

Eugene Masonic Cemetery Association
Oral History Project

Narrator:

MIKE HELM

Interviewed by:

ALEX BROKAW

KATE THORNHILL

June 10, 2021

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

NARRATOR

Mike Helm grew up in Pendleton, Oregon, where he learned to ride horses and harvest peas and wheat. During the Vietnam war he served in the Marine Corps in California and the Peace Corps in Uganda and Kenya. Since 1985, Mike and his wife, Chris, have been Hope Abbey's closest neighbors and still live in the house at the edge of the cemetery where they raised their four children and which is now enjoyed by their five grandchildren.

Mike served on the original board of directors for EMCA and for the past thirty-six years has patrolled the cemetery almost every night.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability. Readers 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.

Brokaw: I'm going to read an introduction script. This oral history interview is part of the Eugene Masonic Cemetery Association's [EMCA] oral history project. This interview will be conducted by Alex Brokaw (speaking) 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 Mike Helm on July 10, 2021, taking place on Zoom, a web conferencing tool. Audio recordings will be made available for research and educational purposes for future EMCA boards, staff, and the general public.

Mike, 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?

Helm: Yes.

Brokaw: Thank you. All right. I'd like to introduce Mike Helm now. And I'm gonna read a little bit about him. His background. Mike grew up in Pendleton, Oregon, where he learned to ride horses and harvest peas and wheat. During the Vietnam war he served in the Marine Corps in California and the Peace Corps in Uganda and Kenya. Since 1985, Mike and his wife, Chris, have been Hope Abbey's closest neighbors and still live in the house at the edge of the cemetery where they raised their four children and is now enjoyed by their five grandchildren.

Mike served on the original board of directors for EMCA and for the past thirty-six years has patrolled the cemetery almost every night.

Thank you for doing that by the way. It's wonderful.

Okay. We'll begin with the questions. Mike, did you have any surprising or significant experiences, while growing up in Pendleton that affected the direction of your life?

Helm: Yeah, sure. You know I lived there for eighteen years. The first eighteen years of my life. When I was thirteen, my dad got me a job on a harvest crew, and I worked on the harvest—pea harvest and wheat harvest—for about five years after that.

So that was a really good job. I got out of my mother's kitchen for the summer and I learned to drive trucks and tractors and all sort of things. And I lived in a bunk house with fifty other men. In those days, it took—the harvest crew work from 6:00 to 6:00, a.m. and p.m., and then there was a night crew as well. And there were about fifty people on each. Fifty guys—no I don't think there were ever any women on each of these crews. So, living out there, I developed kind of an independent way of living from—I wasn't living like kids in town were living. I was thirteen and living among men.

There were Mexicans and people with big alcohol problems. Crazy people and they had to get the peas off [the vines], and those are the people that used to do it. Now, they do that whole thing, I think, with about three people.

But anyways, to get to the significant experience.

One fall term, I was asked to leave Oregon State University because I was really not a very good scholar. I got better later. And I went home in the winter and got a job with U.S. Gypsum in Pilot Rock, fourteen miles south of Pendleton. And while I worked there, I had a job I just hated. I was unloading wood chips from railroad cars with belly dumps, and the idea was that if you opened this belly dump the chips would all run out into this pile. But what happened was the chips were all frozen, because it was really a cold winter. And so I had to chip them loose with a peavy pole and that was a really horrible job. And so, at lunchtime we would go into this warehouse where it was a little bit warmer and I was among people who really, like I did, hated their jobs, but these guys had figured out that they had twenty years, six months, eight days.

I mean they just counted down almost to the second the amount of time they had to spend working before they could quit this job. And I thought what a waste. I can't live like this. I can't live hating that interim. So I guess another thing was reading—Walden was really important to me and also—what was the name of that book? Anyway, a book about hitchhiking across the country and it was *On the Road*.

Thornhill: Yeah, Jack Kerouac.

Helm: Yeah, Kerouac. Kerouac and Thoreau were really important to me, so I don't know, maybe that answers your questions. I kind of rambled there.

Brokaw: It does. And very interesting rambling.

Thornhill: And Mike, could you tell us what time period was this in?

Helm: That was from 1955 until I graduated from high school in 1960 and went to Oregon State, so it would have been after about my second year in Oregon State. Like I said, I was asked to leave. They let me come back though after that winter in Corvallis. I was convinced that this kind of life wasn't for me. So, I was going to stay in school at all costs, which I did.

Thornhill: And did you graduate from OSU?

Helm: Yes.

Thornhill: And what year was that?

Helm: 1966. I was on a six-year plan. Mostly. While I was at Oregon State, I also served in the Marine Corps for six months. And because of a broken romance, I followed a girl to Italy. I hitchhiked across the United States and flew on Icelandic Airlines to Luxemburg. And then she dumped me. And so I hitchhiked all around Europe. I spent three months over there and it was just a super experience, because before that I sort of thought that Pendleton, Oregon was the center of the universe, and that somehow, I would end up back in Pendleton just like my parents and grandparents and great grandparents. But then when I got to hitchhike around Europe that year, it's like, "Wow! There's a whole lot more to this globe than raising peas and wheat."

Brokaw: You were very lucky to be able to do that.

Helm: Oh yeah. All my peers thought I was nuts. "Why would you do that?" You know the whole world is out there. So—

Brokaw: All right. You mentioned you were in the Marine Corps and then you went into the Peace Corps at some time. And how did that affect your life?

Helm: Well the Marine Corps was—it was interesting. I actually was quite proud of having been a marine. And it was quite different than the Peace Corps as you can imagine. But when I was on active duty in Camp Pendleton, and one day came back to my bunk and the barracks, there was a telegram there from the Peace Corps. I'd just taken all the Peace Corps tests at Oregon State.

They said, "Hey how'd you like to go to Africa? And also before you go we're having this training program in New York City, where you can live in New York City for four months and go to Columbia University." And yeah, whoa, are you kidding, I'd love it! And I went to my commanding officer, and I showed him the telegram and he said, "I think we could work this out." He says, "The deal will be that you can go to Uganda, but you have to come back up if we want you back—you know, if we need you." This was pre- the really important years, the really build-up years of Vietnam.

So I was actually in Africa for about a year, and I got orders to return to Camp Pendleton. So they sent me plane tickets from Uganda to Camp Pendleton in California. So I resigned from the Peace Corps and I practically had one foot on the tarmac and one foot in the airplane and I got another big envelope from Oregon, I mean from the Marine Corps, and when I opened it, it said Honorable Discharge United States Marine Corps. And for about twenty seconds I was just totally—I didn't know what to do, because I was not in the Peace Corps anymore, and I wasn't in the Marine Corps, and I didn't have any money and I was in the middle of Africa.

So, I went to the Peace Corps office in Kampala. And they said, “We’ll take you back.” And they did, and so I stayed another year, but after that—it was only a couple weeks later—I met Chris, my wife. And yeah, we’re still married after all these years.

Brokaw: Did you two go to Kenya together?

Helm: Yeah, well actually, when I met her, she was teaching in Kenya and I was teaching in Uganda. We met on the Kenya coast. And when we decided to get married, we—the Peace Corps after two years will fly you home, and if you want to re-up for a third year. So, they would have flown me back to Pendleton. But I talked them into trading my ticket for two tickets to England. She’s English. So, we went to England and got married. And her mother arranged a wedding for us, much to her parents’ surprise. “Hey guess what Mom. I’ve got this American and I’m bringing home.”

Thornhill: So, Mike, about what year was this?

Helm: Well, let’s see. I went in the Peace Corps in 1966. And so that was 1967, and we spent our first married year in Kenya. Actually, the Peace Corps transferred me to Kenya, and I taught in a secondary school there. The same one that she was teaching in and so that was 1968. Yeah—we met in 1967, got married in ’68. December ’68. So that’s the story.

Brokaw: All right. We’ll go on from there. There are a lot of questions about pre-EMCA time, because your life is really very interesting. And I’d like my next question to be, what was your career before retiring?

Helm: Oh, I was an English teacher. A high school English teacher. The last fifteen years, I taught in the international high school at South Eugene High School and Sheldon High School. And before that I taught in the English department at Sheldon. And before—well I taught in Springfield. It wasn’t easy to get a job teaching in those years in Eugene and Springfield.

Brokaw: Was this during the ’80s?

Helm: Yeah. Yeah, it was.

Thornhill: Mike, I have one question for you. About when did you arrive in Eugene and what was the reason?

Helm: Well, when we came back—when we came from Africa—we went to Pendleton and it just wasn’t the same. You know like what Thomas Wolfe said, “You can’t go home again.” I had a truck driving job all set up at Pendleton Grain Growers and thought we’d spend a year there, then figure out the United States and see what that was like. But it didn’t take us that long to figure it out. It was not a good

place for Chris and me. So, I talked to my high school English teacher, and she said, “What do you want to do?” And I said I want to write. She said, “Well you don’t want to be stuck in Pendleton.” She said, “Go to the U of O” [University of Oregon]. And of course, that was like anathema to me because I was a Beaver, but I did end up down here and I went to the U of O and got a master’s degree and ended up teaching. So—

Brokaw: All right. Oh—go ahead.

Helm: Well, I was gonna say we also taught in Alaska for a while. But really, we always came back here to Eugene.

Thornhill: What is your master’s degree in?

Helm: English and let me see, what is it? It’s in English and—secondary in history. It’s a long time ago. (laughs) It was—let’s see, I think that [it was], oh, I know, Southeast Asia, because Vietnam was still very much, well, no, let’s see. We got out of Vietnam in ’75. So, it was before the—I got my master’s in ’72, I guess. Yeah, so anyway that’s what it was.

Brokaw: Well, you said you wanted to be a writer. And I happen to know you have written a number of books, and they’ve been published. Can you tell us some of the titles and the themes of these books?

Helm: Yeah, I realized after I wrote the abstract—I’ve never heard that word used that way before—that I’d forgotten to mention that I wrote these books. Yeah, well the one I’m proudest of is the one called—it was, what you call, a critical success and a market failure—it was called *Tracking Down Coyote*.

Helm: And it was—

Thornhill: Oh, Mike. Can you repeat the name of your book?

Helm: Sure, *Tracking Down Coyote*. And it was about—it’s kind of a tapestry of history, folklore, and mythology. All three of those. Well, and the fourth ingredient would be kind of my experiences along the trails to different places. I hiked a long way on the beaches, Oregon beaches, and I hiked a long way on the Oregon section of the Pacific Crest Trail. Also, across the desert. I had an idea to walk across Oregon, but that didn’t work out. Had a lot of funny ideas in those days. So—

Anyway, *Tracking Down Coyote*. I wrote one called *Oregon’s Ghosts and Monsters*. That was a really fun one to write. And my best selling book was called *Conversations with Pioneer Women*. I actually didn’t write that one, but I edited it and—well yeah, I edited it. It was just exactly what the title says. It was conversations with pioneer women, and they were written by—the interviews were done by a guy called Fred Lockley, back in the teen years, the nineteen

teens—and he interviewed people that had come over on the Oregon Trail. And they talked about life on the trail and also their life after they got here. And he had this wonderful way of writing. He was blind, by the way; I'd forgotten that. But he had a pencil and a pad, and he'd go talk to these people. And he'd write down the conversation and he did it in such a way that when you read these interviews it's kind of like talking to your grandmother or listening to your grandmother. He caught—he just had a way with words that worked to make you think you were part of the conversation, just about. They were really good conversations and that book sold thousands of copies. I was really pleased with it.

When I got into that business, I didn't realize that I got into it to write, and I didn't realize if you're going to write you have to also eat. If you have four kids that's pretty important too. So I ended up travelling around selling books, and thought, well, I didn't want to be a book salesman. The other one was called *Conversations with Pioneer Men*. And that one—men don't sell as well as women—for some reason. I don't know. But those pioneer women they really jumped off the bookshelves.

Brokaw: I happen to have bought both of those titles, the women and the men.

Helm: Oh, good.

Brokaw: Had them available at Hope Abbey. And we've sold them over the years.

Helm: Oh, right. Yeah, I used to—I had a lot left over [books] and I just kept bringing them up there.

Brokaw: Well, we certainly enjoyed them. I've lent them out to other board members and—anyway, I thank you for writing those.

Thornhill: Yeah, I looked up your book. The first edition of *Conversation with Pioneer Women* can go for a hundred dollars.

Helm: Wow! I never got anything like that for it.

Brokaw: Okay, I think let's get into the cemetery a little bit. You started patrolling the cemetery at night as soon you moved into your house, which we've mentioned is almost next door to Hope Abbey. Did you go out alone or—would you tell us some of the experiences you've had while patrolling, and I think my big question is that did you go out alone?

Helm: Oh yeah. Yeah. Well, the reason I started it, of course, was self-preservation. I mean we bought this place in 19—let me think—I think it must have been 1983. And it was a day care center called Playland. And Playland was of course empty at night. So, there was never anybody living this close to the mausoleum as we do. I think Playland was in business for twenty-five, twenty-four, twenty-five years.

So it, the cemetery, became a real hot spot for people to party. And when the bars closed downtown, and you wanted to carry on your party, you'd just come on up to the cemetery. And I had seen up to twenty-four people on top of the mausoleum. Skateboards, beer bottles, screaming at each other. It was really grim.

We walked before we moved here—we'd take a walk on Sunday mornings and walk through the cemetery. We thought, "What a peaceful, wonderful place this is. So quiet. Wouldn't it be nice to live there." And so we had a couple of architecture students draw up some plans for expanding this place. We more than tripled the size of it because we had a lot of kids—a lot of other people moving in with us.

Thornhill: Mike, where is your house near the cemetery? What cross street are you close to?

Helm: Well, if University came through, we would be at Twenty-Sixth and University. But the cross street that people have to use is Potter. So, Twenty-Sixth and Potter. And then you go uphill and we're the last house on the left. We are the closest house to Hope Abbey.

So anyway, the first Saturday night that we were here, I had all the kids down here in this room, actually, which is the closest part of the house to the mausoleum. And I heard screaming of obscenities and beer bottles crashing down. And I thought, "What the hell is going on here?" It was just a normal Saturday night for the cemetery. So I thought, well, oh yeah, we had neighbors who told us to never walk up there. Don't ever walk up there because you'll get mugged. I thought, "I'm not going to live next to—I'm not going to raise my kids next to a place that we're supposed to fear." So I figured I'd better see if I can pacify it. And I did actually. It wasn't easy.

Brokaw: What did you run across other than the students. Was there a problem of people spending the night up there at that time?

Helm: Well, we had a few campers, but not a lot. They don't—the big problem was the kind of—just sort of derelict—kind of people and the drug dealers. And we'd go there and find beer bottles and panties, and syringes, and I mean it was a real—the drugs were really bad. And the cops didn't like to come there, and the Masons, of course, wouldn't cooperate and even sign a thing that said they would follow through if the cops arrested somebody for trespassing or anything up there. They wouldn't give us the time of day, much less a key to a gate or anything. Don't ask for that, no way. So—

Helm: I kind of forgot the question.

Brokaw: But it was rough up there. Well, this next question I have for you goes into the same thing. In 1986, well before the EMCA took possession of the cemetery in 1995, you formed the Hope Abbey Restoration Committee. And when vandals

toppled the McMurry obelisk, you brought reporters to view the damage. As a result, Don Bischoff [local columnist for the Register-Guard] made the cemetery one of his causes. Would you explain this part of the history of the cemetery?

Helm: (Dog barks) Sorry. Yeah sure. That's pretty much how it happened, but it's not quite the whole story.

What happened—well, when we moved in here in 1985, I kind of told you what inspired me to start patrolling the cemetery. I really believed that one of the most important things that happened up there was a presence. There was somebody there, and when it started to look like it was cared for, people began to care for it. But anyway by 1986 we had formed HARC, the Hope Abbey Restoration Committee. Roxanne Gillespie was sort of the chairperson for that, but—like before—the Masons, of course, wouldn't give us the time of day. Or they wouldn't—we wanted to bring work parties in and stuff like that. And the Masons were not supportive, and they wouldn't even open the gate. So, I have a very low view of the Masons.

So what I did was I decided I would go up there and make a slideshow. And I made a slideshow of the broken tombstones because the Masons had sent this giant mower around and you could sit down in my house and hear those tombstones, those old tombstones, being crashed into by that mower—we called that “Masonic maintenance”—and just wrecked by this machine that goes through the cemetery as fast as it could, just to get the job done.

Kind of got off there but—

Oh, I know. So, I had two thirty-six exposure rolls of film. And I thought, well, that will take care of all the tombstones in the whole cemetery. But before I got even as far north as Hope Abbey, I'd run out of film. I mean there were so many busted up tombstones, and it just—I mean the place was a wreck. So I went and got two more rolls, and then I got two more rolls, and pretty soon I had, like, hundreds of pictures of busted up tombstones. From here. From the cemetery. It kind of opened my eyes to what was going on there.

So I made a slideshow, and I took it around and showed it to the county commissioners. I showed it—I think I showed it to the City Council. And I started dragging people up there to show them what the mess was. And the Masons were totally embarrassed by my efforts. But Don Bischoff was one of the people that I got to come and walk through the mud with me. Also, Ruth Bascom—when she was mayor—she was up there. I can still remember the TV reporters coming up there, and they were wearing these high heeled shoes and walked down some of the muddy paths. But they did really good stories on 'em, and people began to pay attention to this place. I mean it's such a jewel. How can you not.

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Brokaw: Did you know Ruth Bascom is now a resident of the cemetery. She and her husband.

Helm: Yeah. So anyway, I wrote op-eds and I published them in the *Emerald* [U of O newspaper]. Can't remember what *Eugene Weekly* was called then—the predecessor to that. And in the *Register-Guard*. So of course, every time I did that, the Masons were further embarrassed. But still, you couldn't inspire them to do anything. They'd just come up here—and you could, you kind of could look at the cemetery at that time and if you blurred your vision a little bit, it's like, "Man! This the most beautiful place in Eugene." You'd be ignorant of what was really going on. You wouldn't see all the beer bottles and needles and all the busted-up tombstones. And you wouldn't hear that giant tractor going through there like it did. So anyway—

Brokaw: Did anything result from all these people going up [there], the TV stations, publishing in newspapers?

Helm: Well actually everybody would say, "Wow! That's really sad, but we don't have any money." The commissioner would say, "Well it's not our bailiwick, it's in—it belongs to the city of Eugene." City of Eugene would say, "Hey no, it's not a park, we can't deal with it." And of course, the Masons, they didn't want any help. They just wanted the place to sit here and rot away. So, what actually happened was I worked on this for ten years. So in 1985, I think, was it—no, it was 1995—that's August actually of 1995—I went up in the cemetery like I normally did in the morning. I took my dog up there. And I saw that somebody put a rope around that obelisk and tore it down and swiped the ball that was on top of it. I just sat down. I just sat down and cried. [Helm is emotional talking about it again.]

Brokaw: Mm-Hm. Yeah.

Helm: Like I still do—when I think about that day—because I'd been working on this for ten years and this is the result. So, I got home and I called Barbara Keller, who was on the City Council at that time. And I knew her because I'd coached her kids in soccer. And she lives right on the edge of the cemetery on the other side. And I got her to meet me up there and we stood by that. [Helm is emotional.]

Brokaw: Was she—was she greatly moved by this too?

Helm: She was.

Brokaw: Good. Good. And I remember Barbara Keller, and she could get things done.

Helm: She did. Yeah, we just—it's just like a current, an electric current, passed between us. And she saw finally what I'd been seeing all that time. And she said, "We got to do something."

Brokaw: Or we'd lose it forever.

Helm: Yep.

Thornhill: Mike, do you want to take a pause for a moment, or do you want to keep going?

Helm: Oh, let's keep going. I'm an emotional guy. Sometimes it gets in the way.

Brokaw: I think emotional people gets things done.

Helm: Well—

Brokaw: You care.

Helm: Barbara sure did. She found Kay Holbo, and Kay had already restored a cemetery on the other side of town.

Brokaw: The Mulkey Cemetery.

Helm: Yeah. Kay knew all the right people and she had all the diplomatic skills. She could even talk to the Masons, believe it or not. So she did, and then eventually she was the force that got things done. She knew people that could come up with gravel or wood chips or, you know, she could—she got the sheriff's work party up there to clear up the poison oak and blackberries and stuff. She was—she is a powerful lady. And—

Brokaw: In the right way.

Helm: And then Kay found David Lynch, who worked there—he worked there for about seventeen or eighteen years, I think. And that was a really important step that a lot of people don't realize, but the important thing is that there is a presence there. And that it looks like it shouldn't be vandalized. If it looks like it should be vandalized then somebody will vandalize it for sure. And that's the way this place looked. Who the hell cares if you go over there and kick over a tombstone or something like that. Because nobody cares about this place, but you can come in here, you can do drugs. You can get drunk. You can do anything you want. Throw beer bottles at the rocks. And now the place looks like somebody cares for it. And somebody does. So, people treat it nicely.

Brokaw: Well, you were a founding board member.

Helm: Yeah.

Brokaw: Did Kay—did you approach Kay and tell her what you'd been through with the city, the county, everyone?

Helm: Well, I think so. Yeah, I think so. But she could talk to these people better than I could. I mean I was just like, "Why did you do that?" Like an irate, kind of, citizen. And Kay was just a very calm lady. And she got all this stuff donated and had these work parties. What a powerful force she was for the cemetery.

Brokaw: And did she ask you to be on the board? The first board?

Helm: I think so. I actually don't remember very much, but I think I was asked to do that.

Brokaw: And?

Helm: And I was on it. I remember being on—going to the meetings.

Brokaw: About how many years were you on the board?

Helm: Probably two or three—well probably, I don't know, three to five I'll say as a guess.

Brokaw: All right. And as a board member, what were the most important things you wanted to see improved? And I'm going to give you a choice here. Was your interest greatest for the grounds or the mausoleum or preserving the history of the place?

Helm: Well, let's see. I wanted to preserve the place. Whether the—the history was important of course. But if the place wasn't preserved, the history is going to vanish like it's going to be eroded and turned into sand. So yeah, I think probably—a better term might be security, because that was my job on the board. Everybody had some usable— some kind of usable skill. Like maybe they were an accountant or lawyer— something like that. Or had a lot of money or knew somebody who had a lot of money. Well, I didn't have any of those things, but I could walk around the cemetery and make sure that people understood that it's a working cemetery and you have to treat it with respect, and so that's what I did.

Brokaw: And about how long after the grounds were starting to be taken care of did you notice that there was an improvement in the fact that people were not abusing the cemetery.

Helm: Well, it took a while. It wasn't an immediate fix. But the important—the really important thing was the presence of David. He was there twenty hours a week. Only twenty hours a week, not a lot. I mean yeah, that's right, twenty hours a week. And people would come up there with maybe some idea of hell raising or vandalizing or something and they'd see him this time and the next time they came up here, he wouldn't even be there, but well maybe he is here, you know. Looking around like they'll do and think maybe I shouldn't be doing this. You

know it was a real wonderful change because sometimes you could go up and there wouldn't be anyone up there. Sometimes you'd go up and, "Whoops! There he is. He works here, he's part of the forest."

Brokaw: When you were patrolling at night, what did you say to people? Or how did that go?

Helm: Well, that was the same, the same thing as a presence. I mean I didn't meet everybody every night, but I met somebody most nights. And I would say to people that "the cemetery's closed." I mean, it would depend on what they were doing, but "the cemetery's closed and it's time for you to take your partying and go somewhere else." And almost every time I would get this, "Oh yeah, sir. Sorry, I thought this was a park." "No, the park is down there."

Brokaw: Did you ever scare any of the people with any of your stories? I heard you told one at a board meeting you visited [recently] and told some stories.

Helm: I have this really nice story that I like to tell when I find groups of kids up there. I'll tell them, "Well this is a cemetery and it's closed. You can stay, though, if you're just gonna hang out and you're behaving yourselves. And, of course, you know about the Cemetery Walker, right?" And, "Everybody knows about the Cemetery Walker." And the kids will look around at each other. "Cemetery Walker? No—tell us." So, I'll tell them about the Cemetery Walker. "Well, you won't even know he's there until he's right behind you. He's this big hairy guy, kind of looks like Sasquatch or something. And he's got this terrible complexion that's called acne vulgaris. And he's got pimples erupting all over his face, but you don't have to worry about him. You won't even know he's there until he's right behind you."

By then they are looking behind them, and I'd say, "He and I have a deal, and he won't come out when I'm here." And then I leave. "Yeah, I'm leaving now, so you guys don't worry about him because what he likes to do is—which one of you is the slowest one? The rest of you don't have to worry at all. You just have to outrun Joe here. But what he really wants to do is he puts his arms around you and holds you tight. And sticks his tongue in your ear." And when the girls hear that story they go, "Ew!" "Well, you don't have to worry about him because he doesn't come out until—" (lots of laughing by Helm and Brokaw)

Brokaw: Oh, that's a perfect way to scare kids!

Helm: Anyway, I'm gone now.

Brokaw: Okay. I want to move on to the present day, and I assume you're still going up there at night? Are you or are you—?

Helm: Oh, I am for sure.

Not every night, but every night that I'm home. I don't think I missed a night that I'm home.

Brokaw: Okay.

Helm: But we have a cabin in the coast. And we go there, too. That's where I was last weekend.

Brokaw: Well, when you do go up there, I would think there would be very few people up there at night anymore. Am I right?

Helm: You are right. I mean I've hardly seen anybody up there lately. And the kind of people has changed, too. You know, mostly I see young couples and they're walking through the cemetery or they're sitting on a bench, talking to each other and waiting for the moon to come up. And they're very quiet and respectful. And that's okay with me. You can be there. But if you're up there hollering and yelling and stuff like that, this "ain't" the place you want to be, so they leave.

Brokaw: What you said before, that if something is nice and fixed up, people are going to respect it.

Helm: Yeah.

Thornhill: Mike, I'm curious to hear—just listening to your stories and how much love you have for the cemetery—what is one of your favorite spots in the cemetery and why?

Helm: Oh, well, we have a bench up there. My wife and I. And I like that. I mean it's sort of on an open area. It's the farthest south bench. Those benches aren't real comfortable but I sometimes just sit there and kind of organize my day. There's another bench closer to the north side. I think it's Hill, the Hill grave. So anyway, I like those two benches because you can just sit there all by yourself and it's a nice place to reflect on the day and your position, and if you have a problem it's a nice place to work it out.

I remember, I wrote a book called *Eugene, Oregon a Guide* one time. I reviewed all the cemeteries. "Where will you spend eternity?" And it was before I had any idea I'd be so close to this one. And I remember recommending it if you do a brown bag lunch, this a good place to do it, at the cemetery. In an old cemetery, like the one [Eugene Pioneer Cemetery] across from Mac Court [Mac Court, old UO Basketball arena]. You could just go in there and have a picnic, and there's just something really nice about it.

Brokaw: You're right. Well, they used to be used for social gatherings. And people would take their picnics to the cemeteries.

Helm: Yeah.

Brokaw: And they were for social places.

Looking to the future, are you hopeful or confident that the cemetery can survive? Or, better yet, thrive in the next ten years or even a hundred years and more? And what do you think is needed for the long-term success?

Helm: Well, I think for the long term we're going to need some sort of—I don't think it can continue to survive as a business, which it pretty much is now with the sale of the plots, because we're going to run out of plots. But I think it will become more and more valuable. People—like people in the neighborhood—realize that it's there. This neighborhood just loves it now. For a while, it was nothing but a nuisance. But now it's a real asset.

So, I think that for the long term you've got to have some sort of stable financing and I don't know what that's going to take. Whether it's going to be like the City of Eugene takes it over? I know in Pendleton the city runs the cemetery and that cemetery is well cared for. And it's in perpetual care. I think that one will last forever. But—forever is a bit much. Who knows what will be here forever? So I think stable financing is the most important thing. And also, education. I mean people have to realize what a gem this is. It's like wilderness, you know. The timber industry would say, "Well, you're locking up all these trees and you got plenty of wilderness." Well, look fifty years down the road, where you don't even know with wilderness—there's just isn't enough now. They're having permits to get into Middle Sister. And I know that I actually have gotten permission to float the Rogue River, and they're not easy to get. There's thousands of applicants and hundreds of permits. Anyway, they think wilderness or maybe cemeteries are in abundant supply. Maybe you've got enough for today, but you don't even have enough wilderness for today. And so, if you're planning for fifty years down the road you got to have some kind of way to perpetuate it. I'm not sure what that's going to be, because we can't keep selling plots forever.

Brokaw: No. No, and the board realizes that, and there is an endowment—in fact, more than one endowment—established. But we have to build on those. And we're looking into that currently. But something you said—the first thing you said is, "The cemetery is valuable to the neighborhood." It would probably be a good idea to somehow determine how we can involve the neighborhood in the cemetery more than we do.

Helm: Yeah. Well, I could tell you one thing that you could do is to let them know when the chainsaw and chipper is going to fire up at 6:30 in the morning right behind our house. We thought, "What the hell is that."

Brokaw: Now, see, the board is not aware of that.

Eugene Masonic Cemetery Association Mike Helm Interview

- Helm: So, anyway that was quite a shock that morning when that thing fired up. Sounded like it was right under our bedroom window. I thought, "Oh my god." You know those chippers are really noisy.
- Brokaw: You need to report that to the board or to the administrator, so that we don't have that starting that early in the morning.
- Helm: Well actually, I think that they start at 7:00. So, they did evolve to a little bit later.
- Brokaw: Okay.
- Helm: But I think that's just communication. That newsletter that John [Bredesen, board member] puts out—
- Brokaw: Yes.
- Helm: Is a really good idea.
- Brokaw: People sign up for that, so we know either their address or their email [address].
- Helm: Right.
- Brokaw: And we try to get as many as possible. Okay. But I think that we should look into the neighborhood and their support. Look to ways to involve them.
- Thornhill: And Mike, you mentioned John. Is that John Bredesen?
- Helm: Yeah.
- Thornhill: Thank you.
- Brokaw: And I think we are getting close to the end of this. I've kind of run out of my written questions, but is there anything else that you can think of that I forgot to even ask you?
- Helm: No, I don't think. Well, oh, you asked me if I go out there alone.
- Brokaw: Mm-Hm.
- Helm: I'm not sure if I ever answered that question. I was trying to get around back to it, but I circled away. Yeah, sure I go out there alone. Who else will go with me in the middle of the night?
- Brokaw: Do you take dogs with you or just alone?

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Helm: You know, when I started, I had these two really not very nice dogs. And of course, they've been long gone. So, I have a little blue heeler that goes with me now. And yeah, so if I ever do have a confrontation, I'm sure he'll stand and watch.

Brokaw: But they don't know that, whoever's there. Okay, if you don't have anything else. I thank you so much for this interview. It's been a fascinating interview that we've had. And thank you very much for doing this.

Helm: Well, you're welcome. Thank you very much for doing this. I think probably you're one of the steps in the preservation of the place. And it's just—it's such an awesome place, we're so lucky to have it right here in our backyard. Ten acres of big old trees. It's like a forest you know. And it's just awesome. It's a treasure.

Brokaw: It is. I agree with you completely.

Helm: Yeah, I guess—one thing is, I don't know who's going to take over when I kick the bucket here and somebody—I don't know—I hope there's somebody out there to just be that presence in the cemetery at night.

Brokaw: We have talked about that type of—yes. We have talked about that. Not about you not doing that, but about having a presence in the cemetery. We'll talk about it more now that you've brought it up again.

Helm: And you know, Wendi was a treasure too.

Brokaw: Who was that?

Helm: Wendi, Wendi Probst. [former landscape manager]

Brokaw: Oh, Wendi, yes!

Thornhill: And what is Wendi's last name?

Helm: I think Probst. P-r-o-b-s-t. [Wendi Kuchera, since her marriage]

Brokaw: Yes, that's correct. She just left us a few months ago. But she was there for a long time.

Helm: She was—yeah.

Brokaw: All right. Should we sign off now? All right.

Thornhill: Okay.

Brokaw: Thanks again.

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Thornhill: Thanks Mike.

Helm: All right, you're welcome. Thank you for doing this.

End of Interview