

Eugene Masonic Cemetery Association

Oral History Project

Narrator:

CHARLES R. B. WRIGHT

Interviewed by:

ALEX BROKAW

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

Narrator

Charley Wright, a retired University of Oregon math professor, grew up as a faculty brat in Lincoln, Nebraska, where he got his B.A. and M.A. After further study at Wisconsin and a post-doc at CalTech, he arrived in Eugene in the summer of 1961.

During his years on the UO faculty, he spent time as department head and associate dean, as well as on innumerable committees. He especially enjoyed serving on the Campus Planning Committee, where he got hooked on the importance of both physical and strategic planning.

After retiring, Charley—a bassoonist himself—spent a number of years on the board of the Oregon Mozart Players, where, among other things, he served as president, webmaster, and guy who wrote all the thanks letters. He also helped to draft a strategic plan.

After stepping off the OMP board in 2010, he was invited to join the EMCA board. One thing led to another. He helped draft EMCA's long-range plan, he serves as webmaster and thanks letter guy, and at one point he even filled in as president. On the musical side, he claims credit for naming the *Music to Die For* summer series, in which he's had the opportunity to play several times. One of his special physical planning interests has been the rehabilitation of Hope Abbey, which is nearing completion.

Note: 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.

Eugene Masonic Cemetery Association Charles R. B. Wright Interview

Brokaw: This oral history interview is part of the Eugene Masonic Cemetery Association's [EMCA's] oral history project. This interview will be conducted by me, 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 Charley Wright, taking place on May 1, 2021 on Zoom, a web conferencing tool. The recordings will be made available for research and educational purposes for future EMCA boards, staff, and the general public.

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

Wright: I do.

Brokaw: Thank you.

Brokaw: Charles R.B. Wright, better known as Charley, is a retired University of Oregon math professor. He joined the Eugene Masonic Cemetery Association's board in 2010. He maintains the board's contact database, writes thank you letters to donors, and manages the cemetery's website. He has also played bassoon several times in the "Music to Die For" series. His special EMCA interests include long-range planning and the rehabilitation of Hope Abbey.

Brokaw: Charley, where were you born and where did you grow up?

Wright: I was born in Lincoln, Nebraska. My parents moved to Pullman, Washington shortly after that, but then we came back to Lincoln, Nebraska. So that's essentially where I grew up—spent my formative years.

Brokaw: Did you have any surprising or significant experiences that affected the direction of your life during the time that you were in high school?

Wright: When I was in high school, probably not. This was a time in the '50's in which science was big, and so it was reasonable to look at science—being a scientist—as a possible career. And so I thought, well, I'd be a physicist, but I certainly didn't make that decision firmly in high school. It was when I went to college that I started as a physics major. Physics was the big thing at that point. Actually, my brother is a physicist.

Wright: So, the lab equipment did not suit me as well as the mental equipment, and by the time I got to college, I thought I'd be better off being a mathematician.

Thornhill: This is Kate Thornhill. Charley, you mentioned your brother. What is your brother's name?

Wright: My brother is Bradford Lawrence Wright. There's also a Bradford Barry Wright, who is my son—

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Thornhill: Thank you.

Wright: Who's also a scientist, but he's a chemist.

Brokaw: Would you tell us about your college education?

Wright: Well, I started out going to be a physics major and went to a lot of summer school and took lots of credit hours and managed to graduate in three years, but it was a dual major of math and physics. And then I spent a year at Nebraska getting a masters in math.

Brokaw: And that's the University of Nebraska?

Wright: The University of Nebraska, Lincoln, yes. My father was on the faculty there, which really doesn't have anything to do with it, except that he and my mother were obviously very strong influences on me and supported education.

Thornhill: Charley, what year did you graduate from undergrad and then your master's degree?

Wright: I graduated in 1956. I got married in '55, graduated in '56, and then got a master's in '57.

Brokaw: And did you go on from there?

Wright: And then I went on to the University of Wisconsin, which didn't say Madison in those days—it was just Wisconsin. I got a Ph.D. there in a couple years, in '59.

Wright: One thing that actually influenced me at that point, if you're looking for influences, was the fact that the National Science Foundation had just started awarding graduate fellowships. And so I got one in the first or second year they were operating the program, but it certainly made it easier for me to go on to graduate school.

Brokaw: Did you go on to other schooling after that or did you—

Wright: No, no. Then I had a Ph.D. from Wisconsin and went off and had a postdoc at Caltech for a couple years.

Wright: I came to the University of Oregon in 1961, sixty years ago.

Brokaw: I was going to ask you, what was your career before retiring, but I think you've answered that. Have you always been a math professor, or have you branched out at any time?

Wright: Well, I've always been a math professor, but toward the end of things I got involved in teaching the discrete math course, which is what the computer science students need that isn't calculus. So, it's defined in the funny way of being something that it isn't. And a colleague and I wrote a discrete math textbook that actually went through five editions. But I also got involved in graduate seminars in computer science, because that was an area of interest to me. Curiously enough, I was thought of as being one of the more applied members of the department, despite being a pure mathematician.

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Thornhill: Charley, were you one of the first computer science mathematicians at the University of Oregon?

Wright: That's an interesting question. When I arrived here, computer science as a field didn't really exist nationally. There were people at Wisconsin—there was a man who was basically a computer scientist, but he was someone in the mathematics department. When I arrived here, computer science—it really descended into—some colleges had it in electrical engineering. Some colleges had it in mathematics.

We didn't have an engineering school, so here it was in mathematics, and initially, actually, was sort of run by a statistician, Fred Andrews. Then the computer science department spun off of that. It was David Moursund, who was the son of our department head, Andrew Moursund. And David got his Ph.D. at Wisconsin under Preston Hammer and had arrived here. So, I really got here before there was a computer science department.

Brokaw: About what year was that?

Wright: Well, that was '61. When I got here, there was “the computer,” and it took up most of the basement of Deady Hall.

Brokaw: Do you have previous nonprofit board experience, other than the EMCA board?

Wright: Yes, that's one of the reasons I'm on the EMCA board.

When I retired, I had been on all sorts of committees at the university. I'd been on a transportation planning committee for the County. I'd been on the University Campus Planning Committee. I really liked that one, in particular, and I chaired most of these things. And so, it was natural that somebody would grab me, and the person who grabbed me was Sharon Schuman, who was on the Mozart Players board. And she knew me, partly because she had bought my house years before, but also knew me from my musical connections.

So I got on the Mozart Players board, and got quite interested in what it was possible to do on the board—how boards did work. I avoided, for a long time, being president, but I actually was more effective behind the scenes, because I was secretary, which meant I got to set the agendas, and so had some control over what was done. And also I discovered very early on that the executive director at that point was six months behind in writing thank you letters. Six full months!

Wright: And I thought, we can't have this, and I offered to write thanks letters, and that offer was accepted. From then on, for the next eight or ten years, I wrote the thanks letters.

Thornhill: And Charley, when did you first join the Mozart board?

Wright: It must have been just about 2000. I retired in '99 and I think it was 2000.

Thornhill: Great. Thank you

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Wright: I was president for a time. Oh, and I want to comment that also I got involved in setting up their database and running that, though we had an executive director who was really in charge of that. I actually paid money to get them a website, which I thought they probably ought to have in those days. And what else? Did I say I was involved in their long-range planning. Yeah, I was.

Brokaw: On to some cemetery questions, did you have any knowledge of the cemetery before you joined the board? What did you know about it?

Wright: That's interesting. I at one point lived within seven or eight blocks of the cemetery when my kids were growing up. And we knew the cemetery existed, but I wouldn't have let my kids go there.

Brokaw: No?

Wright: It was a place you wanted to stay away from. For years and years, probably almost since I came to Eugene, I'd known Karen Seidel for musical reasons. She was just a friend and she kept saying how wonderful it was to be on the cemetery board, and how much fun we had on the cemetery board, and wouldn't you like to be on this cemetery board? (Brokaw laughs) Of course, I said no. And I didn't really know anything about it until I resigned from the Mozart Players board, and then was seen as fair game. (Brokaw laughs)

Thornhill: Charley, when did you resign, what year did you resign from the Mozart board?

Wright: Must have been 2009.

Thornhill: And then that was when you transitioned over to EMCA?

Wright: About that year. Must have been some time in 2009. And then Denny Hellesvig and John Bredesen took me out for a beer and did their best to try to talk me into joining the cemetery board. I said, "Yeah, I'll go to a meeting." And I went to the meeting, and they were very nice people and seemed to have a worthy cause. And so I joined.

Wright: I discovered after the fact that they thought I was going to be president.

Brokaw: Oh. (Wright chuckles) And were you?

Wright: No—not then.

Wright: But what it did say to me was, there's clearly going to be a vacuum in this organization at some point for a president. John Bredesen had been president for a long time. Before him, Kay Holbo had run the show. Very shortly after I came on the board—and I can't remember exactly when—we got a long-range planning enterprise cranked up. There were five of us in the group: Kay, John, Denny, Karen Seidel, and I. And it was so much fun working with these people, doing things that I was familiar with in other contexts. At one point, I actually chaired a hundred-person committee at the University, so I knew about committees.

Brokaw: But this was a lot more fun. (laughs)

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Wright: This was a lot more fun.

Thornhill: And did you chair the EMCA Long Range Planning Committee or was that someone else's job?

Wright: I don't know that we had a chair. We met for a while at Denny's house. We met for a while at my house. It was just a group enterprise. We all could see that it needed to be done and we had had varying amounts of experience doing this sort of thing.

The plan we ended up with has been ridiculed by some, but it has a range of activities. So you have four goals. Then each goal has some objectives which—if you meet these objectives, you will be satisfying the goal. Each objective has some strategies for attaining that objective. And then, down in the weeds, you've got tactics. And the tactics are what you will use to implement the strategies, and so on. The design is not unique to us in any sense, but it's the one that we have ended up with at this point.

Thornhill: And how did you see your role on this long-term planning committee? What contributions, did you feel like you made the most??

Wright: Partly I had had experience really doing this sort of thing fairly extensively so—I don't say I think of myself as a planner, but it was something that I felt very comfortable doing, and we had a template. This kind of planning is different from physical planning which I always enjoy doing as well. Where do you put the next building? How do you design it? That sort of thing.

Brokaw: Charley, we did refer to you as being president of the board and you did end up finally becoming the president. Would you tell us about some of the projects and highlights of your presidency? If there are any.

Wright: That's an interesting question because, as you'll recall, I was only president for oh, a year and a quarter, or something like that. And, the projects were already underway—though you can think of long-range planning as a project—but physical projects? One of them was building the fence along the north border of the property and then tying around to the east. That was one that Denny was really shepherding. He designed it. He and I carried it to the City people, but really it was his project. The other thing that happened during my presidency, I guess, was polishing the floor in Hope Abbey, which I really didn't have anything to do with. That was funded by Jim Northrop.

Brokaw: Is that a terrazzo floor?

Wright: Yes. It's a marble terrazzo floor. When the cemetery association took over the building, people thought it actually had a dirt floor.

Brokaw: I walked in there at that time and I thought so too.

Wright: So much mud on it.

Wright: But this was something that needed doing, among other things, and was funded by a very generous donation from a friend of the cemetery. I remember—it must

have been at the Memorial Day festivities—there were a bunch of board members standing around in Hope Abbey and Jim handed us a check. Did you get the check, or who did? Jim wanted to know where Denny was, and Denny was standing a few feet away, and he handed him this check and it was for \$10,000. And people couldn't believe there were that many zeros on it.

Brokaw: No. We were all completely shocked. And we were crying; Denny was even crying.

Wright: Anyhow, that's how that project came to be, and I think Denny was the project manager. So I myself was not particularly responsible in any projects at that time.

Brokaw: You do a lot of things for the association. You maintain the database, you write all the thank you letters for donations, you're currently a member of the Endowment Committee, and even though you're not chair, knowing you, you have plenty to say! (Wright laughs.) You are our current webmaster. Will you tell us a little more about these subjects?

Wright: Some of these are, of course, extensions of the kinds of things I was doing for the Mozart Players. And I was—well, you look around the table and you see who can do it, and I was somebody who had experience. The database was being maintained by Mary Breiter, who was not on the board at the time. It's a very simple-minded database. It's an Excel workbook with spreadsheets. One contains all the contact information we have, and the other spreadsheet lists all of the donations, in more or less detail. So all it takes, really, is knowing how to run Excel, but you will remember, Alex, when you came over to my house, because you volunteered to take it over—

Brokaw: Yes.

Wright: And it wasn't as simple as it sounded.

Brokaw: The Excel spreadsheets were fine. It was learning to generate the thank you letters that was the problem.

Brokaw: So, the job came right back to you.

Wright: Well, yes it did.

Brokaw: I've read many of your thank you notes and they are excellent. They're not notes, they're letters and they're excellent letters.

Wright: Well, thank you. The thing about it—about the database, if I can stick on that for a little while—is the organization as a whole is too small—it doesn't have enough money, really, to have an executive director. And similarly, we don't need the fancy kind of database that a larger nonprofit has. So, the Excel with notes on it is, I think, pretty much appropriate. Every so often, I think, “Gosh, I wish we knew this or that,” and it isn't in there. But that's partly because, at one point, we didn't think we'd want to know. Well, that's always a problem with databases. On any database, you want to think ahead of time of everything you could possibly want to ask, and we hadn't thought of everything. But it's quite manageable, and

as you're pointing out, Alex, it could be managed by somebody else. Anybody who was comfortable with Excel. It's not that big a deal.

Wright: The writing the thanks letters came at the interface between Excel and Word. The old Microsoft problem. How can you tell Microsoft that you know more than they know about what you want to do? And, actually, I've written down very detailed instructions now. So if I get hit by a bus anybody can practically—down to the keystroke—know how to generate the listing from which the thanks letters are written.

Brokaw: That's wonderful.

Wright: Which is the critical part of it all.

Wright: So the thanks letters themselves are mail merge documents—there's a form letter. The form letter changes as the seasons change, as the flowers in the cemetery change, as what you might tell a friend about what's going on changes. A friend with some money.

Brokaw: As I say, they're very good letters.

Thornhill: Well, I have a question for you, Charley. You know, on average, what are the donation amounts that you've seen over the years that go to EMCA?

Wright: There's, of course, a wide range. The typical donation is a hundred dollars. And we have mean, median and mode. The most common one, the mode, is \$100. Right now, it's creeping up toward the 250's. The low is as low as ten. We have a couple of people who give monthly, and one of them gives \$10 a month—a hundred twenty a year. The major donations run in the 10K range. Some of them from me, some from Northrop—various others. A lot of them come from board members, but not all. We got a very nice donation from somebody who used to be a neighbor of the cemetery. We're basically in the \$100 range.

Brokaw: We couldn't survive on \$100 donations.

Wright: Oh no.

Wright: We've also got some very nice donations from the Masons. I want to emphasize that. Particularly when they had money coming in—COVID has cut them back, because they made a lot of money selling parking to Autzen Stadium users—but they very generously were giving us 20K a year.

Wright: The Masons' donations were earmarked—but not earmarked. They wanted us to use the money in ways that added value to the cemetery. They didn't want it as just maintenance money. And we can always find ways that we think increase the value of the cemetery for the community. That's been very good.

Brokaw: The cemetery has endowments. What is the Endowment committee planning as the next step?

Wright: Well, the Endowment Committee has sprung back to life. And somebody else is chairing it. We need the new energy. We'll see where that goes.

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Wright: It's clear we're going to run out of lots to sell. And the question is, how do we continue to fund the existence of the cemetery, say for the next hundred years?

Brokaw: Will you explain what things are sold?

Wright: We sell the right to be buried in the cemetery. Some of the lots are small enough that they will just hold cremated remains. Some are large enough for full casket burials. But in any case, it's a dwindling resource. When you run out of land you run out of land.

Wright: Every year, Sally Dietrich, our Sexton and Administrator, develops more lots to sell. We also have a Memorial Garden and a Memorial Overlook, which are specifically for the burial of cremains. And there is a potential—and I'm sure this will come to pass eventually—to have above-ground columbaria for ashes. But we're going to run out of burial space. We have a little more space in the mausoleum but, again, that's a limited, dwindling resource. So that's what our income is. We don't have a cell tower—there's been talk of it—and that could be a source of continuing revenue. And, we don't sell tickets. We don't do anything other than beg for donations.

Thornhill: Charley, I'm curious. How many lots were available when you joined the board? How many lots are available today?

Wright: I don't know, and I don't think it was known. This is part of the problem. The cemetery was way overgrown. It wasn't clear which plots were still available. Some of them might at one time have been available and then trees grew over them or there were other problems. Sally has been very good at locating and making available lots.

Wright: Some of this involves plots that maybe were allegedly sold in the past, but nobody can be found who allegedly owns them. We don't sell the land anymore, we sell the right to be buried, which is a different thing entirely. So, the association owns all the land. That's been legally determined.

Brokaw: What are you doing as webmaster—anything new?

Wright: The story on the webmaster is that John Bredesen's second wife, Fran Ross, designed and built the website, when I got on the board. And she and a couple of other board members had ideas about what the site should look like and how it should work. After Fran died, I got it, partly because of my Mozart Players website experience, partly because I could read raw and write raw HTML code, which was something that was helpful in those days. But now you've got things like WordPress and the like that has made it so anybody coming in off the street could do it. Well, not quite, but it's not that hard to learn.

Thornhill: Charley, when was the website established?

Wright: I don't know. It was before I got on. I simply don't know. What I did do—I was coordinator for, just a few years ago—was a complete conversion of it to a WordPress site, partly so we could use it effectively on mobile devices. The original site was developed thinking only of PCs, because that's all there was,

really, out there. And it was not friendly at all to phones or iPads or anything else. So that was the motivation for switching it over. The work was done by Christine Beneda. And I ended up being the administrator/webmaster.

Wright: And I've exploited that to make some things more public than perhaps they were before.

Brokaw: How easy is it to search? Do we have both board and public searches available?

Wright: Depends on what you want to search for. If you want to see our burial list, for example, well there's a pulldown menu. If you click on burial list, up comes a PDF which is searchable. Searchable for anything that's in it. If you want a date of death, you can search for that, as well as individual's names.

It's in other ways, not so searchable. For example, one of our publications years and years ago was a book called *Full of Life*, which Kay Holbo edited and a number of other people contributed to. And that is fully available on our website, chapter by chapter. You can download *Full of Life*. I don't think you can search it. I haven't tried to search it, but I wouldn't bet on it. [ed note: It is actually searchable]

Wright: I recently set up a page called "Board" that is available to the public, so they can see who is on the board and a picture and a bio of each of us on the board. And then, at the bottom of it, there's a link to "Board Resources" or whatever it's called. The Board Resources page itself is password-protected, but the stuff that it links to isn't. If you happen to know the URLs for them, you can find 'em. ... We have to expect that anything that's on the website can be seen by God and everybody.

Wright: And so, yes, there are confidential pages for the board.

Brokaw: You spend a lot of time volunteering for the cemetery, and I'd like to know, approximately, how much time per week do you think—and be honest about it—how much time do you think you spend with cemetery business?

Wright: That's a wonderful question. My wife, Leslie, has asked me a number of times, "How much time do you spend on that?" So, I've been trying to keep track for the last week or so, or at least the last five days, and extrapolate from that. Probably something like twenty-five hours a week, plus time spent thinking about it.

Brokaw: And that's just as important. (laughs) You're a part-time employee.

Wright: That's off the clock. I actually kept track of my time when I was working for the Mozart Players and it was a half-time job.

Brokaw: Why is this place, the cemetery and Hope Abbey, such an important part of your life?

Wright: Well, you know how I got suckered into it by Karen, and I only live a couple of blocks away. So, it's easy to get there and see what's going on. But why should I care? And the reason I care is it's truly unique. It's a community asset unlike anything else. And I think it deserves our support.

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Brokaw: It's almost a hidden asset in the community.

Wright: It is not well known. But it's unique, not just in its isolation and its unknown quality. I've lived in Eugene for sixty years. And during that time, I've seen things that we just took for granted in 1960—institutions, practices, buildings—and they're gone. At the time, it never occurred to us that those would be gone. "It's always been there." The ice factory on Broadway, for example.

Wright: What we have uniquely in our cemetery is the history. We have the history, not only of early Eugene. We are making history right now and attempting to preserve that, whether we're aware of it or not. I bring this up in the context of—60 years ago I didn't think we were creating history. Now we look back and see that was then. So we are preserving the history, and if we don't do it, who will? If we don't do it, who will? And so, it really comes down to us. The cemetery, in addition to the historical value—we have this serene, beautiful space that is used by people in so many different ways. For example, it's used for contemplation, for dog walking or for family strolling—for simple enjoyment of the beautiful space. That, in and of itself, would justify being a friend of it, at any rate.

Thornhill: Charley, I was wondering if you could tell us some of your personally favorite parts about the cemetery that you think deserve historical preservation?

Wright: (Long pause) Well, for me personally, it's the mausoleum. But looking farther out, I liked seeing the way other people have chosen to highlight the history. I don't write the signs, but I think the signs are wonderful. I don't give tours, but I think the tours that we give are a real community asset.

Thornhill: Who usually is responsible for the signs?

Wright: Initially, Karen Seidel got involved on the cemetery board because of her interest in the history. She did a lot of work before she got on the board because she'd been asked to do the research, which is something she loves doing. So she is responsible for, I would say, most of the language that's on those signs that are placed by particular graves. We've just gone through a project of replacing all the signs with ones that are more durable. And in the process, there's been some change in the wording, but Karen is still very involved with what the signs say. Sally Dietrich is leading the project.

Thornhill: What about the tours? Who usually gives the tours and what do the tours include?

Wright: Caroline Forell has been doing a recent tour. And you'd have to ask her exactly what she includes. The past year was the Year of the Woman, and so I think that the tour, for example, emphasized women who were prominent and were buried in the cemetery. We've had tours that emphasize the plantings and tours that emphasize interesting gravestones and markers.

We have brochures that show you on a map a walking tour for plants or another walking tour for historic purposes. As I said, I'm largely interested in the mausoleum. It's just sort of happened that way. But we are so close to having that thing, not as good as new, but as good as a hundred-year-old building can be.

There are bound to be a few nicks and dings, but we've done a lot of restoration. We have a project going right now [ed note: repairing 16 pilasters and interior masonry] that will essentially finish up the inside.

Brokaw: And why is the building so special?

Wright: Well, it's one of a kind. In the early 20th century, mausoleums were the rage. Ellis Lawrence, who was the first dean of architecture at the University of Oregon, designed a number of them for a mausoleum company based in Portland. No two of the designs were alike. Ours was the one in the Egyptian revival style, which was also quite popular around 1910. I can remember my mother, who was born in 1910, still being aware of Egyptian influences in her childhood. So, it is unique. Beyond that, why not?

Brokaw: We're getting close to winding up here. What were any bumps in the road that were challenges, and then what are some of your best memories of being on the board, even though you're still on the board?

Wright: One serious bump in the road of course was the meeting three years or so ago, at the end of which our board president said, "And, by the way, I'm quitting." That was Crystal Persi. And we all looked around the table, and then they picked me.

Wright: So, for me personally, that was totally unexpected. I lived through it. But in bumps in the road for the organization otherwise, we've had difficulties several times, trying to strike a balance between the plants and history. I think we're coming close now to doing that. At the start, the board commissioned a landscape report that was really heavily emphasizing the plants. And for a number of years that's how the cemetery landscape was administered. "Yeah, there are these stones, and they get in the way, but the plants are important."

We're, at the moment, shifting to recognizing the importance of both, but we've had bumps with people getting mad and quitting. One of those people is now a major donor to the landscape endowment. She's come back. She's a friend, she was always a friend, but she saw things differently. You hate to have a disruption like that, but it's all turned out okay.

Wright: In terms of what's been fun, well the social contacts, working with the other board members—Kay, Karen, Denny, John. The Music to Die For series, and I'll take credit for naming that.

Brokaw: Charley, you're very clever in naming events, titles, etc.

Wright: That happened at an executive committee meeting, and John was talking about this program, and what do we call it and I said, "Well how about 'Music to Die For?'" There was a stunned silence. (laughs) And then everybody laughed, and they bought it. And that's the reaction we get from people as well. The stunned silence and then, "Oh It's okay to think that way."

Wright: So that's part of making the cemetery available to the public, I think. Making them think of this as something that's not off limits. It's not Masons. You're perfectly welcome to enjoy it with us, and we hope you do.

Wright: I have to mention one episode that I had that sticks in my mind. A number of years, not too many years ago, I happened to be walking between Hope Abbey and the garden cottage and I saw a couple—a man in his 30s, I guess, and an older woman. And they were walking, and they seemed to be looking around, and it wasn't clear why they were there. And so I asked them if there was something they were looking for. “Oh,” he said, “Is Thomas Condon here?” And I said “Well, yes, as a matter of fact, he is.” and I pointed to his grave marker. “That's his grave.” And we walked over to see where Thomas Condon was. And by and by I asked him, “Why do you care?” Well, turned out, he was the new man in charge of the visitor center at the John Day Fossil Beds in Eastern Oregon. He wanted to show his mother something of who Thomas Condon was. My own connection with Thomas Condon was I taught in the same room that he did, in Deady Hall.

Brokaw: (laughs)

Wright: But it's that kind of little personal interaction that you never expect to have happen, and there's the person, and it's the right person to talk with, and they appreciate it. And that means a lot to me too. I think there must be a lot of opportunities for that, that we don't know about. And then they occur.

Brokaw: Is there anything else you would like to talk about?

Wright: Well, I sort of have talked a little bit about it but, I'd like to talk a bit about the trajectory of the organization. They started out low, and very rapidly were able to develop funding, to make some changes, get some things done on the ground, build themselves up to being a really fully functioning organization. That's largely Kay Holbo's work—Kay Holbo's leadership—but then also John Bredesen just gently guiding as president and Denny watching all the projects. So, they got themselves up, and by 2010 when I got on—to use a mathematical phrase, I would say they were “in the stable range.” They weren't worried about the startup route anymore. I would say we're still in the stable range, but if you look ahead, we're running out of inventory. We really don't know what the next ten years should look like.

And so I think, going forward, this is the challenge that we've all got to start facing. And I'm hoping to be part of that, but I'm not going to be around for ten more years, probably. We've got to get board members who see this, who are problem solvers, which I think is—that's me. I taught problem solving for forty years. But that's what we've gotta have happen. Aging board members—well you've been interviewing aging board members. You know exactly what I'm talking about. But beyond that—

Brokaw: We do need new ideas.

Wright: Well, if we could grab people who are recent retirees, they aren't working, they're in their mid-sixties. I don't have anything like the energy I had twenty years ago. Let's be honest about it. And ten years from now, I don't know where I'll be—very possibly in the cemetery.

Eugene Masonic Cemetery Association Charles R. B. Wright Interview

Brokaw: Well, Charley, I want to thank you, this has been a great interview.

Wright: I said at the beginning and I'll say at the end again, I want to thank you people for running this oral history program. Something we needed done and I hope you can see why I'm in favor of it.

Thornhill: You're welcome.

Brokaw: We all thank Kate for putting this program together.

Thornhill: There are many other people involved, including you, Alex. And our fabulous library and information science interns that we have supporting.

Wright: Absolutely.

Brokaw: Yes, absolutely. Again, thank you, Charley.

Ending the recording.