

Officers Row Memories Oral History Project

Gayle Rothrock

Project Role: Fundraiser



Interviewed November 5, 2024, at the Marshall House, Vancouver, Washington, by Madeline Hagan, historian with Historical Research Associates

This interview transcript has been edited for clarity and brevity. To view the entire interview on YouTube, [click here](#).

MH: Gayle, would you please introduce yourself?

GR: I'm Gayle Rothrock. I'm a resident on Officers Row and I've been there eleven years. I was drawn to living here when I felt I could no longer live in a home, and really wanted to re-affiliate in some wonderful way with Officers Row.

I was first introduced to Officers Row when I was a child growing up in Portland and my parents wanted to come over and visit relatives -- the Philpotts and the Caples -- and also make a graveside visit. They liked driving through what we know as Officers Row. Believe me, things weren't in very great condition in the late '40s.

The second time I had occasion to have familiarity with Officers Row, I had been hired on the teaching faculty of the Evergreen State College, which was operating a program for juniors and seniors so they could complete a baccalaureate degree. Their rented space was in a house that was two doors west of the Grant House. So, I worked on Officers Row when the houses weren't in terrific condition in the late '70s. Then a work assignment took me to Olympia. I returned here the latter half of 1986 and was contacted by the city manager through some friends. He said, "You've been working at the legislature. Worked for Congress. Done lobbying work. The city would like to hire you to help make sure we stand a chance of getting a state appropriation that will help us meet the budget needs we have in order to affect a recovery of Officers Row." I took the assignment.

MH: You mentioned the conditions on the Row before the rehabilitation process. What do you remember about the conditions?

GR: Well, you never knew quite what might peel off the ceiling and fall down on you or your colleagues or your students. Door hinges would get out of sorts easily. In some parts of the house, of course, there were some odd and musty smells. The Veterans Administration was supposed to take care of the exterior of the homes but I guess it was hard for them to do that. Oftentimes the grass would go up to a foot long, and we would be bushwhacking our way around. And since the name of the college was the Evergreen State College, we had a little joke and posted a sign that said the "Overgrown State College." You couldn't control the heating very well. The lighting was okay. But it was obvious that this was something that was available, that was close to Clark College, and at what was considered an affordable price. We were trying to give life to some of these buildings. The Grant House was experimenting with operating as a museum. It was nice to be able to go over there and see what they were up to. I just looked on the upside of it and said, this is what we have to deal with. This is how we're going to deliver an education and classes in it. But when you did hear

something, you knew there was a chance that something could fall on your head. So I said yes, these definitely need help.

MH: You said you were born in Portland, or grew up in Portland?

GR: Yes.

MH: How did you make your way to Clark County?

GR: After college and working for the U.S. Congress for an additional three years or so, I felt that I'm really a Pacific Northwest person. I think I need to get back to the Northwest. I ended up coming to Seattle because I'd been admitted to a graduate program in public administration at the University of Washington. I studied there and did a job doing public interest lobbying, and then got hired there for an additional public interest lobbying assignment for a public agency that was operating a transit system, but also a water pollution control system. Then I yearned for some changes and was drawn to Olympia, and worked there for the legislature for a while. Then, circumstances were such that I got married and it turned out to be a good idea to move down to Vancouver. I was completely comfortable with coming to Vancouver. Little did I know how much change I was going to be witnessing in those next several years.

MH: When stuff started percolating about the rehabilitation, what was your initial response?

GR: First of all, yes. This really needs to happen. This honors a profoundly important history in the Northwest. Not just Washington, but Washington, Oregon, part of Idaho. The presence of Native peoples in their encampment, and then the Hudson Bay Company deciding that that waterfront down there would be a good place to establish their fur trading company. And then with the settling of the border between the United States and Canada in 1846, a negotiation which allowed the Hudson Bay Company to remain in a guest status operating things for up to ten years. But the army, the US Army, was going to be sent in in order to occupy this space.

At this very time, a lot of people were migrating in their covered wagons to Oregon Country. It became part of the army's mission to make sure that they could make safe passage. This has so much American history, so much regional history, and it's something that simply couldn't be let go. We needed to do our best in modern times to conserve the spaces but be able to make economically reasonable use of them so that you could have them go on for as long as anybody had the wit and the will to keep up Officers Row.

MH: Had you always been interested in history?

GR: Oh, yes. Ever since I was a girl.

MH: Do you think it was like visiting places like Officers Row that inspired that?

GR: It was that, and having grown up across the river. Also, I could see a number of historic spots in the wonderful Willamette Valley. We had relatives over in Eastern Washington and relatives in Idaho and whatnot, and they were interested in history as well. I was around people who respected an interest in history and were willing to show me some sites. Then I went on and studied it more in college until I was an American studies major with an emphasis on history and governance.

MH: So, the rehabilitation kind of starts. You're contacted to help with the state funding. How does that process go?

GR: The key thing was to visit with the city manager and refresh my recollections of things I'd been reading in the newspaper or hearing from friends about the challenge of figuring out what uses would work here. Of course, the first effort was just to defeat any other takers, other than the city. A public benefit authority. I educated myself on that so that I was ready for the meeting with the city manager. And he said, "We know that you've worked for the legislature. We know you've been a public interest lobbyist. We know you worked for Congress. And we need help. We cannot put this budget together unless we can get something close to four million."

I did know several legislators from this area. I knew how you would pursue something like that. Getting an appropriation like this from the state's historic preservation fund at that time had to go directly through action of the legislature and then get signed by the governor. If you don't have a friendly local delegation of senators and representatives, you're likely not going to get very far.

Two gentlemen stand out in my mind, both of whom have passed away. There was a gentleman from North Clark County, Al Bauer, and he was a Democrat. There was Hal Zimmerman, who was a Republican and a long-time senator from the Camas-Washougal area. They liked each other and were respectful of each other. Through working with them and me sitting in on the meetings that Mr. Macht and Steve Burdick and the staff were having, I could see what the advocacy need was, and the arguments were on how it should be fixed, under what circumstances, and what ultimate uses do we think are really going to work. I didn't remain ignorant in any way about it, and was able to work companionably with the senators and representatives from our area.

We prevailed. By the end of the session, there was a significant appropriation, which helped the city balance the budget at roughly 11 million dollars.

MH: What was your pitch?

GR: That this was of profound historic meaning and importance, and a remarkable chance to get some housing and some businesses and some public spaces made available with respect and reverence for an incredible historic scene. It really did resonate with them. And a number of their colleagues said, "Oh, yes. Fort Vancouver and the Hudson Bay Company and so forth is such a profound part of Northwest history." Because, of course, people who were stationed here would often be out-stationed somewhere else in what we know as Eastern Oregon, Eastern Washington, Idaho, and what have you, because of the fortifications and small fort systems. So many legislators said, "Yes. Yeah. That's important and I feel touched by it. I remember fort so and so or camp so and so that really got its start from the leadership at Fort Vancouver."

MH: Do you remember any notable opposition?

GR: Not really notable. There was the usual opposition in a legislature when people just feel called to oppose anything that looks like it isn't, you know, food, clothing or shelter or roadway. There's always just a certain amount of that. But those people were gradually persuaded that this was a profoundly important project. We would quote them. It was just one of those things where it was the classic "I don't want to spend any more money than we have to." In the end, there were no

unhappy people. There certainly were a lot of happy people in Vancouver when it became known that each of the pieces of the funding package was finally coming together in a way that said, "Go!"

MH: What were other sources of money for the project?

GR: Well, there were different accounts that the city had, or sub-funds. They could do some temporary borrowing for several years. The city had bonding capacity, which most cities in America do. They knew that they would have to float some bonds. The rent that would be paid by businesses and residents here would help pay off the bonds. There were even things like, in some schools, little penny and nickel drives where if children wanted to give something to help this Officers Row project, they could, which really made the whole thing have more human interest.

The United States government under a longstanding federal law needed to pass these properties to a public benefit authority, and they did it for a dollar for each of the 21 houses. That helped a lot that it wasn't a matter of forcing a purchase at, let's say, a couple hundred thousand dollars. When you put it all together, you had a package of sponsors and the goodwill of the legislature.

MH: You mentioned community support. What do you think Officers Row at large means to the Vancouver community? Either at the time or now.

GR: I think people just simply understood that someplace that had so many open spaces, so many extraordinary trees and plants and what have you that had clearly been around for a couple of hundred years, people felt it was a place they could go and have some recreation time. There are still lots of people here, walking dogs or walking themselves. And that you could learn something by seeing structures that were built, if it was Officers Row, mostly in the 19th century and the early 20th century. If you wandered down below Howard House, you would see the most recent structures. The noncommissioned officers' brick duplexes. If you looked at the Artillery Barracks, you were seeing a 1904 structure. This is interesting to people. And I think they think, "This is ours, this is where we live."

It happened, of course, it was close to the bridge. Close to what was Highway 99 and then became Interstate 5. So, you could get in and out of here. You could show guests a place like this. But most of all, you could just be incredibly proud that you were in a city that honored these things.

MH: Tell me how you became a docent.

GR: Because of a disability that I had and was going to be permanent, I really wanted to see if there was any possibility of living on Officers Row. It worked out that I could rent the handicapped apartment. That was about eleven years ago. Of course, that meant I was right across the lawn from the Marshall House, a place where I had attended the special anniversary celebration of the Chkalov-Baidukov landing. A place where I'd sat for meetings for ages. And so, I just simply walked over here and there was a person on duty who was a docent herself, but also kind of a house manager. I explained who I was, that I had just moved in across the lawn, and wondered if they needed any assistance with something like docent work. She just asked me a little bit more about my background and promptly said, "Could you start tomorrow?" I guess you could say that was a happy beginning. Because I just lived across the lawn, I could come over in an emergency. Sometimes I came over when they were having a wedding. The people who were having the wedding would say, gee, I wish we knew more about the Marshall House. Staff would call me and say, "Could you please come over

here and talk to these people?” So, I not only took daytime shifts, but occasionally I was able to share with people who’d rented the house for some sort of an event. Maybe ten minutes of history about the Marshall House.

MH: What did you like about being a docent?

GR: I think it’s because I like sharing stories. I thought there were fascinating things about the Marshall House that people might want to know. You know, what about the grand staircase? Well, that had to be shipped around the horn, and come all the way up through the Pacific Ocean. It wasn’t like this is something you could go get down the street or have made locally. I just like sharing stories that are interesting. And you have to make sure that you can adjust it for a child’s level of understanding if a family is there. Or let’s say a group of young people. Here’s Mrs. Jones’ third grade class. Or adjust it for a person who’s a veteran, and they’re very proud to come in here and they’re going to want to know more things about how the military occupied life here. You look at what your visitors’ needs are. You don’t share the same thing all the time.

It was agreed a long time ago that the upstairs should be occupied by one or two business offices and then offices of elected public officials. So, no going upstairs. This is a ground floor tour. Then I would explain about the dining room, and that when this house was first built, there was only one little tiny hotel in Vancouver that couldn’t house a lot of visitors. So, people would stay here and have their meals here.

Then I’d take them into Marshall’s office, and the dial telephone was the big hit. You wanted to make sure that children actually knew what a dial telephone was. So here are the adults standing here not knowing that the children didn’t know what that is.

You can have a little fun. And they can learn a little history, but in an enjoyable way.

MH: Can you describe to me the feeling of seeing Officers Row after its rehabilitation?

GR: I guess relief in one sense, because I had seen it before and worked in one of the houses, and had seen it as a child when it was really kind of forlorn. I just felt like this had taken lots of work, and a lot of time. And it’s all worth it. It’s all worth it because this is going to make housing, business space, and some other public spaces available for people to enjoy. That meets the needs of a city. At the same time, we’re evoking history.

MH: Do you think that people continue to appreciate Officers Row?

GR: On the whole, yes. I think it helps that it is also associated with the Fort Vancouver National Historic Site, and that there’s just so much land. There are a lot of exhibits and a lot of special things going on, like the archaeology school down there in the summer. I still hear a lot of comments when I’m out and about of people saying, “Oh, yes, I so love to go down there.” I’ve never run into anyone who said that was a poor public investment. The bonds were getting paid off. It was financed honestly. And no scandals.

MH: Can you tell me about what the community is like living on the Row?

GR: I guess people who themselves appreciate some history. They may have needed to be quite close to a bus line. They love being close to downtown. A lot of people can easily walk in town when the weather is pretty good. I'm driving my car, I can get anywhere. I can go north. I can go east. I can go west. Or I can get on that bridge and go over to Portland. People just find it convenient. We don't have any children here. It is for the most part, middle-aged and older adults.

MH: Do you know your neighbors?

GR: I know a couple of the people who are in the business in the front part of Point North Consulting in the front of the house where I live. I'm acquainted with some of the other people. Mostly we see each other at the mailbox. Even if you're just going in and out of your automobile, there's a friendly exchange. There are some people who actually have some close friends, and I think in some cases they were friends somebody talked into moving in here.

MH: What's your favorite house on the Row? Is it the Marshall House?

GR: Yes. Probably because of my long association with it in different ways. Now I happen to live right across the lawn from it. But I enjoy going into the Grant House. But this is probably a dear old favorite.

MH: Can you tell me about any favorite memories you had while working and fighting for the rehabilitation?

GR: I think realizing how seriously and yet creatively, with great professionalism, the planning team, the design teams, were working. It was a wonderful thing to sit in on the meetings and see that nobody was giving this short shrift. Everyone was taking this task seriously. They knew it was special, and that it had to come out right. They knew that if you'd made too many residential, and too few were offering a business space, that you could make an exchange and offer a few more offices and not so much in the way of housing. There aren't a lot of places that exist in this city or anywhere else where you can actually, given a little bit of time, shift something so it would work as either a business space or a living space. Over time there have been some adjustments. No one perfectly estimates what you might actually need for the housing. Nobody knew that we were going to have, you know, thousands of units of housing eventually that would be built downtown and close into the center of town. I think they sussed it out pretty well.

MH: What do you think the legacy of Officers Row is? What do you hope for its future?

GR: That it continues to be a place that evokes both memory and specific examples of things that were once part of life here. And yet, offers something that modern people need. We need space. We need housing. We need business space. You really need to keep things up. And hopefully the lesson about letting things go over time, and then seeing just exactly how much money it cost to try to make something out of it, hopefully was a permanently learned lesson.

I do reflect on my time of active work here in '86, '87, and '89, '90, and then my service for eight years as a docent. I do look back on it with rather remarkable memories. I realize mine is perhaps an unusual story, you know, having actually worked in one of the buildings when it was still dilapidated, and then having the privilege of being an advocate for public funding. Because this is what the Northwest is about, and we mustn't lose touch with that.