

Eugene Masonic Cemetery Association
Oral History Project

Narrator:

KAY HOLBO

Interviewed by:

ALEX BROKAW

KATE THORNHILL

January 23, 2021

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

NARRATOR

Kay Holbo graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1963 from the University of Oregon with a triple major in history, philosophy, and literature. She married Paul Holbo, Professor of History at the University of Oregon, and has two children.

In 1993 Kay was invited to join a planning committee, organized by the City of Eugene, to take ownership of the Eugene Masonic Cemetery located in Eugene, Oregon, established in 1859. Prior to forming the Eugene Masonic Cemetery Association as a nonprofit organization, Kay led the rehabilitation of a smaller neighborhood cemetery, the Mulkey Cemetery. She was voted EMCA Board President for five years and then Vice President of Fundraising for twelve years.

In 2013, Kay was awarded an Oregon Heritage Excellence Award for Historic Cemetery Preservation, and in 2016 the EMCA honored her with a basalt column placed next to the newly named “Kay Holbo Camas Field.” Kay has also been honored for her volunteer work in historic cemetery preservation by the Oregon League of Historic Preservation (now known as Restore Oregon), the Oregon Pioneer Association, the Daughters of the American Revolution, the City of Eugene, and United Way.

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: Kay, 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, 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 Kay Holbo on January 23, 2021 taking place over the telephone and Zoom, a web conferencing tool. The recordings will be made available for research and educational purposes for future EMCA boards and staff and the general public.

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

Holbo: Yes, I do.

Brokaw: Okay we have an affirmative answer. Now I would like to read an introduction.

Our interview today is with Kay Holbo, the founder and first president of the Eugene Masonic Cemetery Association.

Kay graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1963 from the University of Oregon with a triple major in history, philosophy, and literature. She married Paul Hobo, Professor of History and they have two children.

In 1993 Kay was invited to join a planning committee organized by the City of Eugene to take ownership of the Eugene Masonic Cemetery, Eugene's oldest, established in 1859. A nonprofit was formed, the Eugene Masonic Cemetery Association, or EMCA, to rescue the cemetery and its historic mausoleum, Hope Abbey.

Kay, who had led the rehabilitation of a smaller neighborhood cemetery, the Mulkey Cemetery, was voted board president for five years and then vice president for fundraising for twelve years.

In 2013 Kay was awarded an Oregon Heritage Excellence Award for Historic Cemetery Preservation.

In 2016 the EMCA honored her with a basalt column placed next to the newly named Kay Holbo Camas Field, a beautiful lavender landscape in spring.

Kay has also been honored for her volunteer work in historic cemetery preservation by the Oregon League of Historic Preservation, now known as Restore Oregon, The Oregon Pioneer Association, The Daughters of the American Revolution and the City of Eugene and the United Way of Lane County.

Bravo Kay!

Kay, do you have an opening comment or comments before we start the questions?

Holbo: I guess I would start by saying nobody grows up thinking they're going to restore old cemeteries; it is really something you fall into. As I look back, I realize that what led me into it was not particularly academic interests. Or what provided the background that allowed me to take hold of that organization and start it on its first years was life skills, instead of academic background and skills.

I grew up in a very small community; my father was the banker. I learned two things from him I think that were relevant for what I did with the Masonic Cemetery. One that I acquired is absolutely a very strong sense that debt was to be avoided. The other thing I acquired was the sense that he was very closely tied to his community. He had this network of contacts and friends and people he could go to, and whenever I walked down the street with him we couldn't get very far before he would stop to talk to somebody and they seemed happy to see him coming. And I got the sense and the feeling I could not have identified at that time, that this was an elaborate networking, as we call it now. It was something that helped him be a leader for many, many decades. He enjoyed it, he did it well, and he had four brothers who did the same thing. And in my images, my childhood images of those five men I saw confidence and energy and a kind of personal agency. They knew how to do things, they knew how to get along with people, they knew how to solve problems and they were grateful to do those things.

So I had this kind of unconscious introduction to a world in which everybody did this—or not that I thought everybody did it, but it was something I saw. And in looking back at what I did with the cemetery, it was something that I drew upon because that was my style and had been transferred to me as a very workable style.

Specifically, how did I go from being involved with the Mulkey Cemetery to the Masonic Cemetery. I should say that after I had children, for a few years I did the suburban mother kind of thing.

We lived on top of a hill and behind a cemetery and one day fire broke out in the cemetery in the high grasses and much to the chagrin and the horror of the neighbors, the fire department did not know who we were, or where we were. And there was a fire, so the neighbors put it out with their hoses. But it was a wakeup call to us, somebody needed to stand up and say, "Who is in charge of this place, who owns it, who is responsible, who will help us prevent the next fire?" And I have learned now that when you stand up and say those kinds of things—

It goes straight towards being the next president, yes.

Thornhill: This is Kate Thornhill speaking, I was wondering if you could tell us what year did that fire happen, if you can recall.

Holbo: It would have been in the late '70s.

I got busy and looked into who is managing this. It turned out to be one of the few remaining pioneers from this pioneer cemetery was an older woman, and all

the other pioneers are gone. So, she was in charge of a four-acre cemetery, with almost no funds; she only had enough money to have it mowed twice a year. So that was the reason why—in August in Oregon, the grasses grow high.

And so, one thing I did was think about if I step forward and try to help with this, what authority do I have to do this? It got me thinking about authority.

I was very lucky to find two living direct descendants of Philip Mulkey, the man who began the Mulkey Cemetery. I became friends with them. We had a neighborhood event where everybody could come.

First, we cleaned up the cemetery, and then we had ice cream and met under the trees and we talked about passing the baton from Mrs. Gertrude Albro, the remaining pioneer, to me and everybody agreed on this. We talked about what we would be doing, how we would raise money. But basically, I made sure that there was some sort of ceremonial moment at which the baton was passed. And we could show pictures and other things so that if anybody ever said to me, “Who gave you the authority to do this and this and this, ...?” It was very helpful to me then to think about credibility and authority.

So that picnic took place in ‘82, and from ‘82 until 2005 I was actively involved. In fact, I was the only person, but there was a board of directors that met yearly then. It was such a small thing, but I learned a great deal. I learned, among other things, about the rules and regs, the state rules and regulations for pioneer cemeteries.

Brokaw: Excuse me, were there still active burials there?

Holbo: There hadn’t been for a long time, but as people came forward and asked for them, I said yes. There were active burials for a family that already had a plot. Was I selling things? Not really for a while. We had a burial about once a year. It was really a very low-key involvement. But I learned, and because of that involvement there, when the City became concerned about the condition at the Masonic Cemetery, which is about four miles from my house, they asked me to join.

They had put together what was a planning committee to talk about creating a happier future for what was really a very, very troubled historic site.

And now I’m looking at my watch. I want to make sure we’re not going over time.

Brokaw: Okay you’re getting into some of the questions I already have. Can I start with the questions now? Because I’m going to have to cross one off my list here happily.

All right, just to back up a little bit, where were you born and where did you grow up, you didn’t mention the city.

Holbo: In Grants Pass, Oregon, in a really small town.

Brokaw: Of course, you went to university, because of what I read in your intro. Did the university education provide you with any skills to manage the cemeteries? I think you already answered that. But would you speak to that a little bit again?

Holbo: I think growing up I became interested. I became a book reader and I became interested in how people lived in other places and times, and I focused on history. I married a history professor. So, I helped with his research and writing. So an interest in a local cemetery was not alien to me; it seemed to be a natural fit. I'm a third generation Oregonian, so it was a natural connection.

Nothing that I learned academically led to managing a small cemetery. What I did was manage a small cemetery and take care of all sorts of daily needs. But really for that small cemetery it was weekly or monthly needs.

Brokaw: I think we're now going to switch back to where you were. And that was how did it happen that you are called on to lead the rehabilitation of the Masonic Cemetery and I believe you started with that. That was the City of Eugene [Oregon] called.

Holbo: City of Eugene. And what I was going to do at that point was to quickly go through the history of the Masonic Cemetery in maybe four or five minutes, describing how it became such a trouble spot—

Brokaw: Oh good.

Holbo: By 1980 or so. It was incorporated on the same date that Oregon became a State, February 14, 1857. They were very proud of—

Brokaw: '59. I'm sorry, I've got that burned into my brain. Okay.

Holbo: —And from the very beginning somebody suggested that one thing that Masons do in a new community is to create a cemetery. So they created a cemetery and by 1910—

In their records there's already evidence of problems, security problems, vandalism, the same sort of thing that every cemetery has. I think that by that time there were about four hundred burials there in the cemetery.

The Masonic Cemetery is ten acres, it was ten acres of beautiful tall trees and high grasses and underbrush and blackberries and underneath all of this was just a marvelous collection of native plants, trees, shrubs and flowers.

So this was 1910, and they decided surprisingly that one of the ways they would deal with all their problems—which was they didn't have any money anymore—they decided to take advantage of an architect in Portland [Oregon], who was offering to build and design mausoleums around the state of Oregon, and there were five or seven of them and we were one. The construction of the mausoleum went on from '13 to '14; labor was thirty-five cents an hour.

It was an elegant building; it was one of the first buildings to be built of reinforced concrete and because of that they weren't going to worry about fire, and they weren't going to worry about too many other things. They saw it, I think, a relatively maintenance-free project, and it may have been or may have

looked that way in the beginning. It was a real—Crypts sold for \$200 apiece, and they went fast in the beginning. And in fact, people took—and I've never understood how this was exactly done practically—they transferred their buried family from the graves to Hope Abbey, which was handsome and stylish and much more probably attractive to them. And by then what was an old cemetery with problems—

[ed note: deleted interaction with Kay asking what the ping was on Alex's computer]

They had a mausoleum; it was pretty filled by 1930 when the major company that owned it in Portland went bankrupt. That meant the Masons were on their own in terms of running this thing.

Then came the depression and the Second World War, and the end of the Second World War, and there's almost no records about what happened during that time, I think their attention was just other places.

Families of those buried in Hope Abbey looked at the condition of it and they said, "Yikes, this is in very poor condition. We will create an organization and look after the maintenance and the care of it." They did this; they charged each other five dollars a year. It lasted twelve years. And I think at that point they found that the needs of a building that was beginning to deteriorate—

It was the focus of a lot of vandalism. Believe it or not, people at the University of Oregon thought that if—you may want to excise this—but students were sometimes given the green light to go into the mausoleum and take things, art students. So, things were taken out of the mausoleum, things that had been vandalized. It was—the mausoleum was—beginning to be very vulnerable. At some point—and I think this was the point where they put locks, where they locked the door. Other than that, that beautiful building had not been locked. The people could come in.

But in 1945 they looked at the condition of it. They looked at the vandalism, they looked at the roof and probably the mud on the floor and decided, something had to be done. They worked on this for about twelve years, and then they just let it go. Along came 1976, with the celebration of the bicentennial of America, and the local historical society got active and cleaned up the whole area, raised some money, and put that money into the Lane County Historical Society for safekeeping. Had a nice celebration and hoped that somehow this would—somebody else would come along to carry on. But when all of this good work was done, they all left, so there again there was a real lack of daily management.

By the '80s, neighbors were complaining about it. There were terribly raucous Saturday nights and there were screams and yells. Women did not want to go into the cemetery. People could not see through the cemetery. When we took over the cemetery, the police told me there was no point in trying to follow anybody into the cemetery, even if you knew they had just stolen a car or something, because once a policeman entered the cemetery it was so dense with overgrowth and trees

that police couldn't find anyone. There were too many places to hide quickly for somebody who is on foot relative to somebody who drove in in a police car and just tried to find people, so the police didn't want to go there.

Neighbors became increasingly concerned. Barbara Keller, who was the City Council person for that area, got involved and said to the City, "Would you take this over?" and the City said, "No, we don't want anything to do with an old cemetery, but yes—"

Thornhill: If I may interrupt could we circle back to what year this conversation was happening, about when the City made the decision not to be responsible for the maintenance?

Holbo: Would probably be '92 or '93.

Thornhill: Thank you.

Holbo: Because they said we're going to set up a problem-solving process, which we hope will result in the creation of a separate nonprofit. And all of that it then becomes—and then the Masons were now on board with doing this. They were cooperating, so they chose about twenty people for this problem-solving process. And then they asked me because of my involvement with the Mulkey Cemetery just to sort of sit in on it and just to come—

Thornhill: If you can recall, you'd mentioned that there were twenty people, who are some of those individuals; would you like to share their names.

Holbo: I will tell you that there was a well-chosen committee; they were the people who had a stakeholder in the situation. Neighbors who had complained, neighbors who wanted to do something, somebody from the historical society, there was somebody from the neighborhood association; there were two people from the Masons, there were people from the University of Oregon. It was well chosen.

They then had public meetings where if someone had come to a public meeting and shown an interest and any kind of capability, they would have been invited to do this. So, it was fairly conceived for everybody to take part, and later when I got questions about, "What gave you, Kay Holbo, the right to tell me I can't do this," then I could go back and tell them how this process went, of passing the baton. It was very carefully done. I joined in about the later part of '94, that conversation. I remember that early in '95—and all of the conversation centered around what were the goals, what were things people wanted to see taken care of, the vandalism, the deterioration. They wanted better public relations; they would like to work with the history of it. All of these were laudable goals that everybody agreed on. We got to January of that year, of 1994, and the Masons said, "Okay, folks, all of this is great in concept, but you need to get your feet wet. You need to find out what it is really like to run this cemetery, because it's been very hard, and we've gotten a lot of criticism and now we're willing, happy to work with the creation of a responsible board."

“We want you to take care of Memorial Day this year.” That would be an event that was going to happen three and a half, four months into the future. That was a reasonable timeline. So several people volunteered to do things. One man volunteered that he takes care of the mowing. Great, that was a big part of it. Another person said she’d have some sort of an historical something to show people who came to visit. There would be the book to sign, it would be low key, but we would be open. As somebody, the representative would be there. I just sat on the sidelines, and thought, I’ll see what happens, because I was not intending to ever get more involved than that.

Memorial Day came, and I went up to see what was going on. The door was open, there was nobody there. No, no mowing had been done, not at all. There was no evidence of what we were trying to do. I walked outside and here was an older man sliding down the grasses on the south side of the cemetery behind the mausoleum and he looked like he needed help. He was sliding on the seat of his pants down that hillside. So, I went up to him and I asked him who he was. Alex, this will make you gasp. This was Orlando Hollis, the retired dean of the law school, whose family plot was up behind him. He had weak legs and he had gone up to see what was going on, what was going on with his plot, see what this new group was doing. And he was madder than hops, was he ever angry, by the time I got him down—but he was embarrassed—down and on his wobbly feet. His legs gave out, I think, somewhere earlier than the rest of him, so he was wobbling. I got him into his car, got the car headed down the lane and out the street. And I let a while pass and then I called his home and talked to his wife, and he did get home, but he was still mad. So, then I called Jim Johnson, my contact with the City and said, “Expect a very angry phone call tomorrow morning.”

Brokaw: Was Jim Johnson at that time the City Manager?

Holbo: Jim Johnson was the head of Parks and Recreation—of the cultural division. Jim Johnson was the contact with the City. He was the one who planned out this process, he did an excellent job of it. He was a great contact. He sort of had an idea of when things should happen, when a board should form, incorporation, bylaws, formation of the board, president and all of that. And he didn’t want to be—

This nice timeline interrupted by the fact that this organization is small, the planning committee had really dropped the ball. So he’s—

I was mad, I said, “If I’m going to continue to do this, I think I need a bigger say,” and by that time this group was somewhat embarrassed at the lack of success, at the total lack of success and—long story short—many of them left the planning committee when it became a board. We had a board of about six people. That was what was left of this group. I was the president. Jim Johnson was my contact with the City. Two Masons, who were excellent, Jim Stroud and Rich Fish, remained on the board. A wonderful neighbor named Roxanne Gillespie was my right-hand person for more than a year, probably two years. She was just terrific at doing things.

So we were set up, this is now fall, there were bylaws written, there was a nonprofit in place, and they set the date of February 14th, 1995 to actually hold the ceremony where the Masons formally transferred ownership to this new organization. So, it was very carefully planned. Everybody had a chance to take part, the goals were all agreed upon; a relatively small and inexperienced group of people chose to be board members and I was their leader.

Thornhill: Kay, I'm curious to hear—this is less a question about time and individuals—but I am curious to hear, you had shared earlier about your experience with the fire in the '70s, and while you were living in the neighborhood where the cemetery is located. When this board came into shape and was becoming ultra-formalized, now I'm just curious, how did you feel when this was becoming formalized?

Holbo: I felt like this was a hill of problems.

And they passed on to us \$15,000 which was the accumulation from contributions or the sales of plots over the years. All of this was passed on. And I think it was the week after the formal transfer took place, and I went up there one morning, and found the big iron gate to the front of the cemetery on the corner of University and Twenty-fifth Avenue.

Well, no, it's not University, its one block in—anyway, there's a big iron gate. Yeah, someone cut the cable that held it to the big tree. All of a sudden, this huge iron gate was on the ground and it was just a sprawling, many-ton thing that would have prevented any fire engine from going in, any police car going in, I mean all of a sudden, we had security concerns. And so that was the first thing that popped up.

What did I do? Because it sort of—what I did then was began a template that was expanded over and over and over again in working on it.

First of all, I picked up the phone and I called three gate repair people. I made appointments to meet them at the entrance, where the gate was, at intervals of fifteen minutes so that I could interview them and see if they wanted to do this. Give me a call and I will just have one visit to the cemetery.

Well three of them came, but the first two looked at me standing at the gate and kept right on going, maybe they didn't even acknowledge me. They didn't want anything to do with this. They looked at the big hill in the back, they looked at the problem gate on the ground and that was all. See, they kept right on driving. The third man came from Springfield [Oregon], whose name I've forgotten, popped out of the pickup and said, "Howdy, how can I help?" And it was obvious how he could help; he did help. He was practical, he gave me a very reasonable price. He picked up that gate with his whatever it was, he did it in a couple of days, and it was back up in a week. And it made me realize there were going to be refusals along the way, but that I would probably be able to find people who could help.

So that was just the beginning of the security problems. We had tremendous vandalism. That was tied to a kind of backlash against the idea that the cemetery

would now be owned by a group of people who were going to be actively managing it and doing these good things that we all agreed upon, but active management meant we had to corral the out-of-control parties, the drinking, the drug dealing, all of those things.

It was a lot of work.

We just— It wasn't work I could just hand over to this board. It was work that Roxanne and I did together. We learned who we could go to for support and help and when we needed a door opened. We had trouble getting the attention of the fire department. So, I went to Jim Johnson and he made a call and then I was able to talk to the fire department. We just began to work our name, our contacts, as they were, and went week by week, month by month, and security was always the problem.

My husband was on the city budget committee at that time. And I asked him once, what part of the City's budget is focused on vandalism for all of Eugene, and I think he said five percent. Well, we found that we were paying about five percent for doing various things to either repair vandalism, or to prevent it.

I went to the Lane County Historical Society and asked them if they would give us a grant. No, what they would give was the use of their mailing address on a one time only basis for me to send out a letter and try to raise money.

I did do that; I raised \$2,500 very quickly. I went to a security company, the kind that, you know, we open the gate, they drive to the cemetery up to the area at the top. I made a contract with them for two years and their presence was very helpful. Just being able to say—that we were able to put up a sign that said security was in place. It was just the beginning of a great deal of problems with security. There was a lot of evidence of individuals who did atrocious things.

Once somebody pushed over probably more than twenty tombstones over a weekend night. That was, that was amazing. We never figured out how they did—exactly, who did it.

Another amount of vandalism occurred when we tried to—we set up a program to identify or to answer the question of—the place looks like a mess, it looks like it's chaos. There is no appearance of a grid underneath there, which there should be. There was a plot map that shows all of the burial spaces and numbering them and showed that they were all twenty-by-twenty feet, contained about eight plots and in each one, or we call them—the big one was the lot—the little spaces were the burial spaces.

On paper, they should have been about—I think there were ten to fifteen feet between them, or maybe between each twenty-by-twenty plot—it all looks so orderly on paper—and then you looked at the reality and it was just dreadful. So the purpose of a big project, which the City got started, with help from Jim Johnson and the Masons and Ken Guzowski, who was the City person for historic preservation—the purpose of this was to have a visual record of every single plot as it exists now and to be able to answer the question of where are the four

corners? And is there still any reason—rhyme or reason—to the underground thing because I realized at that point, we could not sell things if we couldn't figure out where we were.

Brokaw: You know Kay, that kind of leads into a question that I had. How did people on your committee learn how to operate—legally operate—a cemetery, because there are state rules and regulations that abound. So how did you go about that?

Holbo: Jim Johnson, who shepherded us through the formation of bylaws, technical, passing the baton, didn't get involved in all of that at all. But I knew, from my working with the Mulkey, that there was a state board that oversees cemeteries, historic cemeteries, and other cemeteries. I knew that there were statutes and I read all of them, and there weren't that many. But I read and I re-read it and I went to the Masons. I went to the Musgrove's Family Mortuary with him. I already had a contact by working with the Mulkey Cemetery. And I asked them for technical help, to get me through this and to teach me, not just once, but over time. And they assigned one of their staff people to be my contact with them. And I knew when I needed, I had a question, and went to that person. They were absolutely wonderful.

They helped me, they didn't do the work for me, they pointed me in the right direction. And that was the best, the most professional thing to do. So gradually I learned those things. Again, I was looking for authority, what gives me the authority. Eventually we were challenged in court by somebody, again related to the Orlando Hollis plot, who felt they should be able to put up a little white picket fence. They should be able to do this and that, because it was their family plot and Orlando was the dean of the law school.

The Musgrove's had drilled into me that when you sell a plot and money passes and they get a deed for it, they do not own the plot physically, they own an easement that allows them to place a coffin, to make a burial, but they're not going to be responsible. We're not going to ask them to take care of them. We're not going to let them plant roses, or rhododendrons or let somebody else do poppies and something like that, because in order to control the whole cemetery we had to be able to say we have authority, and my personal feeling is, I'm unwilling to put all of this work into it if we can't control the whole cemetery. It didn't make sense for us to have responsibility without having control. So legally, that solved the problem of control; the judge ruled in our favor.

Brokaw: That makes so much sense.

When did you hire the first employees? And one would have been the sexton/administrator and the other would be the groundskeeper. Were they hired just after the association was formed or were they hired later on?

Holbo: Ken Guzowski, the man from the City, had a neighbor named David Lynch, who was in need of extra work. He was wonderful at doing anything involving landscaping things. David Lynch—by hand!—cleared that whole cemetery in three years.

We did not want to use sprays. We didn't want to use any artificial things. We were not going to go in and cut down the trees, so what was left? What was left was to take everything out that was invasive, like blackberries, ivy. You can imagine what this was like.

Brokaw: Oh, excuse me, you told me one time about how bad the vines were with a car. Can you relate that? Oh yes, great.

Holbo: —Was named Alice Adams, who had been taking care of the red book, which we'll get to in a moment, since probably 1945. She was, at that point, an older woman, but she was part of the board and she held the records. She had a good mind.

—Now I've lost my train. What was it?

Brokaw: About the car.

Holbo: Oh. She was the one who told me this story. Once, when they had a work party at some point—this would have been in maybe the '50s or '60s—she said they found a car buried in blackberries.

Brokaw: That to me, that's a great illustration of invasives.

Holbo: Yes. Another time, they found they were cutting down a lot of vines and they found a neatly manicured marijuana plot that probably goes back to the '60s.

Okay, David had to start with this jungle. And we paid him. I don't know what, we paid him whatever we could; he would defer taking money. He would—maybe every eighteen months—he gives me a wad of receipts for the materials he had purchased. He was low price and high productivity and trustworthiness, and it was just great to be a face to the public.

There were a lot of people walking dogs. People stopped and talked to him, asked him what he was doing. He was un confrontational. He was gentle, he would stop and tell them what was going on. He was a good face. He looked a little like Walt Whitman or something straight out of the nineteenth century.

Brokaw: I remember seeing him.

Holbo: What he did was start in with a shovel and rake and whatever else he had and began to clear things.

Brokaw: Did you hire him right after the board was formed, or was that a year or two later?

Holbo: I think it was probably during the following year.

Brokaw: Okay, and what about the sexton, when did you hire her?

Holbo: We did not even call her a sexton. I took part, I took care of any—

In 1996, we had our first burial there. I took care of that.

We hired her. She had been a board member. She graduated from the University of Oregon historic preservation program. And when she got her degree, she said “I’ll be your administrator,” so we had her lined up, yes.

Thornhill: And what is her name?

Holbo: Mary Ellen Rodgers. She was retired from the Navy; she now had a masters in preservation. She was meticulous in keeping records and making sure we knew what the reference was; she was very good. And she took it very seriously. And she was on duty—she came to feel she was on duty—twenty-four hours a day because she’d get calls from the police or calls from the Musgroves [Musgrove Mortuary] or somebody, possibly at night. And after about six years she said, “I just can’t take this anymore.” She had a disabled child and it was really a heavy stress for her.

Then that was followed by our fine, wonderful Sally Dietrich, who is a friend of Alex’s. And one of the many wonderful things Alex has done for us was to point us in the direction of Sally. Sally has been wonderful.

Brokaw: Can I just say a quick aside about Sally. I was having coffee with Sally and another friend, and Sally said, “You know, I wouldn’t mind having a part time job”, and I laughingly told her that this job was available at the cemetery, assuming that she would laugh too and say, “No, no, no,” and she didn’t. And she said truly that was her dream job. She loves old cemeteries and I know there is a word for that, but I forget what it is. And that is how she came to be our administrator, just by happenstance.

Holbo: And she knew a great deal about business, and she has been business-like. She’s also very creative aesthetically. She transformed the appearance of the mausoleum for their Memorial Day weekend into something that is just great. She has a wonderful sense of making something presentable, so I can’t say enough about her. How did we get to these people? Sometimes it was happenstance, sometimes somebody just came along. In the early days it was more casual.

It was—one thing that happened was that we did become—we headed towards people who were more experienced and more skilled, and at some point Hugh Prichard came to me and—about 1999—and said, “Would it be helpful to you if I were the next president?” I said, “Wow, would that ever be helpful.” So he was president, I think for two years. Then we had another president for ten years, John Bredesen.

And what happened between the time I first started and the gate fell over and people pulled out? I was telling you about the time when we had this great project and Sally Donovan [Historic Cemetery Preservationist and Consultant] and a photographer, who was a friend of mine, were going out into the cemetery and putting stakes in the corner of every plot to see whether it all made sense. Well, she put 400 stakes all over the cemetery, blue stakes. She lived in Hood River [Oregon] and went home for the weekends.

Brokaw: What was her last name?

Holbo: Donovan.

Brokaw: Sally Donovan, and she was known throughout the state?

Holbo: She was known throughout the northwest; yes, she was a professional.

Thornhill: So all of this is volunteerism, correct? Or is anyone getting paid to do this work?

Holbo: She was paid. She figured at the end of the project about two dollars an hour. She was paid from a grant that the City of Eugene got together with the Masons. I think they each put \$5,000 into it or something, but they were paying for—this was more help from the City. That was a very positive thing to do, to answer the question of what is underneath this horrible blanket of hedge. So she was great.

Brokaw: She actually was laying out the grid. Okay, very good.

And my friend Ashley Foster was a volunteer. He was a professional level photographer. He was a retired public health officer. And I brought him to the thing, and it was so much work clearing away each plot enough to see where was this tombstone—what did it say on the tombstone? He photographed each plot; he photographed each tombstone and what it said. She recorded the condition of the plot, the condition of anything else that was—and all of that was put on microfiche, it was put on film of some kind. She gave me at the end of the project this long set of boxes that held all of these things.

Thornhill: How long in feet do you think those boxes were? I know you just gave us a visual.

Holbo: I think we had five feet of them. Wow!

Brokaw: That's true, I've seen them, they were all in notebook binders.

Holbo: That is correct, yes.

And yes, it was a terrific tool.

And at this point I'd like to talk about— You asked what I felt, and what I did.

I had in my mind the need for authority and for credibility and for the capacity to handle the day-to-day administration, and what happened from there was what had been a kind of linear narrative of the decline of the cemetery and this kind of passing—the narrow passage that was very structured by the City—of the transfer. Then it sort of broadened out into areas where the problems repeated themselves again and again and again and again. Security was one. I call it authority. Fundraising—things like that. And they just kept repeating themselves in more complicated ways, and we kept repeating ourselves in more sophisticated ways until what we had was a lot of resources to call upon and we just used that

mix of resources in the ongoing planning for the next steps. The next fundraising and the next things to implement.

They [Masonic Lodge #11] gave us \$15,000. I said to the board, we're not even going to touch it; we're going to put that aside, we are not going to spend that money. We have to raise our own.

Shortly, I was able to get a gift of \$10,000. I got another gift within a couple of years of \$10,000.

Brokaw: Excuse me, Kay, how did you convince people or donors that those donations wouldn't go to waste, because of the past? So how were you able to convince them?

Holbo: Well, this story, it's worth saying—

Oh, are we almost out of time?

Thornhill: We are good; you keep going.

Holbo: Okay, all right. I got a call after—first I went to Ethan Newman, who was the head of the historical society and a former—

Well, he was known throughout town. He had a great deal of familiarity. I was given a list of sixty people on the contact lists from the Masons. This would have been ongoing contacts with specific families. I took him up and gave him that list and said, "Tell me. Who on this list has any money? Who on this list could help us?" And he recognized the name of someone—Goodrich.

So I called this Martha Goodrich. She lived at that retirement home at 29th and Portland.

Brokaw: Cascade Manor.

Holbo: I wrote her a letter and told her what we were doing, told her who I was and she apparently had been one of those who complained a lot. She was connected to the original Chambers family that had owned so many things around town. She was delighted to hear from me. She asked if I would take her to the cemetery to see her parents' burial space. I said sure. I had no idea how old she was or what her condition was, and I should have asked those things, because when I arrived at Cascade Manor and I found this little old lady in her bathrobe and slippers expecting to go to the cemetery and all of a sudden it occurred to me, she might be much more, you know, than I knew. Was it safe for me to take her out? Were there other family members I should have been consulting? What had I gotten myself into?

Thornhill: And what year was this?

Holbo: This would have been about 1996.

Well, I swallowed hard and took her out, and we went over to the cemetery and she seemed in her talking quite with it, quite cogent, and very pleasant, very

gracious. She was part of old, old Eugene, and she just—she was just a delightful woman.

I had planned where we were to go to get to her family plot from the quickest way, the closest entrance. We entered the cemetery that was a mess. She wasn't fazed by it, she walked directly to her family plot, which was kind of amazing. She asked for a few minutes by herself. She didn't stay there very long and then she turned around and said she was going to go home. On the way back, I told her more about what I thought we could do, what my background was, what I was planning to do next. And all of that sounded—and she sent a \$500 gift. She said more will be coming; she looked kind of mischievous at that point. She died within a couple of months. There were no survivors. There was nobody, there was no one else I could have talked to that morning, but she was much closer to death than I realized, but she died having seen the possibility that it was going to be okay.

She left us \$10,000 in her will, and she wanted it specifically used for the upkeep of the Chambers plot. And there was one other plot or so, and so we accepted it, we put it in a CD and we decided that we would allow ourselves to spend the interest on that for upkeep of the cemetery. So we broadened it ourselves to include some of the plots around her plot. So we got that money in about 1998. Jim Stroud, who had been this cordial, gracious man of the Masons who helped guide, and his wife, made a contribution of \$15,000, so we have that. And about that time the Lane County Historical Society admitted they had been courting this little contribution that had been money that had been raised in 1976 and grown to about \$13,000 or \$15,000; now they gave that to us.

When Ethan, who I took out to lunch, gave me this list of sixty, I thought that's not enough people to start a fundraising thing. So I turned to Roxanne Gillespie, this wonderful neighbor who was helping, and she said she thought that she could get a printout from Lane County of all of the people who live within our precinct. All of a sudden, we went from sixty to hundreds and hundreds. Yes!

Thornhill: Okay, we should have asked this earlier—can you recall where you lived in Eugene when you were working with the board? Were you living in south Eugene? What was your address?

Holbo: It was 2090 Broadview, which is on top of Hawkins Heights and basically four miles just west of the Masonic Cemetery.

Brokaw: Yes, you were talking about the donors...

Holbo: What Roxanne did for me was something I would not have been able to do, but she had the contacts. She was an appraiser, she knew how to get information about individual precincts, and you can, for a price, get the City to run off these long pages of that information. We started with the precincts around the cemetery—it started from Twenty-fourth to Thirtieth and from Hilyard to Agate. That gave us—I don't know how many I sent out at that time. We had a brochure or a letter and a request for support. And we immediately got \$10,000. So here

you see a pattern of the bigger contributions were coming up, ten to twenty, or we couldn't always control when this would happen.

We began to build a list of contributors. And 1995, the year we went to them—and each mailing was coordinated with a newsletter, which we began in 1990, *Monumental News*. And it talks about what we had achieved and what we were going to do. We started a column called, “What do people do, or what do board members do all day?” and we interviewed one after another to get people an idea of what people were doing—who was doing the work. And money began to come in, and it did come in on a regular basis and continues, too. I will say that we expanded that list to include the district and to include the southeast area south of Thirtieth. We didn't get much from them. The moment we cross Thirtieth—the return fell off. The moment we went into the Fairmont area, that returns a lot. One thing that did help us a great deal was that we began to put a little box on the side of our fundraising letter each time, which talked about specific things that we had achieved. When we did that, our giving went up about ten percent, so I kept doing it.

Thornhill: Kay, I have a question. What year was it when this became more formalized with the outreach to donors? What year did that really start?

Holbo: We were formally—the Mason's handed over the ownership in February of '95—by May we were sending out this appeal to as many people as possible.

We had actually had something going on in the mausoleum and that Memorial Day, and that became a routine. We did it twice a year, we asked for money. And it was always coupled with a newsletter which gave them much more information about what we were doing. I thought it was really important in terms of credibility to show progress—pictures of it. Who did this, to acknowledge who did this, to list the contributors, to make it look as though we were a going concern, and so I wanted to establish a sense of more and more going on. At this point I have to say that we, in the books, in the run up to the ownership—

Everybody assumed that much of the work would be done by volunteer groups that came from schools or the historical society, churches, the whole gamut of groups that are often called upon or are known for volunteering.

This became quite clear that this was a very cumbersome way to get work done and eventually we just put this—it just became much—

It became a minor aspect of anything we drew upon to get work done. What got work done was adding to our board people who were highly competent. And then when that happened, things passed from my hand to somebody else's hands. I started the newsletter. But when Karen Seidel came on and now—I did the newsletter—I think I passed it on to her. I passed it on very quickly. As soon as I could pass things on, we had a lot of resources that didn't necessarily appear to have been resources. But looking back I wanted to list some of those because when people plan to do a project over and over again, as Alex knows with this

knowing nod of her head, people think they are going to get things done with volunteers and grants.

And those things I was pretty sure that wouldn't work out, and you know exactly what I'm talking about.

Brokaw: Yes, well, it's always hard with volunteers because with this type of place, it takes so much training, and that takes up staff time. It's just, it's more economical to do it with staff or with volunteers on the board who know what they're doing. Am I right, Kay?

Holbo: Absolutely, absolutely. But if I had said that to the other people on that planning commission or planning committee, they would not have believed it.

Brokaw: No, no. Kay, I think we are stepping into the last question that I had and that is, when did you think, "I can start the process of stepping away and let others take the reins?"

Holbo: Okay, after I'd been president for five years, Hugh Prichard came along and was president for two years. I think this would have brought it up to 2001. John Bredesen stepped in when he was president for ten years. Denny Hellesvig joined the board, a man named Jim Luckey was on the board, Karen Seidel was on the board, Barbara Cowan. We had very competent people in place.

I think by about 2005 I was thinking, I hadn't been the president for six years. My main focus became on the fundraising. And I say that one of the good things that we did, and that was a turning point in the development of the board, was that we went towards an executive committee meeting where every month before our board meeting a small group of officers and whoever wanted to attend.

We talked about looking forward, planning, we talked about how is the fundraising going, we talked about problems, we discussed and digested things that we then passed on to the board. It made for great efficiency. We got a great deal done with that format and made it work. I have a list as—

Does that answer your question?

So I would say 2005, I began to sort of feel like I don't have to—I don't have to worry about this.

Brokaw: But you still did attend many board meetings as I remember.

Holbo: Yes, and at the executive I attended, I paid attention to what was going on, but I felt less like I was the only one responsible for this or that. So I like the way it just grew, it morphed into something else. And all along the way we got to be a bigger and bigger team of really skilled people and we also had a wonderful time together. There was a lot of not only networking but camaraderie and concern about each other as individuals. And many of these people now have served eighteen, twenty years. I did. David Lynch, the man who cleared the cemetery, he served about eighteen years.

That's extraordinary, for a new organization that appeared to have as few resources as we did, we simply created resources and made it work.

Thornhill: Kay, how many people were on the first board, and how many people were on the board after you were no longer president and Hugh took over for two years?

Holbo: I think we probably started with six and we then went to thirteen and probably may have eighteen now.

Brokaw: I think we're still at about thirteen; okay, yes, yes.

Thornhill: Alex, you were going to say something.

Brokaw: Well, I think she answered very well. The process of stepping away—because at some point the burden of having this thing on your shoulders—and I think you must have had that feeling, but gradually stepping away must have felt so good.

Holbo: It really did. And it was very purposeful, and it was wonderful to me. It was wonderful to find that success attracted success.

Brokaw: Yes, that's true.

Holbo: People take that and, you know, more members—people don't want to join boards and take up debt. They don't want to take up great problems. They don't really. They want to do the fun things, and they're willing to take up problems if they can see a way to contribute. And if you're organized enough and clear enough you can describe to them what their job would be.

Brokaw: Yes.

Holbo: And we then—it takes about a year to get your feet under you. It all worked together in a way that was unusually, I think, successful.

One of the people we worked with was McCarthy—Brian McCarthy, a landscape architect. At one point, he said, "Kay, did you have to step back and create, repair a terrible mistake? Did you do things in a sequential way that always led it forward, or did you continually have to correct what had gone wrong?" And I think that what we did through working together was a sequential, orderly, purposeful discussion of what comes next. Who's responsible, how can we help, what do you need, what's the budget, do we have the money? And it—and then gradually larger contributions.

Brokaw: And also, as far as I know, the planning—the budget planning—was excellent, so that we were never in the red.

Holbo: That's right.

So in 2009 there was, as you all may remember, there was a real dive in the economy here, and all the nonprofits suffered. At one time we had only about \$4,000 in the bank, I think.

Sometime in that year, or maybe two years before, John Bredesen stepped forward and gave us \$100,000. And that started our endowment, which is now \$300,000 or so. We didn't use that.

It's just really been a great success story, and I feel such pleasure when I see pictures of it now or when people just rave about it.

Brokaw: And people do.

Holbo: I can hardly tell you how much, how much pleasure that is to have somebody get up, somebody wave me over in a restaurant and then get up and come to my table and say thank you.

All I know, the best story, the story I just love. In the nonprofit world there is always a dream on the part of anybody who wants to raise money, and the executive director who never stopped thinking about it. There's always this dream that someday in some quiet corner some tall man rises and walks over to you, quietly, and says "I like what you do, here's my contribution."

Well, this happened to Denny, he—

Brokaw: Excuse me, this is Denny Hellesvig [former board member].

Holbo: Yes, Denny Hellesvig, he had taken a group on a tour. This man had been part of the tour, and he kept up with Denny in other ways, and a couple of years ago he came to the open house at the Memorial Day, and I understand, somewhat tall and quiet and he said, "Where's Denny?" and Denny came along. He said, "Hi, I like what you do, here's my check", and he gave him a check for \$10,000.

Now that is a dream of fundraisers and nonprofit leaders. It went exactly on script. It was—Denny was almost in tears, his wife was in tears. We were all in tears, I happened to be there.

Thornhill: Well, I was wondering, just to give some context, who is Denny?

Brokaw: Denny Hellesvig. Oh, Kay, please you go ahead.

Holbo: You tell, Alex.

Brokaw: All right, I'm supposed to be interviewing you.

Holbo: Denny had been city building inspector. He was an architect by trade, he got on the board in about '97, he and John just clicked. They became what we called the dynamic duo. They worked together on planning, electronic things, build projects. Denny took over for the treasurer. Denny stepped in and did what he needed to learn to do, and he's a low-key gentleman who's just delightful and John is this man who is this everlasting fount of goodwill.

And in a time of—you know, Eugene is pretty well riven with controversy often—they knew how to get along, and they helped tremendously with the connections and with this carrying forward of things. And now they're going to

be honored this spring by the placement of a couple more, well you describe it, Alex.

Brokaw: Well, we're going to have a couple of—like you have—we're going to recognize them with a basalt column with a plaque and in fact I'm on the committee to think of what goes on the plaque, and I'm thinking, oh, "dynamic duo," "master of projects."

Thank you, Kay, right, but, you know, I don't know that we would be where we are without these two gentlemen working together and being really masters of projects. Yes, they would get the grants, they would write the grants [applications], they would sometimes do the work themselves if they could. Hire the professionals, watch over the jobs. It was absolutely amazing what they did.

Holbo: When a job was done, it was beautifully done, yes.

Brokaw: Well Kay I think maybe we are coming to the end of this interview and I want to thank you so much. I mean you're to us—you're the founder, the leader, you're everything to this organization. There would be no organization without you, and I truly mean that. We all know it.

Holbo: And I think you, too, can see the pleasure that we all had working together, and the appreciation, and the sense that it grew, and that—yes, I like to get all of those nice honors, but I always felt a little uncomfortable. I always wanted to say, "But there's this group of people just standing behind me."

Brokaw: That is correct, but we have to have a leader.

Holbo: Well, I was it for a while, and then we found other leaders, which is the way it should be.

Brokaw: Well again, thank you so much, and I think it's time to sign off. All right, thank you.

Goodbye, and thank you.

End of interview.

Addendum

From Kay Holbo 2-11-22

Two things I emphasized in my zoom conversation on early history of the EMCA were issues of security and of authority and how I worked on them.

There were other, and more obvious, subjects that an observer would have said I should have talked about: how did you really start the engines turning, how did you gain and then keep public attention and how did you deal with opposition and conflict?

I'll address them in that order.

By getting engines started I mean at least, how did we manage to raise enough money to start actually implementing larger more visible projects that not just rescued the place but began large aspects of renovation for which we needed funding that went beyond what could be funded by individual donations? Answer: it took about 4/5 5 years, but my efforts to develop plot sales, particularly the Jewish cemetery, were crucial to increased income after about 2003. There were practical problems re replatting the cemetery, and legal issues in obtaining ownership of old plots. The actual process of working with the assigned TBI committee was quite collaborative and pleasant but took a lot of time while I dealt with the first two problems of how to define and then legally sell needed burial space. I did most of this by myself.

Crucial people included the land use lawyer (name forgotten) who advised me that the legal process as well as the practical one, would be arduous, but was absolutely necessary to do right. Pete Sorensen, then a Lane County Commissioner, was PIVOTAL, in liaison with Lane County legal consul that at first hesitated to help us. Sorensen got approval to define a more streamlined process of defining legal ownership on plots that were sold from 1857 through 1909. Sorensen was excellent to work with, efficient and effective, although I did not know him previously and he was not informed at all about the existence of the rescue operation at the cemetery. On the other hand, working with the surveyor who actually did the needed survey and preparation of hundreds of new "plots" (and by implication "lots" too) was very slow and painful, taking three years.

Finally, Hugh Prichard took three full days to walk the cemetery with measuring tools in hand, to make absolutely sure that markers left on ground by the surveyor actually matched the paper version of the survey.

All of the above took a huge amount of time and while Hugh was the president during much of that time, I did the spade work, represented the cemetery and kept the board apprised of all this.

In addition, another as yet unmentioned board member named Violet Johnson, did an enormous amount of basic research of early Lane County records of deeds and transfers to trace original owners of deeds for plots. Her work was pivotal in finally obtaining help from the county. Violet is now dead but Karen Seidel will remember her well.

When all the above was complete, in about 2003 I believe, it started a lot of sales which gave us earned income stream that assured our survival and ultimate growth, in spite of the 2008-09 downturn that saw our overall income really hit hard.

Note: I think Oregon has stream lined its provisions for reclaiming old cemetery plots since we

went through it. Maybe our experience helped as an example!

Here is the second area of responsibility that I took on in the early days of the EMCA

I took control of building a constituency. It was a very slow, very time-consuming process and I thought about it all the time. I was the face and voice for the first five years.

I made sure we had news-worthy events or timed projects for use twice a year in combined newsletter and fundraising efforts, just as we do now. It was a big effort to start and keep going.

There was no single or even combined source of financial support that was sufficient to fund us reliably into more than a modest future.

Some things that helped that might not be obvious but were part of my focus, and became part of the board's self-image. We avoided controversies. We lived within budgets. We celebrated success. We had stable leadership. We had a few larger gifts. And then we opened the TBI section and greatly grew out supporters, sources of income, etc., etc.

These were some of the beginnings that I helped shape.

Other things were not at all obvious. We paid attention to image and style. I chose the design of the first scatter garden and first newsletters, brochures and Full of Life. Those who followed with design-build projects like John and Denny carried forth a style that when brought to today makes our site look and feel very different from a traditional cemetery like Musgrove's.

Who could have imagined that many of our early decisions, like avoiding costly overhead by having only a modest shed with several purposes, now seem so right for the times and the community?

We are a "boutique" cemetery with environmental purposes and a cohesive and attractive style that has contributed to our success. We have managed to build a constituency that supports us in larger and bigger ways than we imagined.

The above is more than you ever needed to hear, Charley. But looking back, I do think it was very important to think and talk constantly in terms of a constituency.

Yes, it's what nonprofits have to do. But for us, it has paid off handsomely.