

Eugene Masonic Cemetery Association
Oral History Project

Narrator:

MARY ELLEN RODGERS

Interviewed by:

ALEX BROKAW

KATE THORNHILL

April 10, 2021

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

NARRATOR

Mary Ellen joined the Eugene Masonic Cemetery Association's Board of Directors as a volunteer in 1998. At that time, she was working toward a Master's Degree in Historic Preservation at the University of Oregon.

It was clear the EMCA needed a paid staff person to manage the renewed community interest in this historic space. Mary Ellen's knowledge of and interest in the cemetery, plus her abilities honed through her service as a U.S Naval Officer, added up to the skills needed for the position. She was hired in 2003 and retired in 2014 to care for her parents and spend more time with her family.

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

Brokaw: 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 Mary Ellen Rodgers on July 10, 2021, taking place on Zoom, a web conferencing tool. The audio recordings will be made available for research and educational purposes for future EMCA boards, staff, and the general public.

Mary Ellen, 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?

Rodgers: Yes.

Brokaw: Thank you. I'm going to read an introduction for Mary Ellen. Mary Ellen joined the Eugene Masonic Cemetery Association's Board of Directors as a volunteer in 1998. At that time she was working toward a master's degree in Historic Preservation at the University of Oregon [UO].

It was clear the EMCA needed a paid staff person to manage the renewed community interest in this historic space. Mary Ellen's knowledge of and interest in the cemetery, plus her abilities honed through her services as a U.S Naval Officer, added up to the skills needed for the position.

She was hired in 2003 and retired in 2014 to care for her parents and spend more time with her family. And now we're going to start asking you some questions Mary Ellen.

Rodgers: Alright.

Brokaw: Let's start at the beginning, where were you born and raised?

Rodgers: Well, I was born in Flint, Michigan. And my whole family is from Flint, Michigan on both sides. And then I moved to Royal Oak, Michigan when my dad was transferred and that's closer to Detroit. It's the northern suburb of Detroit. So that was that.

Brokaw: Did you have any surprising or significant experiences while growing up that affected the direction of your life while you were growing up in Flint?

Rodgers: In Flint?

Brokaw: Yes.

Rodgers: No, not too much in Flint. I was raised a very conservative Roman Catholic. And at that time what we did is, and some people do it the same way though it might be harder, we weren't exposed to anything else except the Bible. I read the bible. I read the encyclopedias. And that's no kidding. And my dad wouldn't even let me go to the church fishing event, you know, you fish and the kids get something, a prize. I couldn't read comic books. I—just none of that stuff. Now I don't know what that says about me. But there's a lot of stuff I didn't realize. That's basically, you know, you're in isolation.

Some people might call this like a cult and it does have cultish— You didn't marry somebody that wasn't Catholic. You didn't have friends that weren't Catholic. My aunt married somebody out of that [Catholicism], that was a divorcee. A priest told my grandmother never talk to her again. And that's what she did. I mean it was that kind of era.

Brokaw: I remember that era.

Rodgers: Yeah. So we're Irish and Irish are always interested in their family history. And so a lot of the nuns— We, of course, had a lot of nuns in our family, mostly going back a couple of generations. But they did the history, a lot of the genealogical history of their families because that's something that they could research and do. And they provided those to the family, so I had this from early on and I was just mesmerized by it all.

In second grade I learned I really liked history. [If] you're getting everything right on the tests, there must be something to it. So coupled with this family history and my love of history—history explains everything. If you read in a broad nature, even the history of different religions, because, I didn't have any of that. I had the history of the Catholic Church and their missions and memorized a lot of stuff. So, I guess I'm just fascinated with learning different things that I never knew. In the end, I still am.

Brokaw: Did you join the navy to more or less get out of being in Flint and having—

Rodgers: Well, I moved to Royal Oak, and I attended the Shrine of the Little Flower Catholic Church, the St. Therese of Lisieux in France, St. Theresa. And that is now a minor basilica of the world [National Shrine of the Little Flower]. And I was done—it got burnt down by the Ku Klux Klan when they had a wooden church. Burnt it right down because we were Catholics, and we helped the poor. And the Ku Klux Klan didn't like Catholics. They burned the rectory down, they burned a cross on the lawn. It scared the bejeebers out of me!

And so they built this church that the pastor, Father [Charles] Coughlin—he was a famous radio priest in the United States at the time—

Brokaw: What was his name?

Rodgers: Father Coughlin.

Brokaw: Oh. I remember that, yes.

Rodgers: Yeah, yeah, yeah. He was pretty famous. He did radio programs and what not. And he said I'm going to build a church that no one can burn down. So, it's all built in the round with a copper top. And this is "historic buildings," for me, and in the art deco, neo-byzantine fashion. Lot of things done in iconography, that you'd see in Russia in their churches. And it's just a grand beautiful place.

Brokaw: Sounds like a destination place just to see that.

Rodgers: Oh, it is. Definitely is. So yeah, everything else looks sort of shabby to me. We had an organist and all this stuff going on and the school was next door.

Thornhill: Mary Ellen, I want to pause for a second. What time period are we talking about right now?

Rodgers: We're talking about 1962 to 1974.

Thornhill: Great. Thank you.

Rodgers: So that's probably how it all started. I went to undergraduate school in Northern Michigan and majored in marketing. So that had a pretty big influence on the skills that I learned at the cemetery which I think we'll talk about later. And I didn't like the city. I like the woods, and I was a long-distance bike rider. We rode all over the place up there. We also got to ride to—which was one of the reasons why I went up there, were my relatives, my Irish relatives came from Canada and they worked the copper mines in upper Michigan. The Finns were there and the Irish came afterwards. So, I just tootled around to all those historic places. And Greenland, Oregon [not Oregon, but Michigan] is where they were. Ontonagon [Michigan], it's on the border between Minnesota and the U.P. [Upper Peninsula] and Copper Harbor [Michigan]. And I thought that was cool because I'm a dork in kind of a way.

And so we just tootled all around there and looked at the historic sites. We looked at Greenland, Oregon, [Michigan] where my grandfather lived, and there were all these foundations of houses because as soon as it was done up there they all pulled up the mining camps and the lumber guys all pulled up, and they just dropped everything. Lots of money up there. Dropped everything where it was, even some of the beautiful buildings they did for theaters and what not. And everybody went to work in the automobile factories in Flint. In mass. And that's where my grandparents met. So anyway, I'm just really enthralled with that stuff and I'd rather live in the woods and I don't like the city. So, there you have it. And cemeteries are woods.

Brokaw: So how did you get to the navy?

Rodgers: Right after I got out of school, I worked for a market research company for a while. Then I was just bored. I just didn't want to live there the rest of my life so I

joined the navy. And my mechanical background wasn't great, so I just enlisted. I got really high scores on the other part, but mechanical stuff, never seen it. So anyway, I enlisted for three years and [I was an] air crew life support equipment person. And I applied a couple times for officer candidate school, and the second time I got it.

I lived in Sicily for two years, which has a lot of historic stuff on it. Every single, well not every one, but a lot of ancient civilizations have been through that island and it's all just lying there for us to look at. So that was cool. And the last squadron I was in was Florida, combat support squadron and search and rescue, and so I applied and went to officer candidate school after that.

Brokaw: Good for you.

Rodgers: Because it was interesting. I was always learning something new.

Rodgers: I didn't have to sit at a desk all day.

Thornhill: And when did you graduate?

Rodgers: 1982. I actually went to a community college first and got an Associate's degree. I wanted to do business because I didn't know anything about business, didn't know a thing, so I thought it would be useful. And I chose marketing because it was harder than everything else. And since I chose marketing, they hardly had any electives, so I had to go for three years.

Brokaw: How long were you in the navy? And how many—

Rodgers: Ten.

Rodgers: And then, oh, worked around for a while after I got out of college and that was just boring. I just—I was just stuck. And I never travelled anywhere. So, I just joined and chose Sicily [and found my husband there too].

Brokaw: Sounds like a good choice. Well, let's move on to the story about you becoming a board member, and did you find the cemetery or did the cemetery find you? How did that work?

Rodgers: Well, I found it. I'm not quite sure when I found it, but it was towards the beginning. My husband retired from the navy in 1999 and I came up three months earlier [to Eugene] with the kids. Twins and one that was a year and a half earlier so that's three in 1998 in the fall.

And every time I'd go somewhere I always—because we moved around all the time—I always read the history of the town because [it's] a good place to start. So I was reading the newspaper and there was an article in the R-G [Register-Guard] about the Masonic cemetery. So, I went up there and met Charmaine Landing [a UO masters landscape architecture student who created a landscape management plan for the cemetery], who was the first landscape board member, or maybe not a board member, but she was the landscape person in the cemetery. And right away

she grabbed me, and I adopted the John Wesley Johnson plot, the first president of the UO. And I took out what was weedy and kept and documented what was a native plant. And I think I found about fifteen in there. And over the years, as soon as it got to be pretty well done, I took on other things. And that was that. That was a lot of work. It was buried in ivy and blackberry.

Brokaw: Yeah, I can imagine. But you said you took over one plot. And that was to clean it up or—

Rodgers: Well, not clean it up. It was a certain strategy from Australia that Charmaine used in her terminal project at the UO for landscape architecture. And that's what we were using as a guideline, though it was, I think, it was privileged UO owned information, and so we couldn't adopt it for our own, but we were using it. So, these Australians would take out the weeds and leave what they wanted. And over time what they wanted, the native plants took over, and didn't have to weed it so much. And it was kind of like a mid-range thing. So that's what I did. A lot of other people—there were several people—it was a program, I think. The others were doing the same thing at other lots.

Brokaw: All right. Interesting. I haven't heard of that before. And how many volunteers were doing that?

Rodgers: Well, I'd say a handful. I don't remember, but there were other people doing it. Neighbors and other people that were with the cemetery.

Rodgers: And right at that time Barbara Cowan started. Because she was one of the first people I met there.

Brokaw: And that—

Rodgers: In 2000. The year 2000-ish or so. She's probably got a more accurate date.

Brokaw: Were you able to finish your master's degree in historic preservation while serving on the board?

Rodgers: Yes.

Brokaw: Good.

Rodgers: I started it in—I went part time. I started in 2000 and finished it in 2003.

Thornhill: And this is at the University of Oregon, correct?

Rodgers: Yes. [The] Historic Preservation Program in the School of Architecture and Allied Arts.

Brokaw: And was Don Peting [UO Associate Professor Emeritus of Architecture, former Director of the Historic Preservation Program] one of your instructors?

Rodgers: Oh yes, he was, because when I was going through there I'd say, well this is what Don Peting told me and it turned out to be true. It came up a lot in my head. It was crazy.

Brokaw: He's a member of the board now.

Rodgers: Wow, lucky you guys.

Brokaw: He's a big help.

Rodgers: Did you know he was there at the beginning?

Brokaw: I have heard that. I don't know much about it.

Rodgers: Well, he was brought over at the very beginning when Kay [Holbo, founder of EMCA board] was starting to figure out how we're going to work with this historic site. Don Peting came over with a group of students—this is like before my time. The group of students did a preservation plan for Hope Abbey and maybe some of the other parts, but it was really Hope Abbey. And he gave recommendations to the board and a formal booklet about how to begin to start to restore the mausoleum. And they [EMCA board] were working through those lists for a long time. They always refer back to that. So—

Brokaw: And the mausoleum is now close to being finished for major repairs.

Rodgers: That's what I hear.

Brokaw: Yes, it's beautiful. How long did you serve on the board before becoming the cemetery's first sexton and administrator, and how did that come about?

Rodgers: Pretty much as one of the articles in the Monumental News [EMCA newsletter] said. I was very familiar with everything—about three years [on the board]. Okay, I was really familiar with everything because I was doing all these historical things, of course. And I understood where everything was at the cemetery. They made a list of these. On the board, we voted to sell plots for burial—this was before I was hired. And [voted] to establish the Temple Beth Israel [TBI] section and the Temple Beth Israel section was sponsored by Temple Beth Israel, which is a community temple in the Eugene area. It was on the northwest side [of Eugene]. They were building a new temple just down the street from the cemetery. And it was like a perfect match, so that was a lot more work than everybody had imagined.

And Kay Holbo, who was the president and fundraising director, and Libby Bottero who was a board member from the temple, worked on that. It was a long process, and they worked with the people from the temple, kind of incorporating all their rituals. And I say this later, but what the temple wanted, as some background or context, they had designated the Jewish section is what they call it, at Resthaven [Resthaven Memorial Park, a lawn cemetery in Eugene]. They were running out of space, and they also wanted a space where they could bury blended families and not blended in the race way, blended in religious ways.

A Jewish husband and a Catholic wife. Or Protestant. Or whatever that combination religiously and spiritually might be because in traditional Jewish cemeteries you can only have a Jewish person there. And they might have made some allocation for maybe the Catholic wife or the Catholic daughter on the side, somewhere outside the sacred space. But they thought it might be good to have more of a combination. And they went to, I want to call it Sun- something, but I forget what the other cemetery was. [Sunset Hills cemetery] And they went over there, and they tried to work out something with them and they just, it just didn't fit, so they came over here and decided it was a good fit.

Brokaw: Good.

Rodgers: And so, there's a lot of design [for the Jewish section], lots of conversation and most of that happened before my time, but right before I got there. Kay was really good at giving me and Libby the history of what went on before me. So, I knew what I was getting into, I guess.

Thornhill: And Mary Ellen, what time period was that?

Rodgers: It was between 2000 and 2003. I guess that was going on when I was a board member because I voted on whether to start selling cemetery lots or not. But I wasn't quite involved with that. I was involved in other things at the time. But it was maybe 2001, 2002.

Brokaw: And the cemetery does have that one larger designated spot for TBI and now—

Rodgers: There's two. There's two.

Brokaw: Yeah, and now we have another one too.

Rodgers: Yeah, we were running out of space over there. And the only contiguous space we had for the temple was right behind the mausoleum. The spot that goes south to north. And that came about probably in 2010, 2011. And you know, Libby Bottero did most of the work on this, because I didn't do it by myself. And I worked with her on that and developed policies. In fact, I wrote an entire new landscape policy for the temple. And it went through their board, and I was a little nervous because I had to go through the entire TBI board and they're pretty smart, pretty particular people. The other landscape policy they had was done by a lawyer for the first one [TBI section]. But I could only find a few pages of it. And we went back, and nobody had an original copy. So that wasn't really working well because landscape issues come up and burial issues come up. So that was that.

Brokaw: Can you tell me about the size of the lots for the TBI people? Compared to the other lots, as I understand it, they're smaller lots.

Rodgers: They're smaller lots. Yeah. They're smaller lots. And individual lots. The entire cemetery was plotted originally back in 1860 or so as 10.2 acres and within that there were twenty-foot by twenty-foot plots where the Masons eventually put

concrete retaining walls around each twenty-foot lot generally. And then between those, between all of them, there were eight-foot spaces.

The paths were eight feet. And they weren't really paths. We kind of— the paths were vernacular in that we decided where they were ourselves. So that's the way it was laid out. Now I think the second section might have been ten by four. I'm not sure. Not sure on that, but the first ones were definitely small. Eight by three.

Brokaw: And was that because caskets were not needed? Or could they still fit a full casket in there?

Rodgers: They could still fit a casket in there. I don't know. Maybe it's because we were stepping out of context of the original planning of the cemetery. And we were just going down this one contiguous space and just putting in plots [plot markers], one right after another. We didn't care about the paths or anything.

The historic grid was sort of put aside and we developed it differently, and the same thing as the second section where we put aside the original plots, twenty by twenty feet, and we just made one continuous plot row right down the—

Brokaw: It's a beautiful part of the cemetery, I think.

Rodgers: Yeah. They did a good job.

Brokaw: Yeah. Going back to your career as a naval officer, specifically, how did that prepare you for your future job as the administrator and sexton. And by the way, I don't think we've mentioned here that you were the first administrator and sexton of the cemetery.

Rodgers: Paid.

Brokaw: Paid.

Rodgers: Everybody else was doing it, but—

Brokaw: That's right. And what skills from the navy were you able to transfer to this unique job, because this is a very unique job?

Rodgers: I went back to my notes here to my marketing degree and I was really interested in consumer behavior and why people bought things, and how they felt about things, and how to market things to people visually. So, you have that. I have a sense about it, it's not just what they're telling me, but it's also their body language, tone of voice, their background, how the relatives feel. There's all that that comes into combination, especially in this case.

Brokaw: And you may be dealing with people that could be distraught at the time.

Rodgers: Right, and I didn't realize how that was. The dynamic. I learned that, but, yeah, they are. It's the worst time of their life.

Brokaw: Right.

Rodgers: A lot of people in the family don't agree with one thing or another. So always something—and you had to determine who the responsible party was, which may not be the one that's doing all the talking.

Brokaw: That's interesting, what you said right there.

Rodgers: Yeah. There's a hierarchy and I think that's one thing that I brought in from the military, because I managed warship maintenance, but as an officer, I'm not a lawyer, but I was in a job that should have had a lawyer. But it was me, so I did a lot of legal work in the navy. So, I understood there's a hierarchy and I had to look [at the family's legal documentation to determine who may make burial decisions]. It's important to pay attention to all the legal details, what the state rules are, what the cemetery rules are, what's traditionally done, because you can't really gloss over this stuff. It seems really bureaucratic and a lot of paperwork, but it's like that for a reason. It's kind of annoying, but you have to be precise about it, because if there's a disagreement down the road or if people don't remember what they heard. It's like telling somebody they have cancer, they don't hear anything the rest of the time.

Brokaw: Yes.

Rodgers: And they're upset, so it's important to have all this documentation just to remind them. And if something goes wrong or there's a complaint, it's right there. And you've got to be accurate. You can't fudge it or miss it, that's why it's good to have one person hired to do it. Because when you have several people there's a lot of different things going on and Kay Holbo recognized that. And she just couldn't do it by herself.

Brokaw: Yes.

Rodgers: She's got other things she's got to do. So, it was a good move.

Brokaw: Yeah, it sounds like you had the perfect background for that job.

Rodgers: And I can pass a background check which you have to do, too.

Brokaw: Oh.

Rodgers: Yeah. You can't have anything in your background, or else you can't hold a cemetery license. A lot of people can't pass a background check. It's amazing, even people my age.

Brokaw: That brings me to... I don't think the average person has any idea what a sexton is or does. Can you describe that job?

Rodgers: Well, I looked it up. I Googled it. And I got an amalgam of different things, so this is just the amalgam from all that. It's a word from middle English. It's a person who looks after a church and the church job at a church yard, sometimes acting as a bell ringer—and guess what I'm doing right now? I'm ringing bells at

Central Lutheran [Church in Eugene]! It all fits, I could have done that too, right? That was cool when I read that.

It is a grave digger because normally the grave digger would be the sexton. And David Lynch [Groundskeeper] did all that and the grave digger would sign the burial certificate with the location and everything. But I did that.

I made sure it got logged in and sent to all the right places. The word [sexton] is said, and this is special down at the bottom, so bear with me. The word has come from an Anglo-Norman word segrestein which originated from the Latin word sacristanus which basically refers to someone who looks after the sacred objects. And that is— I understand that from being a Catholic, because you had the sacristan, my mother did that job. You took care of that host. They feel it's the body and blood of Christ. So, it's sacred—sacristan—and the burials, especially for the Jewish community—the Catholic community they came over and had to sanctify or bless the area if they were Catholics. And the Jewish people did the same thing so there are sacred spaces. So, it kind of makes sense and—

Brokaw: Oh, let's stop just there. I want to think about that for a moment. I have thought about that as a sacred space. I mean—

Rodgers: Yeah.

Brokaw: It's a sacred space, but I mean formally a sacred space for people of certain religions.

Rodgers: And even if you're secular or someone not practicing. It's still a sacred space for them.

We have some Wiccan burials up there. Sacred space, you know.

The thing about sacred space is, if you're not religious, that's where your pioneer ancestors came and were buried. You have to maintain that. At all costs.

Brokaw: I think I was thinking of having it blessed—

Rodgers: Sure, sure. Exactly.

Brokaw: And I realized that that had been done there.

Rodgers: Even the priest has been there. Even the Greek Orthodox priest has been there. And since I have a background in religion, I can appreciate that and look it up just to see what it is. I couldn't talk to other religions, remember.

Thornhill: I have a question. I'm curious, just estimate-wise, how many different spiritual religious beliefs do you think are represented in the cemetery today?

Rodgers: There's a Muslim burial, Jewish, Catholic, Greek Orthodox, Wiccan. Well, the rest of them were likely Protestant pioneers from Missouri, you know, Southern Baptists, but they had a lot of Masonic rituals up there. So, there's a heavy, I want to call it, Masonic spiritual belief up there.

You can't mess with something that's a three or a triangle in a plot. We took out a plant, I can't think of [the name] now. A basic plant here, here, and here in a cemetery plot and the people went crazy. They were pioneer crazy. They went crazy. Did you know? No, I had no idea. No, I didn't have any idea. The Masons really didn't pass that [information] down because it's probably a secret, but which is true. They won't tell us everything, but we figured that out just from comments on what we did to the lot. So we just planted something else there. And we learned to be sensitive toward that. So there's a lot of that symbolism there. And even in the Masonic symbolism in the way the mausoleum is constructed. The steps in the front and there's a couple other things. I don't remember but it's all there.

Thornhill: Interesting.

Rodgers: Anyway, I can't remember that far back, but it's all there.

Thornhill: So just for clarification when you mentioned cleaning up plots, there were plants that were put in the plots in a specific way that represented something connected to the Masons.

Rodgers: Right.

Brokaw: That's a new one on me too.

Rodgers: It was new to us. And I should have thought about that, but I didn't make the connection because the Masons had really been doing a good job, trying to do the best they could.

Brokaw: Right. The other part of your job was the administrator and you've probably talked about that. I would assume that has a whole lot to do with the paperwork, but you also had to answer a lot of questions. Being knowledgeable.

Rodgers: Well, you had to have a lot of people skills. That's my first.

Brokaw: Yeah.

Rodgers: And listening, I did a lot of listening in the navy because I didn't know what was going on. Not at the beginning. Listening, reading.

Brokaw: Yeah.

Rodgers: A lot of listening. 'Cause people had vastly different ideas of what the cemetery meant to them. At the beginning when the Masons had it, it got too much to keep up and they would let people come and mow their plots on Memorial Day. There was kind of a free-range attitude toward it because that's just the way it's always been. And then when Kay had the burials set up, there was kind of a—when we first started selling burial plots, there was kind of a free-range attitude there. So, this is not being critical, so we could incentivize people to buy lots. You can put this marker there, you can do this over here and that got to be intolerable. The more people that came in there—people's ideas of what they wanted to do was

completely different. I remember the day at the meeting we sat there and voted on cemetery lots and Barbara Cowan [board member] looked at me, she wanted me to vote it down. And I thought, well people bury people and then they go away, right? Well, no, no, no. In my family they went away, but, no, no, no. Not here. So, we just had to standardize things.

Brokaw: Yes.

Rodgers: And there's a lot of requirements by the Oregon Cemetery Board, which is stated in a letter. And those requirements fall into keeping track of things, we were inspected every two years. They just showed up and I had to pass that inspection and their eyebrows always raised when we went into the mausoleum. And they saw that over the years it was getting better. And I always did pretty well because that's what I did in the military was learn how to pass inspections and then follow through on them afterwards, because they'll come back and ask. And then—I'm sorry, go ahead—there's just so much stuff like this!

Brokaw: What did they come to see? Did they want to see all of your paperwork?

Rodgers: They wanted to see every blasted thing I had. They picked out files, my files because I made files. She [Kay Holbo] had a few in different areas, but I made files and a map for every single lot in that neighborhood. They came in, and they [the files] were in my house, and just pulled out a bunch and walked away with them.

Brokaw: Oh, my goodness!

Rodgers: I know, it was like (exhale). And then I had to show them how the board was taking the perpetual care percentage of each last sale, putting it in directly and it couldn't jump around in a bunch of different pots before it got there, directly, in that perpetual care fund. And that was an issue because they didn't want you to spend it before you have it. Just things like that, and then there was, oh, there's just all kinds of things like licenses and fees and it wasn't getting done. And not being negative, but it just got too much for volunteers [to do].

Brokaw: Right.

Rodgers: When I found out what we were getting into—

Brokaw: I want to say that the perpetual care fee is 15%.

Rodgers: And I also had to rewrite contracts and when we started selling graves in the mausoleum, and written on that contract was, "for Caucasians only." Uh-huh, 1920's. And some other things in there and they just had to go. And that's one thing to look at, I think, because it just jumped right at me. I thought, "Whoa!" You hear about it, but you never see it, right? A lot of times you don't see it in front of you.

Brokaw: It had to be rewritten.

- Thornhill: I heard stories—I've heard about older pioneer families who knew immigrants, specifically, Chinese immigrants. And they weren't allowed to be buried in the cemeteries in Eugene. And in the dark of night, they would allow Chinese immigrants to bury their loved ones in the Masonic cemetery.
- Rodgers: In the south. Mike Helm probably knew about that. In the south end, yeah, they put them in the burial records, but they didn't put a tombstone or any kind of marker on their space.
- Brokaw: So sad. Even though you had job responsibilities, a lot of job responsibilities, you volunteered to help the board with events such as the annual Memorial Day weekend event. And what did you offer to do for that event and for other events?
- Rodgers: You know how that goes because you had it after I did, didn't you? [plan the event]
- Brokaw: Yes, I still do.
- Rodgers: I know. I tried to get rid of it after—I don't know—about ten years or so. But no one was biting on that. So, thank you.
- Brokaw: I'm sure that was not in your job description. (laughs)
- Rodgers: No, that really wasn't. But I was doing that before I got hired. And when I got hired, I figured, well, it's in my job description now I suppose. But I continued some events and I ended up boiler-plating the entire Memorial Day event. And I did the same darn things every year pretty much. It was all on paper. So, if I had to go sell plots or there was a funeral, I didn't have to reinvent the wheel every year because you don't have time. But there were a lot of other people like John [Bredesen, board member] and the music series [*Music To Die For*] and Fran [Ross, now deceased, volunteer, married to John Bredesen] and a lot of other people that did a lot of PR work in their area of expertise. [unintelligible] space with the media, the papers, anytime somebody wanted to talk about something. I did tours. I took school groups through, and it wasn't so difficult. There was a new focal point or big new idea every year [for Memorial Day]. So it worked okay.
- Brokaw: Good.
- Rodgers: And other things I did was I went to a lot of meetings. I did docent duties in the mausoleum during Memorial Day weekend with the volunteers. And I did all that scheduling, and I also did it sometimes during the *Music to Die For* events. I did a map and I'm going to say a couple more things and then I'll stop. I wanted to say that I did a map of all the trees in the cemetery so we could do a major tree assessment on everything. The neighbors were kind of worried about trees falling on their houses.
- Brokaw: Yeah.

Rodgers: So, we had Nathaniel Sperry [arborist] come over, pro bono, and he looked at all of them. And it was useful.

Brokaw: Good.

Rodgers: And also, I attended landscape parties. [volunteer work “parties” to clear brush, etc.] Another big thing that I did was coordinate with the Seabee Reservists [US Naval Construction Battalions, known as Navy Seabees]. They do community projects, and they built that western path that runs north to south along the western part of the cemetery. The whole thing. They dug it. I mean Seabees build things. They build airfields. They build buildings. So, they can do that heavy work. Then the whole detachment came over, they helped put new bike racks in. They have their coin. They’re not a regiment, that’s army, they put two “detachment coins” in those bike racks down there. [A detachment coin is used to say thank you during a visit to a command or a job completed by the Seabees.] They helped Denny [Hellesvig, board member] with a lot of other things too. So that was good. There, it was free!

Brokaw: All right. I didn’t know about that either.

Rodgers: Well, it’s good you’re talking to me and I remember.

Brokaw: In the spring of 2009 issue of the *Monumental News*, and that is the EMCA’s newsletter by the way, there’s an article about you and Tilly. I really couldn’t pronounce her first name. But she’s Otilia “Tilly” Lay from the Oregon Genealogy Society Library.

Rodgers: You got it right.

Brokaw: It tells about how especially you two and a few other board members compiled a complete burial list of the people buried in the cemetery from its inception in 1859. And to me it seems odd that there wasn’t a comprehensive list until 2009, when you did it.

Rodgers: Oh, it was by no means the first one.

Brokaw: No, but it was a comprehensive list.

Rodgers: It was by no means the first one, let me tell you. There was comprehensive stuff done before. Now, were they all accurate? Were they out of date? Oh yeah.

Let me tell you what I believe I remember. Well, they wanted to do a booklet, the Oregon Genealogical Society, to sell down at their office. And I just had major back surgery, so it was a good time to lay on the floor and do this with Tilly because I wasn’t going anywhere. So anyway, she was great to work with. In front of me, it was on the floor in the kitchen, I had the original red book. There were two things. And I forget what the difference was, I just don’t know, but there were two historic documents that Alice had given me. She wouldn’t give them to anybody else before she gave them to me. The originals.

Brokaw: Are you speaking of Alice Adams? [a founding board member]

Rodgers: Yes.

Rodgers: And then Kay had a copy of it that she was working on during her tenure as logging in burials. A copy. And then the Masons had put that all together, compiled everything together in a binder. I don't know how they did it, the technology is so old you couldn't add to it. Then Sally Donovan, a professor at University of Oregon (before my time) came over with her students and did a cultural inventory of every single plot in the cemetery. They took pictures. They described it and there's a whole lot of information in there that's valuable. Some of it was overgrown, and overgrown later, but she had that. And then a couple of board members decided it was a piece of cake just to go through and get it done and they only got halfway through. So I had that with me, just in case there was something I missed. So that was a couple of board members. So I had it all in front of me and we went plot by plot. This document. This document. This document, so everybody was out doing their own thing at certain times. So anyway, that one by Tilly is as accurate as anything. It combined all that historical stuff in one spot. Now there's a few errors in there, but that is the way it is. We'll just fix them later.

Rodgers: It was good.

Brokaw: We're still using that.

Rodgers: Oh, that's great!

Brokaw: On Memorial Day weekend people come in and want to find where their relatives—

Rodgers: Sure. It's a good comprehensive thing. What I worry about is as technology changes, and it changes quite fast, you need to be able to switch it before the technology changes, because you can't read the original document anymore.

Brokaw: Right, we do have it on our web page also. I mean our website.

Rodgers: Good, that's perfect. That's great.

Brokaw: Yes.

Rodgers: And somebody might come along and say, well that's not right (from the old pioneer family) and just fix it. You know?

Brokaw: Right. Exactly. Okay, even though you've been retired for about seven years, looking into the EMCA's future are you hopeful or confident that the cemetery can survive into the far future? What do you think is needed for long-term success?

Rodgers: Oh, I'm biased because I'm a historic preservationist through and through and through. I always think of Don Peting sometimes when we're going through these

things. And I did a lot of little individual projects at the cemetery that applied to my work over there because it's right down the street, I live right down the street.

So, I really think that we need to keep this historic site historic. Because it's a long-term resource. It's not a short-term resource. A lot of these burial spaces, which need— you have to walk a fine line because there's no money out there, for the most part. For these cemeteries we're kind of on our own. The state doesn't run it, the city doesn't run it, not in Oregon, generally. There might be one or two.

Developers [cemetery businesses] at a macro scale and micro scale, have a lot of power. "Here's a way where we can earn all this money in a short one [period of time] and earn it now. We're not thinking about what's going to happen later." There's nothing to see behind this curtain but that short term gain, that short term resource, the money gets spent and the money goes away.

That long term gain is that historic site there. And we need to keep treating it that way. There's the landscape. There's a people history. There's a burial history. There's an architectural history. And that's always going to be there with you. And there might not be any grants right now, but there might be later. And that's one of the reasons why people want to be buried there. On the cemetery board there's always one board member described as a "push me, pull you." Well, the landscape people weren't real happy with having burials. Which I understand. It wrecks the landscape. And I thought nobody would show up there, but everybody does, and they have their own ideas or they think it's supposed to look like a lawn cemetery—

Brokaw: No!

Rodgers: [unintelligible] And then some people really wanted to develop it. Ah, we'll use plastic for this. The Hope Abbey Mausoleum windows (which my professor identified in my class). Kay almost—her jaw dropped when she saw me taking them out of the mausoleum. They didn't know what kind of glass it was or whatever. And I took it to my stained-glass class and they knew what it was and knew what it was called. So anyway, that was exciting. And I'm getting off track.

So, I think, I just think once you develop over it. It's lost forever.

Brokaw: Yes. We're turning it around just a little bit. Pivoting a little bit right now to stress the historic part—the markers—to keep them as safe as possible for history.

Rodgers: Right.

Brokaw: And trying to combine everything equally.

Rodgers: Yes, there's got to be a balance there.

- Rodgers: In school they taught me to be way on the historic preservation only side. But Don Peting, one of the things he told us is—when you get out there—is you’re going to have developers here and you’re going to have the historic preservationists here. And you aren’t going to believe what they want to do. And sometimes he would take students over to some meeting or something, just to show them how it was going and that’s here on a micro scale. Everyone’s well intended, but in the end, history is what you have.
- Brokaw: That’s right. Do you have any more comments that you would like to add—anything to the conversation? Because I think it’s time to wind it up, pretty much.
- Rodgers: Well, I think I said everything I have on my four pages [of notes]. You let me say them. (laughs)
- Brokaw: Okay, good. (laughs)
- Rodgers: I was going on and on and on. But I didn’t do all this stuff alone. I had a lot of support from the board.
- Brokaw: Yes. Well, I want to thank you for doing this. And thank you for your service with the cemetery.
- Rodgers: Was all that helpful?
- Brokaw: Yes.
- Rodgers: The information?
- Brokaw: Yes.
- Rodgers: Okay. It’s good because a lot of people just don’t know.
- Brokaw: Well, what I hope is [that] people, researchers will listen to everyone. And then put things together.
- Rodgers: And write a paper on it.
- Brokaw: That’s right.
- Thornhill: Thank you.
- Rodgers: All right. Thanks for doing this too. You know there’s one little vignette I have and that’s the end. It was Barbara Cowan who came up with the idea of doing oral histories and so they sent me, when I was working there, up to a conference in Pendleton. It was the Oregon Cemetery Historic Preservation conference. And I took the class on how to do oral histories and there was a lot of legal work involved and a lot of what if’s and whatever’s. And somebody just needed to do or needed to be hired to do it as their own project. And you guys are doing that and it’s nice to see there’s follow-through eventually. Because I hear good things about you, Kate [Thornhill], from the other board members.
- Brokaw: Yes!

Eugene Masonic Cemetery Association Mary Ellen Rodgers Interview

Rodgers: And you, Alex.

Brokaw: It's Kate who thought of it, suggested it, and said let's do this before we jump into the archives [start to digitize the archives].

Rodgers: Of course, it was Kay.

Brokaw: What?

Rodgers: Of course, it was Kay.

Brokaw: No, I mean Kate. Kate.

Rodgers: Oh, Kate.

Brokaw: Yes.

Rodgers: Is Kate there?

Brokaw: Yes, Kate Thornhill.

Rodgers: Oh yeah. Well, we were thinking about that earlier. Good job because we needed a professional.

Brokaw: And we started our interviews with Kay Holbo, of course.

Rodgers: Oh yeah. That's the main lady.

Brokaw: And because so many of our board members are getting on. We thought we'd better start right now.

End of Interview