

SUSAN HENDERSON

March 21, 2017 (Portland, ME)

Interviewer: Emma Wynne Hill

[00:00:05.15] Emma: We're recording now. If I could just have you state and spell your name

[00:00:15.03] Susan: My name is Susan Henderson- s-u-s-a-n h-e-n-d-e-r-s-o-n.

[00:00:30.14] E: And I'm Emma Wynne Hill E-m-m-a w-y-n-n-e h-i-l-l-, and we are meeting at Mrs. Henderson's beautiful house in Portland Maine on March 21st, 2017. Alright, so you replied with a bunch of different things that you wanted to talk about, including the Wilde Stein Club and the Maine Gay Task Force and the newsletter and the Gay Symposia. I was wondering if we could start just very quickly with a little background information- where you're from and all that stuff.

[00:01:13.08] S: I was born in Calais Maine and grew up out of state, which is why I don't have a Maine accent and what little I have is acquired. I came back to Maine in 1970 to go to graduate school at U of Maine at Orono. And over the Christmas break I think in 19... must have been, 72' or 73', I'm not clear on the year, I got back... I went down to see my parents for Christmas, got back and found the Wilde Stein Club was going to have a symposium on, you know, being gay and lesbian, and 3 of the local clergymen were creating a ruckus about it and this is a civil liberty issue, I've got to support the Wilde Stein Club... so I do fiber arts, knitting, crocheting, I was going to make them an afghan to auction off the raise money for the symposium, so I went to a meeting of the Wilde Stein Club, saw half the people I knew from the history club there (laugh), by the end of the meeting I realize these are my people, this is where I belong, I'm gay too. So, I joined up. We did make the afghan; I think it was an afghan that year. I usually made quits, where you just stuff pockets of fabric and sew them all together. Several of the fellows usually pitched in to help, so we had a crew doing it. We raised money for symposia several years that way. So, that's how I got started.

[00:03:14.29] E: How many people were involved with Wilde Stein at that point?

[00:03:21.20] S: I'm really not sure, maybe 10 or 20. Other people would have better grasp of the numbers. Things get a little vague (laugh) after a while. It's hard to remember how long it's been since the 70's.

[00:03:43.21] E: So, then... you were in Orono, and where did you go after that?

[00:03:48.24] S: in '74 I moved down to Portland. I was working on my doctorates dissertation by then and I needed a job so I went to work for the social security administration. One of my brothers worked there and recommended it. I ended up working there for 36 years at the Portland social security office. Got my dissertation done, got my degree. The bottom had fallen out of the college teacher market, so there weren't really that many jobs in my field. So, we... there was a gay liberation group at University of Southern Maine for a while. And I got involved in that one along with some of the people who had been in the Brunswick and Portland groups. Gay rights groups popped up all over the state after the publicity

about Wilde Stain club. And they kind of allied as the Maine Gay Task Force, we worked together. As I recall the biggest problem we had was distance. Getting to meetings in a centralized place. Some of the women hitchhiked and I worried about their safety. Thank goodness nothing bad ever happened to anything that I know of. And, the task force started putting out a newsletter and it then grew into Mainely Gay Magazine, still reported meetings and what the various groups were doing. But we got into, we'd reprint news from other publications and several essayists and one very... at least one very talented artist Tim Boufard, who unfortunately was an AIDS victim, died of AIDS. But he drew some very clever covers for the magazine.

[00:06:03.09] E: I was looking at those, I didn't have time to print out a whole one, but I was impressed with how long they were, some of them were like 60 pages long, I thought it was pretty amazing.

[00:06:14.20] S: Yeah, we had people writing from all over the state, and it was great- lots of people had things to say that were worth passing on. And I wrote a column about gay people in History. Frederick the Great, the king of Prussia is one of my fascinations.

[00:06:43.13] E: Yeah you put that on your list, that was very interesting to me.

[00:06:44.22] S: Yeah, the convolutions that historians went through trying to deny the fact that he was gay is pathetic (laugh). They're finally coming... coming out and saying (laugh). You find that in really a lot of history: the prejudices of the day. Which is somethings historians always have to be careful of. You know, don't judge the past by the present. In the 19th century they did that a lot. People saw the world differently at different times.

[00:07:36.15] E: Is that what you wrote your dissertation about?

[00:07:35.04] S: Actually, no my dissertation was on General Montcalm's officer corp. He was the French commander in the French and Indian war, and it turned out that most of them were poor noblemen. They didn't have very much money. Most of them from Southern France, as was he. But when they probably all got together speaking in their southern French accent the Canadians probably couldn't understand what they were saying. Because Canadian French is based on Norma and Bretton.

[00:08:13.08] E: Well it's definitely interesting thinking about how much... I feel like that's what a lot of, kind of rethinking history has been, looking back and saying 'well this is how we've been taught history, but through who's lens was it? And what things did we miss? With someone like Fredrick the Great... It's interesting to even be able to go back and find that information.

[00:08:45.19] S: yeah, especially in Germany, with all, everywhere you see all the war damage, it's amazing how much of the old Prussian archives is still in existence. So now we're looking at it through our lenses and future generations will probably wonder "what were they thinking?"

[00:09:09.21] E: so, how long were you involved in the Mainely Gay newsletter?

[00:09:17.04] s: It was until sometime I'd say until the mid-80's (cat climbs on recorder and interviewer, laughing, shuffling). Most of us were students at the time and eventually we all had to get jobs to support ourselves, those who had work often supported the ones who didn't. And for a while between the time I moved to Portland and then time I got the job at Social Security I was on food stamps so I'd feed everybody when the food stamps came. We kind of shared, and those of us who had money supported us who were working on the movement. Eventually we all got jobs, we got older. I remember

at the end, the mail from Mainly Gay sat around for about a year. It was at my house so I finally went through it and sent back the checks that people sent to be subscribed and told them that I was sorry but the magazine had folded. So at least I sent back their checks and they could balance their checking accounts and not worry about who's hands the check had gotten into.

[00:10:45.23] E: I think it's amazing that that was able to sustain itself for such a long time

[00:10:54.23] S: It was about 10 years.

[00:10:59.29] E: And to think about those ten years, how many people I'm sure it reached that maybe otherwise wouldn't have had that community.

[00:11:08.17] s: It was a good thing. It told them "you're not alone, there's a bunch of us out here." There was one man who lived in California who used to send us bags. Big manila envelopes stuffed full of clippings from papers. So, I guess the word spread. So, people did know about us.

[00:11:43.16] E: I was impressed with how many letters I found in the newsletter that were from all over the country. It seems like at that point there was such a need for that.

[00:11:54.21] S: Yeah, the movement was just starting. It was that current phase of the movement; it was growing at the time. There was a gay rights movement in the United States in the early 1950s. There was a lesbian group called the Daughters of Bilitis, and I don't remember the names of the two founders, but they lived long enough to see gay marriage legalized and they married, I think just shortly before one of them died. So, that was beautiful that they lived to see that. And I don't remember the name of the men's group. But Frank Kameny, he was one of the founders. He had worked for the army maps services and they threw him out, it was during the McCarthy era in the 50's. They threw him out for being gay and that was the worst move they ever made because he made the federal government's life miserable from then on (laughter).

[00:13:01.02] E: That'll show them!

[00:12:57.17] s: Yes, you couldn't keep Frank Kameny down. He came up here once to speak to one of the local groups, he was a live wire! He was full of energy. It took people like that. AIDS really cut an awful swath. I had a friend who contributed to the newsletter and friend with a lot of us. He lived in New York and he was in the theater... I'll remember his name right after you've left. He said his community in New York was just devastated, they lost a lot of people. And we lost Tim Boufard. And there's one man in New York, he's the brother of somebody who lived in this neighborhood, he worked as a lighting expert for the theaters. He died... I remember some people organized the making of quilt squares in memory of the people who had died of it... and someone made one for him and it had a theater light on it. And I know there were a couple of other people I was acquainted with who came down with AIDS. One of them worked for one of the farmers who sells at the farmer's market and I saw him growing thinner and thinner and then I didn't see him anymore. But, I think the only good thing that came of that was that a lot of people were aware of how many of us there are. Because they were their relatives. Or their friends got sick with it.

[00:15:07.08] e: Did your community... was there a community response within your group of friends?

[00:15:18.07] s: Yes, there was a Portland AIDS committee, they'd raise money to help people. Some of the fellows formed... there was a group out in San Francisco called the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence,

came in a dressed up in nun's costumes. So, some of the fellows started a chapter. John Frank was one of them, he died suddenly a couple of years ago, I think it was heart trouble. but he organized the local Sisters of Indulgence, and they'd go around to the bars and sing and dance. Things like "if you want to make love to me wear a rubber"... except they used franker language than that (HARD LAUGHTER). They'd pass the word about safe practices.

[00:16:14.12] e: Was there a gay bar at that point?

[00:16:22.03] s: Yes, there were a couple. There was one at the corner of Cumberland avenue and either High or Forest, I don't remember the name of the man who owned it. But he had to have a lot of courage to run a gay bar. One time... one of the patrons, I think, had a grudge against somebody, set it on fire. Thank goodness it was closed; nobody was in it. But, at the time we in the movement were a bunch of young radicals, and we thought he was kind of reactionary in his attitudes, kind of plugging into the old stereotypes. But a couple of years ago, there were some of us that were giving- some of the old members were giving talks at the library during Pride week and they say "we realize now how much you helped to make a space for us, thank you." So... I'm glad that... that reconciliation happened. And then there was a bar up in the west end where a lot of women went to. And then there was a club, I think it was on Spring Street, they recently closed.

[00:18:00.21] e: Oh, Styxx.

[00:18:06.23] s: They said there wasn't that much call for a bar anymore, I don't know about that. Apparently, they felt gay people are welcome enough in all the other clubs and concert places. Which is good.

[00:18:21.20] e: I was looking, again, at another issue of the newsletter and I found an article that you wrote that was about- it was a book review for something called "Superstar Murder?".

[00:18:42.21] s: Yes, that was the man I was talking about from New York

[00:18:47.12] e: John Paul Hudson

[00:18:53.03] s: John Paul Hudson! How could I forget? This is what happens when you get old (laughter). I'm starting to forget names.

[00:18:59.17] e: well there was a quote in there that I thought was really beautiful where you said that you like the book because, "The real activists are real loving and gentle people." And I just thought that was so beautiful. I think it's so true, and just lovely to see that from a different generation, because that's what I think about the activists that I work with, so to see that that is not particular to us, and spawns from somewhere else, It's just very beautiful.

[00:19:32.02] s: You know people think of radicals as violent bomb throwers. Most of us are in it because we care about other people. We get upset when we see something unjust, or seeing people harmed. That's how I thought when I got back to Orono and read how fundamentalist clergy were giving the Wilde Stein club a hard time. I said 'That's rotten! They have the right to be who they are! They are what nature made them!' Then I found out that's what nature made me! (laughter). I remember the student newspaper in Orono came to our defense. The three preachers who were making the most noise were the Reverend Bubar, Reverend Gass, and the Reverend Franklin. The campus paper called them Reverends Boobgrass and Frankenberry. (Laughter).

E: That's beautiful (laughter)

S: So, that was, you know it was, some people on the campus were hostile, but a lot of them were supportive.

E: How long were you there for?

S: I started there in the fall of 1970 and I moved to Portland in, must have been the spring of '75. That summer I went to work for social security.

E: And have you been here ever since? Did you move anymore?

S: No, I stayed in Portland. I put down roots. I stayed with, let see... oh god, names again... Rob Calkins and Stan Fortuna who were a couple at the time. So, I stayed with them and shared my food stamps. Then when I got a job I rented the apartment upstairs from them and Peter Prizer who was a member of the Portland group who was living down in Cape Elizabeth moved in, so we were roommates, then Rob bought this house. He was a lawyer, he worked for the state. I think Stan was working at a candle shop at the time. So, Rob bought the house, he and Stan moved in, into this apartment, Pete and I, Prizer and I were downstairs. So, it was a little community. We had a little mimeograph machine from Mainely Gay here, so that was the print shop. And in 1980 Rob moved back to Colorado, he and Stan had broken up by then. Rob had another partner. So, I bought the house from Rob. And then about a year later Peter Prizer moved out to his own place. I had a couple of boarders. Then tenant's downstairs. The man who lives there now has been there ever since the 80s. So. And they've all been gay, so it's been kind of a safe house.

E: That's great.

S: I mean I don't ask, but... what anybody's love life is, but they were people I knew from the movement. The tenant downstairs was treasurer of the AIDS group for quite a while. I haven't asked him if he wants to be interviewed or have his name mentioned...

E: So, you also had on here the Gay symposia, was that connected to the task force?

S: Well actually, the Wilde Stein club organized the first one, they invited a lot of people from the movement in New York and we didn't know until after we invited them that they all hate each other (laughter). A lot of factions in the movement in New York at the time. But they were all very nice. All very pleasant, we learned a lot from them. And then after, I think a year or two after, the Maine Gay Task Force started sponsoring the symposia. You know, they were yearly gatherings of, kind of scholarly meetings and things like coming out, gay people and the law, just informative things that we needed. That went on I guess maybe for 10 years. Probably more than 10 years. They had several in Orono after I kind of dropped out of the movement. For a while we were alternating them between Orono and Portland. But I kind of burned out in the mid 80's. And found I was insisting on doing things the way we'd always done it. And I think at that point you've got to step aside and let someone else try it their way. And I was probably burnt out anyhow and needed to do something different.

E: Had it grown considerably then since you started?

S: Oh, yes, I'm sure there are groups elsewhere in the state that I don't even know about now. And there was one group, Northern Lambda North that's from in Aroostook county. Which is why the name is mixed English and French. There's a lot of French Canadians and Acadians live up there.

E: I bet that's a whole different ball game being out up there as well.

S: Yeah, I don't know much about it. Because I didn't get to see those people very much, very often. But, so I kind of lost touch with the movement after that. But a lot of people who were involved are still around, Stan has a partner, his name's Andy, I don't remember his last name. But they got married. Whoever would have imagined that gay people could marry each other? That was really the last thing we would have worried about back in the 70's, in fact I think marriage was kind of bourgeois (laughter). But AIDS changed that, too. You had to be careful about playing the field, there was this deadly disease going around. So, I think people became more monogamous out of self-preservation and from that, I think the idea of marriage must have formed. From being rebels in free love to getting married, it seems terribly ironic, but that was how it turned out. And of course, any time we campaigned for any sort of civil rights, the right wing always said "OH YOUR GOING TO HAVE GAY MARRIAGE, YOURE GOING TO HAVE GAY MARRIAGE!!! You can't have the equal rights amendment because you're going to have gay marriage!!!!" well, ok, we'll give you gay marriage!!!! Sweet revenge (Laughter).

E: It is amazing in one lifetime how much has shifted. There's clearly still work to be done, but that's huge!

S: Yeah, it is, it amazes me that it could have become allowed. Seeing my old friends in the movement marrying each other. That's beautiful.

E: Do you ever go to the big pride events?

S: Well, a bunch of us old hands were asked to be the honorary parade marshals. We were riding down congress street in a convertible with, next to a woman I'd known in grad school and hadn't seen since. It was, it was neat. I've gone to, down to the fair that they have in Deering Oaks a couple of time. My friend Steve Bull, from Wilde Stein, he was from the history department, he's involved with the archives, so I think he runs the booth.

E: That's very cool. Yeah, it's huge! There's just hundreds and hundreds of people.

S: Yeah! having dance parties on the pier. Who would have thought? So, it's. I feel like, we did our bit and helped, helped the cause along. It's good to see all of this happening.

E: Well and like you said, I think before we started recording, it's the first people who first sort of put their necks out... if people don't do that then it never gets started.

S: Yes, it took immense courage.

E: Absolutely

S: I think the group started with kind of an alternate university class in homosexuality. We had a sort of a free university going along with the regular university. Courses or discussion groups that people would organize, and I think that course turned into the Wilde Stein Club. I remember some of the people in the course wouldn't join because they were afraid to be out. And they had their reasons. A few did stick their necks out and drew in other people. I think we gain courage from each other.

E: Absolutely, power in numbers.

S: That's the truth, you look around and see other people involved in the same cause.

E: In Portland, did you ever get much backlash?

S: Well, probably individual cases. There wasn't any organized opposition in Portland. Portland's pretty cosmopolitan. I know there were people at work that probably didn't like the fact that I was gay. It kind of became known because I wrote a letter to the paper. But, it was interesting when, during the AIDS epidemic some of the people were afraid to take interviews. They were afraid it might be contagious. I remember we talked at one staff meeting. I went to my supervisor, who it turns out was also one of us. And told him, you know, send the AIDS interviews to me. Because I knew I couldn't catch it from them! And even if you could I have no dependents. My friends would take the cats, someone had to do it. So, but one of the men I worked with who had been afraid of the AIDS interviews later came up to me and said, it was a couple of years later, said I've changed my mind about gay just by watching you (crying softly). And I almost burst into tears. He was a good fellow, but he just had some ignorance to overcome. I remember he married for the second time, and his new family had cats that didn't get along with the ones he already had. So, he asked me... I was the cat lady... (laughter) so I told him there is such a thing as a cat psychologist and he hired one. He spent a, paid a considerable fee, but they figured it out!

E: Are you serious? that's amazing!

S: Yeah they are. So, in that case, it turned out well. He's basically a good guy, he just did some learning.

E: And what a thing to... I think people need to do their learning and to have someone in front of them like you that was brave enough to be their example, that's a really incredible thing.

S: I know we all need to learn. I know nothing about trans people. And there was a transwoman who gave a talk at the library, I think it was during last year's pride week. And I realized there's a whole community out there that I know nothing about. It happens to us all.

E: Absolutely, yup. Well, can I ask, and feel free to not answer this question, but you mentioned that you came back to UMO and realized that you were gay, is that something that was accepted within your friends that you already had and you family?

S: Well, I didn't lose any friends over it. I was very cautious about coming out to my family. I'm not sure they know for sure. I know my Mother's figured it out. I'm not sure if they know for sure or not. They're New Englanders, so even if they know they won't talk. (laughter). I'm careful who I tell it to. I don't know if my neighbors know. My tenant is more open than I am so they probably do, but if it doesn't come up in conversation. My generation is still wary.

E: Yeah, that makes sense.

S: It is your self-preservation.

E: Well I think we went over most of the things that you had on your list. Is there anything else you feel like you'd like to talk about?

S: No, I think that about covers it.

E: And if anything else does come up, I'm happy to do another interview with you. I'd love to pick your brain more.

S: sure, and if you have any more questions do give me a call.