

## **Randall Thompson Interview**

3/2/01

Bonnie Habel, Interviewer

Bonnie: I'm Bonnie Habel and I'm here with Randall Thompson, who is going to discuss with us his experiences with the Unitarian Universalist Church of Asheville.

Randall, when did you move to Asheville?

Randall: In 1972.

Bonnie: What brought you here?

Randall: Well, Lois and I were living in India and we decided that it was time to retire. We returned to the U.S. and we picked out Asheville as the suitable location. Mostly because of the Unitarian Church here and the mountains and the climate. We came to Asheville early in May and had an apartment on Edwin Place until we could buy a house and our shipment of furniture would arrive from India.

Bonnie: The Unitarian Church wasn't there on Edwin Place though, of course.

Randall: Actually both of us had been in Asheville a couple of times and I had actually attended a Layman's League meeting at the Church on Vermont Avenue. So it was a surprise to find in the newspaper they announced the location of church was on Edwin Place, just within the block from where we lived at the moment.

Bonnie: How fun.

Randall: So we went to church on Sunday. People were sitting on chairs in Sandburg Hall because there had been no upholstery on the pews. The pews hadn't even been ordered because the committee couldn't decide upon the color.

Bonnie: I remember that time.

Randall: And money for the carpet, \$5,000, had been given by Una Schmidt.

Well, during the service the treasurer, I found out later Charlie Nixon, had reported on the sale of bonds for the construction. After the service I walked over and asked about the bonds and bought a few and Charlie was aghast to think that somebody walked in off the street and bought some bonds. He was my booster.

Bonnie: Oh, yes.

Randall: Then by the end of the year the church was finished inside and out and we had a party in the evening just before Christmas, at which one of our chief builders, the president of Champion Paper Company -- I forget his name . . .

Bonnie: Robertson?

Randall: Robertson.

Bonnie: Reuben Robertson.

Randall: Reuben Robertson. And his son was a member of the church at the time. Well, Logan came in, with sort of a stretcher arrangement, and sat down next to the Candlelight Service with Bill. That was a nice service. And that was the only time I ever saw him. Well, why was the church in that location? Because of Mr. Robertson. Mrs. Nolan, a daughter of Mr. Robertson had bought all of the houses on that block, except two, for use by the Asheville Community Theatre, as a new home.

Bonnie: Mrs. Nolan was Dr. Robertson's daughter?

Randall: Yes. And then the ACT Board decided that it preferred to stay downtown, and she then offered to give all of these houses, except the two, to the church, the Unitarian Church. It was a tremendous contribution.

Bonnie: Yes. Now the ACT Board declined it, so she gave it to us.

Randall: Yes.

Bonnie: That is a good part of our history.

Randall: Now in the fall someone asked me if I would be willing to fill a

spot on the Board of Trustees at the church. I said I didn't know anything about the church. That didn't make any difference. There was no great responsibility. After Christmas, in the new year, the telephone rang one day and it was Mrs. Nolan, and she said, when are you going to come over and fill out the necessary forms so I can give that house, now Jefferson House, to the church. I realized it was mentioned at the Board meeting, and I said, well, we'll take action today. Well, she said, I can't today because I'm going in the hospital. She died so we never did get the house. We had to buy it.

Bonnie: Oh, my.

Randall: She wanted to give it to us.

Bonnie: Yes, she wanted to give it to us. Wanted to sign for what is now Jefferson House. The heirs didn't know of her intent to give that to us?

Randall: No, they didn't. By that time Logan was sort of . . . he was unhappy with the church. Anyway as time passed in the spring, someone asked me if I would be the vice president candidate, and I was elected to that position. But during the summer the president, who happened to be working at Enka, was sent back to Holland, so here I was president of the church during that period of time. Ill-prepared.

Bonnie: That wasn't Roger Guthrie, was it?

Randall: Yes, Roger Guthrie.

Bonnie: Oh, it was Roger Guthrie. I didn't realize that he lived in Holland for awhile.

Randall: No, it was another person. But Roger Guthrie . . .

Bonnie: Because he was at Enka about the same time my husband was.

Randall: By that time we had bought a house in Woodland Hills and made friends who were living in Woodland Hills, the Snokes and the Longleys and the Schmidts. Everlasting friendships, and very important people in the church.

Bonnie: I did know the Longleys and the Schmidts.

Randall: It is interesting to note that they came here from Detroit and New York State and New Jersey.

Bonnie: And you all came together and became good friends.

Randall: In Woodland Hills and the church.

Bonnie: Could I ask you what -- I know you hold a doctorate, and it's in what field?

Randall: I have a doctorate from Johns Hopkins in microbiology. I have an MD degree from the University of Chicago.

Bonnie: Your Johns Hopkins degree came first?

Randall: Yes, it came first because that was the one where I had money to go to school. When I taught in medical school, I thought I should know something about medicine, not such microbiology, so I finished up medicine at the University of Chicago.

Bonnie: Were you married at the time?

Randall: We were married in 1934 and lived in Boston for a time, where I became a Unitarian. My wife was a Methodist deaconess at the time of our marriage. She became a good Unitarian, a vigorous one.

Bonnie: What were you, were you a Methodist also.

Randall: I was nothing. I opposed religion. I did go to church. I was forced to, the Methodist Church.

Bonnie: When you were younger?

Randall: Lois and I attended the same high school in Kansas.

Bonnie: Oh, so you knew her from high school. OK.

Randall: We met in Cleveland and were married there. I thought she was the best looking girl in the class.

Bonnie: She was, I'm sure. You were married then . . .

Randall: In Cleveland.

Bonnie: But you had been a member of a Unitarian Church before you came here.

Randall: I became a Unitarian in Boston after Lois and I were married. Second church in Brookline. Wonderful church, small, a hundred members.

Bonnie: So you were a little bit prepared for Unitarianism when you came here.

Randall: This is perhaps beside the point, but after we were married we went to Boston and rented an apartment, and it wasn't long before the minister, Mr. Haws, came over. He says, well, it'll be hot here in the summer time. Why don't you come and live in our new house. You'd pay the same rent as here. So we lived there the whole summer -- had a marvelous time -- and \$60 a month. He had 2,000 books in the library in the basement. I hadn't experienced such things before. Well, that's all beside the point. So then back to our church here in Asheville. I was president then because the position had been vacated. The only problem was, then, to get a new minister. Maybe before that I ought to also say that the situation was this. When I came in the late 1960's, it was decided that the church should build a new building and we began to look around for places and Gus Schmidt looked for one out towards the University, but in the meantime this gift came from the Robertson's, so that's where we are. Tracy Pullman had been the minister of the Unitarian Church in Detroit and retired and so it was nice for him to come down and spend his retirement years. During that time his wife became ill so he was limited somewhat. He had an office someplace -- oh, that was in the building, and Mrs. Guthrie worked for him as a volunteer secretary, and she and Tracy would talk and she'd type a letter or two during the morning, and then go over to Merriman Avenue to a sandwich place for luncheon. And that was the staff of the church. They had a janitor too, I think. And had a woman for RE.

Bonnie: Lillian?

Randall: Must have been.

Bonnie: Must have been Lillian. She took care of the little babies.

Randall: Then the problem came up of getting a new minister, so we appointed the selection committee, search committee, and Gus Schmidt insisted that Lois had to be chairman of that. She had been president of the women's group in the National UUA, so she knew a lot of people in other churches.

There were five members of the search committee, and decided that they couldn't employ a minister for \$12,000 a year, so they asked for more money and we raised the ante to \$14,000. Personally Lois wanted a woman who had graduated from Harvard Law School and Harvard School of Divinity. We had heard her speak and were very impressed with her, but Mrs. Walters, I think it was, a member of the search committee, said, we're not ready for a woman. And that was out. And so our friends went to Wichita, Kansas, where she was a minister of the Unitarian Church. Then Bill Hammond came into the picture and he was willing to come if his wife could get a paid job as a librarian, and that was arranged with Pack Library, where she became a responsible person.

Bonnie: And stayed there until she retired really, at the Library.

Randall: That's right. I remember how I called each of the individual members of the search committee to come up to the microphone and swear that this was the man they wanted. One of them was so she just .

Bonnie: You don't remember who that was?

Randall: No. So then Bill sat down with the members of the board to sign a contract. He wanted his \$14,000. He wanted to have a Sunday off every month, the summer off, two weeks off in February. He wanted a housing allotment, he wanted retirement, and I couldn't imagine that we could ever deliver, but we did, one way or another. So Bill came, and he was interested in sermons and I began to wonder what we were going to do about our church directory and other things so I decided that I'd better get a church directory ready for the fall, and I used a method that I'd used in New Delhi to put the telephone number and the surname at one side and the other

information on the other that is still used today, which is a very helpful way if you're calling somebody.

Bonnie: So yours was the first church directory.

Randall: No, that was not the first. I had one earlier, there was a church directory, but this was a little different format. And Bill hired a secretary, and I'm a little confused now -- Bill had an office, I don't know if he had an office in the corner of the church or not before the renovation. Tracy did have when we came, and on the north side of the wall, the back wall of his office, was the library. There were books along there.

Bonnie: I remember Tracy's office. I don't remember Bill Hammond's office.

Randall: I don't either. Then as the year passed on things began to happen. We began introducing new ideas. I was president for two years. We finally started some courses at night. There was one course on photography given by a chap who is now a member of the church. He lived in Texas for years, I'm trying to think of his name. And I gave a course on religion, about which I knew nothing. But it was something to make the church a unified organization and the -- what was that name -- Jo Birdsall . . .

Bonnie: Oh, yes, I was thinking of her this morning.

Randall: The Birdsalls -- he was with the telephone company. When he retired they became wanderers, and they wandered around in caravans in the wintertime and parked it someplace in the summer, parked in Asheville. Jo said we must have something here in the summertime, and she worked and worked. The one specific thing that came up was the women's group. It had been meeting and it had fizzled out, and she said, well, let's start a different thing. I think Noonlighters would be a good name. And that's what it is.

Bonnie: Noonlighters, yes. They needed some activity in the summertime.

Randall: And other activities came into being and developed into a year-round church.

Bonnie: I missed a lot of that beginning because we were out of town at

that time. And then moved back to Asheville, which I'm glad we did.

Randall: And then on the social side, as I say, we had become good friends with these people . . . Mr. Hoffman, John Hoffman, was from Rhode Island. He lived in Biltmore. He took us to the Biltmore Country Club one time. Mrs. Walters was a woman, a member of the search committee, who said that no woman was available for the ministry of our church.

Bonnie: She and Henry, did you get together with Sarah and Henry Walters?

Randall: Yes.

Bonnie: At their home?

Randall: Not him, but her. Lois got together with her because they were both members of the search committee. Now we did one thing, we began to have people and members of the church, people who visited the church, to come for Sunday dinner.

Bonnie: We were lucky enough to be two of those people that got to come to your house.

Randall: Well, I remember one day that somebody from Hendersonville, a man, asked George Love, who was there. He said, if I become a member of the Unitarian Church will you become a member of the Unitarian Church. George thought awhile, and he finally said yes. So we had two new members and their wives.

Bonnie: And they've been such faithful members, George and Virginia. Do you remember Becky and Bob Pitts?

Randall: Oh, yes.

Bonnie: They told me yesterday that they had been at your house for one of the new member dinners.

Randall: Well, it worked out very well. Then as the church grew and the membership increased, it became evident that we needed to do some building, and, especially George Love, came into the picture, and they had a man come down from Boston, and arrangements were made eventually to

receive funds from Boston, that were paid back, so that we tore down the old house, where we had RE programs . . .

Bonnie: I can't remember either -- was it Norton or something that began with an "n"?

Randall: So we tore that down. I remember taking down the vines, and the walls were shaking like this (demonstrating).

Bonnie: So the vines held it up for awhile.

Randall: That's right. Then we had this wonderful ambition for the church. We had the money, and Bill Moore worked out the plans, and we had to handle the Zoning Commission. We never did have the space that was required for parking. Mr. Abbott, who owned the Abbott Building, across the street let us use that area for parking, which people didn't use. And we went to the Zoning Commission, and I remember the meeting. The chairman was a pompous person, man. He got up and called the meeting to order. He asked if there was somebody representing the church here. And a little woman, young, beautiful, got up. He looked down at her and said, are you an architect? She said, yes, I am. His heart melted. We got everything we wanted.

Bonnie: Isn't that wonderful. Do you remember who that woman was?

Randall: I don't remember her name. I don't think Bill could afford her for very long. Maybe she got married or something. She was a

Bonnie: Bill Moore would remember.

Randall: Oh, yes. A long time member. I don't have any idea why, he just was. He had a very nice wife at that time. They separated because they went their separate ways. They were better off separate. So, that was that. Now the only other thing that I may have missed was when the church was first built there were two buildings facing south between the church wall, east wall, and Bond Street. One contained two apartments and the other one was a single unit. We found renting those was a losing proposition so we had them taken down and the area was landscaped, and then with this new edition we increased the size of the parking lot.

Bonnie: That's good.

Randall: That, to the best of my knowledge, is all that I can recall.

Bonnie: You were president or on the board during much of this time.

Randall: I was on the board for a year or two before I was president, and then I was president 2 years.

Bonnie: I know you've been active in the church a lot since then.

Randall: Yes, but actually it was time for the new generation to come into the picture, and that has happened.

Bonnie: Do you care to comment on any major changes, positively, negatively, in your beliefs that have occurred during your years as a Unitarian Universalist in Asheville?

Randall: Well, I became more of an agnostic in some respects. Lois also was influenced in this regard. She started out as a bona fide Christian, and she became so angry at the time her mother died at the way the undertakers tried to exploit every aspect of life, that she would have nothing to do with such funeral services in the future. And that it in pretty much with my own views. How can people believe in God or something, how can the Hindus believe in something, what difference does it make. So why don't we decide what we believe ourselves, and not what somebody tells us.

Bonnie: Your years in India influenced that too.

Randall: We were there seven years. We traveled all over -- around the world at least three times all told, so we had seen something of Europe, Africa, South America. And viewed the situation from the viewpoints of other people.

Bonnie: Were you acting as a doctor, were you a medical doctor, when you traveled to these places?

Randall: I began teaching at Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland, and then went to Harvard for a year on a National Fellowship, a year in Washington, then back to Cleveland during the war, the start. Makes

me think of one time somebody had to go to New York to get enough cash to pay us enough salary for a month.

Bonnie: And this was during the war?

Randall: We were broke too. And then I taught at the University of Indiana. The Dean and I disagreed on some things, and he stayed and I left. I went to a commercial operation in New York State in Albany. Lois blossomed at that time. She became a president of every organization that she became a member of, so she was all set.

Bonnie: Her leadership was very evident.

Randall: Then I decided that I'd had enough of industry so I asked a friend how about a job in Bethesda, Maryland, and I got the job and after a couple of years I was asked to go to India and extend the operation of . . .

Bonnie: You were saying -- I'm sorry. We were interrupted by the tape.

Randall: Well, I was with the National Institute of Health in the Food for Peace Program in 1961, where we had to buy food stuffs for countries in need in various parts of the world, which was paid for in local currency. In India it was paid for in rupees, which were non-convertible so the U.S. Government owned millions of dollars worth of rupees. I was there and we traveled. I took Lois to various places in South Asia. We also traveled around the world. We'd go east and come back from the west, so we saw a lot of country and became acquainted with people. That was wonderful background for us.

Bonnie: Did you speak to the religious education classes at all about any of this? Were you able to share some of your travels?

Randall: I never did. I would have been willing to, but I guess no one asked.

Bonnie: Well, we certainly should have asked. And I think that's a good thing for us to keep in mind that our church is full of people who have had wonderful experiences, and they need to be asked to share them. I am sorry that you and Lois weren't because that was a fantastic opportunity for our kids. Are there any changes that you thought about? That made me

think of that because we certainly need the fact that we haven't maybe made enough of an effort to ask our members with experience to share it. Any other changes that would be most helpful to our whole church or to the religious education or to new members? We have a lot of new members but we maybe need to do something more as far as involvement of new members.

Randall: Well, I don't know really. The thing of it is about our church, it has pioneered in these parts and it's an influential church, and it has in a way been responsible for the fellowship in Hendersonville, which I didn't mention. One morning the telephone rang and it was a chap whose wife was secretary to the church. He had been in the armed service, he had a Phd from Columbia, he worked for Bell Laboratories, and he came down here as a marriage counselor. And he said he wanted to join with two other couples and start a fellowship in Hendersonville. He could give better sermons than Bill Hammond. Well, he did and they started a fellowship. There was friction, some friction at least, no cooperation for a good many years. Fortunately that has now been solved. The Hendersonville Church is a going church. Now one has been started in Black Mountain. That will blossom, I hope. Then we're in . . .

Bonnie: Brevard.

Randall: Yes, one in Brevard. A real church. Unitarianism is growing and I think our church is not only attending to it's own internal problems but encouraging the development of satellite churches.

Bonnie: So you see that as a good thing for us to be kind of there to help them grow.

Randall: This was done in the case of the All Souls Church of Washington where they had, I guess, a half a dozen satellites, so it's much larger than the original church.

Bonnie: Right. And you attended that church in Washington?

Randall: We attended it off and on. We were members of the UU Church in Bethesda, and I was president of that church. It's name was Cedar Lane, and the minister was Bob Zoorheide. He had been minister of the UU church in Syracuse before going to Bethesda. We became acquainted while

attending Laymen's League meetings in NYC. He told me a story about a man who joined the Syracuse church -- a real fireball. He was in everything and became president of the Layman's League. The man lined up the mayor of Syracuse to speak at a league meeting, but failed to take any action. The mayor appeared at the appointed hour, but found the church locked. He then promptly disappeared from the scene. I could tell you about my experiences at Cedar Lane, like firing the choir director. It was a great world. (Addendum from Randall at a later time.)

Bonnie: That was in Bethesda, in that church in Bethesda?

Randall: Right.

Bonnie: Well I've appreciated the time that you've spent with me this morning, and I hope that this can be shared with many, many Unitarians because it is a helpful thing to see our history.

Randall: It might be a little different than the usual one.

Bonnie: It might be, and that's good. I'm glad for that. Thank you.