

Officers Row Memories Oral History Project

Thomas Ryll

Project Role: Resident of Officers Row pre-rehabilitation; journalist during project



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](#).

Madeline Hagan: I am interviewing Thomas Ryll. Thomas, would you please introduce yourself?

TR: Hi. My name is Tom Ryll, and I lived on Officers Row from 1963 till 1974. My parents moved here with us from Lincoln, Nebraska. My father was the chief engineer for the Barnes Hospital. I was eight years old. I'm actually 69 today. I had been in four different schools in three different school years. We got here to Vancouver and made it clear as kids, we were tired of moving around. So effectively stayed here until we were all more or less grown up.

MH: Did the VA house people on Officers Row?

TR: Yes. Officers Row is a much prettier name, but at the time the community knew it as the Barracks. Really, there was no association with the US Army. This entire Row, as we know it today, was reserved for the senior staff of the VA Hospital. The hospital director, the director of nursing, and so forth and so on. My father, as the director of engineering, which was a facilities and operations position, was able to live here.

MH: What was your house like?

TR: The house is the one that's immediately west of here. It's now at least two units but then it was for a family of what was initially the five of us, and then my little sister was born later. It was a creaky old dilapidated structure. When the wind blew in my room on the south side, it would come through the cracks in the windows and my door would rattle so much that I'd get a piece of paper, fold it up and cram it into the crack of the door so I could sleep. It went like that for years.

MH: What did your parents think of the house?

TR: My mom is famous for being the kind of person who could contradict herself at times in the space of five words. If you asked, "Mom, what was it like being on the Row?" She said, "Oh, those cold and drafty buildings." These homes were heated by coal at the time. Every so often, a truck would back up down the yard in the grass and dump a load of coal into a chute that was right by the family room. So, she said, "There was coal dust everywhere and all that." Then somebody would say, "Oh, it must have been a terrible place to live." And she'd say, "Oh, no. It was a wonderful place to live."

Then my dad, on the other hand. I became a newspaper reporter, spent my entire career at *The Columbian* here and reported on the time when the Row was being transferred from the VA to the City of Vancouver. I remember telling my dad kind of excitedly, "Dad, they're going to rehab all of

those old buildings!” And he said, “What?! They ought to tear them down.” He had had to maintain them. At the time, they were a bunch of crumbling old buildings.

MH: What was your perception of the entire grounds as a kid?

TR: It was paradise. We didn’t know it was paradise. Imagine at the time we were here, the library down the street was brand new. Gorgeous, gorgeous brand new library. I could ride my bike down there with a pile of books. Spend the entire day there in summer when it was fiercely hot. Next to the library was a set of tennis courts maintained by the City of Vancouver. There was a machine you could put a quarter in and get a half hour’s worth of lights to play at night. There was a swimming pool next to the tennis courts, the old Memory Pool, which burned down some years ago. Then the city built the Marshall Community Center. So, there were two swimming pools within walking distance. Downtown Vancouver with two movie theaters 20 minutes away and a giant field in front and a giant field in back with all of the amenities for Hudson’s Bay High School. We didn’t know it, but what better place to grow up, right? With all this amazing amount of room. A big house. My parents were renting that house in the early ‘60s for 100 dollars a month, 25 dollars of which were the furnishings included.

MH: Were there other kids on the Row?

TR: There were other kids, and it was its own insular community. We were this rather tightly knit group of kids—and there were a number of other kids my age. There were several families I grew up with.

MH: You mentioned being able to use the library close by and the community center. Did you feel like Officers Row was a part of the larger Vancouver? Or did it feel somewhat isolated?

TR: I think it would be fair to say maybe without knowing it at the time, that it felt extremely isolated because it wasn’t a dense-packed neighborhood like so many. It felt like almost its very own society in some ways. In fact, I delivered the newspapers for a year or two as a kid, and I had probably the worst newspaper route in the whole city because it was so stretched out. Other kids could deliver their 50, 75 papers in no time. I had to ride my bike way downtown and all the way to the far end of the Row for 30 dollars a month or whatever it was. So it felt like we were very much isolated. Not in a bad way, but insulated.

MH: What was downtown Vancouver like at the time?

TR: It was hardly thriving, but it wasn’t exactly dead, either. There were two movie theaters for us to go to. There was a J.C. Penney store. Long, long gone, and a few others. It was rather modest, but for kids, it was perfect. Especially with two movie theaters and a couple of stores to shop at. Not like today’s Vancouver. But that was a long time ago.

MH: Do you have memories of Fort Vancouver particularly?

TR: The fort at that time was pathetic. Literally the north wall of the structure had been reconstructed, without the block houses, mind you. I’ve got to believe that anyone coming here to see the historic fort was like, this is all you get? They had placed slabs of asphalt on the original footprints to the buildings which were known because of excavation, and the maps that were

available. Highly unimpressive. Today it's a showpiece. But it was for us it was a giant field to play in.

MH: Do you remember the other conditions of some of the houses on the Row?

TR: Some of the homes literally were a husband, wife and one child in a two-story house with 20 rooms. They would literally close off most of the building because to heat it would have been ferociously difficult. Other houses, like the one immediately east of here, there was a big family that lived there. That place darn near fell apart with that family living there, to the point that they moved to the other half of the building and occupied that until it started to fall apart. Very different, of course, from today. My dad's aggravation was that some of these buildings were already a century old. The house we were living in dated probably 80 years old at that point. You can imagine the difficulty of maintaining structures all that time without big budgets to do it.

MH: Were you conscious of the history here when you were a kid?

TR: Only somewhat. I remember knowing that the buildings were so old. In fact, my dad showed us a photo of the house before we moved here. It had, for whatever reason, at that time a giant set of wagon wheels positioned along the front porch steps. Of course, as kids it was like, "Oh, how cool is that!" My dad's like, "Well, they're probably not there anymore." And they weren't, right? We knew it was old but we didn't really have that sense of history that is evident today with the Marshall House and the Grant House. The Marshall House did not have that name then. We called it the Red Cross House. The American Red Cross had its local chapter headquarters here. It was white, and the pedestals out front just happened to have places where they could paint them with red crosses.

MH: Do you remember what color your house was?

TR: White and white. They were very, very pale white. Unremarkable, really, at the time. The house didn't have circuit breakers. It had the old-fashioned fuses. Those fuses would blow and you'd have to unscrew them and put a new one in. They were very archaic, to put it mildly. I remember overhearing somebody at the time looking at the mansard roof. It's very distinctive and uncommon, of course, in today's architecture. I remember that person saying, "Yeah, it looks like they added that second story later." No, they didn't. It was built that way from the start.

MH: What was your initial response to calls for rehabilitation?

TR: As an adult and a newspaper reporter, I thought it was pretty cool and that it would be a nice addition. I've said for years this was the prettiest place in Vancouver, if not the only pretty place in Vancouver. People could say now the waterfront has become sort of a showpiece. But I think the result here was fabulous. Even my late father might agree. He would have lived to have seen the renovation. Still in the back of his mind, though, "How are they going to take care of those old places?"

MH: So, the reporting. How did you get the story?

TR: That was the late 1980s. I was not assigned at that point to the City of Vancouver beat. My assignments shifted around while I was there almost 30 years. I had the liberty—and a lot of staffers did—of basically saying, look, this project's taking off. I lived there. Why not write a story about

what it was like living on the Row way before the renovation started? There was no one else on staff who had had that experience.

MH: Did you know as a kid that you wanted to be a journalist?

TR: I thought I wanted that, actually. I wanted to be a photographer. At 12 and 13 years old I got my first cameras. By the time I was in high school, I had two Nikons and a bunch of lenses like no kid in the county did. I was so into photography! I had a darkroom in what was my dad's workshop. I'd cover the windows and try to make prints, and all that sort of stuff, right there in that little house on Officers Row. I thought that that would be my career, and so did a lot of my friends. I was involved with the school newspaper at Hudson's Bay.

MH: Did you go to college?

TR: I did. Washington State University. I spent a year at Clark College. At that point, I was not certain about a journalism career. I was imagining I was burned out from a year of being the editor of the school paper. I thought I would study business administration. So, I spent a year at Clark College, and worked for Fred Meyer, and realized that I really wanted to go to college. That's when I ended up at WSU in Pullman. There was no WSU campus here at the time. Right from the start in Pullman, I studied journalism. By kind of luck I ended up at the newspaper where I thought my career would end, rather than start. Which I loved. It was a terrific opportunity then.

MH: Do you remember ever having conversations with friends either at Hudson's Bay or in Pullman about your living situation?

TR: I remember, of course, one premiere event for us as kids was the Fourth of July. The City of Vancouver had the enormous fireworks show. Then you found out, if you lived on the Row, how many friends you had that you didn't know existed because everybody wanted to come over and watch the show. So again, it was quite an experience.

MH: Did you develop a passion for historic buildings from your time here?

TR: I spent essentially all my childhood in older buildings. In fact, as kids we were kind of envious of kids who had wall-to-wall carpeting. It's like hardwood floors, they were nothing. We lived in a house with hardwood floors everywhere. It's like yeah, but they have a shag carpet. That's cool. So, we thought we were somehow being left out of these modern things, when in fact it was a lot cooler building once it was renovated.

MH: How do you think that the rehabilitation of Officers Row has contributed to the Vancouver community?

TR: Oh, I think enormously. You can imagine, especially prior to the redevelopment of the waterfront, take away Officers Row and look around and go, what makes Vancouver notable? Without this history, it would be just another suburb of Portland. Today you can point to the Marshall House, the Grant House, the Fort Vancouver site.

MH: How did you feel about the change? Did it feel very different after the rehabilitation than from your childhood?

TR: Hugely, because the buildings were so well done. I heard once that somebody had kept the color information because people would drive by and want to know the name of that paint color on the building. The transformation was enormous.

MH: What about the sense of community? Did you feel like there was, did it feel similarly familial, or that there seemed to be some kind of vitality in the community here?

TR: Well, first of all, as you know, it's vastly different. Today's occupants here are people who are renting private residences, and also a lot of businesses. So, I expect it would be way different than a community, a neighborhood of children and families in my time, but still somewhat cohesive because it's all so architecturally similar.

MH: Do you think that your story had any impact?

TR: My "first person" story was, for me, especially rewarding. I heard from friends who had lived on the Row with me, one of whom was a hospital administrator in Georgia. Long lost contact. But that story prompted responses from people that had lived here, some of whom I knew and some I didn't. For a reporter, that's always hugely gratifying to imagine that oh, somebody read my story, right?

MH: Did they share any of their own memories, too?

TR: Some of their memories would have been shared because they were our friends at the time. In fact, there's another sort of side story. One of the friends that I grew up with here on the Row, his father was a doctor. The whole family were skiers. They would travel and ski in Europe. He had since moved to Indiana, but he sent me a postcard one summer because his parents had gotten him a job working in a restaurant in Germany. I wrote back and said, "Hey, could you get me a job?" He wrote back and said, "Sure. I'll get you a job. You can come next summer." So, I ended up traveling as a 17-year-old to Germany through the connection of my friend who had lived on the Row. I went to Germany but that job had become unavailable. I ended up on a chicken farm in the Black Forest in Germany and thought it was the worst place in the world until I realized that the pretty young girl, the farmer's daughter, lived on the property. She actually was my first wife.

MH: Really?!

TR: So, there's your circle of growing up on the Row, having a friend from the Row, ending up in Europe as a direct result of that. Meeting this young girl who was my first wife. We've been in touch much more recently, which has been really neat.

MH: Do you come to Officers Row often?

TR: An occasional drive through, once in a while walk through for various reasons. Talk about a sense of past, you know, and sort of reliving it one way or another.

MH: Did you ever take people here?

TR: Yes. Visitors. Family, friends and relatives that had come to see the Row. In fact, just today I was telling a friend, a newer friend, she's from Colombia, South America. I realized that she didn't know about the Row. I told her, "Rose, you need to see it. It's one of the prettiest places around."

MH: Are there any questions that you wish that I had asked you?

TR: I think about the odd things that happened. This is a really goofy anecdote. There's a horse chestnut tree behind the house. It's still there today. The horse chestnuts drop from the tree with the spines on the outside and on the inside this gorgeous inedible seed. My dad for a time was a golfer, and he would set those horse chestnuts on a tee and hit them over the back fence there. They would explode invariably. What else are you going to do with horse chestnuts, right? That was life. Life on the Row.