

Interview with John Hancy & Alice Hancy

July 13, 2001

Interviewer: Bonnie Habel

Bonnie: We are meeting with John Hancy and Alice Hancy in their cool home, and we're going to sip some tea here in a minute too, but I want to talk to them both because they have been members of our church, UUCA for . . .

John: Since 1977.

Bonnie: Since 1977, thank you. When did you move to Asheville, John?

John: 1977.

Bonnie: Right away then, you joined the church. Where did you move from?

John: Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

Bonnie: Had you been in Milwaukee a long time?

John: 12 years.

Bonnie: Was that where your job was?

John: Yes, I was transferred there.

Bonnie: Are you originally from Wisconsin?

John: No. I was from Detroit and Alice was from . . . well, she'll tell you.

Bonnie: OK. So you were transferred here. Tell me a little bit about why you looked up the UU church right away.

John: Well, we were married in the UU church in Detroit so we've been -- Alice was UU ever since the University of Michigan, and I've been a UU since we got married. That's 51 years.

Bonnie: And you were married in the Detroit church. Did you know any of our ministers from there?

John: Yes, Tracy Pullman.

Bonnie: Did he marry you.

John: Yes.

Bonnie: Oh, how fantastic.

Alice: Would you like to see his picture?

Bonnie: Yes, I would. That would be a wonderful part of the history. Your background, your education?

John: Bachelor's degree in accounting and a CPA.

Bonnie: So that was your career?

John: Yes. From Wayne State University in Detroit.

Bonnie: When you first came to the UUCA here in Asheville, what was the size of the congregation?

John: I would have to guess several hundred, a couple, three hundred. The sanctuary was built and half of Sandburg Hall.

Bonnie: Who was the minister?

John: Bill Hammond.

Bonnie: Did they have a choir?

John: Not so you'd notice.

Bonnie: Your early involvement . . . did you have special activities that you liked to do right away?

John: No, I don't know how they found out - - we lived on Leasure Mountain Road, and Lois and Randall Thompson lived down Leasure Mountain Road, and they came up and introduced themselves, and ever

since then we went to the church. At that point we didn't know exactly where the church was. We knew there was a church. So we got involved fairly quickly after we got here.

Bonnie: And Randall and Lois would certainly get you involved.

John: Yes.

Bonnie: The other leaders that kind of stand out besides Randall and Lois .
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John: Well, to me special is Gus Schmidt, Gus Schmidt and his berries. Gus Schmidt had four enormous holly hedges in front of his house and he was going to have it re-landscaped, and the landscaper came down and bagged them and brought them over to us, and they are planted, and I just spent \$100 getting them trimmed just now, so this is how many years -- 20 years. You can't kill them. And all of our day lilies started from three or four that were in there that he gave us. And we must have scattered -- a lot of them don't even bloom anymore -- a hundred of them. So Gus was very instrumental. And the other one would be George and Virginia Love.

Bonnie: Gus blooms in your yard then, right now, all the time. George and Virginia. Did they live near you?

John: No, they lived in Hendersonville.

Bonnie: They have just recently moved to Asheville, I think. This year maybe.

Alice: They're at Highland Farms.

Bonnie: But because you saw them in church on Sunday you could do things with them.

John: Yes. Gus was involved with Alice picking berries all the time, so there was a constant -- and he lived in this area -- so there was a constant connection. His wife was pretty ill then so we rarely saw her. The only thing I remember about her is when they were getting -- I suppose you've heard this a dozen times -- carpeting, she offered to buy wool carpeting for the church, and they said nylons cheaper. She said, well, go ahead and get

the nylon, but I'll only buy wool.

Bonnie: No, I have not heard that before.

Alice: She said, just get what you want, but she said if I'm paying for it, it will be wool.

Bonnie: That's a wonderful story. Una, was that her name, Una? Some major changes, either positive or negative in your belief after you came to the Asheville church . . . or after you became Unitarians, maybe we could start that way, and maybe discuss a little bit about your beliefs. Or like background and when you decided to join.

John: I was raised as a backsliding Lutheran, so I had no very strong religious beliefs, and then when I met Alice she introduced me to the Unitarian Church. I would say then it was a little more conservative than it is now. Tracy would wear a robe. Very interesting, because I had always questioned the existence of God in the sense that he's got a big computer up there keeping track of everything you're doing, but he talked about the philosophy of what I call creative energy, that there was something. And that sort of felt good to me, that there is something. As far as the rest of the details, no.

Bonnie: Have you given a This I Believe?

John: No. What I probably believe is, if you could describe it in two words, is enlightened self-interest. That's probably as close as I can come to the details.

Bonnie: OK. Any changes that you would wish in the church right now. Any things that you see have changed or that you would like to have changed?

John: Well, I see the church as growing tremendously over the 20 years or 22 years or 23 years that we've been here. To me it has become a little less personal, which is inevitable when you grow. In the beginning you knew most of the people, and when they built the addition, tore down the house that was in front, and added the kitchen and the rest of the room, that was a very interesting experience. Now I don't know -- I think we're getting old and probably set in our ways. One of the things the church probably needs

is a strong Sunday School, but we're past that stage. Our grandchildren live in Wisconsin so we don't have that much contact with it. I don't see at the moment, if you're talking about expanding the church . . . with a new church developing in Black Mountain, that we're economically viable to talk about expanding the church. That's the way I see it.

Bonnie: I was thinking about the activities that you enjoy now. Do you go to Noonlighters or . . .

John: We used to go pretty strongly to Noonlighters, but after I got sick we've sort of drifted off. We probably don't participate as much as we did. That was in '93. But we enjoy things like the Noonlighters and you had these various courses that were interesting to us. The last one we took with the church was Tai Chi.

Bonnie: The adult classes and activities have been broad, haven't they?

John: Yes, everything. Actually we would probably like to do more, but right now we're busy taking computer courses.

Bonnie: Are any of your family involved in the Unitarian Church?

John: No. I would say that both my son and daughter are Unitarians, but they don't belong to the church. My daughter married a Catholic, and although she doesn't go to church the children are being theoretically raised as Catholics. And my daughter-in-law is in the Congregational Church, but my son doesn't really belong, but he does participate.

Bonnie: Are there are other things that -- because I've skimmed quickly here -- are there are other things that you'd like to say, that would add to the history of and development of our church?

John: No. I can think of all these things when you're not here, but I can't think of them right now. Maybe when Alice is talking I'll interrupt. That's the best way.

Bonnie: Good. I was just going to say, let's do that. Let's Alice have her say and then get together and both of you have a chance to pick up from there.

Now I am here with Alice Hancy. Alice, tell us about your first joining the Unitarian Church.

Alice: I joined in Ann Arbor where I was going to school, and that was the beginning for me. Then I moved to Detroit, to the University of Michigan.

Bonnie: And then you met John, I understand.

Alice: Yes, I moved to Detroit and that's where we met.

Bonnie: And you joined right away.

Alice: Pretty much, yes. I think the church was called All Souls Church.

John: It was right by Wayne State University, where I went to school.

Alice: They later changed it to First Unitarian Church of Detroit. But then it was . . .

Bonnie: First UU Church or just Unitarian?

Alice: Unitarian. The Birdsalls belonged when we were there.

Bonnie: I knew they were from there. That's wonderful, and they moved down about the same time you did?

Alice: No, they were before us.

Bonnie: Your education and career -- when you were in school you were pursuing --

Alice: I was in the pharmacy school.

Bonnie: Did you go ahead and do anything with that?

Alice: Sure. I did my State Boards and started working.

John: Now able to work in Iowa, Michigan and Wisconsin, but not here.

Bonnie: Oh, you just didn't pursue that.

Alice: It's complicated to get your license so when I came here I filled out all the forms, but never carried through with it.

Bonnie: You were busy.

Alice: Yes.

Bonnie: And how many children do you have?

Alice: Two, a girl and a boy.

Bonnie: We were just mentioning about those two. John was telling us about that. Tracy Pullman . . . you were going to tell us a little more about him.

Alice: Oh, he was great. I took John with me to church the first time and, as you know, John does not . . .

John: Fidgets.

Alice: He fidgets. He does not sit still, and I thought halfway through the service, he's having a difficult time. I'll never bring him back again, and as we left the church John said to Tracy, this has been the best church service I have ever been to.

Bonnie: That's wonderful. Little did you know.

(Tape turned over. Perhaps something not taped.

Alice: . . . Michigan, and they had a fellowship there, which later became a church. They were just becoming a church as we left. There was a beautiful church in Birmingham, but we were leaving by this time, being transferred out to Iowa, and in Iowa we joined the church there, almost right away. It was called the Peoples Church. Nice downtown church. As far as I know, it's still there, although they did buy property in the outlying area, but I don't know that they ever . . .

John: I think they bought the lots next door and have been doing expansion. It would be in the same location.

Alice: OK. So we stayed there until we moved to Milwaukee, and in Milwaukee it was a fellowship again, which is now a church. But it was a good experience all the way along.

Bonnie: Fellowships go up to 75 families or . . .

Alice: I'm not sure what the number they have to . . . well, we had our own minister.

John: In suburban Detroit, Birmingham, we met at a school first, but we built a church. A very beautiful modern, Japanese style church. But in Milwaukee it was a fellowship. This was during the 60's and the 70's, when there was lots of conflict, so the thing was up and down. Subsequently Milwaukee built in the area a church in the shape of an octagonal barn, because along the Lake Michigan shore there were a lot of octagonal barns, so the Unitarian Church in northern Milwaukee is an octagonal barn.

Bonnie: It's still in existence?

Alice: Oh, yes.

John: It's practically brand new.

Alice: It was after we left that they built it. We have a picture of it somewhere that -- DuMez took a picture of it and brought it back to us, because DuMez were originally from that area.

Bonnie: From Milwaukee?

Alice: Yes. They lived in Wauwatosa, which is a suburb.

Bonnie: So DuMez formed a part of this early group too.

Alice: Well, not real early. They moved here after Ross Guernsey. Guernseys came first. They had since lived in the area where the Guernseys lived, but they came after Guernseys did so . . .

Bonnie: The size . . . John has already told us about the size of the UUCA . . . and the minister.

Expand a little bit about Bill Hammond and Nancy, and some of your involvements with them.

Alice: I was very fond of Nancy. I liked Bill, but he was cold, I felt. I felt -- I enjoyed his sermons in that you always felt when you left that this man had done his homework. He went deeply into his subject and I would say the message . . . you know, they say every minister has one sermon that they give, and his sermon was Gaea, Mother Earth, always get back to the earth. And that was, I think, the message that he was bringing forth.

Bonnie: When we were talking about Bill and Nancy, did you work in the RE department at all?

Alice: No, never did. I have in the past, but not in this church.

Bonnie: Tell me, though, about the thing that you do do, because you're busy in that church all the time.

Alice: Well, when we first came -- I feel I have been on every committee that existed. I started out as housekeeper, and all that meant was seeing that there was enough supplies for coffee hour, and Larry Holt, whenever I needed the cups, Larry was the one who . . . for some reason he had a connection, and he would always bring in the Styrofoam cups, so my job was just to see that there was enough of everything.

Bonnie: You're a detail person, so I imagine that was a good job.

Alice: There's a story I think you might enjoy. You were talking about the early days before they completed the building project. This was back when Sandburg Hall was a half, and there were two classrooms beneath and there was the deck. The house, that was the old house that was there, was still connected.

Bonnie: Did we decide that was Norburn House?

Alice: I think it was Norburn. I think the other was Beacon, but I'm not sure. So Joe Birdsall decided to get these new people involved, and I remember the one is Sue Walton, her daughter is Dizzy, and Dizzy was at that point about this high, you know 20 some years ago, and so our job -- we were all going to meet and clean that old kitchen. This was part of the

house kitchen. We didn't have a kitchen attached there. So we cleaned and we got rid of stuff and threw out stuff. We were so thorough that we threw out Bill Hammond's lunch. We did a very good job. Let's see, what else have I done . . .

Bonnie: Were you on the board?

Alice: Yes, I was on the board. I was on long range planning, I was on the building. The biggest job I had, I think, was on the executive building committee.

Bonnie: When they were going to finish Sandburg hall?

Alice: Right. Right from the very beginning there. I was on with George Love, Lois Thompson and Gus Schmidt. Also, I think, that Larry . . . well, Larry was on too.

Bonnie: Was he president by then?

Alice: I think he was. And this must have been in '88 or '89. George can tell you exactly.

John: '78 and '79.

Alice: Yes. George can tell you because he has a copy of my minutes, or a portion of it at any rate. The first complete batch I gave to Maureen hoping that it would get to Mr. Oliphant for the history. I'm hoping that that's where they ended up, but I did have copies made because somehow I couldn't bear to just suddenly not have them anymore. But I ended up giving those to George. So somewhere around -- maybe in George's moving he may have just tossed them too.

Bonnie: Somehow I don't think so, because I was on this last building committee. We were talking about the new addition for RE, which might be possible. I'm not on it currently, so I don't know, but I know George brought up a number of the things that you mentioned to me the other night, so it sounds to me as though he has those minutes.

Alice: Well, he knows in detail how you approach the building projects.

Bonnie: What size, for every certain number of children?

Alice: That's right.

Bonnie: So you've been on the board.

Alice: You could check with George, but I think we were involved on that for almost 5 years.

Alice: They tore down Norburn and completed that. I think at the same time they tore down the house, which I'm calling Beacon, though I'm not sure. That's where the playground is now. And then started the building completion project, is what we called it.

Bonnie: It was in the original design to do this, wasn't it? Wasn't it put off until we had more money?

Alice: I'm not sure. You'll have to check with Bill Moore. Now one of the things that I think is interesting is at that time the congregation, I would say, was older. We didn't have these nice young families that we have now, and the emphasis was not on having church dinners and church suppers and feeding people. We old gals decided we didn't want to cook down there.

Bonnie: And that's why the kitchen turned out the way it did.

Alice: Yes. They had warming ovens -- Birdsalls gave the warming ovens. They figured we could potluck it then, but we didn't want a setup where people went down there and cooked. I'm not sure they would feel the same way today, because there are lots of times when they would like to have suppers prepared right down there, but that was the thinking at the time.

Bonnie: I'm glad you brought that up because I remember that too. When I was on the building committee that came up. So that has to be resolved, where the church is now on that. Did you ever give a This I Believe?

Alice: No. And I probably never would.

Bonnie: So the changes . . . it's grown so much and we've talked about the numbers of people . . . John mentioned how much it's grown in 23 years. To what do you attribute that growth?

Alice: I think it's appealing to more people now. I don't know whether this is an enlightened age, but there is this emphasis on church, both sides of the spectrum. You find that the evangelical churches are larger now too, but there is a need for churching, I think. Actually, I think when Maureen and Laurel came in, Laurel's appeal to the younger families, and Maureen too, both of them have been instrumental in the church growth, and I hope that with our new religious education . . . have you met her?

Bonnie: I haven't met her, have you?

Alice: No. And I hope she has the same appeal and we have the same confidence in her that we had in Laurel. She reached out so well.

Bonnie: The energy and excitement that the growth in the RE during Laurel's time.

Alice: She had such a good understanding of the needs of the young people and the children. I just think very highly of her.

Bonnie: Do we need more staff help, do we need an associate minister or are the interns working out, or . . .

Alice: I was very disappointed when we went through a year of no intern, because I felt that . . . well, even for us we got to know these young ministers before they went out into the world, and each one had something special, so I missed it last year and I'm glad to see that it's back.

Bonnie: I met Beth Marshall the other day.

Alice: Oh, did you. And how is she?

Bonnie: Nice. She is very strong, Any changes?

Alice: That I'd like? There isn't anything high on my list of changes, I may think of something before we stop.

Bonnie: Well, we're almost through because we're talking about any additional and other things, and John may have thought of something too.

John: You were talking about changes. One thing that's happened is, of course, we've grown older, and the church is growing younger. We're not as involved as we used to be. Sunday services is largely what we do. Alice spent a lot of time on working on . . .

Alice: In the office.

John: In the office. But I think the church has grown more or less beyond us and people like us, George Love and everybody here, cannot be as big a fundamental part of the church as we were fifteen years ago.

Alice: There is one thing that I've always promoted -- don't know how it would work, but I know that they do it in other churches. As new people come in, it's almost a buddy system. They are assigned -- you as an older member are assigned to a younger person, and there is a closeness there, and you keep track of each other for awhile until they get established in the church. As John said, we look forward to seeing our old friends when we go to church, and lately I have noticed when I have made an effort to see someone there that looks like they're a visitor, and I have made an effort to go over and talk . . .

(tape ended and perhaps something lost)

Alice: I would have to talk with friends, but I know that this happened, say, with the Presbyterian Church on Merriman Avenue, a new couple come in, they are given to someone to kind of buddy up with, and they keep track of each other, the older member to get them acquainted into various things. That always seemed like a good idea to me.

Bonnie: And the valued older members, John was saying there just isn't the interest and energy to put in like you did fifteen years ago, ten years ago, but that kind of thing would be very agreeable to just help another couple to get involved.

Alice: And as I started to say, whenever I have made the effort to cut off my chatting with the old members and welcome a visitor or new person in, I've come away feeling better. It has served me as well as them.

Bonnie: You never know, they might be the couple that will stay and be president of RE, really get involved.

Alice: But they can't stand there . . . and I have seen people stand looking pretty lost because we old folk are so happy to see the rest of the old folk. More effort has to be put in welcoming people.

Bonnie: Are we winding up a little, or do we have other things to add?

Alice: There was something about Gus, but I guess we covered Gus pretty well.

John: Well, Gus -- we talked about the berries.

Alice: Oh, yes, we picked berries. He had lots of people -- at the beginning he didn't want a bunch of people tromping around in his garden, but then as he got older and could not pick for everybody he allowed them to come in and pick themselves. We had just had a nephew here helping us paint. He had his Ph.D. and was a professor at the University of South Carolina, but he was helping us out painting, and as he came down off the roof, he said, you know there's no such thing as a atheist in a foxhole or up on a roof, so I was going to pick with Gus that day, so I told Gus about this, and he said, one time I was working down on the shore, and this was very early days because they were attempting to set up . . .

John: Well he was with G.E. This was before World War II.

Alice: Oh, long before. And they were trying to get telegraph across.

John: Radio.

Alice: Radio, rather. OK. So they had these big towers at the coast, and, of course on the side of the ocean they were trying to get these messages across, and he said one day he was looking up at these big tall metal things and he decided you could really take some pictures from up there, so he took his camera and up he went and he snapped his pictures, and then he came down and he said just about that time they started transmitting and the electricity . . . he would have been fried. So Gus was saying there are no atheists on a tower either.

But I'm so glad he got down. He worked on the Manhattan project at Oak Ridge. Did you know that?

Bonnie: No, I didn't.

Alice: I thought that was pretty interesting.

Bonnie: Well, thank you very much for your time today. It's been way too fast, and if there are things to add, send it to me like Randall Thompson did. After we got through he thought of two or three other things he really wanted included, and he just typed it out and sent it to me.