough, the right things for a, a vegetarian
meal because many of us were vegetarians. But we did our best.

MW: Were you involved with any of the workshops?

SH: Oh I, I may have been I don’t really remember. The only workshop I remember
doing was I think in 1981 or ’82, right after The Empire Strikes Back came out _______
and I did a science fiction workshop (laughter).

MW: That’s right I do remember about that.

SH: And went in costume. We had a great time.

MW: Yeah, Diane Elze was the female speaker at Symposium this year.

SH: Ohh.

MW: And she quoted your Star Wars thing that you --

SH: Oh yeah.

MW: I can’t remember now, but it was so funny!

SH: Oh, about a gay version of Star Wars. We rescued a poor gay man who was
being tortured (laughs) by one of Anita Bryant’s henchmen. (laughs) It was terribly
melodramatic. We had a great time. And I hope George Lucas never finds out about
this (laughter) at this point. It probably is a … (laughs) But we had a very good time.
MW: I know that at Pride, I don't remember how many, just a few years ago I guess, you all were asked to be grand marshals.

SH: Yes.

MW: That must have felt wonderful.

SH: Quite a treat -- it really was -- so that people remembered us. I think the same year Stan and Peter Prizer and I spoke at I think the Matlovich Society. It's a cultural group. So we, we, reminisced for -- it, it's really so gratifying to hear people want, want to know what we've done and say that we'd helped them and it really felt good like it was all worth it.

MW: Yeah. It's interesting how people become pioneers in some things. I mean sometimes it's just timing or sometimes it's just, you know,

SH: Yeah the, the occasion was there so. I just felt I had to do something. And probably all the rest of us did it the same way.

MW: You all are true pioneers for the Maine gay movement. I mean you look back --

SH: Well it didn't seem so very brave at the time but now looking back on it I thought, gee, we could have, we really put ourselves at risk. And I remember Karen Bye wouldn't, would never sit with her back to an open door or window. You know she, but she's, her name was the one in the paper so she got a lot of hate mail. But we-

MW: Yeah I read some of that.

SH: Yeah, we had a whole folder of it -- we called the humor file (chuckles).

MW: Gosh, I hope that still exists somewhere.
SH: I don't know, I suppose it’s buried there somewhere -- if Wilde, if Wilde-Stein is still in existence, they may still have it. We left the archives there when we came south -- so. People weren’t as afraid of being murdered by extremists. I, I imagine black people certainly were. Terrible violent racism. But we innocents from Maine didn’t think about that sort of thing then. Of course now after Oklahoma City it’s pretty different but I’m aware of being a federal worker. Yeah so, but, somehow it seemed less risky at the time then it did looking back on it.

MW: Yeah, also when you’re young.

SH: You’re more daring. Yes. (chuckles) Death is far away.

MW: Right.

SH: I remember we picketed down in Ogunquit because we felt they were discriminating against gay people.

MW: Was this Valerie’s thing?

SH: Yeah, yeah. They’re happy to have someone to spend money, but if the men wanted to dance together, that was an absolute no-no. They didn’t mind the women dancing together.

MW: Isn’t that weird?

SH: Yeah, yeah very strange ideas people have. At least it seems strange to me. But we were a, offended that they were taking our money and wanting us to pretend that we were, that we weren’t gay. So we went down and picketed and a rather ugly crowd on the other side of the street and the police were protecting us from them, I think (laughs). A couple of eggs were thrown, so we, we really took a chance. I’d be terrified
to do something like that now, but, but we did it. I think we picketed at the Wells Town Hall that morning because they, they gave a gay business a hard time and then someone burned it down.

MW: _______

SH: Yeah, mysterious fires. You, you never know where it comes from -- you have all, you have all the suspicions.

MW: Do you see a big difference nowadays or you still feel like it's fairly risky?

SH: Well there are still a lot of prejudice, but we've got a lot more people on our side now. I mean at least would never, would never mention stuff in the newspaper. The Portland Press Herald I think went for a long time trying not to mention us. They wouldn't take advertisements from us for the, for the Mainely Gay. But now, now they print news, our causes all the time and editorialize on our side. I think they were for the state gay rights bill and against the repeal. So, that's a big change for them as well as a lot of other people. A lot of the mainstream churches will come out for us now. So there are a heck of a lot of Maine people that are much more open about homosexuality now. It used to be a thing you didn't talk about. So that, that's changed. And now there's, there's certainly a risk still. I'm afraid to put a rainbow bumper sticker on my car for fear someone will break the windshield. But my tenant has one on his car and nobody's broken his windshield (laughter). He says middle aged ... (laughter)

MW: Well you have to be at, your comfort level is what's important.

SH: Yeah, yeah. You pick your battles.

MW: Yeah. So are you active at all in anything?
SH: No, not now. Send a contribution to the Gay Men's Chorus. But, I'm not in a political stage right now. Mostly earning a living and keeping up the house and the tenant downstairs and I do a lot of gardening. But who knows, when I retire it may be different. You get radical when you're old too. You have nothing more to lose. (laughter) It's middle age when you're cowardly.

MW: You just see things clearly I think.

SH: Yeah, yeah.

MW: You think about things rather than just acting upon them.

SH: Right, right. You, you gain more experience, it changes your perspective. You've seen people you know die and you know that there are no guarantees. So that changes your outlook.

MW: Yeah. Well, I know that you had an office on Middle Street there?

SH: Yes, way up -- I think it was, I'm trying to remember, the businesses have changed so much that I can't remember.

MW: It used to be Horsefeathers.

SH: Yes, before that it was Boss Weeds.

MW: Yeah that was before my time.

SH: That was back in the -- in the mid seventies. We were upstairs in one of those buildings in that area and there was attorn -- an attorney on the same floor with us, he did a lot of civil liberties work. I don't remember his name now. But it was pretty much bare space. We brought in a couple of tables and chairs. We had the Task Force and
the newsletter office in there. I think for a year or so. That was the summer of seventy-five. I was working there until I got the job at Social Security.

MW: Any good stories about anything that happened there?

SH: Well, not that I remember, it's mostly meetings we had joint meetings with various groups and we were cooperating well. I don't know if we met with the Gay Prisoner's Group there or over in their office space which was around Fore Street, it's the same area. That's before the Old Port district really got built up, it was just starting. So there was still a lot of cheap ren – rental space down there. Fellows who were working on the gay rights bill worked out of that office. I most, again I mostly was working with the newsletter. I think we had a small lending library there too.

MW: Because that newsletter was an amazing thing. I used to hear about it for years. My partner is friends with Tim Bouffard …

SH: Oh, he was one of the old hands too. I think he was in the Brunswick group. Either Brunswick or Portland I don't remember. I know for a while he had a flat down on I think Chestnut Street.

MW: Yup, and it's like it's something I've heard about and when I finally saw it I was so excited. And all the names that I had heard of, seeing them in that newsletter was very exciting.

SH: Most of us wrote for it for a while. It was kind of like the French Revolution – everybody put out a newspaper or a pamphlet (laughter) It ____ in that and run for your life. I think I have almost a complete set.

MW: Oh really?
SH: A couple of the issues are missing but between Stan and me we can get together a complete set if the archives ever wants it.

MW: Absolutely, yes. Because Stan mentioned something about you all getting together and going through stuff.

SH: Yeah we’re going to do that at some point because eventually I’ll have to sell this house. It’s an old house, needs a lot of repairs and you can’t keep it up on a pension. So, a lot of things will be carefully disposed of and, I want my newsletters and things to go to a gay archives. There’s going to be one so people will have it. My family won’t have any use for it. It won’t mean anything to them.

MW: Right.

SH: If someone can have it and use it rather than it’s going to the recycling, collect the data (laughter). We’ll make sure that doesn’t happen.

MW: Right, right. Is there anything else that you can think of that you might want to include that you haven’t told me or we haven’t covered?

SH: I don’t remember very much right now, of course after you leave I’ll think of all sorts of things and I’ll write you a note if I do.

MW: Okay great well thanks very much.

SH: You’re very welcome. Thank you for calling, it’s been a pleasure.