Gomez, Gail Cornell

Interviewed by Bob Potter
30 October 1994

Side A:

Bob: This afternoon I am listening to stories about her father, George Cornell, and about her own life. Tell me about this house that we are sitting in (90 Mt. Carmel Rd. Asheville).

Gail: This house was built for my mother and father. It was their dream house. I was about seven years old. This was a dirt road when we moved out here. Buncombe County at that time was mostly dairy country and county farmland. My mother and father always joked they moved over the hill from the county farm, because that was what was there, in fact the building is still there. This was Rhodes Dairy property around here.

Bob: Rhodes Dairy.

Gail: Rhodes Dairy. It was huge dairy property around here. And when they moved out here there was an old pine frame house here. They bought it from the Chapins who built Lincoln School. The Chapins lived right down below us here. They were retired Presbyterian missionaries, from China. I'm not exactly sure when mother and father met Ruth Melcher and Jack Boyce. They were remodeling the old building that was here. The downstairs had been a stable, and the upstairs was an apartment. They worked on it and worked on it. During that time we started attending the Unitarian fellowship meetings being held in the basement of the Congregational church on Merriman Avenue. That was right around the corner from Ruth's, actually.

Bob: That was their first couple of years.

Gail: That's right. Mother and Daddy were among the first couples, I just don't know how they met, encountered, Ruth's family. The Melchers we've known all of our life.

Bob: You have.

Gail: Yes, since that time, all of my life really because I was literally about seven or eight years old when my folks started going to the fellowship meetings. By the time I was nine or ten the downstairs of the house had been remodeled. The church was holding fellowship meetings at individuals' homes. We used to meet at the Melcher's house, I remember going out to the Guthrie's house, and here. The adults used to meet in what was our side and back yard, and the children used to meet in the basement where we had a large, unfinished wall that was painted, and we all used to do art projects on that wall. My mother was a bit of a genius with children, with a little group or a huge group of children and make it interesting. She was wonderful. She actually founded the Sunday school.

Bob: That's Muriel. What was her maiden name?

Gail: Cann. She was Canadian, from up in Nova Scotia. My father was her second marriage. Her first husband had shot himself as a result of World War I depressions. He had been a land speculator in Florida, quite well off at that time, and after his death she had two small children, my older brother and sister. She opened a boarding school for very wealthy college girls in Boston. It so happened my father ran a boarding school for very wealthy boys in Boston (laughs) and he was attending MIT at the time, and she had gone on to get her degree at Wheeler College and was boarding girls throughout college. And so they met in Boston prior to World War II and prior to the Depression. That's about when it was, still part of the Depression time. They had moved to Asheville in the 1940s. It must have been 1944 when they moved here. My father had broken his back in the Navy.

Bob: He broke his back?

Gail: He was a Seabee in the Navy. He had re-enlisted probably in about 1942, because that's when I was born, and was working out of Portsmouth. He was teaching construction engineering, he was a construction engineer. They were working on a bridge that fell on him. He held up the bridge while everybody got out from under it, and subsequently ended up with a broken back which was not diagnosed for a number of years, in fact my mother didn't know what had happened to him, he just disappeared. They had put him actually in the mental wing because he couldn't lie still enough for x-rays, which were rather primitive in those days. The surgeon came to the hospital, he was touring the hospital, and asked what was wrong with my father, and they said he was crazy because his back was broken. And the doctor had him in surgery within about twelve hours...

Bob: In the surgery for twelve hours duration.

Gail: Yes, about twelve hours they had him in surgery.

Bob: This was not the duration from the accident, this was in surgery.

Gail: In surgery, yes. They thought actually he would never walk again. He couldn't feel anything below his waist. He was sent here to recuperate because Appalachian Hall was a rehabilitation hospital. He moved down here, and my mother came with my middle sister Karen and I. She must have been about seven, because I was just eighteen months old. So she came down here on a troop train, would you believe, to Asheville. She always used to recount leaving Boston in furs, and getting to Salisbury in 80 degree weather, (laughs) both the children in snow suits and her burning up. So she came here to Asheville. We lived in a series of small apartments near town until my father was finally discharged from the Navy.

Bob: How long was he under treatment?

Gail: It probably had to have been about a year and a half, because I remember clearly the hospital, and learning to walk with my daddy, he and the sailors would learn to walk on the golf course.

Bob: Together. Did he wear braces?

Gail: He wore braces and used canes, and crutches at first and then canes.

Bob: You were old enough to remember that.

Gail: I remember that. I remember shutting my hand in the door in the hospital. My father had a foreman who helped him, he was named Tiny, 6 foot 8 and weighed about 300 pounds. I remember Tiny crying worse than I did when I shut my hand in the door, one of those big swinging doors that hospitals had in those days. The grounds of the hospital were beautiful, that was all done by the Navy. Asheville was very much a military town at that time. The army of course had the Moore Center.

Bob: They had prisoners I understand.

Gail: Oh, they had everything, and really the city was very much a military headquarters. Of course the weather wing was already here as a component of that. There were at least two Navy rehabilitation hospitals, and an Army rehabilitation hospital. Somebody older than I could tell you. Oteen Hospital was an Army hospital.

Bob: That's right. I have interviewed Tim Takaro, and he told me about that.

Gail: Yes, Tim knows that very well. So Dad was discharged from the Navy here. And he was told at that time that he could not tolerate the cold climates in New England, so he and Mother decided to settle here. He was a 100 percent disabled veteran, also the kind of person who never stopped doing something, and immediately went to work for a man named Al Goodman, as his chief construction engineer. He oversaw the building of a number of roads in this area, one of which I'm sure you've been on old Pisgah Highway, and old number 9 going over to Bat Cave, and he built a lot of the roads up in the Cherokee Reservation. In fact, his foreman was married to a Cherokee woman. He lived in town here. His name was Earl Young. His wife was actually on Tribal Council for a number of years. We grew up with a real close association with that family. They had a daughter just my age who had leukemia. They had ten boys, only one or two of which I've been able to find in the last few years. They stayed here, eventually my sister relocated here, I guess about 1946 or 1947.

Bob: What was her name?

Gail: Elizabeth Kdan

Bob: Kdan. Elizabeth, Betty. And that's his sister or your sister?

Gail: That's my older sister. My mother's oldest child from her former marriage. My brother who was in the Royal Canadian Air Force came home from World War II, long after the rest of them, and he was married to a British war bride brought over from England. They lived here for a few years. They relocated down in Rocky Mount. He built his own business which became the Seaboard Coffee Company, a distribution business. He is still

living, his wife, and they have two children. So the family kind of centered around Asheville.

Bob: From 1942 on.

Gal: Right. It was probably 1952-53 when we moved out here, and '53-'54 when the fellowship met here. Mother and Daddy were great gardeners. Walter Adams and his wife, whose name I can't say right this minute, was the editor of the evening newspaper. Walter and his wife, she died since I moved back to Asheville.

Bob: In the '60s, she might not have been alive then.

Gail: She was. She died since I came back here.

Bob: Arlene, is that it?

Gail: Yes. Arlene died in probably 1976 or '77. She was living at the Vanderbilt when she died. She and Lisa Andrews and Mother and Daddy were all very close friends.

Bob: Lisa was the first person I interviewed. I didn't know anything then.

Gail: She's a special lady. Her husband owned a big junkyard, a salvaging company. He died quite suddenly, they weren't too old when he died.

Bob: She ran that business, didn't she?

Gail: She ran that business for years, she certainly did, and a heavy supporter of the church, all her life and I'm sure still is.

Bob: We have a door to the Sanctuary that is named for her.

Gail: I haven't seen Lisa for a few years because I have not been active in the church.

Bob: She is up near Chicago.

Gail: She had Fanny up there. I never knew Lisa's kids, they were grown, but we knew the Andrews very well. And the Adams children were pretty well grown, too. Mary Melcher I knew quite well. She relocated to Kingsport, I guess in the early 1960s.

Bob: I haven't gotten over to interview her, because I'm working on this early period, and she told me she couldn't tell me much about that because she was a mere child.

Gail: Right. We met first at the Congregational Church, and then of course the YMCA, four years there.

Bob: And during that period some of the Sunday schools were held in houses because it was very difficult to set up Sunday school there.

Gail: It was terribly difficult to set up Sunday school there.

Bob: That may be what caused them to terminate that.

Gail: Yes, because they had no permanent space to have anything that they owned. The house burned down here when I was twelve. They were finishing up the last stages of reconstruction, and my father used to joke he couldn't figure out where to put the stairs, so just burned down and started over again (laughs). They actually had a faulty furnace, a new furnace, and it wasn't what he had ordered, and it backfired with oil onto the walls and just burned the house down in just a few minutes.

Bob: No one was here at the time?

Gail: Mother and Daddy were here. At that time there were no volunteer fire departments.

Bob: So you were on your own.

Gail: Yes. Mother was trying to get our things out upstairs because she saw the fire spreading very quickly, and Daddy yelled to her he was going to help, and she came down to help him, and realized he was gone. She couldn't get back in to get our clothes or anything, it burned so quickly. It was a pine frame place. So, we started over again. At that time my mother was teaching kindergarten for the Asheville St. Joan of Arc School.

Bob: Was it on West Haywood? Same place?

Gail: It was on West Haywood, the same place, it was the older building.

Bob: She was teaching art there?

Gail: No, she was teaching kindergarten there. She had her doctorate in preschool education, rare in those days. She had to practically make up her own degree, and was a genius at preschool education, truly.

Bob: I'm interested to hear you talk about your mother, because I've heard nothing about her.

Gail: She was a really special lady.

Bob: She must have concentrated on the church school and was not known to a lot of adults at the time.

Gail: I don't know, she had a very wide circle of close friends, she and Lisa Andrews were very close, and Arlene Adams was a very close friend of hers. But she did, she concentrated

on the church school. My mother always believed if you start a child right the first three years of school you couldn't stop them. I had an informal survey going for a number of years. Most of her kindergarten students graduate from college, which seemed to bear out her... (laughs). Well, it was unusual at the time because the Catholic community was not a very wealthy community, but they had a very strong school structure here. One of my father's very best friends was Father Kuder, the paster of St. Joan of Arc Church. When our house burned down the Catholic church gave us a house to live in while we were rebuilding. It was over on Blue Ridge Avenue. It had been a home left to them by one of their parishioners. After we moved out it became briefly a place where the nuns lived, until the nuns fell out with the bishop that's where they lived (laughter). My sister and I both went to St. Joan of Arc School.

Bob: Is that right? For how many years?

Gail: I went all eight years, she started in the sixth grade.

Bob: Did you have to pay tuition to go there?

Gail: My mother did work there, so that was probably part of her pay. My sister went on and went to St. Genevieve, my sister did.

Bob: You have a sister.

Gail: Named Karen.

Bob: Do you have any brothers?

Gail: I have a big brother that I told you about, he went to Rocky Mount.

Bob: Oh, yes. So this is a full sister, and your big brother is a half-brother.

Gail: That's right. Karen graduated from St. Genevieve, and went on to University of Tennessee.

Bob: You have other members who went to St. Genevieve. Rosalee Davidson?

Gail: It was probably one of the finest women's schools in the region. That's where Gail Godwin went to school. There are about four major writers...

Bob: The writer who is speaking downtown...

Gail: Last week, I think she was. She went to school there. The teachers of religious education, most of them came out of France, and Ireland. They were excellent teachers, they really were. And probably very good role models for us later feminists. Very independent group of women, and they work very hard at what they do.

Bob: Yes. In Catholic girls' schools, women learn a kind of independence they don't learn in co-education. I learned that from a woman named Frankie Shelley who gave a talk about feminism at church this year.

Gail: They were very much on their own. I could never understand why the bishop got in a fight with them which led to them leaving this community. The religious education nuns did. And when they left, this really closed St. Joan of Arc School down. It damaged St. Genevieve School to the point where it became a lay school, not a nun's school. That was largely over whether they were or were not going to wear habits.

Bob: And this is post-war, so this is really modern feminism.

Gail: Very much so. This is in the mid-1960s.

Bob: It was also anti-patriarchy within the church, too.

Gail: Well, it was in the mid-1960s, and I was amazed that, they weren't trying to do anything radical, and he was really trying to force his will on them. A really dumb move on his part. We lost a valuable education tool in this community when those nuns left.

Bob: You told me where St. Genevieve was located.

Gail: I didn't go to St. Genevieve. My sister did, I didn't. It was located on Victoria Road, up where AB Tech now is, and the boys' school was Givens Hall, which I think is now one of the administration buildings at AB Tech. The old St. Genevieve Chapel is gone, it was up in the Pines, in fact, it was called The Pines, up in the pine trees where there are a lot of doctor's offices, just before the AB Tech campus starts. It was the city side of the Smith-McDowell House, up on the hill. And Givens Hall was up there; that was the boys' school.

Bob: You are a gold mine about Asheville. Wait till Dottie Joynes hears this tape, she will be delighted to meet you.

Gail: It's real interesting, because my father and Father Kuder and Rabbi Unger were probably leaders in the civil rights movement here. I don't remember the name of the black man they worked with, but when I was twelve, I joined the Young People's Christians and Jews. And by my joining the Asheville Library was desegregated for the first time. Because I joined this group they could not discriminate against a religious group, and that integrated the library, by the bylaws of the library. I remember, we used to meet upstairs over the black man, and I wish I could remember his name, I want to say Moody, but I don't think that's right. He had a jewelry store down on Eagle Street, and the Young People's Christians and Jews used to meet up over his jewelry store.

Bob: I'm sure that Dottie Joynes will follow that up.

Gail: She'll find out. There was a drug store there where we used to check out our books. And what they did, they had a card catalog in the drug store, and a black person who

wanted to check a book out of the library would write his name on the card, and they would go around the corner to the library, to Pack Library and get his book out. They used a cart that rolled around the corner to the black people. I was twelve.

Bob: You're talking about Pack Library.

Gail: Yes. The library was really the first institution to integrate in Asheville.

Bob: What about the YMCA. I know it was very early, too.

Gail: The YWCA was very early. The YMCA, which I'm on the Board of now, they had a complete break with the black community. I've never gotten the history of that. I wasn't old enough to know, and that is why there is a YMI. And I have never understood it. I don't know any older people really associated with the Y who would tell. It's been a third generation since that, and I don't think a lot of people really know. Some in the black community could tell, for sure. I always wondered... Who is the black guy who just died, Jesse Wright, I'm sure he could have told all that, and probably his son knows all that story, I would expect, because Jesse was a very important community leader at that time, too,

Bob: That family would be pleased to let us know.

Gail: I think they would be very interested in giving a history. Jesse Wright was always a backbone of this community, one of the leaders in the civil rights time. Asheville was a relatively peaceful phase of the civil rights movement, until in the middle 1970s when I wasn't here, there was a lot of unrest in the high school. I think it's probably because they were really heavy-handed in closing down some of the black schools that had a great deal of pride involved, actually. Stephens-Lee High School was a pride of the community.

Bob: Well, and some very fine teachers we were losing.

Gail: And what was the black girls high school here? The black girls school was where all those legal buildings are, the office buildings, going up towards the tunnel. It will come to me in a minute. Famous black women from all over the country came to that school. Who was the young...Barbara...in Texas. The Congressman during Nixon. She graduated from that school.

Bob: Barbara Jordan.

Gail: Yes. And Shirley...a real famous North Carolina black lady who came from that school, too. Allen School. The Allen School. Allen School for Black Women.

Bob: Allen School. OK.

Gail: The desegregation of Asheville came largely from the Unitarian Church and the Jewish community here in Asheville.

Bob: I was talking to Monica Gross, she is the daughter of Dick Gross, last week, and she said that a lot of churches were involved in a combined effort.

Gail: Yes, it very much was.

Bob: Everybody volunteered to sit in for a couple of hours or something...

Gail: They would sit at a lunch counter or something...which was kind of funny. It was sort of anti-climactic, because it came largely from the church communites, there was a broad support. And you have to remember that, I think Asheville is a little unique as a southern city, in that the black was very much in a minority here. So it wasn't a huge issue. But it became a real part of public embarrassment, you know... Unger was probably one of the most respected people.

Bob: Who was that?

Gail: Rabbi Unger.

Bob: First time I have heard his name. AR or ER?

Gail: I would say UNGER if I had to spell it. He was a very high profile community leader. I would suspect that three quarters of fundamentalist Asheville listened to his sermons every Saturday night. On the radio. And he had a wonderful speaking voice, and I grew up listening to his sermons. He and my father, and Father Kuder were all three very close friends.

Bob: Spell that.

Gail: KUDER.

Bob: Father Kuder. At the Catholic Church downtown?

Gail: No, he is from St. Joan of Arc. Actually we were never very closely associated with the St. Lawrence people. But they were real close friends. And as I say, because it came from such a broad religious background, that the actual integration here came very peacefully. We didn't have a lot of confrontations and so on.

Bob: We didn't have as much bitterness about the Civil War here in western North Carolina.

Gail: We had to be enticed into the Civil War...They were independent enough that they had to start a war to get them to go to war (laughs). But there was a lot of unrest in the early 1970s in the high school. And again, I think that's largely because the school had been closed down in a very heavy-handed fashion and all of the black children were put into the Asheville City school system, by a majority really, we had very little busing or anything like that. But I'm sure there was very little preparation among black students for the closing of

their school, who had a great deal of pride in that community. I'm not sure exactly when the Allen School...

Bob: You still hear about it...

Gail: Oh, absolutely.

Bob: There is a reception or ceremony to remember, all kinds of people show up.

Gail: That's absolutely right. I was gone from Asheville, I graduated from high school in 1960, and I went to Asheville-Biltmore College on the mountain, it was in the Seely Castle, and I was in the first class to go down to the campus of UNCA. That was my second year in college, and I subsequently went off to nursing school at Watts Hospital in Durham. Largely at the persuasion of Polly Hin(?) and Tim Takaro and a few people who knew me very well. So I was gone from the community for about three and a half years and came back here, and my husband came here at that time. I had met him in Durham. He did a rotating internship here in Asheville. Because he discovered in Durham he did not want to be a surgeon.

Bob: He did not want to be a surgeon.

Gail: Yes. He used to say, surgery is the failure of medicine. He opened a practice in Black Mountain. After about a year and a half, we were married at the Vermont Street church in 1966.

Bob: By what minister? Gross or Welch?

Gail: Neither. Gross was the minister here, but I was married by Sidney Freeman who was the pastor of the Charlotte Unitarian Church and a very dear friend of mine. And in fact he buried my mother the next year.

Bob: She died a natural death?

Gail: She died of a stroke in 1967. She had not been close to the Grosses, that's why Sidney buried her, she did not like Dick Gross at all. He was not one of her favorite people. But she was active in the church right up to the end of her life.

Bob: Bruce Young says it was his dry, Pennsylvania judge kind of...

Gail: He was very cold, and, he actually killed a cat my mother gave his children, and mother never forgave him for it. And my mother, as far as that was concerned, it was just too horrible. It was a mental thing on his part, and my mother just said, That's it, and I think that's a good description, he was very dry, very cold, and things were very black and white. My father all this time had been President of the church a couple of times, worked with the Sunday school, he worked with the men's fellowship organization.

Bob: Did you ever have a class with your father?

Gail: I never had a class with my father, because by this time I was old enough to be working in the LRY [Liberal Religious Youth]. I was traveling for the LRY all over the south. I was in many discussion groups with my father in conferences and things, and he was a delightful teacher. His students absolutely adored him because he made you think. I think I was always in a class with my father, because every meal in this house ended with a long discussion, philosophical discussion of one type or another. My father used to really believe that you need to understand other religions. So, a lot of discussion on the Bible, discussion on Eastern religions. He was a tremendously intelligent man, and read very broadly, and encouraged us to do so. And so he raised two daughters who were intense readers and very much exploring their world. He had a little bit of Irish whimsy. When he had stopped working for the construction company, probably when I was maybe ten, he had started delivering newspapers at night. At first at night, and then night and day. He had...

Bob: Was there an evening paper here?

Gail: There was a morning paper, it was always delivered between 1:00 and 4:00 in the morning. And the night paper was delivered between 1:00 and 4:00 in the afternoon. So he delivered over a thousand papers, twice a day, from Town Mountain all up to Oteen was his route. That was a really heavily populated part of the city at that time. So he did that...

Bob: On the eastern side.

Yes. He did that, he worked with boy scouts in the Unitarian church...

Bob: He drove a truck or a car?

Gail: He drove a car.

Bob: Anybody with him?

Gail: He had a various assortment of helpers, and sometime he worked alone, usually he had high school kids working with him. I grew up delivering newspapers with him. I can remember going on the paper route when I was eight or nine years old every afternoon after school. In fact, it was kind of a family endeavor, all of us worked on the paper route. The day the house burned down, my father sent word to my sister who was at St. Genevieve's at the time, to pick me up and go ahead and start the afternoon paper route. Well, being my sister was a very stubborn and independent young lady, she said, wait a minute that doesn't sound normal, because she usually collected for the paper in the afternoon, she didn't deliver the paper. And she assured me I didn't know the paper route, and so we came home and that's how I found the house fire, which my father had planned to catch up with us and tell us what was going on. He delivered the papers until...I was in high school, I was a senior, it had to have been 1959. It was the year my sister was married. He developed another serious problem with his back, probably secondary to trying to fix

the transmission on his car. He was repairing the transmission on his car, and the doctors always thought that holding the weight of the transmission did something to his back. That led to this wing of the house being built, and him retiring from active work. Because they realized that he was having more trouble with his back, and was going to be wheelchair bound eventually. He was a smoker all his life, and he was developing emphysema at that time, so between his lungs not being as strong as they had been, it was not as easy for him to walk the way he had. Because he had walked by balance all of his life, he didn't feel anything, he just did with balance. And a lot of times didn't even use a cane. He used to hike with boy scouts, and did all kinds of things one would not think a man who could not feel anything from the waist down could do. It really wasn't until his lungs got bad that he became pretty much wheelchair bound, putting it in his car and going where he needed to go.

Bob: He was a strong man, strong arms...

Gail: He was a very strong man. He could do anything with his hands. He helped a lot with remodeling the church on Vermont Avenue, he did a lot of the work there, I can remember stripping wallpaper, I still remember doing that (laughs). I had to be about thirteen, fourteen years old when we were doing that.

Bob: My feeling about that is that you people put that into pretty good shape for a guy who was...

Gail: It was a lovely place for a church. It really was. I taught Sunday school, I taught the Takaro twins in Sunday school. Tim Takaro's kids. I was teaching a young group at that time, and literally by the time I started college, I was so busy teaching Sunday school at that time. But I was still active in the LRY and I belonged to a couple of the national offices.

Bob: LRY was very important to you.

Gail: It was.

Bob: The connection with people in other towns...

Gail: It had a lot to do with the growth of Unitarianism, and I think the young people were a part of Thomas Jefferson [the Thomas Jefferson District of the Unitarian Universalist Association] and planned the conferences. We used to have two or three conferences a year, we always had one at Thanksgiving and one at Easter, and of course the summer conference up at the Blue Ridge YMCA center.

Bob: What years are we talking about? This is after you were back in town.

Gail: This is before I left town, when I was in high school so it had to be from 1955 into the 1960's I was real active in the LRY and did not become disengaged in that until I went away to nursing school. I clearly remember when the Knoxville church was built because I was

there, same way with the Oak Ridge Church. I was at the dedication of a lot of those churches because I was a person in the LRY.

Bob: You knew Claudette Reed well.

Gail: Oh, very well. Actually, she came up right behind me. I taught Claudette in kindergarten in Sunday school. She went into the LRY right behind me. I was the first real active person, my sister a little bit, she was older, and all ready getting into high school. She's five years older than I am, I don't think she was ever as active in the LRY as I was. That was a real active period. That was the time of integration, the civil rights movement was important, so there was a lot of support. We traveled all over the southeast, organizing the conferences, helping other groups get started. There was this charming boy, Leon, I can't remember his last name, he drove a Volkswagon. I've driven to Birmingham with him, I've driven... we were everywhere. We were in Birmingham back when there were black and white fountains, black and white bathrooms, and black and white... and a lot of that was tied up in the civil rights movement. But we got off very lucky here. My father did not want me to sit in at the lunch counter, because he thought I was young for that. It was so innocuous. I remember him laughing. It was like the good old boys didn't give a damn, as he used to say. He taught Claudette in Sunday school, he taught many of the kids of that age.

Bob: He tells about his course on the Bible.

Gail: Oh yes, it was fabulous.

Bob: They had to really understand it and then write their own version of that. Wow. What a task. He spoke of how he used to come out to the house in the afternoons and stay the whole afternoon. There was no subject he wouldn't have taught.

Gail: That's right. That's true. And those kids worked with him. I'm trying to remember who all the kids were. Arthur Poultney was my age, a younger sister was in Dad's group. I don't remember the kids, exactly. There were about eight or ten of them, they worked... Actually, he got drummed out of the Baptist church over his Biblical teachings. That was prior to the Unitarian church forming. My mother was raised a Baptist.

Bob: That's northern Baptist.

Gail: Absolutely. She was involved in the Calvary Baptist church, and she got my father to teach a Sunday school class. I can't remember what he was teaching, I know it was Bible stories, and his whole class built little arks, and they did a whole thing on Noah's ark. The church was so impressed that all these kids were so involved in this. Dad built this big, six-foot ark that was used for some spring celebration. Then the fathers of the church found out he was Unitarian. They had this snake-in-the-grass Unitarian teaching their children for well over a year before they found out. Daddy was a very liberal, very open person. He made you own your moral standards. That's what the kids really remember about him, what are your ethics, and why.

Bob: He wasn't engaged in a lot of political activity.

Gail: Mostly in religious things, mostly in the Unitarian church, and mostly in ethical and religious things. He had such a broad spectrum of things...

Bob: How about yourself? Have you stayed pretty much in ethical areas?

Gail: No, I've gotten involved in politics off and on, until I got fed up with the...I think my whole generation did get fed up with politics. I came from the anti-war era, and I think many of us were very turned off by the government activities.

Bob: I've got to ask you to stop right here, and turn this tape over.

Side B:
This is the second side, Gail Gomez speaking.
Where were we? We were talking about LRY and ...

Gail: About politics in Asheville, and about the Baptist church...

Bob: ...and about your own politics. Wait a minute, before you get into politics, I haven't asked you about your own biography... You told me about after you married, I know that you married a doctor from Durham...

Gail: A doctor from Spain.

Bob: He was going to school.

Gail: That's right, he was going to school, actually he was going to school at Watts Hospital when I met him, he was doing his internship.

Bob: You were a nurse at that time?

Gail: I was a student. And we got married after about a year, we'd been out of school and came back here.

Bob: Did he come here as an intern?

Gail: Yes, at Mission Hospital.

Bob: OK.

Gail: And we got married, and opened a practice in Black Mountain. We were there for about 18 months. He was probably very largely protected from the draft at that period, because he was not an American citizen and he was in rotator's town, rotator ran a doctor in this town, and he became very interested in going back to school, a residency in internal

medicine. As soon as he enrolled at the Lahey Clinic in Boston he got his draft notice. So he closed his practice...

Bob: He was not a resident alien, he was a naturalized citizen.

Gail: No, he was not, he was resident alien.

Bob: You could get drafted? That's news to me.

Gail: This was 1967, they could do what they wanted to. 1967 he was drafted. He had closed his practice, and actually established an emergency room physician program at Mission before he went in the army. They finally took him in the army in the summer. In fact we had already gotten an apartment in Boston when he got drafted. It was very quick. They took him to San Antonio and trained him with about six Cubans and two or three Czechoslovakians, who were all refugees. When they got through officers' training they suddenly realized they couldn't do anything with these doctors. They had all these doctors they couldn't send to Vietnam. So they held him in San Antonio, I think he graduated his book camp training in September, and it took two months, they had to pass a special act of Congress to send these men to Vietnam.

Bob: Talk about politics. That must have waked you up.

Gail: I was already awake. I think my entire generation had very mixed feelings about the Vietnam war, and I guess politically even before I knew my husband, my first political activity had been establishing the Republican party in Asheville, because Asheville was so staunchly 100 years Democratic. When I was in college we used to go to the register, all the registers were kept in people's homes.

Bob: The what?

Gail: The registration papers were kept in people's homes. I'm dead serious. The League of Women Voters organized a group of college kids to go to the registrars' homes and read the rolls. The first time we went we copied down as many names as we could remember and then we took those back to the League of Women Voters who challenged people, most of which were dead. (Laughter) So the next time we went back to registrars' homes we were not allowed to copy anything, but we would memorize names. You could get about an hour appointment to get last names, and we would give those to the League of Women Voters, who would challenge those dead people on the rolls. It's so funny, because my father had voted both Republican and Democratic all his life, I think he was registered independent. I can remember painting "I Like Ike" down the middle of this road, right after it was paved, actually. It was time for the November elections, and my sister did that for Halloween night. Actually there was an effort to establish a two party system here in Asheville. I've always been real independent, very much a liberal and very much a Democratic voter as a large rule.

Bob: You're not in favor of machines.

Gail: No. I don't like machines. I don't like political cabals that control things. Because it was very much controlled here in Buncombe County. We had the same sheriff for thirty years.

Bob: Somebody named De Bruhl who was telling me that it still is.

Gail: It is, but it's a little looser that it was, because there are a lot of independent voters in this community now. The community's character has changed a great deal.

Bob: Well, you described the tremendous influence of the Navy, the Army, the veterans and so forth, in World War II, and that kind of thing has been the basis of a cosmopolitan element here, which really goes back before that, with the Fords and so forth and so on who visited here.

Gail: It's been a fascinating community historically. The power politics, I don't think it's the same political machinery, but there is very much a cabal of people who are in charge in Asheville. It's very hard to get your message to them if it's not their favorite thing. There's a very strong active group of middle-aged people who run the community, and getting them to back your causes is a difficult thing to do. I've had four years of working at it, and I know what I'm talking about. But we left here, my husband went to Vietnam in 1968, or 1967. Yes 1967. I stayed here and my father by this time, he had had lung surgery when I was in late high school or college when he had surgery. I came home for that. My mother died in 1967. My husband and I moved back from Black Mountain to take care of my father in the spring of 1967. My husband wound up in Vietnam in December and was there in 1968-69. And then my father died in the spring 1968, two years and two months after my mother died, 1969.

Bob: Would you say that they were unusually close to each other?

Gail: Very very close, they really were.

Bob: But they had independent careers.

Gail: Oh, very much so, but they were just real close. Two years my father lived after my mother, he was pretty lonely. My sister was living in Salisbury. She had children then. He saw my second nephew born. But his health was declining, he wasn't traveling like he had, he used to travel around to see all the kids. I think he was just basically lonely. He was still quite involved in the church, because I remember going to the meeting where we decided to get the land for the new church. That was up at one of the Reynolds homes, Sandburg's daughters. He was very active still in the church, never stopped being active in the church. He wasn't teaching at that time, I don't think. But he was still quite involved. I don't think he ever didn't go to church, unless he was down visiting my sister. He had essentially a large clot in his colon, one night here. It was April. I got him out to Oteen, and they did surgery on him for about six hours, and he died on the table. He would have wanted to go, just fighting something. He couldn't even tell, because he couldn't feel, so he wasn't having

pain. He just had all the symptoms of shock. I got up to go to work, and he was in shock, and I got him to the hospital. Like Tim said, he died fighting, just like he always did. He just had a real strong heart, and a real strong spirit.

Bob: But he wasn't an angry man.

Gail: No. Not at all. I think in fact he probably would have moderated some of my anger. I think that my generation of people... I went to an anti-war demonstration. This was right after my father had died. It was in May, I had just come back from Hawaii visiting my husband, and I just went to see what the rally was about. And my phone was tapped for the month after that. And my phone was tapped until I moved to California to meet my husband that next winter. I think that my whole generation, both the death of the Kennedys, the Chicago convention, all those things really disenchanted my generation terribly. Because we had grown up to be more thinking, I mean there wasn't a thinking person alive that thought Kennedy was killed by Lee Harvey Oswald. And to see the government absolutely back away from its responsibility to my generation was very discouraging. And I went into a phase of being very politically inactive. I think it was bitterness, and the pain of watching Robert Kennedy killed, and then Martin Luther King, was just, it was devastating to young, thinking, active people at that time. It was like nothing I can think of otherwise in my life, politically. It was so morally away from what I had been raised to be that I think it was particularly painful to me. We were brought up to be thinking and active and try to do something about their world. We went to California. My husband served his last year in the army there and got his citizenship in California.

Bob: He survived Vietnam.

Gail: Well, with great difficulty. He had had to refuse a couple assignments, because they sent him into the Parrot's Beak. And he was not an American citizen, and he had to refuse that assignment. They tried to give him a hard time, but what they really wound up doing was making him work the emergency room the rest of the time he was in Vietnam. He was in Chihuly after that over on the coast. He came back pretty bitter about his war experience, but he would not get his citizenship until he came back here.

Bob: The ones who didn't come back bitter weren't worth their salt.

Gail: And he saw so many young people dead, he worked grave registrations and did things, the doctors and medical people really... the year 1969 was a horrible year, chewing young people up and spitting them out like fodder. He came back here, and we spent a really wonderful year in California, traveling all over the west part of the country. He had a really easy assignment in Sacramento. We traveled everywhere in the West, really enjoyed it. Then he went back to Boston, to the Lahey Clinic. We were there 1971-75, we came home at the end of 1975. I worked for Beth Israel Hospital, I was in the Harvard system, and he was in the New England Hospital system. I went into intensive care, and became the head of the cancer care unit at Beth Israel.

Bob: When did you stop nursing?

Gail: When my son was born, actually. We came back here in late 1975 and I went to work for a very special director of nursing at Mission. I had come back and I really wanted to just work staff in intensive care, because I had been in administration for three years at that time, and intensive care was very primitive here, just real primitive. I had been where they were doing the cutting edge research where I was. And I knew I was coming back in time medically fifteen years, but the way the unit was set up was very bad. I literally came from one of the best units in the country to a real primitive deal in intensive care.

Bob: At that time, I know that Carl was doing research on lung surgery.

Gail: At Oteen. Yes, he was. That was the VA hospital, and I'm talking about Mission hospital. Mission was coming along. They were developing a heart team, they were getting there, I know several of the residents that came down here from Boston when I did with Dr. Salisbury had trained when I was in school. Anyway, I worked in the intensive care unit about a month and I couldn't stand it. I went in to this lady whose name was Mary Lynn Byers and told her I was going to resign, and she said you can't resign. I had written. She said you have to tell me why you resign, so I read her an eleven-page documentation on the intensive care unit. I mean, textbooks are written about the unit I was the head of. So I was really coming from another century. I knew that, I was very prepared for that when I came back, but it was so bad. The nursing staff was poor, very poorly trained and very poorly managed. So I read her an outline of what was wrong in the intensive care unit. She said you can't quit, you have to help me fix it. She hired me into administration. I worked with her for...practically until the day my son was born.

Bob: Did you get pregnant on purpose, excuse me?

Gail: Yes. We were planning to have our family when we came back here. We'd been married ten years when I had my son. We had really both been very caught up in our career. And in Boston we were literally on the cutting edge of medicine. It was a lot more exciting than I was willing to back (?). I mean, this was the advent of open-heart surgery. It was the beginning of so many lung transplants and all kinds of things were going on. I was working with people from NASA and Houston medical center and Stanford University and it was just way up there on another plane. So I went to work for Mary Lynn, and I started doing consult on nursing, really nursing research all over the western part of North Carolina. It was pulmonary nursing, which was my specialty. I did a lot of teaching throughout western North Carolina, both when I was pregnant and then after my son was born.

Bob: What is your son's name?

Gail: My son's name is Miguel. He was born December 30, 1975. I went back to work part-time after he was born, I just worked weekends, and did administrative work.

Bob: What pulled you and your husband back to Asheville?

Gail: Probably my roots here. He was offered a position for Lahey Clinic and we both thought about it a lot. I really had trouble living in a big city. I didn't like it. It was very claustrophobic to me. I was used to being able to leave the city. I think I could have lived in San Francisco, some place where you could get away. Boston was such a megatropolis. I loved the city, but there was just no way of getting away from it. So we came back here, and he went to the VA. He had finished his last year with the VA. He had gotten his residency in endocrinology at the VA in Boston. When we came back here he went to work for the VA where he was still employed. My daughter was born in 1980. Her name is Gail. My husband and I were divorced in 1986. He still works at the VA, so he's still here. He is very involved with the kids, still. In fact, he is putting my son through college. My son just started college in September.

Bob: Where is he going?

Gail: He is going to Chapel Hill. He just left a few hours ago. He's been home for the weekend. And my daughter just started high school at Asheville High.

Bob: She's pretty young, then, isn't she.

Gail: She's fourteen. She'll be fifteen in February. My son's approaching nineteen very rapidly, can't believe it. It gets away from you, doesn't it! I quit working in nursing when we divorced. I felt I needed to give more time to the children. I was a member already. I was doing a lot of photography. I had gotten very involved in photography, both as an art form, and I just loved media. I had joined High Country Crafters as a member. When I quit working at the hospital, they had opened up a position for director of their shows. My sister who was 22 years old and I had been running the shows.

Bob: Which shows are those?

Gail: These are the arts and crafts shows...

Bob: Of High Country. I see.

Gail: So I went to work as their show director.

Bob: So she has pretty well stayed in Asheville, too.

Gail: She is seventy-five this year. She has been here all her life, or since 1946 she moved here. Or 1947, she moved here. She is Executive Director for High Country, and I am Show Director for High Country. I have both run shows and started new shows in various parts of the country. Kituwah is our latest project. I realize as I look back over my life that Kituwah has a lot to do with where I came from as a young person and my social conscience and brought me directly back in contact with things that I was raised to believe. People need an opportunity...

Bob: Those things for you were very much a part of your family.

Gail: Very much so.

Bob: Not part of the community.

Gail: Well, no. I think it's part of the community, too. I think it's both. I think I grew up very aware of what the attitude was toward Cherokee as a community. I can remember when English was a second language on the Cherokee reservation. When I was a child there was very much a second language. I remember the first time I saw a jet airplane I was up on top of the ferris wheel at the Cherokee fall festival. And I can tell you that English was the second language of that community. And yet, when I became involved with arts and crafts I realized that the artists and craftsmen, particularly in the mountains here, had been very isolated from the market for a number of years. When I started to look at the Indian exposition, I began to realize the issues were exactly the same, the artists had been isolated and exploited terribly. It really became both a social cause as well as an art cause to me. As we did the assessment with artists across the country they were saying there is no very reputable window in the eastern part of the United States for very good art work. Not American art work, forget Cherokee. I was very conscious that the Cherokee artists were still selling their wares in the back doors in the shops in Cherokee for less than two thirds what they are worth. Terrible exploitation of their artwork. The isolation of the Cherokee community had a large impact on their art. They were beginning to miniaturize which I think is fascinating. That is an art term in and of itself. And had very little influence from other parts of the country, which other American Indian artists at least enjoyed that impact of each other.

Bob: Especially in the southwest.

Gail: Yes. So, we started Kituwah. It has been both a social and a business cause for all of us. It has achieved a few victories in the last few years. The first year was very much a...

Bob: This picks up on your mother's interests.

Gail: Yes, my mother's interests and my father's interests. He hated people to be exploited, he really hated that. So it really picked up on both their interests. Both Mother and Daddy were very, very strong about how people were treated by each other. That was a big issue with them. I was brought up not to discuss religion with my Baptist friends because I could discuss it so much better than they could (laughs). I'll never forget when I was in high school, I was in the eleventh grade, up to that time I had ducked ever having to do any religious ceremonies. Which were very much a part of all the public schools in those days. And I had been told I had to do a morning, one of the morning prayer sessions, which they did over the intercom at my high school. I just went to my Sunday school text and pulled together what I thought was a very good (laughs) message and read it over the intercom in the morning. They called me Preacher Cornell to the day I graduated. (Laughs).

Bob: Was this Joan of Arc?

Gail: No, it was here at Erwin High School. I decided not to go to St. Genevieve's because my sister Karen was a particularly brilliant student. And for eight years I had heard how brilliant she was. And I decided I wasn't going to go to high school and listen to that. So I went to high school at Erwin for four years. Because I was way ahead of the public high school. So when I started college I had to sweat blood to get back into my study habits. It was tough my first year in college. I remember I had 8:00 classes five days a week, and it just about killed me the first semester in college, but I got it under my belt eventually. During this time was when my father was real active with the Unitarian youth. He spent probably the last five years of his life real actively working with the young people. And that was like I say when Diane moved in. He also was very active with Boy Scouts. He taught scouts, I guess a good ten years he worked with the scouts actively. He had friends from every walk of life. He was that kind of person, that drew people to him. In fact, when he died we did not have the service at the church. One, the church was being built. But we also did not know who all his friends were. He knew everybody in Asheville. So we had the service at the Groce Funeral Home. Groce's were all friends of my family, too. And people from everywhere showed up that I didn't even know. It was like my father to go out and... I remember one time he took some Russian sailors on a tour of the Parkway. He found these Russian sailors hitchhiking out on Tunnel Road. Couldn't speak a word of Russian, they couldn't speak English. He was supposed to be home from delivering the papers by about 9:00 in the morning at the latest. He calls my mother at 10:00 and says I'm up on Mt. Pisgah, I'm taking some Russian sailors around to see the mountains. That was the kind of thing he would do. I met Robert Mitchum, the movie actor, through my father because he ran into him at a little restaurant in Asheville when they were shooting a film here. He was just that kind of person. He literally could walk with kings and keep the common touch. He knew everyone, and had a very broad spectrum of friends who really appreciated both his willingness to discuss anything and his sense of humor, which was wonderfully Irish. A very bright, witty person. He really could get to the heart of most anything if you just gave him a couple minutes, and he used a good sense of humor to do it. I think he got through a lot of tough political times within the church, you know, when people wanted to go in different directions. He had a skill at pulling things together. I really think he did. I know he helped search for some of our better ministers, and I think he did a very good job of that.

Bob: You haven't been active in this church since when?

Gail: Since I started working nights after my son was born. My son was actually christened in the church, but when I went back to nursing I was working nights on the weekends, working a ten-hour shift, and I just physically couldn't get to church on Sunday, I was usually so tired I couldn't stay up.

Bob: You were doing dual duty.

Gail: We got very much away from the church. We went back a little bit when my daughter was small, and then I think through the period of my divorce I just kind of came away from the church at that time. I was so involved in being a single mother. I've often castigated myself for not turning to the church as a resource at that time. But I think a lot of it had to do with what I was working and what I was doing at the time.

Bob: Maybe you don't need it.

Gail: I probably didn't need it as much then. It's interesting, my ex-husband and his new wife go to the Unitarian church. And that's a very recent phenomenon. It's only been going on for about the last year and it's not very consistent.

Bob: You're not mad at the Unitarian Universalist Church, just busy. It's so nice to know that. Tell me about your own religious philosophy. Do you feel it has changed much in the last ten years?

Gail: No, I think I'm very much still the fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man. My son teases me that I have the George Lucas philosophy of the Force. I don't have any very strong preconceptions of what a spiritual power larger than myself is, but I know that if it's nothing but the collective good, it's there. I come from a very inquiring, broad spectrum. I feel like nobody has the answers, and it's not really important, it's how you live here while you're here that's important. But I'm not sure I'm an agnostic. I really do believe there is a higher force, even if there is just the force of good. So that's pretty much the way I brought my kids up to be. They are not very religious oriented, and I wonder sometimes if that's a failure of mine, not to have seen that they had more guidance through the church. But I think they are very much part... they've gotten the standards and the morals through the way they've been brought up. That feels good inside. They have learned to be very discriminating and to ask questions, and that was the way I was brought up.

Bob: Do you feel that you were wounded by the divorce, or not?

Gail: Not particularly. It was the better choice. It's hard for a mother to raise children alone in this culture.

Bob: What help have you had in that?

Gail: My family, my friends. Both my sisters, and my brother somewhat. My brother less so. He doesn't... He has never been close to the family...

Bob: I haven't heard much about your family.

Gail: My brother is not close to the family. He was very much involved in becoming a multi-millionaire most of his life. He is a multi-millionaire. He is very much a money-oriented human being. He lived in the other part of the state. His wife was not close to the family at all. I think that she really kept him very isolated from his family. I always laugh because when he retired he bought a house up in Sapphire so he could be near his sisters and Betty and I don't hear from him three times a year. It's a sentimental thing that I think...he just turned away from his family to make his money. All the rest of us are very, very close. And largely due to his wife. She is just not a warm, fuzzy person. She is a British war bride. There is no other description for her. She always kept him motivated to

make a little more money, a little more money, so she probably was a very big impact on what he became professionally.

Bob: Is your brother one of your mother's children from her former...

Gail: Yes, he's my mother's second child.

Bob: OK, I understand that distance, too.

Gail: But very different from his older sister, Betty, who is much more involved in the community. Betty is a wonderful person. She is one of the founders of the High Country Craft Guild. Betty raised her kids in this community. She graduated from college when she was 50 from UNCA. She went back to school and took an art major. She has probably done just about everything in her career. She worked from a laundry when she first was in high school, she worked at Pinkerton's as an undercover detective in New York, she worked with a tax office here in Asheville, she raised chickens for five or six years, had a huge chicken farm. She became a LPN [Licensed Practical Nurse], and then went into an art career. I would say she is typical of the way my whole family's interest change and things, she just really took care of what had to be done. She's a neat lady, she really is. She has been a big influence on my life, too. I really have enjoyed working with her this last eight years. It's been a real experience. A joy to work with her, she's a lot of fun.

Bob: I think that's enough for one and a half hours. I appreciate it. I've got an awful lot about your father and your mother both, more than I got about you, actually.

Gail: Both of them were just so dynamic, I think they were a very dynamic group of people pulled together that really birthed this thing we call the Unitarian Church here in Asheville, and cared so deeply about having that opportunity for people to have a religious area where they could be free. That's largely why my father brought me up not the Baptist religion of my friends.

Bob: I'm learning a new conception of the word free. If one has read Erich Fromm, about freedom from this side or the other... whereas I'm seeing that freedom also has this time dimension, where it's free to go somewhere new or change and develop new interests. Do you see that very much in your life?

Gail: It's so interesting. My sister and I have been having philosophical discussions about whether people are becoming more awakened to the issues of today, or is it just baby boomers getting old and getting to that stage in their life...

Bob: Well, I think that is what I would say about your children, I think the time will come in their lives when they will turn to more active and organized.

Gail: They will. My son is so funny. He went down and picked a fight with the...he got bored at Chapel Hill and wrote a letter about he did not believe we need to legalize pot, at least not for any reasons that he heard, and he was so funny, he called his mother and he

said, Mother, I've got everything but a death threat on my hands. And he brought home all these letters that he had gotten in response. And I said, have you answered them, and he said no, none of them are logical enough to answer. He said, if someone has a good argument, I will answer them back. He is a very strong leader. And he is the kind who will speak out. He has always dealt with issues himself, he has never wanted his mother and dad to step in and deal with things for him. He is real strong that way, and I am very proud of that. I think that has a lot to do with being brought up by a very independent mother. Coming from a real conservative Spanish father has been difficult for them, I think, to balance the two different perspectives on life.

Bob: Can I turn this off?

Gail: OK go ahead.

End of Side B.