

**Southwest Virginia LGBTQ+ History Project**

**Oral History Initiative**

**Interview with Edna Whittier**

**March 2, 2016**

Interviewer: Tessa Pleban

Interviewee: Edna Whittier

Date: March 2, 2016

Time: 4:25pm

Location: Floyd Public Library, Floyd, Virginia

Transcribed by: Mahmoud El-Hazzouri and Jessica Hopkins

0:00 = on preferring the title "Ms." versus "Miss"

2:30 = childhood in Midland, Michigan (1950s / 1960s)

5:02 = experiences in college at Central Michigan University (early 1970s?) and the story of a lesbian women's music festival in Mount Pleasant, Michigan (founded c. 1974)

11:47 = experiences with the Girl Scouts in Midland, Michigan

15:12 = gay teachers at high school in Midland, Michigan (1960s)

16:22 = coming out as bisexual (early 1980s)

19:25 = the gay scenes in Saginaw and Lansing, Michigan (1980s); more on coming out, and deciding to move to Lansing in 1983

27:55 = coming out to her parents

30:51 = religious upbringing in Midland, Michigan; discovering a Quaker community in Lansing, Michigan (c. 1986); debate about gays and AIDS within the Quaker community (late 1980s)

40:29 = women's responses to the AIDS epidemic, in Lansing, Michigan, and nationally

49:16 = on the power differences among white gay men, gay men of color, and lesbians

53:56 = reflecting on the origins of Lansing's first pride marches (late 1980s?)

57:03 = involvement with Lansing's AIDS network and the Michigan Organization for Human Rights

58:47 = reasons for moving to Roanoke, Virginia in 2003

1:02:20 = Metropolitan Community Church of the Blue Ridge  
1:03:33 = The Park and Backstreet Café  
1:06:26 = Pride in the Park festivals in Highland and Elmwood Parks (mid-2000s)  
1:08:30 = differences between the gay communities in Michigan and Southwest Virginia  
1:13:40 = starting a women's soccer league through the Metropolitan Community Church (2011 – present)  
1:16:29 = helping to organize pride parades in Floyd, Virginia (c. 2014 – present)  
1:22:56 = the women's soccer league in Roanoke  
1:26:13 = what will the future be like in Floyd?  
1:30:10 = predicting a future backlash in response to marriage equality  
1:36:38 = concluding the interview

0:00

Tessa Pleban: Hello, my name is Tessa Pleban. I am a student at Roanoke College and right now we are in the Floyd Public Library and I am interviewing Miss Edna Whittier. Edna, could you tell me a little bit about yourself?

0:15

Edna Whittier: Well my first reaction is, being a feminist, it would be "Ms."

0:23

TP: Oh, I apologize.

0:25

EW: For anybody who doesn't know the why, there is no single or married status for men with the "Mr." so the idea behind the "Ms." is to remove that single or married status but most people don't use it unless it's in formal correspondence and here in the Southwest section of Virginia "Ms." is usually put in front of a woman's first name so it would be "Ms. Edna" but that of course is just a shortening of M-I-S-S so "Ms. Edna" is something common around here when people are talking to each other. Sometimes, I've heard some women address one of their friends as "Mr. Mike." You're asking for a description of myself?

1:38

TP: Well I would just like to ask you so could you tell us, do you live here in Floyd?

1:45

EW: I do. I've lived here for five years.

1:49

TP: Do you work here?

1:50

EW: No, I work in Roanoke at Virginia Western Community College.

1:54

TP: Ok, what do you do at Virginia Western?

1:57

EW: I'm a study skills and testing skills tutor. My official title is Academic Success Coach. If the students ask for a one-on-one tutor, they're asked to sign up for a session with me.

2:15

TP: And do you do anything else up at Virginia Western?

2:19

EW: No, that's it

2:21

TP: Ok. So have you always lived in Floyd?

2:26

EW: I've lived here for five years.

2:28

TP: Ok, where did you live before that?

2:30

EW: I was in Roanoke for seven years before that and before that two years in New Jersey and before that I lived in Michigan, fourteen or fifteen years in Lansing, the rest of the time moving around the state. Grew up in Midland, Michigan.

2:59

TP: Midland, Michigan?

3:00

EW: Mhm

3:01

TP: So did you live with your family there?

3:03

EW: Mhm, my mother and father and my older and younger brother. Born a part of the baby boom.

3:16

TP: So how long did you live there with your family?

3:21

EW: Mmm... Until I was 18 when I went to college and then my parents moved to Lansing, or the Lansing area I should say, so [in] college [I was] going home to wherever their house was. Got married in '73. Got a divorce in '79. I already had a degree in education. Went to the community college in Lansing and got a Licensed Practical Nurse Certificate. Have been a Licensed Practical Nurse for over 25 years. Used my education degree on and off to tutor study skills and testing skills or for a while sciences, biology and geology.

4:28

TP: So is it alright if we start at the beginning back in Midland?

4:31

EW: Sure

4:32

TP: So you lived in Midland with your family. Did you go to schooling there?

4:36

EW: Mhm. Yes.

4:38

TP: And did you go to college in Midland after high school or did you leave?

4:47

EW: Twenty minutes away to Mount Pleasant to Central Michigan [University].

4:51

TP Ok. Did you find that in that area, if it's alright for me to ask, was there an active community at the time?

5:02

EW: I was not aware at that time. At that time, the first time I had been aware of anything in terms of the issue of gay or lesbian was I was in college and friends with a lot of Girl Scouts in the area and there was one high school student who had a crush on me and long distance calls between myself and her. At that time there was only one phone on the entire floor so it was a question of her trying to call me and somebody coming to get me. So we had some pretty long telephone conversations. She ran up bills of \$120. At that time, if you decided you were lesbian or gay, you could be committed. And in her situation, her parents put her in therapy. She was very vocal. She was a sophomore in high school and very vocal about the fact that she was a lesbian. And it didn't bother me in the sense that I didn't feel threatened. Everybody knew her, everybody liked her other than the fact that she just would obsess about calling me. So there wasn't any, as far as I know, there wasn't any "shunning" [air quote with fingers] of her. But, because of her obsession, I don't like being around her when she starts obsessing. That was kind of the response from the Girl Scouts that I was with. She had a beautiful singing voice. She played drums incredibly well. And we were a musical group. The campfires and that sort of thing, she didn't have any problems there, it was just the other part. When I got married, she actually was the person who, she went around and made sure the corsages were on the right people so she took care of that. After I got the divorce, I had to move back home from where my ex-husband and I were living. We were living in Flint and I moved back to the Midland area and she was still living in the Midland area and it was through her that I have become aware of what had been going on in Mount Pleasant, since the time that I had been in school. She let me know about the Women's Music Festival which had been started in '74 or '76. At the time that I was a junior, a sophomore, a senior in Mount Pleasant there was a group of women. They were called the Lyon Street Women because they had a collective on Lyon Street. I think that was the name of it. And they decided they wanted to hear Women's music. They were tired of listening to all of the music by men so they formed a co-op or a collective and got some land from a farmer. They were able to rent some land from a farmer and invited all these women who were lesbian, bisexual women making music, through an independent music recording group and invited them to do concerts and last year or this year is the last year of the Women's Music Festival. So it ran for 40 years, '76 to 2016, or maybe it was last year, but any rate it ran for 40 years and the last time was either last year or this year. And it got shut down, surprisingly enough, because of the transgender issue. The Women's Festival did not allow women on the grounds that were not female-born and they stood by that until their performers started boycotting them so they couldn't get anybody to perform and they were having trouble holding vendors so finally the organizers just said "that's enough, we're tired of this" and they shut it down. So there was something going on there [when she was in college] I was just not aware of it until after my divorce and my friend took me to the festival. At the time that I went to my first festival, it was six years, six or seven years after the first one so I went to the seventh annual Women's Music Festival for the first time.

10:45

TP: So did your friend, when she introduced you to that did she say that she had been going to the festival for a while?

10:51

EW: She had been going to every one of them. She was there for the very first one. When it only cost I think \$10 to go for the entire weekend.

11:00

TP: And she's the one that invited you to the seventh?

11:02

EW: Mhm

11:04

TP: So did you find yourself going to them after that?

11:07

EW: I went to three more if I'm not mistaken. It kind of blurs together. And the t-shirts unfortunately do not say which years they were. They say like "the seventh annual" but they don't put a year on it and I don't have all of my t-shirts. It depended on whether I liked what the image was. Every year they would change the image on the t-shirt.

11:34

TP: So if I could ask about that person. When you were back in high school did you realize those were advances or did you think of her as a friend?

11:47

EW: I thought of her as a friend. In the Girl Scout groups that I was with, we were very active outdoors. I would say the majority of us would've been labeled tomboys. Our biggest thing was camping and singing. So we all had crushes on each other. We were all in love with each other in some manner. We sent cards to each other that used the word "love" frequently and it was one of those deep friendship sort of things. We made friendship bracelets for each other. You could tell who the popular person was by the number of bracelets on their arm. Again it wasn't a threatening environment. As a matter of fact when we heard from one of the troop leaders that the Girl Scout council was concerned about our particular group because they were afraid there were lesbian tendencies going on, we all laughed. We thought "that's ridiculous. Of course that's not true."

13:04

TP: So you being in Girl Scouts did you find out later that you had an issue with them? Did they ever talk to you or your friends?

13:11

EW: You mean the council?

13:12

TP: Mhm

13:13

EW: No, they never did. We just blew them off. On top of that we had those troop leaders that were championing us, and you got to put it in the context of time. This was sex, drugs, and rock and roll or if you wanted to be more hippy it was love, peace, and rock and roll. So it was lots of bell bottoms, lots of incredible colors, fringe jackets, and Back to the Earth movement, and it was appropriate to be expressing that kind of love because our parents couldn't. They weren't that open. They weren't that free. That was our attitude that these council women from the Girl Scouts were old "fuddy duddys" who didn't know what they were talking about.

14:14

TP: So you mentioned that your friend... that her parents put her in therapy, was that it was illegal at the time, did you find though that was kind of the usual that would happen as, rather than ostracizing their child, parents would put them in therapy and kind of press it down or...

14:36

EW: It depended on how "out" a person was and she was very vocal and because she was very vocal about it, her parents asked her to go to therapy and she didn't really have a choice. She was under age. She wasn't emancipated or anything, and being committed we heard stories. We didn't know anybody personally. The closest we came to it was her and [her] having to go to therapy for it.

15:07

TP: So you never felt like you faced that threat when you were younger?

15:12

EW: Well I'm bisexual and so for me all of those things were just "okay, it's out there," but my parents never talked about it. There were two P.E. teachers, physical ed[ucation] teachers, in my high school—no, it was my junior high school—that evidently lived together and I never heard anybody in the school say anything about that. It was just "oh, so they lived together, so what?" It was one of those things that was so underground it wasn't even whispered about. It just never occurred to anybody. She [her friend] was carrying on a little too much with her girl crush.

16:14

TP: So you said that you identify as bisexual, could I ask you when you came out?

16:22

EW: In '82, after the divorce when I was living back in Midland and my friend... and I was working the second shift as a nurse so that means I worked from 7pm until 11pm which made it very hard to socialize. The only place you could go was to the bars afterwards if you wanted to socialize and I didn't want to do that. By the time I would get up around 8 or 9[am] and have to get ready to go to work and if there was anything to do it would occur between 5 and 7[pm]

and most people were eating supper then. They didn't start doing anything until 7 o'clock. So basically, I wasn't living with my family, divorced, didn't know anybody in town because everybody that I knew had left, and she was the only friend that I had who, because she wasn't working a job, or a steady job, could come and talk to me. After a certain amount of time she just said "I can't do this anymore. Either we become lovers or I leave." I thought about it and I thought, she's the only person I know. I'm not in a position to say no to love, so I told her "okay, If we're gonna do this, we're gonna get therapy," so we started couples' therapy with a social worker friend of hers which worked out very well in terms of it was easy to get along with her [the therapist] and she understood. The therapy was a good move because it turned out my friend was alcoholic, which I didn't recognize, and we were like oil and water. We just didn't mix well. I was 32 when I decided "okay." So I was one of those people that actually had a choice. I can choose to be heterosexual or I can choose to be homosexual. When religious people talk about people having choices, they're talking about people like me, they're talking about me.

19:17

TP: Have you found that there was a backlash when you came out from either your family, friends, or as you mentioned religion?

19:25

EW: Not a backlash in the sense that I was open about it. Let's see where shall we start? I was living in Midland. There was no gay community in Midland whatsoever. The closest gay community was 20 – 30 minutes away in Bay City or Saginaw, in the form of gay bars and that's basically all that was available. And it was really disappointing too because all of the gay bars were male gay bars so they had this techno beat to them. My lover and I, we went down to Lansing, which was two hours away, and we went to the women's bars in Lansing and they played a variety of music, so it wasn't all boom boom boom. And she and I liked dancing and we could dance to that [the music in the women's bars]. We'd go over to Saginaw and I would approach the DJ about playing something else and "well, this is what we always play." "Okay." Just being aware that you couldn't hold hands in public did present problems occasionally because I called her "babe" and I did that once or twice in public and didn't realize I had done it because when I was married I said things like "love" and stuff like that and she was very aware of it because she had been to therapy. She knew you don't do things like that. She would remind me afterwards, "you didn't see the look that clerk gave us. Did you realize you said that?" "Ooo, no, sorry, didn't mean to do that." That was the only pressure I noticed.

My brother preceded me in terms of being gay or being part of the community. He had left our family early on to go to Oregon and when he was in Oregon he discovered that he was gay and he had a gay lover and there was a gay men's community in the Oregon area, in the university area. When my mother and dad went out there to visit, he very carefully took them to different parties where he introduced them to his friends and about halfway through their visit he said to them "maybe you noticed, but every party we've been at all of my friends are male and I'm gay." The way my dad described it to me afterwards was that when my brother said "I'm gay" and realized that my parents weren't concerned then he kind of went "you mean it's ok? It's alright? Well, this is just wonderful!" and my dad said it was the happiest he had seen my

brother in a long time, not that we saw a whole lot of him. Again, we were half a continent away from each other, but he had come out to them before I became involved, a good three years before I became involved with my lover. And for me, honestly, it was harder for me to accept that my older brother was gay. It took me 48 hours to figure that it was okay. I just had a repulsion originally and that was all due to sexual practices, so there was on my part, as far as my brother was concerned, a resistance. Didn't voice it to him, never have, because he wasn't there and it didn't affect our relationship. I talked to my younger brother about it because my younger brother knew earlier than my parents. He had gone out to visit my older brother and my older brother was much more relaxed with him, just took him around. It didn't take long for my younger brother to figure out what was going on.

So, for me coming out to my family, that sort of more or less happened, not because I just out and said it, because I didn't really know. Is this a passing fad? Is this a desperation act because I'm all alone and the only thing that I have is my friend who says we got to be sexual partners or she's going to leave? But as I said she was an alcoholic. I would say about eight months after trying to go through therapy, we quit each other, we called it quits. I called it quits. I continued to see the therapist and she said, "you really shouldn't be staying here [Midland] if you want to be part of a women's community. One, the job that you have is isolating and two, there's nothing here." So for a while I went back to Mount Pleasant, went to school, decided that wasn't working even though the women's community was sort of there in terms of the festival. The women organizing the festival had all moved to California. They would come back in the summer time to organize the festival so there wasn't really a community in Mount Pleasant either. And talking to my therapist I just decided it was time to move to Lansing. The capital had a very strong women's community. It was in the time I was back at school trying to do some graduate work that I came out to my parents and that was by accident and they were just kind of like "oh, okay." Although I think, I know my dad was disappointed in the sense that my older brother was gay, I was gay, and my younger brother didn't seem to want to marry anybody, so my dad was wanting grandchildren and he really felt regretful about that. But I am very unusual in the fact that my parents were so accepting of it. I've heard so many other stories about the way friends were treated by their family. My parents were very unusual, very special in that fact. One of the favorite past times, when you got together with other friends, was your coming out story and we'd talk about what it was like to come out to your parents so I heard lots and lots of stories.

27:49

TP: When you went to go talk to your parents, did you feel any anxiety or did you already feel comforted by your older brother?

27:55

EW: Well, see what had happened was my mom and dad were supposed to meet me in the university town in Mount Pleasant for supper before we were going to go see a comedian, a political comedian in Mount Pleasant. My lover at that time, she was part of it, when we bought tickets and my dad, my mom, my parents showed up early and we had left our clothes all along to the bedroom so I couldn't invite them in. I'm, like, looking out the door, with the door

cracked and they didn't know. I hadn't said anything to them. I was with a friend, that's all it was [to them], and they didn't know about my first lover. I had a friend, a friend who I'd known in college. Both situations—and actually my second lover was a friend I knew in college. So I'm standing there with the door kind of cracked, looking at my dad saying "Dad, we'll meet you at the restaurant, if it's okay with you" and Dad's like "okay," and they left and I closed the door and my lover and I kind of fell on the floor laughing. When we were in the restaurant I basically explained why I couldn't bring them in. Here's all these clothes and my mom and dad just kind of smiled. I didn't feel any stress. It was a laughable matter. Again, very very lucky. My parents were very unusual.

29:46

TP: So you mentioned that you found your second lover at college. Do you feel like the college scene was more accepting? Were you able to show outward affection or was it still that same...

29:57

EW: No. We are still talking about Mount Pleasant which is a very conservative, was a very conservative town, surrounded by corn fields, just farm, not city. Cities are much more accepting. Farm areas are very conservative and my second lover was a friend from my first college years. Again, now I was fairly certain that she was a lesbian. Even then I knew that, but we were friends, same thing. Again, no sense whatsoever of stress, we were just friends.

30:49

TP: That sounds actually really nice, doesn't it?

30:51

EW: Well, I look back and listen to other people talk and I'm just plain lucky or my parents were just very unusual. And you also asked about religion. So in my experience, with religion I grew up United Methodist, at that time it was just the Methodist church, and I was very into religion. My favorite book, even as a child, at the age of 6 or 7, was my parent's coffee table book that was a Life-Time magazine *The Worlds of Religion*.<sup>1</sup> It was covered in all these beautiful pictures and told about different religions. Again, I think I was 7 or 8, like in the first or second grade and again part of the baby boom, so there were three... The church that we went to seated 1,000 members and there were three first and second grade rooms for Sunday school, which means there were 10 or 15 kids in each room and I won a Bible because I knew the most verses. So I've always been interested in religion and in college, we're talking late '60s early '70s, there was a charismatic movement by the Roman Catholic Church, which was basically a Roman Catholic version of Pentecostal. Pentecostal being what some people would call "Holy rollers," prayer and praise, raising your hands and singing, doing harmonies, that sort of thing. Since it was a more moderate Pentecostal [the charismatic movement], it wasn't a lot of falling on the floor and fainting, being struck down by the spirit sort of stuff, but I could feel the presence of

---

<sup>1</sup> Perhaps *The World's Great Religions*, which was published in 1957.

something moving through the room in the harmonies. However, it being Pentecostal, evangelical, Bible based, it had stereotypes about what women do and what men do.

When I moved to Lansing, as a lesbian—and, because at that time, you didn't talk in the women's community about being bisexual—Lansing was, still is, a very strong feminist area and there were a lot of lesbian separatists that didn't do things with men if they could avoid it. If they had something to be repaired, they would look for a female electrician or a female plumber, or a female construction boss. They went out of their way to employ women whenever they could and they only tolerated working with men when they had to. So you just didn't say you were bisexual. You were lesbian or you were a gay man and that was it, those two things. So here I am in a situation where I want to go to church but I can't, in the sense if I'm going to be honest as to who I am—and my dad was painfully honest, so I grew up with you tell the truth and there is such a thing as lying by omission. If somebody thinks something of you and it's not the truth, you correct them—So I couldn't go to church and expect that I was going to be accepted by them, by charismatic groups. So I just didn't have a church to go to. And in '86, the Challenger disaster, the space shuttle blew up, and I wanted some place to go and I knew that one of the women in the community had said that she was a Quaker, so I ask[ed] her if she thought—not knowing what Quakers did, that is sitting in a circle, in silence, waiting for a message from the Spirit—So I said to her, “do you think anybody's going to talk, or will there be talk about the Challenger disaster?” She hesitated and she said “maybe.” Again, me not knowing what un-programmed, silent meetings were like. So I went and interestingly enough, someone stood up and spoke about Judy Resnik, who was the other female astronaut [besides Christa McAuliffe who was also on the Challenger] and I kind of liked what was going on. I stayed for the potluck.

I started coming back to those groups and at one point, at that time, the Quaker meeting that I was going to didn't have a permanent house, they were renting a room from another church and they would have potlucks but it'd be in people's homes. So I went to a couple potlucks and I think it was about the third potluck, we had all finished eating and the men picked up all the dishes, took them into kitchen and started cleaning and all the women got up and went to the living room and started talking and I thought to myself “I can do this.” So that's what I've been ever since, I've been attending Quaker meetings ever since. At that time liberal Quakers were having problems with how do we deal with our gay members? How do we handle [it]? Do we accept them? Do we actually minute something saying welcome? Is that something that would be helpful? Is it something we as Quakers should be doing? And that was causing a bit of a division in the Quaker meeting in Lansing at that time. There were those that said “no. There should be no special minute for a group of people that are coming to worship with us. Besides, we don't want to be seen endorsing that lifestyle.” And then there were those who were saying “everybody's equal,” which goes with the Equality Testimony of Quakers.<sup>2</sup> So that was in the late '80s. At the same time, in the '80s, the AIDS crisis was happening. So there was a lot of persecution, verbal persecution, and physical violence going on against gay men. So the issue on whether the Quaker meeting was going to be welcoming to gays had political ramifications,

---

<sup>2</sup> On the Quaker testimonies, see American Friends Service Committee, *An Introduction to Quaker Testimonies* (2011), [https://afsc.org/sites/afsc.civicaactions.net/files/documents/AFSC\\_Testimonies\\_Booklet.pdf](https://afsc.org/sites/afsc.civicaactions.net/files/documents/AFSC_Testimonies_Booklet.pdf)

particularly with the AIDS thing. There was talk about having anybody identified as carrying the AIDS virus be put in a special camp. There was those extreme talks.

38:58

TP: During that time did you ever worry?

39:00

EW: Myself?

39:01

TP: Mhm

39:02

EW: No, I was lesbian. All I had to do was keep my mouth shut.

39:08

TP: [Did] that affect how you felt at the time? Did you ever feel or worry that that persecution would switch over to all homosexual members?

39:17

EW: We were very aware of it. It was a community...

39:22-40:28

*Paused as asked by Ms. Edna, due to tears interrupting the interview.*

40:29

EW: The women's community was very aware of it, that they had a choice. They could choose just to keep their mouth shut because lesbians don't get AIDS at that time. Statistically, it was just negligible, we just simply weren't a part of the AIDS crisis. We could choose to be silent and be invisible and nobody would say anything. It's funny because this was never verbalized. I just simply noticed it. Nationally, that was the same feeling. It was never verbalized. The women could just choose to divorce themselves from the homosexual community in terms that homosexuals are men. That goes with the part about being invisible. Lesbians were very invisible.

The men, being men, well, I suppose that is inappropriate, the experience had been that the men didn't organize themselves as well as the women did, that the community thing was just not there [for men]. For the feeling was that the gay baths were things that men went to have sex as much as they could, and one of the questions we would get asked when we would do panels on "What being gay, lesbian was all about," one of the questions would be "Why do gay men have so many sex partners?" because at that time stuff was coming out that men were having 100, 200, 300 partners, different one every day sort of thing, and that the AIDS crisis was spreading because of those multiple partners. So one of the questions we would get asked

when we would do mixed panels was “why do men have so many partners?” and the response from the men [on the panel] was well, “our understanding is that if heterosexual men could find the partners, they would have as much sex as we’re having. You [heterosexual men in the audience] just can’t find the women that were willing to do it as often as men are.” That was their response. Because of the idea that the men were going to the baths not to learn people’s names. Again, if you’re persecuted, it’s better that you not know the other person’s name, so they would make up names when they were in the baths. They’d choose a different name. There was one man actually in our Lansing community who went by one name at work, which was his legal name, and chose another name within the community. A full first name and last name and would publicize a newsletter under that pen name as it were. When he was in the women and men’s community, as we got to working together, he went by that pen name rather than his work name, just to protect himself.

When the AIDS support groups got started, the majority of them were started by women. The majority of them were started by women who were bisexual, and almost always in the medical field. In some manner they were nurses or they were doctors that were trying to support the AIDS community with an AIDS network. Again, it wasn’t just gay people being affected, gay men being affected. That was what was making the larger community, the heterosexual community, so angry is that there were people being affected by blood transfusions, being affect by—for the women, for the heterosexual women—by their spouse being a gay man. Again, obviously, not a gay man, but a bisexual man, but at that time it wasn’t viewed that way. It was a man who was gay lying to his wife. He was lying to his wife because his religious community wouldn’t accept him if he came out. It was just a vicious circle.

The women’s community in Lansing, the AIDS community was three women, at least two of them bisexual, who had started that. It wasn’t talked about, wasn’t said, it was only known inside of the community. It was not a public knowledge thing because these women wanted to get general support. They needed money from the general public so they weren’t going to say [that they were bisexual or lesbian]. They were just these wonderful helping women who were doing this good thing for these poor men. That’s how the general public looked at them and they [the women] were just fine with that as long as the general public was giving money to help support the medical needs. So to go back to, did any of us feel threatened at the time? Yes. And the women chose to support the men. Rather than just being silent, lesbians came out in support of the male community because they knew if somebody was going to put gay men in a camp because they might have AIDS, it wasn’t going to take long before they start coming after the lesbians. So it’s one of those times I saw lesbian separatists working on a panel with gay men.

You got to understand before all this happened, gay men were some of the worst misogynists in the group. They hated women, a lot of them, they were very active in making sure that women didn’t have political power. These were men that were hiding as senators and as Congress representatives, very vocal against homosexuality and very vocal against women. Some of the strongest misogynist, fem-phobic [people] were gay men masquerading as straight men in political power. So here we have the lesbians seeing that in order to protect themselves, they’re going to have to talk with these men who, some of whom, hate women, but because

the AIDS crisis is causing them to need somebody to support them—it was a very, to me, a very heroic, a very moral bond. There was a morality there that was, to me, just amazing. And as this continued, the men began to see it and began to, I mean, there was a picture of a Pride march and here’s this gay man sitting on the lawn with a big huge poster sign on a stick that said “Thank you lesbians.” It just was something that up until the AIDS crisis just wasn’t happening. New York had its Pride march and had had it for over ten years but the rest of the nation wasn’t responding the same way. Again, if they were women they weren’t getting together with men.

49:11

TP: Were there solely female Pride marches or solely male Pride marches?

49:16

EW: There were Pride marches—in New York City, there was a very strong women’s group, and you know, they were going to be part of that pride march. Any place else, the Pride marches that might have occurred, occurred mostly with men. But it is interesting because, well, it’s been said that the ones who has the least to lose are the ones that are the most active, and when you look at the power structure and the economic structure of the gay community, there is a big gap there. In the weirdest kind of ways, if it’s two men who are white and have high power jobs—engineers, architects, doctors—the wage income and what you could lose if you came out is very high. So, you have a high wage earning power and you have a high risk of losing everything if you came out. And then, on the other extreme, was our women lesbians, who have very low income and very little political power, who have very little to lose by coming out, unless you are talking about their children. If they have children, then they have a whole lot to lose. And, in between that were the swish queens, the homosexual males who were people of color, and who were very effeminate, who, even when they were working, had a hard time not swaying their hips, or having limp wrists, or having lilted voices. So, those couples had low earning power, usually ended up being what is called direct staff, in terms of working in nursing homes or... Actually it was mostly nursing homes. I can’t think [of any other jobs] because even the hairdressers had more power than the ones working in the nursing homes, or the interior design companies. So, when Stonewall happened it was those people of color, men of color in those kinds of jobs, of being low wage earners, very swish, and the women who were dressed in male attire with their female partner, who had the least to lose and were the most likely to rebel. I don’t remember how we got off on that...

53:12

TP: That is alright.

53:15

EW: Oh you were asking about pride marches, so in some situations... There were never any just-female pride marches. It is one of those history parts that somebody who is trying to work on a doctoral thesis might do research on. Anyway...

53:43

TP: So you mentioned moving up to Lansing and before that there is a much more active community up there. For events like Stonewall, did you see any changes in the community, an influx of people coming through?

53:56

EW: Well, Stonewall happened in '69. I did not go to Lansing until '83. I was very active, once the AIDS thing started, I became active in the AIDS network. And at that point, some of the men were taking the risks of coming out. There was no pride march until after the AIDS crisis got to be bad enough that the women's community and the men's community came together. So this is in Lansing, a town that had 300,000 people at that time and was right next to East Lansing, which is the home of Michigan State University. Michigan State being part of the late '60s- early '70s war resistant colleges, universities. In '74, they had written a gay ordinance in the sense that they offered legal protection to gays living in East Lansing. So, East Lansing had a very active women community, part of the university, which spilled over into Lansing. But I don't think there was anything going on with the men's community and I don't think that came out until the AIDS crisis had brought the two communities together in the mid-eighties. So there was not, as far as I know, a pride march until after that in Lansing. We are talking the Midwest area, what was going on in the east coast in the northern sections, the northern states, and what was going on in the west coast in terms of California and Oregon, I don't know. I am thinking that they had pride marches by that time, because Harvey Milk was there in San Francisco and I think his murder happened in the late '70s. That was again a community of women and men coming together trying to elect this man.

56:52

TP: So you mentioned that you were active during the AIDS era, were you in any vocal groups that came out?

57:03

EW: We had the AIDS network and we would do panels for high schools, religious groups if they wanted it, any social group that has any community group, civic group that asked us, we would go and talk. In the same time, there was the human rights—Michigan Organization for Human Rights—that same group, the network, the AIDS network group and the Michigan Organization group had their housing—I can't think of offices, what little offices we had—in Lansing. And as the human rights organization tried to get an ordinance passed in Lansing, the capital of Michigan, we would go out as speakers, as mixed panels, and go to high schools, so there was a group doing it for the AIDS support and there was a group doing it for human rights organization, equality and support.

58:33

TP: So you had this very interconnected and you felt safe in this community here in Lansing?

58:39

EW: Yes

58:42

TP: So could I ask why did you move over to Virginia?

58:47

EW: So for eleven years, my Quaker group and most everybody I knew, assumed that I was lesbian. I knew I was not necessarily [a lesbian]. Going to a Quaker conference, I met this fella and he lived in New York City and I had not been in a relationship for eleven years, so when I was talking to my Quaker friends in Lansing, [I'd say] "I met somebody," that's how I would lead off, "I met somebody," and they go "Oh, who is she?" and I say "well, she is a he" and then we talked about that. And I basically followed him out to New York City, but I could not handle New York City, so I ended up in New Jersey for two years and then we kind of broke up, and in between all of this my mother died, and so the agreement with my younger brother who is still in the state [Michigan] was my younger brother would take care of my dad and I would take care of my mom, so mom died, dad was still alive, and we had this agreement plus my then-boyfriend was in New York, so I moved out to New Jersey, spent two years out there trying to make a go of it, that did not work. Here I am on the east coast not wanting to move back to Lansing because it's cold. Michigan winters are just plain cold, and I'm trying to figure out do I want to go to the southwest, because originally I thought about going to Arizona or New Mexico, just simply for the change in scenery. Michigan is green; Arizona and New Mexico are brown. I was wondering what a desert environment would be like, to live there, but that's five days travel and I did not have the money to get a mover to do that. So I was looking to what was on the east coast that I would want to say I was—what state would I be proud to say I was from—and I knew there was a Quaker meeting in Roanoke, Virginia. I had lived in New Jersey for two years, the cost of living in New Jersey was incredibly high, and it was like running in place. I did not know how anybody could manage it and I did not want to repeat that, so when I talked to a friend who had lived in Virginia, I said "what area in Virginia can I live in and not be doing a New Jersey cost of living?" and she said "anything south of the Richmond Corridor," so here is Roanoke and here is a Quaker meeting. I decided to come to Quaker meeting here. So that's how I got to Roanoke, to the southwest area. I got a house in Roanoke, had it for five years then decided it was too big for me and wanted to come back out to the woods, so I moved to Floyd.

1:02:15

TP: So did you find that in Roanoke was there an access to a community there?

1:02:20

EW: I did not find it. I know that there must be one in the sense that there were two gay bars—there are no longer two gay bars. And because of the Metropolitan Community Church which is a church based on... It is a Christian Church open to homosexuals, was started by a gay man out in California, I don't remember which one, might have been Los Angeles. So I knew there was a women's community in the sense that there were women going to that church [Metropolitan

Community Church of the Blue Ridge] and they were active in the pride march in Roanoke, but I was not finding an individual women's community, nothing like what Lansing had.

1:03:28

TP: So you mentioned going to two bars that are no longer around, do you remember what they were?

1:03:33

EW: One of them is gone, The Park has closed, they decided to shut it down. It opens up, as I understand, during the Pride March events, Diversity Roanoke or Roanoke Diversity, I think it is Diversity Roanoke... puts on the Pride Event and The Park opens up for those events as far as I know.<sup>3</sup> But for some reason two years ago or three years ago—2012, 2011—something like that, The Park just shut down, they said it was not worth their time. The Backstreet Cafe, I guess it has been around for quite a while. And Roanoke does its Pride March in September because about ten years ago or fifteen years ago—I think it occurred before I came to Roanoke in 2003, so at least fifteen years ago—a man whose last name was Gay and who resented the fact that that name meant something now about who he was, walked into the Backstreet Café with a gun and shot two people, killed a man and wounded a woman,<sup>4</sup> and the Pride March that occurs in September does that, rather than June, in memory of the shooting. But, as far as I know, Backstreet is still open.

1:05:40

TP: I believe that The Park has come under a new management but I believe they are still operating.

1:05:45

EW: Are they?

1:05:46

TP: Yes. I am not sure though, this will be something we have to check.

1:05:51

EW: My experience, they might have different nights, but my experience is it is a very techno beat.

1:06:01

TP: Yes

---

<sup>3</sup> This reference may be to the Roanoke Diversity Center, the region's first LGBTQ community center, which opened in the basement of Metropolitan Community Church on Jamison Avenue in 2013. Roanoke Pride, Inc. is a different organization that is in charge of organizing the annual Pride in the Park festival.

<sup>4</sup> On the night of September 22, 2000, Ronald Edward Gay shot seven people inside Backstreet Café on Salem Avenue in Roanoke. He killed one person and wounded six others.

1:06:02

EW: And again I don't like dancing to that very often. I mean, I could do a little bit of it.

1:06:10

TP: So because of that shooting, were you still in the Roanoke area when that shooting occurred?

1:06:16

EW: I don't think I came into the Roanoke Area yet.

1:06:18

TP: Okay

1:06:19

EW: I think it occurred before 2003.

1:06:23

TP: Did you feel worried hearing about it?

1:06:26

EW: No, because, again, there was not a strong community there even at that time. When I first got involved with the Pride March, which I think, was 2004, it was meeting at Highland Park over in a little corner of the park and there might have been a hundred and fifty people sitting and listening to a band play and then there was singing going on, and there was some female impersonation going on. They did not move to Elmwood Park until 2005 and even then, it was done on a Sunday. Because on a Sunday, the downtown is basically—nobody is there and everybody is at church—so they [the heterosexual public] are not going to come and demonstrate against any parading that was going on. So the first two years, that they were in Elmwood Park, before they would start the events in Elmwood, they would parade [around] the block and they did it on the sidewalk, the street was not closed down and half of the people that were there did not participate in the parade because they did not want to take the risk of somebody driving by with a gun. So there has been some major changes, both in the size of it, I believe it happens two days in a row now and the fact that they shut down the streets to have the parade.<sup>5</sup>

1:08:20

TP: Have you found that there is a different look on the community here different to Lansing or to Michigan?

---

<sup>5</sup> According to an informal history written by Charlotte Eakin, Roanoke's Pride in the Park was held in Wasena Park from 1989-1995; Highland Park from 1996-2003; and Elmwood Park from 2004 to the present. See Charlotte Eakin, "PRIDE History," c. 2006, <http://www.roanokepride.org/history.html> (Accessed March 24, 2016).

1:08:30

EW: Definitely. Definitely. It is sort of like, how I can say this? It is sort of like when integration really started to take effect in the black community, the black community just kind of disappeared, in the sense the business people went out of business, the sense of we will take care of our own kind of disappeared and got absorbed in the larger [community], so now you can integrate with white folks, but you are going to disappear into them, because they are the majority. And as the northern states began [to move] towards more acceptance with the gay community, the gay community began to disappear into the general community and wearing the rainbow colors became blasé. You just don't see that kind of identification of being proudly out up north as much. Of course there is always New York City, there is always San Francisco, but coming down here and, again, seeing the smallness of the parade and the cautiousness of the parade and now that it is more open and people feel somewhat safer, [although] there is still that sense of backlash could happen at any time. There is a lot more rainbow color wearing and deliberately identifying outlandish outfits. What was not going on in Lansing, that I did not see it, it probably was there but I did not see it, [because] there was a real sense of being politically correct in Lansing. So, you did not see female impersonators in the parade, you did not see female impersonators in the entertainment, you did not see women dressed as men, male impersonators, and you did not see what would be called foo-foo fem. Lesbians wearing fancy dresses and high heels and lipsticks. It just did not happen. Make up was just not worn by the women. The men did not wear it [in Lansing], whereas down here in the Roanoke area, female impersonators are part of the parade. They are definitely part of the program, male impersonators are definitely part of the program. In Lansing there was just, I did not see my first male impersonator until I came to Roanoke and saw it at The Park. I was stunned. I could not believe what was happening. It was like "seriously, we are doing this?" And at that time I would have said "nonsense," if it had happened in Lansing, it would have been called "bullshit." But, yes, so there is a difference of what is politically correct up north versus, in my sense, versus of what is down here which is more heartfelt, more personal, more raw, very much identifying with "I need to do this, it is essential because I am not allowed to do it anyplace else." The gay community here has not integrated into the larger community and so that identifying with the rainbow colors comes out in the parades a lot more because that's where you are allowed to do it. I do not notice a whole lot of holding hands in the events and in the parade, just isn't done, that's still sort of flaunting it. Whereas if you go up north, there is probably a lot of smooching going on, holding hands, kissing, and hugging. That's just doesn't show up here, again that sense of you don't know what the larger community is going to do if you flaunt the fact that you can actually kiss your lover or your partner.

1:13:31

TP: So when you moved down to Floyd, was there any distinct difference between Roanoke?

1:13:40

EW: Not in that sense, because I did not make a connection with a women's community. When I was in Lansing I got a women's soccer league started, and one of the ways I got it started was appealing to the lesbian community. I put an ad[vertisement] in *The Lesbian Connection* which

is an international newsletter. I put an advertisement in the Lesbian Alliance which was a separate group [local, not national]. This town [Lansing] was big enough, this capital city town was big enough, to handle two separate groups of women's community, and they were the ones that came out and formed the core of the soccer league, and for the first I would say eight-nine years, ninety percent of the board was lesbian but you weren't out [didn't say you were lesbian] for it. Because what we were trying to do was attract the heterosexual soccer mom family who would make the core of the league, make the majority of the league. When I came to Roanoke and tried to do the same thing, I went to the Metropolitan [Community] Church and appealed to the only place I knew, for a women's community, and got women out to play. But nobody would volunteer for the board and that was a big difference for me, made it much harder for me to organize. It took a lot more of my energy because we weren't a group whereas in Lansing, there was seven members, eight members on the board and only one of them was not a lesbian. Whereas here, I don't think there was anybody on the board, except myself, who was bisexual or lesbian, so it made a difference. I just have not been able to find to connect with a separate women's community. It is very much integrated into the—it is a gay community rather than women's community.

1:16:01

TP: Have you found a difference since the gay movement has picked up and gotten so much cover and so much national recognition that it is starting to become this thing where it's okay and that's what's coming out of this pride and this acceptance that we haven't really seen before, that kind of, the rainbow colors burst through, have you seen a difference down here in Floyd or in Roanoke?

1:16:29

EW: We had our first Pride parade in Floyd two years ago, this would be the third year, and I say would be because we are really having problems. It is only happening because of myself and two other people. The [larger] community is very supportive if we go ask them for help, but if the three of us decided we don't have any more energy for it, then it just would not happen. The very first parade we had [we had to march on the sidewalk] and we're still marching on the sidewalk. Part of that is because Floyd only has two main streets and both of those are state roads. Some diesels come through on both of those and to block that off takes a big deal with V-DOT [Virginia Department of Transportation] and the state permission sort of thing. They're reluctant to block off any of those main streets for us marching on. Anything else we would march on would be side streets and that's not the same [as main street] so we're still walking on the sidewalk. We started out with about forty people and then we moved up to fifty people and that seems to be where we're at. We don't seem to be going any further than that ... and again there is only the three of us doing it ... at any point we could all just say "enough," and I don't think it would happen any further... I'm thinking that in the northern states when you're not in the rural areas there is a real sense of safety that didn't exist before. Particularly with the Supreme Court deciding what they decided with the marriage situation. But you don't have to go very far into the rural areas in the southern states... I'm not sure what the southwest states are like, but in the southern states you don't have to go very far out before it becomes

dangerous to be out. I saw a bumper sticker here in Floyd that said 'Disappear Fear,' and it was in rainbow [colors]. The idea being that if we stick together we can make the fear that keeps us from being who we are disappear but I think that bumper sticker speaks to the fear that exists down in this area. I never saw anything like that in the northern ... in Michigan I never saw anything like that.

1:19:36

TP: Do you feel like [the] threat here for that persecution is more real than it was in Michigan?

1:19:41

EW: Oh definitely, from among other things the gun laws that Virginia has. This is an open carry state. It's a shell issue. If you want a concealed weapon ... even when we do the parade march now I worry "is somebody gonna drive by?" And it's been very bluntly said that this [the Pride March] could only happen in Floyd. If you try to do it in Franklin or in Patrick County the danger would be higher. There is something about this town, its artistic mix with the farmers, the way that the small business owners respect each other whether you're Democratic or Republican, whether you're a hippie or an old farmer. That kind of integration occurred back in the late sixties and early seventies and worked its way through so that the attitude of this town is one of those few towns where you could actually have a pride march in a rural county. It just wouldn't happen in other rural counties because they don't have a town like Floyd.

1:21:06

TP: Have you found people coming from these other counties to Floyd to find this community?

1:21:13

EW: That would be our hope, but it hasn't happened at least as far as we know. Anything that's happening here in Floyd in some manner ripples out to Franklin and Patrick County and it's one of the reasons that we try to keep the parade going. But I haven't noticed any particular strangers or group of people or crowd. Again, I think while they might be happy that it's happening here in Floyd and Floyd might be a symbol of "it could happen in our town eventually" anybody who wants to feel more safe goes to Roanoke for the Pride March. That is why they [Roanoke] moved from a one half-day event to a two full-day event, I think two full days. Because they're getting people from the other counties to feel safer. Unfortunately what that means is the people that come have to be able to drive a car and usually what that means is the high school students who can't drive a car don't have that permission... they don't have any outlet to help them.

1:22:41

TP: So you mentioned that you started a women's soccer [league], have you found that it's been helpful to those... So is it geared towards younger women or is it geared towards college age or older?

1:22:56

EW: You have to be eighteen. That's the only way we save the terms.... Injuries and liability... so in both leagues you have to be eighteen. In Lansing we were able to quickly form a recreational division and a competitive division. And now they have, I believe, an over-forty division. But in Roanoke, that didn't happen. The Lansing one started in the mid-eighties so it was a lot of women who had never played soccer before. The Roanoke one started in 2011 so a lot of the women that were coming through had played soccer in high school, played soccer in college, they knew how to play soccer, that keeps it very young, very energetic and the older women just simply drop out... well, I haven't been able to play [much] yet which is as I told you before a real disappointment to me because I haven't got anybody who is as slow as I am to play with.

1:24:19

TP: Have you found though that, did that soccer [group] here... I know you mentioned, in Lansing, that [the women's soccer league] almost became a safe spot and part of that women's community? Has that aided at all here or has it just kind of maintained that it is about soccer and that's it?

1:24:36

EW: Yeah... It's about soccer... It's not... again I didn't make that connection. If there is a women's community in Roanoke, I did not make that connection.

1:24:45

TP: And you haven't found one here in Floyd?

1:24:46

EW: No. The women that I have met have been heterosexual, bisexual, but not lesbian. There is not that... the women's connection here mostly has to do with new age philosophies. There is a feminist sense in that they're talking about women's things but there is no political power behind it... no desire to make a political power.

1:25:37

TP: So what do you see for the future of Floyd? Do you see it changing any time soon? Do you hope that it will become a big central hub with how things have been in politics and such like that? Do you think that this will die out?

1:25:55

EW: You mean like the Pride March?

1:25:57

TP: The pride march but also that sense of community, do you think that will be able to build up here in Floyd or do you think that it's [too] rural?

1:26:13

EW: I think it's gonna be... I think it's going to be absorbed by the larger community here. I think the parade... unless people step forward, the parade is gonna stop. This is not going to occur anymore. But there is a movement on that is to protect the high school students in the sense [that there are] too many suicides and how much that might be related to the fact that some of those people might be gay... So in the way that Floyd is political in terms of the environment—the pipeline—is political in terms of local food, the gay community—the non-existing gay community—will just become part of it. I don't think it's gonna have a separate identity. I think it's going to be one of those things where everyone is welcome for that [larger] group because again this is still a Republican county, so you have that sense of conservative Christian-centered group and then you have the "everyone is welcome" new age group. The interesting thing is that with the Supreme Court decision it's more acceptable to identify in some way. It's more acceptable to be in a partnership as long as you don't flaunt it, you don't hold hands, you don't kiss. If you go to church you're accepted as long as you are silent in terms of having a partner. I honestly don't know how the future will move. I can't get a good sense of it... not growing up here... I think if you talk to someone who grew up here they might have a much better sense of it. I mean any place that can support a place like Blue Mountain School, Spring House Community School, it's a very small town and it's got at least two private schools. And they have the Roanoke Symphony people come up here... very much into the arts. Anybody who is gay in a partnership can find a place here, a safe place... as long as the art community still exists, as long as the local food [community] still exists...

1:29:50

TP: Do you have advice for someone who is growing up in this area? Would you recommend that they stay here or do you think that if that food and if that artistic influence were to go away, do you think that it would become unsafe for them?

1:30:10

EW: Definitely [unsafe]. The suffragette movement, the feminist movement made a big leap in 1920 when they got the vote. It took seventy-five years to get to that point, seventy-two years, something like that. Then things died down because there were two world wars. Things moved ahead during the second [world] war in terms of women were doing things, just like in the first war, that they could not do before. But when the men came back, the men had to have the jobs, so the women were told to go back into the house. Those steps forward as far as the civil rights movement and the black community's concern, there was the Reconstruction era where black men got elected to Congress but then that stopped and there was this huge backlash in terms of Jim Crow and then that kind of moved forward with the Harlem Renaissance period and again black men being soldiers. In World War II, the services were integrated but there were no jobs for those black men, so there keeps being this backlash. A black president got elected. It is very possible that this won't happen again for thirty, forty, fifty years. Some people say that this divide between Republicans and Democrats is a backlash to the fact that a black man got elected president. So this thing about gays being married, I would not be surprised that within ten fifteen years there is more violence against gay men and women than there is now. Because there seems to be in the US, there seems to be, this liberal idea surges forward and the this conservative idea says [vocal sound meaning 'not so fast']. It is not possible anymore to

discipline your children the way you used to be able to discipline them. It is not possible for a man to physically abuse, a husband to physically abuse his wife the way he used to, and even the churches have stopped saying "if a man, if your husband is beating on you, you should take it because your husband is the head of the household," even the churches have stopped saying that. So there is, you can look back and say a hundred years ago we made this movement forward, but there is always this forward back, forward back. If someone who grew up here and is gay, they would need to leave and then come back if they found the inner strength to identify who they are and... I think that almost every kid growing up in a small town moves out as soon as they can and maybe at some point comes back, so part of that is just a general small town thing, and the additional part is that person is gay and so that person grew up with the prejudice that goes with that, of being different. Full lesbians and full homosexual males are only ten percent [each] and only form twenty percent of the [general] population so that makes them out of the norm automatically, and high schools, junior high schools being what they are, that means they get picked on. Usually people leave and then maybe they come back.

1:34:51

TP: But do you see hope for the community? Do you see hope for these young people?

1:34:56

EW: Yes, they can always go to a big city. New York and San Francisco, the big cities are always more forgiving.

1:35:07-1:36:38

*Section removed by EW as not relevant.*

1:36:38

TP: Well, as an ending question, if there is anything that you would be able to give advice and not just to you know someone in the community but to anyone... do you think how you have lived your life and how looking back in ways that you would have wanted to be different or ways that you are very happy about what you did? Is there anything that you could give advice of you know...

1:37:13

EW: I am shaped, my personality is shaped from my parents and the way they raised me. I would only wish that everyone else could have that kind of experience.

1:37:43

TP: Well thank you so much for talking to us, for sharing your story, we really appreciate that.

1:37:49

EW: Thank you for asking.

1:37:54

TP: Of course!

1:37:59