

Eugene Masonic Cemetery Association

Oral History Project

Narrator:

BARBARA COWAN

Interviewed by:

ALEX BROKAW

KATE THORNHILL

August 31, 2021

(recorded using *Zoom*, a telephone web conferencing tool)

NARRATOR

Barbara Cowan was born in New York City in 1953. She received a bachelor's degree in English (BA) at the University of Oregon. She became an Oregon State University master gardener in 1990 and established a garden design and restoration business with business partner Rachel Foster. In 1991, she attended a master class taught by the English designer John Brooks. Due to parenting demands, she retired in 1996 in order to care for her four children.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose. The following transcript has been reviewed, edited, and approved by the narrator.

Eugene Masonic Cemetery Association Barbara Cowan Interview

Brokaw: This oral history interview is part of the Eugene Masonic Cemetery Association's Oral History Project [EMCA]. This interview will be conducted by Alex Brokaw, an EMCA board member with assistance from Kate Thornhill, an EMCA digital archives volunteer, and with technical advisor Carolina Hernandez, an EMCA digital archives volunteer. Today's interview is with Barbara Cowan on August 31, 2021 taking place on Zoom, a web conferencing tool. The recordings will be made available for research and educational purposes for future EMCA boards, staff, and the general public.

Barbara, do you agree to be recorded for this project, and do you give your permission for EMCA to preserve and make available your recorded and transcribed interviews?

Cowan: Yes.

Brokaw: Thank you. (Cowan laughs). Okay. I'll introduce Barbara now, a little more formally. Barbara Cowan was born in New York City in 1953. By the way, Barbara, you're the first narrator to give the year of your birth. (laughs)

Cowan: (laughs) It was a good year.

Brokaw: She received a bachelor's degree in English (BA) at the University of Oregon. She became an OSU [Oregon State University] master gardener in 1990 and established a garden design and restoration business with business partner Rachel Foster. In 1991 she attended a master class taught by the English designer John Brooks. Due to parenting demands, she retired in 1996 in order to care for her four children. All right. Nice background!

Brokaw: I'm going to start with the first question and we go way back to 1953. Where were you born and where did you grow up?

Cowan: Well, as I mentioned in my abstract, I was born in New York City, and shortly thereafter I moved to New Jersey, twenty miles southwest of the city and was raised there, and later in Massachusetts.

Brokaw: How old were you when you moved to Massachusetts?

Cowan: Well, I was in high school, but I summered in Massachusetts on Cape Cod for most of my life.

Brokaw: That sounds wonderful

Cowan: Yeah. It was. It was idyllic.

Brokaw: Yes. Did you have any surprising or significant experiences that affected the direction of your life?

Cowan: Well, I have to go back to those summers on Cape Cod where I followed my father around who loved the outdoors. Loved walking, swimming, clam digging, you name it, sailing. And, I did all those things with him. So, I really developed an appreciation for the outdoors and the natural beauty of the place, wherever that is.

Brokaw: All right. What was your career before retiring and I think I somewhat covered that, but would you expand upon it?

Cowan: Well, I took over the restoration and design of really lovely gardens. I was fortunate to get one particularly nice job which led to another particularly nice job, and my business grew, and I spent hours and hours in these beautiful gardens thinking, wouldn't it be nice to work on a public project? Because all of the work I did was, of course for the homeowner, and it was shared with a limited number of people, and it just seemed that, with all that beauty, it would be nice for it to be more visible.

Brokaw: When did you join the EMCA board?

Cowan: In 1997. And prior to that I did some volunteer work. I helped with, I led an installation of bulb planting, it occurred in the fall of 1996, it must have been.

Brokaw: What kind of bulbs did you put in?

Cowan: Well, they were bulbs that Kay Holbo [founder of EMCA board] had ordered. And she had a vision, sort of a meadowed English estate garden kind of image for the cemetery in that moment in time—I don't know. But she went to White Flower Farm, which is in Connecticut, and ordered massive numbers of narcissus and scilla and alliums, and they got distributed in lots of different locations.

Brokaw: Are any of them still there, have you noticed?

Cowan: Oh yeah, all of them actually. Some of the narcissus that were planted in shadier places didn't survive, but the ones uphill from Hope Abbey [mausoleum] and around the Public Square [top of hill in cemetery], I think you can still find those, and the scilla along the entry roadway are still there.

Brokaw: That's wonderful.

Cowan: Yeah, yeah.

Eugene Masonic Cemetery Association Barbara Cowan Interview

Brokaw: Why was the cemetery important to you at the time you joined the board? And again, you've partially already answered that, but let's expand again.

Cowan: Yeah well, this is where I wanted to share a story and, with your permission, I will go ahead and read. It's not too long.

Brokaw: All right.

Cowan: "I first discovered the cemetery on a walk shortly after I moved to 22nd and Kincaid Streets around 1990. At the time the cemetery's understory was largely covered with Himalayan blackberry canes with just a few deer-like trails leading to what we now know as the Public Square. Nearby was Eugene Skinner's grave. [founder of Eugene, Oregon] Along the way to the square, I passed and admired a patch of blooming red columbine. I was both delighted and reassured by finding untouched natural beauty located in an otherwise residential neighborhood. In some romantic sense, finding Skinner's burial place after traversing through a sea of blackberries felt like a real-life fairytale with the heroine, but in this case the hero, asleep, waiting to be discovered."

Brokaw: That's wonderful.

Cowan: Yeah. And I get chills reading that, actually, because that has the strongest emotional appeal to me. [Out of] many opportunities here in Eugene, that's a peak one.

Brokaw: Yes.

Cowan: So, then I just went on to say, "Of course at the time, I did not know I would someday lead the reclamation and restoration of the cemetery's landscape, but when the time came, it felt like a perfect fit."

Brokaw: And it was.

Brokaw: Yes

Brokaw: Again, you're almost ahead of me here, but would you tell us about your passion for the landscape of the cemetery, and I would imagine that went on for quite a few years. That was what kept you there, I would imagine.

Cowan: Yeah, and initially my passion for the landscape was the native plants and the beauty—and the setting—you can't separate the two really. And I spent time on the hillside staring out across into the Amazon Park area over the top of the mausoleum, envisioning a sea of camas [bulbs that bloom in spring]. We had to the south of Hope Abbey—there's this postage stamp field of camas. The point of fact, once upon a time, before all the development occurred, that entire wetlands

was all camas along with other native plants. And the sheer beauty of my imaginings was a delight really, and to preserve remnants of that beauty seemed important to me, seemed compelling. So that's what got me involved.

Brokaw: And now that's been formalized into the Kay Holbo Camus Field. For her for really starting this whole organization.

Cowan: Right, right. Which is lovely.

Brokaw: Yes, and it's a beautiful sight when they're in bloom.

Brokaw: When did you become the chair of the Landscape Committee and how long did you serve?

Cowan: Well, that's a real kind of circuitous question because the Landscape Committee existed when I first joined the board. And we met at Agate Alley and there were about six members at the time, and I can name those if you like.

Brokaw: Well, first of all, what is Agate Alley?

Cowan: Oh, oh, it wasn't Agate Alley at the time. [It's] what Agate Alley is now at 19th and Agate. There was a little sandwich shop.

Brokaw: Oh, I see what you mean.

Cowan: And we met and had tea and coffee.

Brokaw: Yes, yes all right.

Cowan: And water. (Brokaw laughs). And that's where we formally met once a month and Ken Guzowski was involved. Hugh Prichard was there, Bruce Newhouse, David Lynch, Karen Seidel and Kay [Holbo] occasionally came. [All board members except David Lynch, EMCA Groundskeeper, and Bruce Newhouse, a natural resources advisor]. At the time we were relying largely on Charmaine Landing's Landscape Management plan.

Brokaw: And when was that?

Cowan: That was written, I think, somewhere between 1994 and 1996. She was a masters student at the architecture school at the U of O [University of Oregon], and this plan was her masters thesis.

Brokaw: I understand.

Cowan: And she taught at the university adjunct classes, and took her students through the cemetery for at least a decade after she left the organization. She'd do tours and talk about—

And the plan was thorough, and it was really helpful initially. At some point, there was a "Y" in the road when burials began to occur, and the plan didn't really adequately address the issues that arose from that. So, in any event—and there were some other issues that arose and I can talk about those later.

Brokaw: Okay.

Cowan: And so that committee disbanded, I was still involved with the landscape. I really didn't have a formal title as the chair until later. And so what I did was refer to the people that were on the committee and other advisors on the prior committee and used them as advisors. I was going to the executive committee meetings and I was bringing up questions then.

Brokaw: Did you have any professional landscape architects helping you with this?

Cowan: Um—no, actually. Well later... Justine Lovinger [landscape architect] got involved later, and Robert Melnick [U of O professor emeritus and former dean, School of Architecture & Allied Arts]. I consulted with Robert Melnick. And so, yes, I guess I should say "Yes," but we weren't meeting. Justine met when the landscape committee meetings began to convene again with a different group of people. Roz Slovic [board member] and Karen [Seidel] were still involved. Myself, David Lynch, Mary Ellen Rodgers [Sexton/Administrator], Wendi Kuchera [Asst. Groundskeeper], and occasionally Justine came and Alan Kluber [neighbor and volunteer] got it off [the ground]. And Bruce Newhouse always made himself available as needed. So, yeah, he was very generous with his time.

Brokaw: What do you remember as the accomplishments of the Landscape Committee or those involved with the committee?

Cowan: Yeah, or shall I say those who were involved with the landscape, because early on I established a Friday morning volunteer drop-in work party. There would be David, myself and then anywhere from two to four other volunteers, and we would work three to four hours together on projects. And I organized the work parties that way because, as I mentioned earlier, I had four children at that point that were in school or daycare, but I needed to work according to the school calendar. So, weekends weren't particularly helpful for me in terms of leading Saturday work parties. So, instead I did these Friday morning work parties and took the summer off. Those work parties were really quite successful; they were consistent, we could accomplish quite a bit with four or five people working in the landscape at any given time.

Brokaw: What did you do, mostly?

Cowan: We weeded and we planted. And that was pretty much— We took out invasives, and replaced them with non-invasive native plants, and I did some pruning. And, yeah, talked about interesting things. (Brokaw and Cowan laugh). Erik Muller was part of that. Joe McKeever. [volunteers] And, yeah, some others I can't recall right now.

Brokaw: It sounds like it would have been fun, but hard work.

Cowan: At times, but yeah. So, in terms of replacing hard work, I have some good memories of the early wheelbarrow brigades of covering the paths with bark using wheelbarrows. But at some point I realized I was going to lose all my friends and my husband was going to go on strike. (Brokaw laughs)

So, I dreamed up this idea of getting Lane Forest Products involved and blowing in the bark. I thought this can be done mechanically. And so, I reached out to Lane Forest Products and they discounted the bark for us. And they were also very generous, so that was birthed, and the wheelbarrow brigades went away and a very noisy two-day enterprise took its place, but it was a lot less labor-intensive.

Brokaw: That's, as far as I know, that's still going on.

Cowan: Yeah, yeah.

Brokaw: So, I didn't know that you started that.

Cowan: Yeah, yeah. I think that was a winner. And then you know, this seems like a relatively small thing, but I also reached out to SaniPac [trash removal company], and asked if they could donate free garbage [collection] for us. I don't know if they're still doing that, but that turned around the dog waste issue for the cemetery. There was a huge number of walkers, and people just couldn't bring themselves to clean up the dog waste. I think the culture has changed, and people are more compliant with that in the cemetery and all around town, but at the time it was sort of a paradigm shift socially to ask people to clean up their dog waste, but having a place to deposit it made a big difference, and the board was understandably quite frugal about these kinds of operational expenses, so getting SaniPac to agree to provide it for free was a win-win.

Brokaw: I think that's amazing. At that time, I believe, SaniPac was a local company, which it isn't now.

Cowan: Yeah, and I remember I ended up talking to the company president and I'm not sure how that came about, but you know he was the right person to talk to.

Brokaw: That's great. And I remember that was a huge problem—with the dogs.

Cowan: Yeah, yeah

Brokaw: And we certainly welcome dogs, but they...

Cowan: Yeah, for sure, because that's important.

Thornhill: I have a question for you, Barbara. How long—what was the time range of the restoration project? How many years did it take—when did it start and when did it, I'm going to put in quotes “end?”

Cowan: I don't think it has ended. And you know I think it's morphed a little bit and expectations are different, but I will bring up—because I like sharing this story—you gave me an opportunity here, an opener. There's something called The Bradley Method, and it's based on these two sisters that lived in Australia that had a forty-acre parcel of land. And they'd walk their dog in the morning, and went to the outer edges of their property and pulled out invasive plants with the theory that the non-invasive native plants would be allowed to creep into their property. And it took them twenty years of going out in the morning and in the evening, working fifteen, twenty minutes each day to restore their land to native species.

So, I kept that story in the back of my mind as we were working in the cemetery that this was not a one-year or two-year, even a five or ten-year plan, this was you know... How long has it been now, it's been twenty-five years. And a lot of people think that it's pretty lovely the way it is, and I have to agree. And so, probably the first ten years going for the most obvious invasives, like blackberries and hollies—too much undergrowth. That probably happened in the first ten to fifteen years, twelve years. And it just got more and more refined over time. So, we were talking about sightlines and vistas rather than, how do we get from here to there, and working on paths I mentioned earlier, how we covered them, but we developed new paths to allow more access to the cemetery. So yeah. Does that answer your question?

Thornhill: Yes, thank you.

Cowan: So, we were talking about accomplishments and I wanted to mention—let me look here. Some of the things were not just physically achieved in the landscape, but behind the scenes we were working on policy. And, what occurred as a result of the progress in the landscape in terms of making it more accessible for people to walk in, making it more interesting for people to visit, and for people to be interested in burying their loved ones, meant that there was an increased use of the landscape. And so, then we needed to identify and define what was

appropriate use. And then, once that was defined, how were we going to convey that?

So, that process took a lot of time and there were a lot of layers, and sort of word-smithing that went on in order to figure out policies for letters, for visitors, handouts, and what was acceptable in terms of, “could people memorialize on their loved one’s grave and, if so, how long, what was appropriate;” that was all sort of assigned to the landscape [committee] to help sort out and then brought to the Executive Committee to approve. And then, separate from that was—well, there was the allocation of limited landscape staff hours, how were they going to be allocated, so we had a lot of discussions about that.

But back to accomplishments. The native plant interpretive signs, heritage rose signs, documenting the heritage roses in the landscape [and] the Big Leaf Maple Award had to do with how we managed our landscape. I suppose the ultimate success is the number of visitors that come to the cemetery now because of the landscape.

Brokaw: Yes, people love it. They really do.

Cowan: We started out celebrating that one hundred people visited a day, but I expect that number has increased to probably one hundred fifty or more.

Brokaw: People use it all the time.

Cowan: Yeah so, I think that's probably the final and best achievement of all.

Brokaw: Yes. Who was the site manager (landscape manager/groundskeeper) at that time?

Cowan: David Lynch.

Brokaw: And how did he come on board?

Cowan: He was a neighbor of Ken Guzowski, and Ken was Eugene's Historic Preservationist, and so he got involved. Kay found him and got him involved early on. I think he was one of the original board members—I'm not sure—but he did get involved early on around the same time I was on the board. And he found David and asked David if he would come and cut the blackberries.

And really David’s story is an interesting success story because he, over the twenty-five years he worked at the cemetery, somewhere around that, he really grew to become a very highly skilled site manager. So, yeah, accomplished.

Brokaw: I've only heard wonderful things about David.

Cowan: Yeah well, he was a great storyteller.

Brokaw: Oh. (laughs)

Cowan: And I like to say that he learned his work ethic growing up in upper New York State out in the countryside. His father was a machinist and fabricator of parts, and David had a pet pig that had piglets that he was responsible for. (Brokaw laughs) And he just was expected to raise those piglets and take them to market, to the county fair or 4-H fair—and he at an early age started earning his school supplies and his new shoes; that sort of thing. But he would tell the stories in a very colorful manner, chasing his pig around!

Brokaw: [He learned a great] work ethic.

Cowan: Yes, right and that's where he acquired that. And then, at the cemetery, he had a circle of people he knew. He knew an arborist who was very skilled and David understood how to talk to the arborist in a way that said, “Wait a minute, you know that quote’s a little high don't you think?” or whatever. He conserved resources, financial resources for the cemetery, as well as, he was always there making sure that the environment was safe while tree work was being done, and that nothing got damaged. And he was just very skillful about determining what trees should be worked on and what ones could wait.

So, there was that side of it, and the other side was that he always walked the cemetery first thing every morning when he came to work, with an eye towards safety, looking up and looking down, making sure that things were sort of in top-notch shape and safe for the visitors. And I didn't know that for years until he started training Wendi. I was like, “Wow! You did that every day all these years and I never knew it?” And he was always just a great ambassador for the cemetery. He greeted people, he’d talk to—had time, despite all the work he achieved, to say hello to people, greet their dogs, give them a real hello, and have people feel welcome and answer questions, and if he couldn't answer them, he’d let me know (laughs) and asked me to if I could.

Brokaw: Ah, sounds like that we definitely had the right person.

Cowan: Yeah, he was a real gem.

Brokaw: We might have covered this a little, but let me go through it, what were some of the challenges in clearing the overgrowth and how did you—this is a series of questions—how did you decide what needed to go and what to keep, and how did you decide where to start a project? I imagine, for starting a project, that [the idea] came from the landscape committee, or someone [on the board or staff] had an

idea and took it to the committee, but all those— It seems to me you had to decide on what needed to be done next.

Cowan: I probably took the lead on that the most. By the time the TBI [Temple Beth Israel, a local synagogue] section had been developed and there were more burials going on throughout the cemetery, then there was—let me back up.

Initially we relied on the landscape historic plan or landscape management plan which identified some areas that should be grown more than others. For example, Skinner's Row was supposed to be more tended, shall we say, or manicured, and then the northeast corner, on the other hand, was considered the wildest area in the cemetery. So that was a little bit later, we'll manage the blackberries, but we're not going to do anything more with it. And that's where the Scatter Garden was, [now Memorial Overlook, for cremated remains] and that was sort of suited to the approach for the scatter garden.

And then there were mowing issues, the meadow area and that sort of thing that came up. But later there was a lot of talk about how to approach selling a plot. Typically, the administrator (at the time, Mary Ellen Rodgers), would ask David to weed-eat an area. There were certain plots that she was trying to sell. And so that would occur, so that was an obvious thing for David to take care of. But then there were other areas that we were thinking that we could—again maybe around what we called Pioneer Row—we would sort of radiate out from that in order to—or if there was a historic plaque that was being put on a particular plot, we might put a little more effort into that. There was also talk about what was appropriate in terms of, if a donor requested that their plot be tended to more—some improvement be made on it—what did that mean for the plots surrounding that? And for me there were some ethical issues there as far as we know.

We had initially looked at the cemetery in a more global sense—the landscape. And it was easier to articulate to visitors if you said, “Well we're treating this area like this, and this area like this and will be mowing.” So, it made the task of being a landscape chair, and the voice for what was being done in the landscape easier.

If we became more systematic in our approach when we develop a patchwork of “we'll do this for this person because they asked nicely...” so, but at the same time, you know, we're all humans and some of that is, you can't be totally rigid about your approach. The other piece of it was just restoring areas. A backhoe comes in and digs a plot. And you don't just have a plot to restore, but you have the surrounding area where the backhoe was, or dirt was piled in, that sort of thing, so then those areas had to be addressed immediately.

Brokaw: Even with a current administrator she has said that there are some areas that we cannot have a backhoe, it just wouldn't work. So that even limits the burial space as to what you can do there.

Cowan: Right, right. And that's good to have those considerations because the backhoes can create a lot of damage and drive over roots and that sort of thing, and interfere with vulnerable species. And so, there was always this kind of tension between burials and the preservation of the landscape, how to approach that. And I think that's going to exist forever.

Brokaw: (garbled) ...cemetery of the type that we have. A lawn cemetery would never have that problem.

Cowan: No.

Cowan: Which is probably why they exist. (laughs). Usually not on a hill either!

Brokaw: No. (laughs). Did you serve in other capacities on the board?

Cowan: Yeah.

Brokaw: Or were you strictly landscape?

Cowan: No. I got involved in a lot of things. I was on the Executive Committee. I'll just run a list and then you tell me if you want me to elaborate.

Brokaw: Okay.

Cowan: There was the Sesquicentennial Committee—when the cemetery turned one hundred fifty years old [1859 – 2009]—and I chaired that. There was a neighborhood grant for interpretive signs at the cemetery entry way, and I wrote and provided the photographs for that landscape sign. [There was] another neighborhood grant where I organized the volunteers for that Skinner's birthday party when he turned two hundred. [That] was a huge success and one of my greatest sources of pleasure. So, I'd love to elaborate on that. [Note: the picnic was held on Eugene Skinner's 200th birthday, Sept. 11, 2009.]

Brokaw: Please do.

Cowan: All right. So, as you know, sometimes success is based upon who you know and not as much on how skillful you are. So, a good friend, Gale Fiszman, whose parents are buried in the cemetery, she provided chamber music. Erik Muller, who had been part of my Friday morning work parties—he's a poet—he recruited some friends that were also poets to do poetry reading. And then Bill Sullivan [William L. Sullivan, a Eugene author], who is a friend of ours, read excerpts

from Skinner's diary that Karen Seidel selected for the event. And Bill literally climbed out of the brush behind Skinner's plot with a shovel (laughs), and dust and dirt all over on his shoulders and had to rise from the grave for this inspiration. (Brokaw and Cowan laugh.)

And then we had donated cakes, and Lynette Saul [past board member] was the cake server. Fran Ross [(deceased) artist and wife of board member, John Bredesen] made the poster which was wonderful, and Mary Ellen Rodgers, the administrator, did the PR, and our son—our youngest son—drove a golf cart from the main entrance because we weren't allowing cars up at the Public Square (which is where this event was held), in order to take people who needed transportation to the top, and he had a blast driving the golf cart! We had over two hundred people in attendance for that, so it was really fun.

Brokaw: I wish I could have been there!

Cowan: I know, I know. Well, we need to think about celebrating his 217th birthday? I don't know. (Brokaw and Cowan laugh)

Thornhill: What year did that happen?

Cowan: We'd have to look at his marker because—

Thornhill: In early 2000? Or in the 2010's?

Cowan: It would have been in the 2000's. [Sept. 11, 2009]

Cowan: And then I also chaired an early Endowment Committee. The focus became making the transition for the endowment monies that had been in a low yielding CD—to move that money to the OCF [Oregon Community Foundation], and then later when the landscape endowment was established that money also went to the OCF.

Brokaw: And may I say that you established that landscape endowment?

Cowan: Oh yeah, thank you. So, moving the funds from one or two percent interest to a yield of more like seven percent was a big change. It perked Denny up a lot, and John, for that matter. [Denny Hellesvig, treasurer at that time; John Bredesen, president at that time]

Brokaw: And perks our current of treasurer, Hallis, up a lot too. (laughs)

Cowan: Yeah, good.

Brokaw: How much time do you think you spent per month working at that cemetery?

Cowan: Well, had it down, I spent probably twenty, twenty-five hours a week.

Brokaw: A week? That is a part-time job.

Cowan: It was a job. Yeah, it was a part-time job, but fundamentally I really wasn't ready to retire when I did retire.

Brokaw: Ah, okay, okay.

Cowan: But you know my family came first and so I found this match. This pursuit that allowed me to work while my kids were in school, and I was available for them when they came home.

Brokaw: Good mother, a very good mother. What were any bumps in the road that were challenges, and what are some of your best memories of being on the board?

Cowan: I guess the bump in the road had to do with working with the board to understand the strains that active burials and increased visits to the—I mean the burials were occurring in a way and in a frequency in order to fund the restoration of Hope Abbey. And there was a lot of board enthusiast for the work that was being done there, and what they achieved is wonderful.

That said, it increased the need for more burials, the increased visits, all the work that was going on in the landscape, and expectations for it, because they were trying to sell plots. It increased staff time hours, demands on the landscape, and there wasn't as much interest in operations versus special projects that could be illustrated as a newsletter article, and you visibly were working with beauty in another more tangible sense for some people. And so that was a challenge. And also, for me personally, my challenge was I joined the board and wanted to work in the landscape, but I didn't realize at the time that I would be managing staff and—

Brokaw: Oh!

Cowan: And when you think about it, I don't think anybody else at the time understood that, but the staff all largely consisted of landscape people—

Brokaw: Yes.

Cowan: David and Wendy, and Mary Ellen Rodgers—she was not landscape staff, she was the administrator, but she worked very closely with the landscape staff and myself.

So there weren't any procedures in place for hiring, interviewing, evaluating, staff positions, how much to pay them, raises, paid vacation. So that was a challenge.

Again, trying to get the board to sort of up the game a little bit, in order to get away from “we can just have a little casual conversation around the kitchen table,” to “we need things in writing, we need to have specific questions and give anyone who applies for a position equal opportunity to be heard.”

Brokaw: I do want to tell you that I believe all those things have been put in place now. As the years have gone by, the board has, I think, developed more positively and most of those things are in place.

Cowan: Yeah, yeah.

Brokaw: So, you were the one that started the ball rolling, though.

Cowan: Yeah, yeah. And they were largely, I think, in place when I left, though you know there's always room for improvement.

Brokaw: Yes

Cowan: So that's an actual—it feels like an achievement too, as well as—what was the question, a challenge?

Brokaw: Yes.

Cowan: It was one.

Brokaw: And also, your best memories.

Cowan: Well, neighborhood work parties were always fun, and I mentioned the wheelbarrow brigades—they actually—people worked very hard [and] they worked supportively and kept each other on the move and that was fun. Skinner's birthday party, and I led several Edison Elementary School groups on field trips at the cemetery. That was really fun.

Brokaw: Oh yes.

Cowan: Listening to David Lynch's stories. And, of course, you know the relationships I developed with people through the cemetery, on the board, and the advisors. I would like to give a shout-out to Bruce Newhouse and his wife Peg Boulay, who led numerous guided native plant tours in the cemetery. Whitey Lueck [tree and plant instructor] who led tours in the cemetery and was another advisor. Dan Gleason—now known as the co-owner of [Wild] Birds Unlimited. He did a bird survey, as Bruce did a plant survey for the cemetery. And let's see. Anyway, I'm probably leaving somebody out, but wonderful group of people that have supported the cemetery over the years.

Brokaw: Yes. I'm writing their names down, as you mentioned them.

Cowan: Thank you, thank you.

Brokaw: Looking to the future, are you hopeful or confident that the cemetery can survive, or better yet thrive, in the next 10 or even hundred years or more, and what do you think is needed for long term success? That's a big question! (Cowan and Brokaw laugh)

Cowan: Well, I know it's a big question. How much time do we have? (Brokaw laughs)

In your mind's eye, what does thrive mean? Because that probably means something different to different people. To thrive might be to just to leave it as it is, a snapshot in time, and just maintain it as it is now. For someone else, it might mean amping up the opportunity to inter loved ones, somehow, some way, long into the future. So that's a question of course for the Board. It's hard for me to explore that here and now, but it's an important question.

But it boils down to maintaining income flow somehow either through donors or endowment, or all of the above. And everyone, I think, on the board understands that you need several different spokes in the wheel in order to create a constituent-supported group that will donate.

And then you also want to increase, of course, the endowment or both endowments in my mind. So, looking at that, I would, at any event that was at the cemetery, I would be at the door saying, "donation recommended." And given the amount of time and energy that goes into things at the cemetery, it's expected for any nonprofit, to not do things for free. That's not why you're involved, to provide free activities for people. So there's that piece.

I would work on developing brochures for the endowment, or a brochure that explains both endowments. And I know, in the past, historically, there was a need for a very formal approach to raising endowment monies. I'm not so sure, I think that just keeps pushing things out to the future; there's never the right time and there's never the right number of people.

Brokaw: I think you'll be glad to know that that is moving forward.

Cowan: Okay, good. So that's great, that's good news. And then the piece that I was sensitive to throughout the time that I was involved in the landscape was, "don't set the bar so high that it's not sustainable financially and physically." So when you're looking at the landscape and saying "Okay, well, I really think it looks lovely because we mow it in this area two or three times a year, or we keep all the markers freed up from—" Is that sustainable?

And again, another way of looking at it is how much financial resources are going into keeping that level of standard of appearance up, and is that what the board wants to—how they want to direct their resources. Because there's always that tension, right, of trying to be fiscally conservative, but want the appearance to be at a level that people think the place is cared for, but again, just like the word “thrive,” the idea of what's a cared-for look is on a spectrum.

Brokaw: Yes.

Cowan: So, how that's resolved, now, and where it goes in the future remains to be seen. But that was something, with our limited resources, if you go back and look at the financial reports in the budgets early on, you see how small the amount of money and how much was achieved on that small amount of money. It's pretty amazing. And so, I think it's good to do some kind of retrospective in terms of how much resources is going into landscape now versus originally. And where is that money going?

Brokaw: Yes. I think you've given us a lot to think about.

Cowan: (Chuckles). Good I hope that's good.

Brokaw: I thank you. Is there anything else that we've missed that you would like to talk about?

Cowan: I've done a lot of talking don't you [think]? (Cowan and Brokaw laugh). Do you think something's been left out?

Brokaw: Probably so, but I think we've—I think you have done an excellent job here, and I thank you. You really have given me—and I'd like to get a lot of these comments of yours to the board. We're having a retreat with—

Cowan: Oh good.

Brokaw: And I think a lot of what you've said would apply to that retreat.

Cowan: Okay. Well, nice. That's good. Good to think what you're doing won't just gather dust somewhere, but may be relevant for—

Brokaw: Well, I think that's where we're coming in, and where Kate came in. When she dropped out of the sky, so to speak, on our doorstep (Cowan laughs and Thornhill laughs)

Cowan: Thank you, Kate.

Brokaw: Thank you, Hugh [Prichard] for introducing Kate to us.

Eugene Masonic Cemetery Association Barbara Cowan Interview

Cowan: Oh good, good.

Brokaw: There's the connection. It's just almost magical the way this is working out. Kate is helping us so much with the archiving and these oral interview archives that I think we don't want any of this lost.

Cowan: Yeah, yeah.

Brokaw: And you've given us so much information today.

Cowan: Since Kate is the archivist, she might be interested in hearing that I did submit landscape committee notes from our meeting minutes, and so they should exist somewhere.

Brokaw: Yeah, yeah. Well, I am now the archivist.

Cowan: Oh, you are.

Brokaw: Very amateur archivist. Kate is our guide, our guru.

Cowan: Okay.

Thornhill: The digital person. (Cowan laughs and Brokaw laughs)

Cowan: Excellent, excellent.

Brokaw: So, yes, I believe, in fact, I think I even have some of your notes so—

Cowan: Okay good.

Brokaw: And I'm sure they're over there in the archives.

Cowan: Okay.

Brokaw: All right. So, thank you again.

Cowan: It's been a pleasure.

End of Interview