

Interview with Virginia Lauder Sayles

July 5, 2001

Interviewer: Bonnie Habel

Bonnie: This is Bonnie Habel, and I'm with Ginny Sayles at her lovely home in Highland Farms. We're looking out on the green grass and the lake and the birds, and I imagine it's just a joy to live out here, isn't it?

Ginny, when did you move to Asheville, was it in the 70's? You had joined the church in . . .

Ginny: That was about, soon it will be 15 years.

Bonnie: And you've been here at Highland Farms 15 years?

Ginny: Yes.

Bonnie: And how long did you live in Asheville before that?

Ginny: We lived in Etowah. And we were there almost 10 years, I think.

Bonnie: The area was pretty new to you -- you lived in Etowah maybe 10 years and here 15, so 25. You're getting to be pretty close to . . .

Ginny: Natives.

Bonnie: Yes, I agree. Were you Unitarians before?

Ginny: Not really. There was a small fellowship outside of Corning, and we had been to it a few times, but it was so small that I didn't really get much of a sampling of Unitarianism.

Bonnie: It was a fellowship, in Corning, New York?

Ginny: That's right, Corning, New York.

Bonnie: Had Hank worked for Corning . . .

Ginny: Corning Glass.

Bonnie: OK. The Corian that we have on our kitchen counters was a Corning product, I believe.

Ginny: Yes.

Bonnie: So after you decided to retire you picked this area.

Ginny: Well, at first we went to Jekyll Island, Georgia, which has history we just adored. But there were too many bugs and too much heat for the long run, so we had come up here to look over Asheville because we knew there was a church here. We happened to hit it at the time of a Noonlighters lunch out at the Balls, so that was a great thing to just meet a few people, not necessarily in the church, but from the church. So we went back convinced that we would rather live up here.

Bonnie: OK. It's interesting to hear stories of why people chose to come here. Tell me a little bit about your education and your background.

Ginny: It's not as exciting as a movie. I was born in Binghamton, New York, went to public school there. Then I went to Wellesley for two years, but I was not enamored, so then I transferred to Cornell, where my father, who was a Cornellian, had wanted me to go in the first place. What I wanted to do, my way of living, I didn't like a solid girls' school, without much else provided.

Bonnie: What was it that you wanted to do?

Ginny: I wanted to teach science. So I decided that although Wellesley's science was good, so was Cornell's, and it worked out very nicely.

Bonnie: Did you meet Hank there?

Ginny: At the very end, almost the end of the senior semester. He was from Elmira, and that was appealing to me, instead of somebody -- in those days, at least I wasn't as willing to move many miles away from home.

Bonnie: Well, we get tricked a little sometimes because I married somebody from Denver and he moved me to Washington, DC.

Ginny: Yes. But now our young people move all over, so it's a whole

different ball game.

Bonnie: So when you got established here at Highland Farms you joined in our Asheville Church, is that right, or had you joined before.

Ginny: We joined while we were over in Etowah.

Bonnie: So that was kind of a drive to get into church.

Ginny: At that point living looked equally nice in Hendersonville or Etowah, and we discovered that as the crow flies there was no difference in that distance, so that wasn't going to hold us back.

Bonnie: Tell me some of the things you were interested in doing in the UU Church in Asheville?

Ginny: Well, of course when we came it was small, and it was a lovely, friendly church, don't you remember?

Bonnie: Oh, I do remember. There were about 250 people maybe at that time.

Ginny: They were such beautiful people, and there were more older people then. Of course, we aren't attracting too many older people now, are we?

Bonnie: I don't think so, except those of us who are getting older.

Ginny: When we came here there were a lot of retirees joined, but that sort of drifted away to the young ones, I guess.

Bonnie: The RE department got very strong.

Ginny: Oh, yes.

Bonnie: And that always attracts the younger ones.

Ginny: That's the way it should be.

Bonnie: What people, what personalities do you remember. You mentioned that you enjoyed the people. Do any leaders, or any of the people stand out

in your mind?

Ginny: You mean by name? Well, one would be Ned Longley. I thought he was terrific. Of course, Norm Sibley, the minister. He was different, friendly; and of course those people that I met at the Noonlighters, the Balls, for instance. The first thing we were doing over there was working to have a drive to build the hall larger, and the Sunday school.

Bonnie: Sandburg Hall?

Ginny: Yes. So that's when we got friendly with people like Larry Holt and Lisa, who else? You remember all that doings, don't you?

Bonnie: Yes. I didn't want to lead you into what you want to tell about the group, so I was just listening. Patsy and John Keever, Pat Godbold. . .

Ginny: Pat Godbold.

Bonnie: That was the group that were quite active. I think Patsy was president of the church.

Ginny: She was sometime along that period.

Bonnie: And that group was strong in getting the new part of the building, and the new RE. And when we had space, then we had people with children.

Ginny: And they came with the ministers. I think that Norm Sibley was a marvelous minister for older people perhaps, but maybe a little bit higher plane than young people would like.

Bonnie: His daughter was a member of the church too at that time.

Ginny: Whose daughter?

Bonnie: I was thinking of the minister. That would have been in the 70's, but maybe not the same minister you're thinking of.

Ginny: Jim Brewer, He came after.

Bonnie: But those are the people that you're remembering.

Ginny: I thought that Mr. Longley was so interesting and he was really very courageous starting off in . . . in a nothing almost . . . when they came.

Bonnie: You probably know more about his story than I do, so it would be fun to know more about that if you would like to share it.

Ginny: Well, one time, I guess it must have been during the drive, we had to stay over for lunch on a Sunday, and I guess she was not able to come to church, and we could see that he was going to be along, so we decided to all have lunch together. And he told us, I will never forget it, how he had a degree from Harvard and MIT the same year.

Bonnie: How did he do that?

Ginny: Well, he was going to MIT as a regular student, but he needed a course at Harvard, and so he got a diploma from them too, and I thought that was such a strange thing to be a graduate of those two schools.

Bonnie: They let him transfer everything he had from MIT, I guess.

Ginny: No, he didn't leave MIT, he just kind of grabbed into some of that, sort of a mixture, I guess.

Bonnie: Sounds like he had a thirst for knowledge.

Ginny: Oh, yes, very much.

Bonnie: A lot of our members have had that, I think. A lot of our members seem to have had wonderful backgrounds like that.

Ginny: I think especially if you've been out where it's so churchy in a way - - if you're not good you won't go to heaven. I mean, that's really the message every Sunday. A lot of people get a little weary of that.

Bonnie: You and Hank still come into church so regularly.

Ginny: No, we don't now.

Bonnie: I guess I don't go every Sunday myself, so maybe I miss . . .

Ginny: Well, we haven't -- after I hurt my back three or four years ago I wasn't very good at walking, and, of course, the church hours really don't mesh well with us. I can't be up and at it to be down there at 9:30 -- or is it 9:00?

Bonnie: 9:30. Now it's 10:00 in the summertime.

Ginny: And the 11:00 service precludes our having dinner here.

Bonnie: So you like Noonlighters.

Ginny: And the church being small, it was fun to be greeters because we got to know people and we were interested in them. It was just a nice job. That was what I liked doing.

Bonnie: That's good to know, because I think that's true that there are a number of people who would be very willing to be greeters if we just reached out and asked them.

Ginny: That's right. It's a fun job.

Bonnie: Do you think putting it in the bulletin and saying, if this is something that you would like to do, please give the office a call because then the group that works with the greeters' schedule could arrange that. I think a number of people would respond to that.

Ginny: I think they would.

Bonnie: And a regular a schedule like once a month, or the first Sunday every other month. We'll probably get it right one of these days.

We talked a little bit about ministers and change.

Ginny: I think we've seen changes since we've attracted young people, and that's the way it should be, but I think we should also try for the other. I mean, before we weren't balanced because we didn't have young people. Now we need some new retirees, because we had a lot of those coming for awhile.

Bonnie: So attracting to membership -- we should try to provide for something the retirees are looking for?

Ginny: I would think so, because you can't run a church without money, and sometimes they can provide that. Or you expect them to be able to.

Bonnie: And the changes that have been proposed, hopefully . . . what are the ones you are most interested in seeing happen in our church? If our church needed to change other than having the older people, what would some of those changes be?

Ginny: Well, I think we do need a second minister, for the sake of the one we have now, I mean. It's a terrible job.

Bonnie: It's hard to cover all of these people. To be able to do visits or what would be good?

Ginny: Well, she wouldn't have to be on deck so much in the pulpit. She goes to all of these different organizations, doesn't she, and I just think we work her to death.

Bonnie: So a second minister could come in and do some of those tasks, divide that with her somewhat?

Ginny: I think when we had an intern that was somewhat the same. I think that did help her, and the fact that she was there to do things. When things conflicted they could each take one.

Bonnie: Other than that small church in Corning, do you have any comparison with other UU churches to compare our church now as it is?

Ginny: Our oldest daughter goes to the Arlington Unitarian Church.

Bonnie: So big.

Ginny: But it's out of this world. I mean, it's in the right place at the right time. They attract such interesting people. They have a wonderful organist, who just happens to be in the city. He's really an engineer, but he loves music, and so that makes for a strong choir, and I think we should use the organ. It is terrible not to use the organ.

Bonnie: I think they need to find an organist that is willing to play our organ. That shouldn't be impossible. We should be able to find an organist.

Ginny: Someone who is good enough. They don't have to play the hardest of classical music.

Bonnie: It is evidently a difficult organ for the young people who are trained to play the organ. They're not trained in the old style organ so it's a little more difficult, but that may be the next task that the music committee needs to do.

Ginny: I just thought that . . . maybe it's from the old days that we're talking again . . . but I used to love to hear that organ when you first came in.

Bonnie: I did too. I think maybe we think similarly about some of those things that have happened in the past. I'll tell you what, I will talk to Hank a little bit now, and you think of some other things, and if some other things come up, then the two of you together can maybe add some last comments. Would that be OK?

Ginny: I'd love to tell you the thing that sealed my interest in becoming a Unitarian was in being in Washington, and this was before Joey was in Arlington, and going to that All Souls Church there, and it was at the time of the horrible civil rights . . .

Bonnie: In the 60's?

Ginny: Yes. But I loved the ministers sermon, his title, so much. I'll tell you what it is in the next segment.

Bonnie: Good, we'll look forward to it in just a minute.