

Interview with Agnes Sanborn
Interviewer, Jane Stearns
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(Seems to start in the middle of a thought. Is there another tape that precedes this one?)

Agnes: So after we were married and then we had two children, and we were still going to the Lutheran Church, and my mother was living with us. My father had died so my mother was a widow.

Jane: How did you happen to . . .

Agnes: Find this Unitarian Church?

Jane: Yes.

Agnes: Well, that's coming up. As I say, we were living in University Heights, which was a suburb of Cleveland, and my husband was working in Cleveland in the steel company, American Steel Company, so my husband was not too well satisfied with the Lutheran Church. He was very, very restless about that. He used to take our son to Sunday School, he must have been about five or six years old. During that time my husband went to bible class for adults while their children were in Sunday School. My husband kept asking a lot of questions that they didn't like to answer. I had an older brother who was going to that church so he accused my husband of heckling. My husband had gone to college in Cleveland and one time at a class, or someplace he had gone to a class where they had . . . you know they always had chapel or something where they all had to get together one day of the week, or first thing in the morning, and they had a speaker, so one day they had this wonderful speaker who happened to be a Unitarian minister, and he said he was such a wonderful speaker, and he said I talked with him afterwards and I was so impressed with him. Then Charlie was reading the weekly newspaper, you know, and at the bottom they had this whole section on different churches. Oh well, he said, I found out that this man is going to speak at the Unitarian Church here in Cleveland so why don't we try that tomorrow, and so we all went there, including my mother. She went with us. My mother was really open-minded, she really was. And we all were so impressed with that minister, and from then on we used to go frequently to the Unitarian Church until eventually then we did join it. My mother didn't object at all even though she was brought up Lutheran. So that's how we became Unitarians. You know who was going to that church, was very active?

Bob Macpherson. Bob and Ann were members of that church in Cleveland that we joined. That's when we first met them.

Jane: Oh, yes.

Agnes: And the first time we came here to Asheville to this church and just visited one time when we came, I poked Charlie, and I said, I wonder who that guy is down there. And he looked, oh for heaven's sake, why that's Bob Macpherson.

Jane: That's a small world.

Agnes: That was how we got to Asheville UU. The long way around.

Jane: You joined the church not too long after you moved here.

Agnes: That's right, oh yes. One thing that was important to us when we were making this move, where to settle when we came to Western North Carolina, we wanted to be sure we weren't too far away from a Unitarian Church. That was very important to us already. And there was a fellowship in Hendersonville, and we lived quite near that because we were in Etowah. It met at Opportunity House, it used to meet at the Opportunity House all the time. Are you familiar with Opportunity House?

Jane: Yes, I am.

Agnes: You've lived there?

Jane: No, I live right here in Asheville, but I know all about Hendersonville and Etowah and so on.

Agnes: That's great. Anyway it was Opportunity House. We used to go to that once in awhile, but we often thought, gee, I wish they had a church, rather than to meet at Opportunity House. So then we always drove up from Etowah to the Asheville church. We'd rather do that than go to the Opportunity House.

Jane: Who was the minister then?

Agnes: Hammond. Bill Hammond.

Jane: Were you and your husband active in the church?

Agnes: Well, I think it was Bill Hammond who asked me, I don't know if it was Hammond or if it was Brewer, but anyway the statement was thrown out, what we really need when the minister can't be here, we really need some kind of a worship committee to arrange speakers for Sunday. So Charlie said, well, I'll do that. He volunteered. Well, of course, my husband was a gregarious outgoing person. And the minister, of course, said, ok, that's your job. So that was his job for quite a few years.

Jane: Did you work with him on that?

Agnes: Well, sure some. I had been trained as a school teacher although I wasn't active in the church. I always let my husband take the lead in being active, but I always supported him in what he was doing, so I was sort of a . . .

Jane: Now this present church was already built?

Agnes: Yes, it was. So I had nothing to do with that background. I don't go back that far.

Jane: You were there when Bill Hammond was there?

Agnes: I don't know when he left, I can't remember that, when Brewer came, Jim and Barbara Brewer. Of course we knew them very well. They were very good friends of ours. Well, also Bill Hammond's wife was a very good friend of ours and still is, so we felt very badly that they separated. I know a lot of people held that against Bill Hammond, but that's their problem, not ours. And of course we are still there now. My husband died in '94.

Jane: That recently. And you were here at that time.

Agnes: Yes, we were living here. At that time we had moved into our condo that we had chosen, so as soon as it was finished here, then we sold our house in Etowah, which was no problem at all, because the people who were our neighbors in Etowah – one of the reasons we chose that location – they were all people from the north who had moved down. They were people from Detroit, the automotive industry in Detroit, and people from Chicago and various northern places. So when we said we were going to move to Highland farms and we were going to sell our house, they said, please do not put it on the market. Don't give it to any real estate people until we have our friends come and look at it, because they all had seen our house and knew our house. Golf Mountain Estate was where we lived and it was a great place for entertaining, for parties. If course they all were people who played golf and belonged to the club and all that sort of thing.

Jane: Did you play bridge here?

Agnes: No.

Jane: You were not one of the people who played bridge over at Ed Smith's house.

Agnes: No, because I was always involved in teaching and I never had time for bridge.

Jane: You were involved in teaching here in Asheville?

Agnes: Not here, But I had never taken it up seriously and my husband didn't care for it, so we just never played bridge.

Jane: Are there things about the church over the years – there have been a lot of changes in this church. Have there been . . .

Agnes: Well, you see – when did you join the church?

Jane: '88.

Agnes: Well, you see when we joined the church there were an awful lot of older people like Highland Farms who belonged to the church. They didn't have the young people that they have now. That was much different at that time.

Jane: Do you think the services have changed?

Agnes: I think things have changed more to appeal to younger people and families. But as Unitarians we understand that that's necessary. We understand that, and I don't hold that against anybody that it has changed that way. It shouldn't remain stagnant.

Jane: Even our minister, Maureen, is a generation younger than you and I are, so she brought a lot of changes.

Agnes: Yes, she did. Some of them are a little bit related to her Catholicism background.

Jane: You think that. A lot of people think that.

Agnes: Well, like the communion business that's coming up next week. I guess maybe I'm coming from churches . . . you know I haven't been going to church much since my husband died. I just haven't been going. But it seems as though we are making some arrangement here with Maxine. One of Maxine's sons is coming to visit her tomorrow and he'll be here over the weekend, and he likes to go the Unitarian Church, so the last time he was here Maxine called me and asked me to go with them. I said sure, and they said, we'll pick you up. So now she's going again next Sunday because of her son, he likes to go, and so she wondered if I wanted to go along. I said, maybe I will, I'll let you know. So I probably will go with them again Sunday. She said, it's not my favorite service, and I said, well, neither is it mine – that cider and cornbread communion.

Jane: What do you think of the music at the church? Is that important to you?

Agnes: Oh, yes, it is very important. You see I have a nephew who is a world-renowned organist, and one time when he came here to visit me, we said . . . and we just loved Plumb when he was there. Do you remember Plumb, the organist?

Jane: No.

Agnes: Oh, he was wonderful. I understand he's back in Asheville somewhere. I don't know where he is, he's not at our church. The sounds he used to get out of that organ. We just say that we wish we could hear that organ more. But of course . . . I don't know whether Maureen doesn't care for the organ or what, I really don't know. But anyway, that's all beside the point. As Unitarians we feel we have to give something, you know, or give up something. But when my nephew came to visit one time, I said, well, would you play for us at our organ at church? Well, he agreed to, said he would. Now he studied as a Fulbright Scholar in Belgium, and he's also a composer, and of course his background is Lutheran because my relatives are mostly Lutheran, so he plays a lot of Bach. Maybe that's the part that some Unitarians don't like, but we couldn't get him in to play for a Sunday morning service, so it was arranged through Maureen that he could come that Sunday afternoon and play and those people who wanted to hear him could come to hear him. All my friends came, all my friends from Highland Farms who knew me came again because he was my nephew, and a lot of other people also who love organ music. I don't think Maureen ever realized that he studied as a Fulbright Scholar. I gave her all the information but I don't think she ever read it.

Jane: Oh, I wouldn't say that.

Agnes: Maybe she did, but anyway didn't realize that he not only one doctor's degree, but they kept giving him honorary doctor's degrees wherever he played, you know, so he had a lot of doctor's degrees.

Jane: Have you kept up with the religious education program at all?

Agnes: Not a lot. I was very interested of course, when my children were going.

Jane: Oh, your children were going?

Agnes: Well, of course, in Cleveland where we became Unitarians. Not here.

Jane: Are they presently Unitarian.

Agnes: No, you don't know the history of my family.

Jane: That's all right.

Agnes: I have mentioned before that I have a son and a daughter, but they both have died accidental deaths. My daughter was in art school . . . that's why we have all of these paintings that were horses. They are all my daughter's paintings. She was in art school in Cleveland, Ohio, and she and her husband were killed in an automobile accident. See they were 25 and 28 when they died.

Jane: I'm sorry. We'll just turn this off for a moment.

Agnes: We thought we should just join the community church so that our children are going to church with their friends. That makes that bond closer, and fortunately this community church was fairly liberal. They did not recite the creed, which was good, which I can't do. This was the first thing that got me out of the Lutheran Church when I was exposed to the Unitarian Church. I had to start really thinking a lot of things, after college. I would go to the Lutheran Church with my family, and I thought, oh, I can't recite the creed. It would be dishonest.

Jane: Are there any things about the church that you would like to see changed?

Agnes: Well, I don't want to feel presumptuous about that because, as I say, I am now almost 90 years old. I don't want the church to do anything different on my account because of my age. It's now really a church for younger families. That's what it should be. That way maybe it can be spread and passed on you see, so that's what I want, I want it to do the right thing for the younger people.

Jane: Not everybody has that point of view.

Agnes: I know that.

Jane: They want things to stay the way they like them.

Agnes: You can't do that. So I guess that's about all I have to say.

Jane: You probably noticed a difference in the styles among Bill Hammond, Jim Brewer and Maureen.

Agnes: Oh, yes. Of course, Bill Hammond was basically a scientist and he and my husband, they just locked together beautifully because my husband was a scientist also. In fact they were both very much interested in astronomy, Bill Hammond and Charlie. At that time it was – who was the guy who is now in Hendersonville? It was a couple who lived down in Hendersonville and go to the Hendersonville Church. He was also interested in astronomy. I'll think of his name, Vi Blount, the Blounts.

Jane: How was Bill different from Jim?

Agnes: Jim was not as much a scientist. He was more, I guess, a philosopher than Bill Hammond was. I know that Bill Hammond was – he spoke above people's heads a lot of time, I think. I really think so. Those people who didn't have that background in science maybe weren't as appreciative of Bill Hammond as they might have been.

When we lived in Mountain Lake, New Jersey, and decided to go to the Community Church every now and then I said to my husband, I said, you know what, I just have to go to a good Unitarian Church one of these Sundays, and we didn't live too far away from Montclair, New Jersey – I don't know if you know anything about New Jersey, but they had a wonderful Unitarian Church in Montclair, so we often went there, and I have a lot of sermon copies here, and I'm going to have to throw all that stuff away. There's no point in saving them any longer, sermon copies of ministers who spoke up there at that Unitarian Church in Montclair. In fact it was during the Civil Rights era that we went to church there, and it was the first time I ever sang the song, We Shall Overcome. We sang it in our Unitarian Church in Montclair, New Jersey, and, oh, I was just so moved and so thrilled by that. It was just terrific. That was such a wonderful church. There was a college there in Montclair. We had a lot of members who were probably professors at the college. So my background as a Unitarian is kind of spotty, but once I was exposed to it I was always drawn back to Unitarians. So now my relatives who are still Lutheran have finally decided to accept that in me.

Jane: Has it been a problem?

Agnes: Well, no.

(Tape seemingly ends here. Nothing more recorded on the tape.)