

**Eugene Masonic Cemetery Association**  
**Oral History Project**

**A WRITTEN RESPONSE TO QUESTIONS**

**By**  
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**March 5, 2021**

## EMCA ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

### Karen Seidel – Written Questions and Answers

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*Where were you born and where did you grow up?*

I was born and raised in Elgin, Illinois.

*Did you have any surprising or important experiences that affected the direction of your life?*

I won a math scholarship to Knox College in Galesburg, Illinois. While we were living in Chicago, my ex-husband decided he wanted to do graduate work at the University of Oregon. (This literally affected the “direction.”)

*What was your career before retiring?*

I was a senior research associate at the Bureau of Governmental Research and Service, University of Oregon, for 30 years.

*Why is the cemetery so important to you?*

It gives me the opportunity to share my interest in historical research with the community and connects me with terrific people who also contribute their cemetery-related expertise.

*When and why did you join the Board?*

I believe I joined the Board in 1997. It was a year or so following a request from Kay Holbo [EMCA founder] to find the obituaries of all the persons buried in the Masonic Cemetery before 1900. The obituaries were in the Knight Library’s newspaper microfiche archives. I enjoyed delving into Eugene’s historic newspapers. I recall how the space in the obituaries devoted to God, faith, good works, and the deceased’s personal history changed significantly between 1862 and 1900. I was happy to say yes when Kay invited me to be a Board member.

*The Board is different from many others in that there is not an executive director. What did that mean to you?*

I don’t believe I’ve served on a Board with an executive director, unless you count the UO staff person who ran the OLLI Board. Obsidians, Fortnightly, City Club, Unitarian Church—none of them had an executive director.

*How long have you been serving on the Board and about how much, per week, do you think you have spent and still spend on Board business?*

These days, as Board secretary, executive committee member, and occasional newsletter author, I probably spend about six hours per week. In the past, as Monumental News editor and active cemetery historian, I spent a lot more but would hate to try to estimate the number of hours.

*Your professional background prepared you to research and write about that research. What was your first research and writing project at EMCA? Have you participated in writing books, pamphlets, brochures, or other projects? Please tell us about them.*

As I said, my first project was looking up and copying obituaries. Second project was researching and writing two chapters of "Full of Life." I also researched the names and lives of veterans buried in the cemetery, from the Civil War to the Korean War, so we could put flags on their graves prior to Memorial Day weekend. I wrote the "Self-Guided Walking Tour," "Welcome to Hope Abbey," and "Civil War Veterans" brochures and researched and wrote most of the text on the historic plaques featured on the walking tour. I also wrote a number of articles about the Masonic Cemetery for the "Lane County Historian."

*You've been Board secretary and still are. How many years have you served in that capacity? What have been and are some of the challenges in serving as secretary?*

I actually don't remember when I began serving as Board secretary. John thinks I was secretary during his tenure as president (2004-2014). I don't recall any particular challenges (except for Zoom meetings).

*You were also editor of "Monumental News." How long was your tenure as editor? Did you start editing and producing the newsletter, or was there a newsletter in place when you joined the Board?*

Kay Holbo, editor, and Christine Beneda, publisher, put out the first issue of "Monumental News" in May 1995. I began writing articles for it in 2001 and became editor of the newsletter in 2005. My last newsletter as editor was the spring 2018 issue. (Note: Christine continues to be publisher.)

*Tell us about the physical aspects of the newsletter, number of pages, layout, etc. How did it change over the years?*

"Monumental News" has been a semi-annual print newsletter from the beginning. It was a four-page newsletter until spring 2002, when the spring issues became six pages. The spring issues increased to eight pages, at John Bredesen's urging, in 2008. And in fall 2016, again at John's urging, we went to a color newsletter for the first time. From the beginning Christine has been responsible for the layout and has done a consistently

remarkable job. At some point we began to place “Monumental News” on the EMCA website.

*What were some of your experiences, both humorous and serious, in editing the newsletter?*

Both experiences relate to the Woodmen of the World tree stump monument in the cemetery. After writing an article about the monument I went to other sources to determine how many other woodmen were buried in the cemetery, albeit under more conventional-looking monuments. I looked up their obituaries in case there were some interesting stories I could use for a second article. The first half dozen or so were of no interest. I then checked the newspaper containing Sheriff W.W. Withers obituary. Its front-page headline read “Sheriff Murdered.” And I had a story.

The single tree stump monument made me curious about other historic cemeteries in Lane County and if they contained tree stumps. I recruited a friend to explore other cemeteries, using the Oregon Department of Transportation’s list of cemeteries that existed before 1900 and information about their locations, which for many was less than accurate. We drove many back roads and stopped at farm houses (when we were lost or when the cemetery was on private property). We (two old women, clearly not a threat) were always treated graciously and directed to the cemetery. We visited about three dozen cemeteries and found six more tree stumps.

*You participated in the Memorial Day planning committee. How many years have you served on this committee, and what have been and are your areas of involvement?*

My first involvement, in 2002, stemming from my research on veterans buried in the cemetery, was placing flags on veterans’ graves during the week of Memorial Day. The flags were donated by VFW, Eugene Post 293. Mary Ellen Rodgers took the north half of the cemetery, and I took the south half. I (with help from volunteers) continued placing flags until a few years ago. I also made arrangements for some of our Memorial Day weekend speakers and served as a Hope Abbey host.

*Have you volunteered and served in other capacities that haven’t been mentioned here?*

I helped organize some of the first “Music to Die For” concert series, as well as other special events at the cemetery hosted by EMCA. They included Eugene Skinner’s 200<sup>th</sup> birthday party (2009), the ice cream social during the Eugene Sunday Streets in the Amazon neighborhood (2012), and the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Hope Abbey’s completion and dedication (2014).

*On April 11, 2019, the United Way (and the Register-Guard) recognized you as the “Volunteer of the Year” for your extraordinary community leadership and dedicated service in the category of Civic and Community. Can you set the stage for that day and tell us about how you felt.*

I felt privileged that day to be sitting at a table filled with EMCA board members and staff, who had come to share the day with me. Later I felt very fortunate because 2019

was the last year community volunteers were recognized in this way. Earlier, when I became Volunteer of the Month with my picture in the R-G, I was blessed when many friends cut out the picture and mailed it to me.

*Back to questions about EMCA, were there any “bumps in the road” that were challenges?*

When Ed Teague resigned from the board in 2019, we lost a [University of Oregon] professional historian/librarian/archivist, who had already made many significant contributions to expanding our knowledge of the cemetery’s history. We’ve replaced the archivist part of his role with Alex [Brokaw, board member] and Kate [Thornhill – University of Oregon Digital Scholarship Librarian and volunteer]. However, we have no one on the present Board functioning in the role of historian. This is a current challenge.

*What are some of your best memories of being on the Board?*

That’s easy—the fabulous people who have shared their talents, passion, and expertise as Board members, staff, and volunteers over the years. Their commitment to the cemetery, respect for their colleagues, and delightful personalities are the reasons I’ve stayed involved with EMCA for over 20 years. And, as John never stops quoting me, we’ve had a lot of fun together.

*Is there anything else you would like to talk about?*

The above is plenty.

End of interview.