

Officers Row Memories Oral History Project



Pat Stryker

Project Role: Central Park Coordinator and Property Manager for the City of Vancouver

Interviewed November 4, 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: Pat, would you please introduce yourself?

PS: My name is Pat Stryker. I first got involved in this whole area because I was hired as what was called the Central Park coordinator when we didn't have a central park. My job then was to get eleven different agencies—federal, state, local and private—working together to commit to the plan. The heart of that plan was basically Officers Row. I went from that to being the city's property manager, which meant I got a whole lot of old historic buildings with no endowment for any kind of maintenance of any kind. It was kind of a challenge but I loved it.

MH: How did you come to get the job?

PS: I got the job because I'd been a library coordinator in two or three counties in Oregon and for the state of Washington. And I was always a good listener. I found that if you served a meal to people who thought they had nothing in common, and they got to bring their boss as a guest to the meal, they all of a sudden found lots of things in common. It worked. Always did.

MH: Tell me about the position.

PS: Well, the Central Park coordinator was basically exactly what it sounds like. I would walk around and talk to the president of Clark College, talk to the head of the VA, talk to the school district, talk to the Soroptimists who took care of the Grant House, the Red Cross people who took care of this building. We explained the plan, and they all loved the plan in general. They sometimes had a little trouble convincing their superiors, particularly the National Park Service had a hard time convincing their superiors. So, it happened. And the results are obvious.

MH: What was the plan like at that time?

PS: It was basically the predecessor of One Place Across Time. It was a very cooperative and very collegial organization of people locally. In fact, at one point the city ran out of funding for my position. The VA stepped in and said, "We'll put you on contract. You can keep doing exactly what you're doing. You don't have to report to us at all. We'll give you an office." That was it. Major cooperation made it all work.

MH: You've mentioned a few of the stakeholders at play.

PS: The City of Vancouver was involved, particularly as relates to this building. Some people loved this building, other people did not. It was a very different building. Much rougher, much harder to

maintain and keep warm. The city owned a former recreation center up on Fourth Plain that had been used during World War II. The deal was to negotiate a swap between the city and the Red Cross. The school district was wonderful, and they had a lot to say about things, and Clark College, and the Veterans Administration. At the time, Evergreen State College was located in a building near here. All these people knew one another but they all were kind of in silos until we took the silos down. Then they were all on the same team. It was great.

MH: What attracted you to this project?

PS: I always liked challenges, and I saw this as an opportunity that fit right in my wheelhouse. To get people to listen to one another. Nothing was cast in concrete. It was just a plan on paper at the start. I could see that if it came off, it would be a really big thing.

MH: Are you from Vancouver?

PS: No, but I've worked in Clark County for close to 45 years. My late husband owned a business in Lake Oswego, so, we split the difference and lived in Portland. When he passed away, I didn't move right away but I've been living here for about 30 years.

MH: Were you familiar with the Row before you got the job?

PS: A little bit. I had driven on it a couple of times. They hadn't done as much here but they had done a lot of reconstruction down at Fort Vancouver, and I always loved to visit there. Then I got to be friends with some people in the arborist business, and they formed the arboretum committee, which then installed a whole bunch of stuff down at the far east end.

MH: What were the buildings like?

PS: Pretty rough shape. They'd been built, of course, in the late 1800s, most of them. They did not have indoor plumbing at first. They had carriage houses in the back, some of which had been converted to garages. Others have been demolished. This particular house was probably in the best shape because it was where the commander for the barracks lived. George Marshall was one who lived here. So, it was in pretty okay shape. The Grant House needed a lot of help but it looked okay. The house right next door here, had two professors at the VA who were doctors. They kept monkeys unfettered, and the house was in utter shambles. These were not housebroken monkeys. That was probably the worst of all of them. In fact, we had to take down the rear half of it because it couldn't be salvaged at all.

MH: Monkeys! That's a very unique preservation problem.

PS: All kinds of monkeys. Monkeys and chimps. They had probably 20 different monkey types. It was pretty bad. Some of the other buildings were not bad. The houses at this end were for a certain rank of officers. From here going east, they were more for generals and were much higher quality construction, and had received higher maintenance. A fellow named John Lee, who was the VA manager, reported to the Portland VA but he worked here. His heart was in the whole project, and he made sure that somehow they got budget approval to maintain.

When Ronald Reagan was running for president, one of his ideas was to sell off surplus federal property to reduce the national debt. Well, this is prime territory. At that time, nobody locally wanted it sold off because there was no control of what it would have been like. It took a concerted effort of our two senators and congresspeople and a lot of political pressure to get that backed off.

In fact, Senator Slade Gordon, who probably doesn't get enough credit, went and sat outside the Secretary of the Interior's office. He didn't say he was a senator; he just said he was Slade Gordon, and the secretary didn't know who he was. Apparently, he sat there for four or five hours. Then James Watt, who was the Interior secretary, came out and said to the office secretary, "Do you know there's a U.S. senator sitting out there? How long has he been here?" "Oh, he's been here since this morning. He didn't even leave at lunchtime." Senator Gordon went in and said, "I've already talked to my colleagues in both the House and the Senate. We will not allow this to happen." He probably was very pivotal in making the decision.

MH: Did you have any interest in historic properties before this?

PS: I grew up in a family that did historic preservation restoration in California. My late husband and I did a lot in the Pearl District. Three or four about-to-fall-down buildings. We brought them back to life. It was fun. I always enjoyed restoration. And not just remodeling -- real restoration. We knew how to work with various restrictions having to do with historic buildings. It prepared me for a lot of things having to do with Officers Row.

MH: Tell me more about the acquisition of the property.

PS: As property manager, I managed our airport too. Tom, who was the day-to-day airport manager could fly and he had a plane. We would fly to Federal Way and visit with the GSA probably three times a week, some weeks. We finally got them to see that this didn't make any sense. They weren't going to make that much money and they were going to really, really anger a lot of powerful people. We had folks like Ray Hickey and George Propstra, major staples of the community, and the mayor, Bryce Seidl, completely on our side. Bruce Hagensen, who then became mayor, was a city council person and was completely on our side. We could exert quite a bit of political pressure. It worked in the end. They just backed off the whole thing. I think because the GSA folks really saw that it wasn't going to generate anything but negative publicity and very little money. I'm glad we did stop the sale because it opened the door to keep these together.

MH: Going into more technical questions about budgeting, and you mentioned the testifying process. Tell me about the National Register.

PS: It wasn't too difficult to get the whole thing on the National Register. The trickier parts were getting the ownerships consolidated into one. Most of the city council were 100% for it. One or two weren't quite sure they wanted a bunch of old buildings they didn't have a budget to maintain but we convinced them. A whole bunch of people would testify at city council that we had the backing of the community and that we were sure we could get grants, and that we had good uses in mind for the buildings. At one point, they weren't going to be residences. They were going to be various kinds of shops but it never penciled out that way. So, we just moved forward.

This place became a restaurant. Eventually so did the Grant House. The Soroptimists moved out of the Grant House because their membership had dwindled so much, they really couldn't take care of

it as a museum. It was not a consolidated museum over one period. They had a tremendous collection of Indian baskets mostly from the Yakima area. They would fix up rooms that they envisioned were what it would have looked like when Grant lived there, which he never did. It was just an interesting place.

There were a lot of people who knew these buildings and had been in them a lot. There was a Campfire Girl office upstairs, as well as the Red Cross down here. This is where you came to get CPR training. It didn't look anything like this but it was a good building. It took time, about three years all together, by the time we got everything consolidated. It wouldn't have been possible without really active support. For example, the VA stationed their doctors and nurses here, including those who worked in Portland. We had to negotiate leasing and rent. In exchange, they would be guaranteed that they had water running and heat running.

There was a tremendous amount of asbestos in a lot of the basements. We got a grant from the state, along with some city funding, to get it ameliorated.

We had all kinds of water issues. For a while, we were losing enough water every night to fill Marshall Pool, and Memory Pool, daily. The public works and the parks department, although they were separate, were all buddies. I remember going along with a stethoscope at two in the morning with a crew tracking where we thought the pipes might be, and we would find where the big leaks were. Eventually. At one time, pipes for plumbing were hollowed out redwood, and they disintegrated, became mulch. But we got that stopped.

I remember listening and you'd hear this little clicking and you'd hear whooshing. The water never came up to the surface. It was just going down.

MH: When you were going through the planning process, did you have models that you looked at?

PS: We had a consultant company based in Seattle. I think Pioneer Square was really hitting bigtime numbers at the time in Seattle. They couldn't see why it wouldn't work here. But, it really wouldn't have. For one thing, there would be no parking. The Park Service controlled everything south, and they didn't want parking lots there. As we became more and more historically-oriented, nobody wanted them on this side, either. It didn't pencil in the end based on the consultant's plans. We had a bunch of charettes for public input.

People really always cared about this place. Many who'd grown up in Vancouver had driven on Evergreen their whole lives and they would come and give ideas. And many of them were really good ideas, too. We implemented where we could, and got a plan approved by all the stakeholders. All had to formally approve and commit to it, and they did. That took about a year and a half to get done. From then on, architects were hired as consultants who had specialization in historic preservation, a firm based out of Portland. They did a really fine job. Came up with the coordinating color scheme. People love this creamy color.

MH: What kind of documentation did Officers Row have?

PS: They had measured drawings. There was a lot of information at the historical society and the library. The consultants they chose were very good at researching.

But sometimes there were wrinkles. We had this big exhibit of Japanese art called Nihonga in this building. When people used to come back here when it was a very active military base, from Asia and other parts of the world, they would bring plants with them and stick them in the ground. We had tremendous numbers of enormous rhododendrons around this building, but they weren't really historic. They were all removed when we had Nihonga. One of the sponsors of that, a company called Wacoal, had lots of money and they wanted this to go well. They gave the city grants to re-landscape and change the entrances and all that kind of thing. We had thousands of people come through that exhibit. It was really amazing. It came here because a bunch of Japanese people were friendly with Bryce Seidl, the mayor, and other city council people. Bryce talked them into having that exhibit here. It had been in Boston. It had been in New York at the Met. It was a big deal. And it came here. I think this may have been the only west coast place. People came from LA, they came from the Bay Area, all over the country to come and see this exhibit. It was about 30 beautiful prints all done by people who'd been declared cultural treasures to the country of Japan. But, there were people very upset with the removal of the rhododendrons.

Then we had other things happen. There'd been that big Columbus Day storm that took down a whole bunch of the big trees out in front. The ones that could be saved, were. But over the course of time, they reached their lifespan, too. People would get very upset. I mean, we would have trees removed in the middle of the night because people would have probably chained themselves to them to keep it from happening. But, you know, somehow the place goes on.

MH: When the actual construction got going, what were the kind of cooperations that you saw?

PS: It was interesting. We had a couple of the garages that had been converted from carriage houses that really couldn't be saved, and didn't really have a function that related to the original building. Demolition of those was pretty easy. The actual restoration pretty much came after I had left as far as the work inside. I was more involved in the exteriors at one point. This building became one that brides loved to have their weddings because they could come down the stairs. The pictures were gorgeous. They often had the weddings out in front, and that was nice, too.

MH: Did you have weddings in mind when planning?

PS: No, it just sort of happened. We didn't even have a restaurant in mind. A guy came forward, and said, "You know, I think this could be a great restaurant." He didn't make it, and then somebody else came in and tried it for a while and decided it's just too big. A lot of things were tried. If they worked, we kept them. If not, we moved on.

MH: How did you land on residences?

PS: We agreed that that seemed to be the most reasonable. There were a lot of VA doctors and nurses still living in them who wanted to continue that. They loved these buildings and they took good care. We had to have them sign leases with the city and they were perfectly willing to do that. A couple of them didn't like the fact that we had uniformity required for Christmas decorations. They wanted to do other more flamboyant things on the front.

MH: Tell me some more of the rules regarding historic character.

PS: You had to park at the back, and you were supposed to tell your guests to use the back road. We were not going to put in any more parking out in front. The rules weren't terribly different from what the VA had had in place. They could have pets, but we had to approve them. And we didn't allow any monkeys, ever again.

When we were selling commemorative bricks, that was supposed to go to exterior fine touches that might be outside a normal budget. We sold quite a few.

Working with people was the key thing. Being able to listen and walk a mile in their shoes. Some of them had hard jobs. They had absent supervisors in DC. The region nine districts were in Seattle or Federal Way, and those folks didn't come around very often. So they didn't know what the local staff had to go through on a day-to-day basis. But we were always fortunate. The right people came at the right time, and they all seemed to meld together.

MH: Tell me about how you feel Officers Row fits in to the broader Vancouver metro area.

PS: I think it's absolutely critical. Schools all over Oregon and Washington visit the fort. They also get to see all the green space. If you get the community on your side, you can hardly stop them. And we had the community all the time. I think it's a lesson, actually, to a lot of the other development in Clark County to start and get the people excited about something. Then get the middle management excited about it. And then get the senior management willing to take the credit. And they do. Even if they might not have been onboard at the start. So, it worked. It was a good lesson.

MH: Tell me about why were you so interested in Clark County?

PS: I liked the people I met. They seemed to have a vision, and particularly at the highest leadership levels, they were really happy to share that vision and commit to it. That was kind of unusual. Some of my other projects before I started here, it would take a long, long time to get people even willing to talk about things. Not here. Everybody was very, very willing. And as long as you could show results and you didn't grossly overspend a budget, they would let you do what you needed to do. For example, a lot of other historic buildings fell in my lap. Some of them were in pretty bad shape. The Covington House up on upper Main, it was about to fall in. I mean, literally. The roof had to be replaced. The Victorian Slocum House in Esther Short Park was a theater inside, and Clark College Drama Department used it, but the exterior was falling apart. People at *The Columbian* really wanted it to succeed. We got some private donations to make it look okay and be stable.

MH: Tell me about your best memory working with Officers Row.

PS: I think the day that we finally got in our hands the piece of paper that was a deed to all of these buildings, and I got to hand it off to the mayor. It was wonderful. It was really wonderful. And it became a little frightening, too, because then we had to do something about it. But we had the support to do it and we did.