

OAKWOOD ORAL HISTORY PROJECT TRANSCRIPT

Ruth Little (moved into Oakwood in 1971)

Interviewed by Peter Rumsey and Liisa Ogburn on August 1, 2012 at her gallery on Oberlin Street in Raleigh, NC

Ruth: I am Ruth Little. I live in the Oberland Village neighborhood of west Raleigh. I am an architectural historian and I write books about architecture. I'm also an artist.

Liisa: Ruth, tell me, when did you live in Oakwood?

Ruth: I moved into Oakwood in 1971 when I first came to Raleigh. I rented a house that was next to Harvey Bumgardner's house on East Street for about a year and then my husband and I bought one of the Pullen houses, the one at the corner of Oakwood and Elm Street, the big stuccoes house in about 1973 and we lived there until 1976.

Liisa: You were one of the first people to move in there. Tell me what that street looked like at that point.

Ruth: I was working for the State Historic Preservation Office on East Jones Street and so Oakwood was very convenient to where I worked as a state government employee and it was then in the throes of transition between urban homesteaders, many of whom were gay. The first group who moved really moved into the neighborhood were gay male couples and the older residents who had been there forever, many of the houses were boarding houses, everything was painted white, Valley Henderson had been there forever with her husband. She was one of the old stalwarts and it was a heady time. Plus we were faced with being exterminated between East and Bloodworth Street, the entire block all the way through the neighborhood was going to be wiped out by the East-West expressway, North-South expressway.

Liisa: What, in light of that, what caused you to buy that house?

Ruth: I think by the time we bought the house on Elm Street I believe that that threat was over because while I was still living in the rented house next to Harvey Bumgardner I was working for the State Preservation Office and we had just started to do historic district designations. I think the first one in North Carolina might have been Beaufort in 1970 as a National Register Historic District. So I think I probably began work on that historic district, National Register Historic District, probably in 1972 and I believe it was designated in 1973 on the National Register. It was so appropriate that I had a chance to do that because I worked for the State Preservation Office. That was what I did with the state and I was living in the neighborhood and I knew what kind of a threat we were facing. Did I answer that question?

Liisa: You did. You did.

Ruth: OK.

Peter: When did you first hear about the highway?

Ruth: I don't recollect. I think that the threat was present when I moved in and I remember very well the organizational meeting for the Society for the Preservation of Historic Oakwood which was at the church up there on Franklin and Elm Street, that small church, it was packed and it was just an amazing demonstration of how many people cared that the neighborhood be preserved.

Liisa: What led you to historic preservation yourself? What brought you into this?

Ruth: I had gone up to Brown University to get a Masters in Medieval Manuscript Illumination and very quickly this first summer I was there I got a job surveying the historic buildings in Newport, Rhode Island, for a huge teardown project and I discovered that it was so much more fun to be walking on the street, talking to people and looking at buildings than going into some archives and putting on white gloves and looking at old papers.

Liisa: Were you involved in that historic designation of Beaufort, that first North Carolina-

Ruth: I was not. I didn't work there then. I will still getting my Masters.

Peter: In doing the historic designation for the Oakwood neighborhood, was that the first in Raleigh and what made that, how did they make that decision to do Oakwood?

Ruth: All I remember is just maybe asking to do it and they said, my superiors and they said "Go ahead." There must have been some behind the scenes work because I was pretty low on the totem pole and I don't know, but we didn't have the bureaucracy down there at that point. We just sort of did what we thought we needed to do. I remember thinking, one of the first two years I was there, I remember thinking that Dorton Arena should be on the National Register. Well, it wasn't old enough because buildings typically, no, not typically, buildings have to be at least 50 years old, except in very rare conditions.

So I said "I want to nominate Dorton Arena and I know it's not 50 years old but I'll try to make the case because it was known all over the world as *The Raleigh Building*" and they said "Go ahead."

We were feeling our way along. It was a brand new program and it wasn't codified in any way what we did.

Peter: At that time in Oakwood the organization was created in the fall of 1972. There was the decision to create the Oakwood organization and charter it. There was then the decision to then designate it as a National Historic District. There was the coming together to defeat the highway. There was the first annual candlelight tour. How did those things, when did you first become aware of those variety of things, if could put them in some kind of sequence or order?

Ruth: I was not involved in the society until a few years later and I got put on the board. My first, I mean, some of the, there was a great deal of overt pressure in the early years to make Oakwood historic. We all had to put an electric candle in every single window for the Christmas tour and I had 40 windows and every one of the rooms in the house had one outlet and I bent over backward and went out and spent a lot of money on all these electric candles and these extension cords and just sweated that. Keeping our grass mowed, Valley Henderson kept, she would practically take her ruler out and measure how high your grass was and that was stressful. Then, remembering something else. Oh. My house was stuccoed and I thought it needed, it was a rather plain house, you know, 1885, and I thought that it really wanted to have a red door and it had beautiful double panel doors, so I painted my doors Episcopalian red like Episcopal churches and I thought that Valley would have a heart attack.

So there were, you know, in terms of saving Oakwood, there were some people had different ideas of what kind of freedoms we should have, and then, of course the historic district came along, the local historic district came along. By that time I think I had left the neighborhood in 1976.

Peter: What's the difference between the local and the national historic district?

Ruth: The national historic district does not have any review of alterations involved. There's no national register review commission. You get on the National Register and you just stay on it forever, whereas the local district set up an architectural review board and anything you did on the exterior had to be reviewed which will bring me to the coach lamp issue later.

Peter: Go ahead.

Ruth: Well, one of the things that I think the gay community thought that would be wonderful was that historic Oakwood should on each side of the door should be a pair of coach lamps. I think the model must have been Charleston or Savannah or something like that. You know, it was early in the preservation movement so people started installing coach lamps, although I don't know that any houses would ever have had them but it sort of became de rigueur to put coach lamps in and some of them were really too large and over the top. So, you know, there were all these sort of competing agendas going on.

Peter: How did those agendas work themselves out in the neighborhood?

Ruth: Well, I left in 1976 so I didn't see the (?) which would have been when the local district was established. Wasn't it the first local district in Raleigh? And what was the date on that?

Peter: I don't know for sure.

Ruth: OK. I don't think I was there when that happened, but that would have taken the burden of the self-policement and put it into the hands of the review committee.

Peter: That sounds like it's an issue that's common to preservation movements in various communities across the country.

Ruth: I think so, and the 70s were the huge teardown era. It was the first real decade of government historic preservation programs and all of these neighborhoods that were behind the wrecking ball were trying to save themselves so I think some of policing, self-policing was absolutely necessary. But I was young and rebellious and I wanted to save the neighborhood but I chafed under some of the policing.

Liisa: You said there was less bureaucracy; people could kind of suggest things. Were you looking to other places that were doing this at the same time or a couple of years ahead of you?

Ruth: Well, I wasn't. My involvement, the other main thing that I did besides do the National Register nomination was that I did the first walking tour. I mean, I just excerpted from the National Register nomination and then I had a neighbor over on Bloodworth Street who was a graphic designer and he laid it out and got that wonderful Victorian design for the cover and so we just kind of did that and so I wasn't, I was sort of trying to avoid the big, overall neighborhood political stuff. I do recall that before I left the Oakwood Athletic Association was established and I didn't ever even get involved in that. I mean, I really wasn't trying to be a leader in the neighborhood.

Peter: What was that?

Ruth: It rotated around from, it was just a neighborhood gathering.

Peter: Potluck suppers?

Ruth: I guess it was a potluck. I never went, so I don't know what it was. I thought the athletic part of it was exercising your elbow when you drank your beer.

Peter: Coming back to the highway and that meeting you described and the events that took place that fall, who were some of the people that you remember as having taken leadership at that time?

Ruth: I mean, I can remember being in the church for the organizational meeting but I do not remember anybody who was up front.

Peter: So it really was a community supported grassroots kind of support?

Ruth: Yeah. I think almost everyone understood the threat and so it really was like a town meeting.

Peter: Did the name Jim Quinn or Ron-

Ruth: Jim Quinn, Jim Quinn who later won the city council.

Peter: Yeah.

Ruth: Was he in Oakwood?

Peter: He wasn't in Oakwood but he was on the city council and Randy Hester and Ron Kershbaum.

Ruth: All the names are familiar but I wasn't involved in that at that level.

Peter: OK. When did you have a sense of success in the defeat of the highway? Can you remember any moments that took place there?

Ruth: No. I don't

Peter: OK.

Liisa: Can you tell me a little more about moving into that neighborhood, even if it is close to your work or convenient it was sketchy then. There were not, there were some old timers and I think I read maybe eight houses in 1972 had been bought but a lot of boarding houses. What drove you personally to it besides the convenience?

Ruth: I am a rescuer of historic architecture and that was, I see that as part of my mission in life. That was the place I needed to be, that was the frontier in Raleigh.

Liisa: Tell me a little bit more about that. Why is that important?

Ruth: My mother was a collector of old things and she collected and she made her rounds in Fayetteville where I grew up. Every week she'd go back down to all the secondhand stores and she'd drag all this stuff home and it would all be broken down. It might be missing a leg or a drawer or something, and she'd stack it back in her storage barns and she never fixed it up. I think my urge to restore and renew beautiful old things comes from that. I think I'm completing her work only on a larger scale with buildings and not just old gun cabinets or something.

Peter: That found its way into one of the books you've written most recently.

Ruth: Right. I wrote a memoir about a house type which I call a Carolina Cottage and I mentioned, I think that one of the main drivers behind my career has been completing the work that my mother started.

PETER: What is the Carolina Cottage?

Ruth: The Carolina Cottage is a side gabled frame house whose roof overhangs on the front to create a deep, very sheltered porch which people used to call a piazza or pizer and it goes back to the early 1700s in North Carolina, South Carolina, all over the south.

Peter: In your rescuing stray houses and neighborhoods you haven't confined yourself to the very old but to in fact live in a modernist home at the present time.

Ruth: I simply appreciate beauty no matter where it is or how old it is. I'm extremely eclectic.

Peter: And you live in presently in what is known as the Oberlin Community.

Ruth: The Oberlin Community, the largest and probably the most successful freedman's village outside of Raleigh after the end of the Civil War.

Peter: Tell us more about it.

Ruth: Oberlin Village was established on some of the land of the Cameron, Duncan Cameron plantation west of the boundary of Raleigh in 1866 and by about 1900 there were about 1,000 people living there, African Americans, freedman, many of whom were brick masons and artisans, middle class. They owned their own houses and I live there now. In recent years there have been a lot of teardowns and it's very racially mixed at this point, but there's still a wonderful atmosphere.

Peter: In Oakwood you did the initial survey that was then part of the nomination as a National Historic District.

Ruth: Right.

Peter: Describe for us how you would in that survey describe the Oakwood neighborhood and its origins and its character.

Ruth: Oakwood was a suburb built on the outskirts of town, the northeast edge of town, between the town boundary and Oakwood Cemetery which has been laid out in 1869 and it reminded me, it reminded me of older parts of Charleston and Savannah and places like that, strictly Victorian neighborhood. Some of the earliest

houses were second empire and had been built right after the Civil War with mansard roofs and towers and it was just a museum of Victorian architecture.

Liisa: Tell me about, taking you back to your younger self, your rebellious self, do you remember some of the more emotional thoughts that were going through your mind at that time when you were renting and when you were thinking of proposing (?).

Ruth: Ask that a different way.

Liisa: Sure. So, you were younger, you felt passionate about this, you saw that there was passion around you, you mentioned a moment ago it just felt like we had to save this neighborhood. Can you tell me a little bit more about what was driving you, what you saw when you walked down the streets at that point, why you thought it was really in danger and what could be lost?

Ruth: I was doing field work all over North Carolina in those early years and I don't think that, I knew that Oakwood was perhaps Raleigh's most intact historic neighborhood and you might see isolated Victorian houses like those in Oakwood in other places in North Carolina, but there were very few places in North Carolina where there were such a large collection and were so thoroughly preserved, and it was so well preserved because of poverty because beginning in the early 1900s the wealthy families that had lived there fled further out in the suburbs and that's when the neighborhood started to go down and therefore really the poverty really was a blessing for Oakwood because people who would have remodeled those old Victorian houses which were really reviled in the early 1900s they didn't get remodeled and so here were these intact Victorian houses which nobody had messed with so far.

Liisa: And those early years because everybody was kind of a renegade, there were tensions in how things should be protected. Can you talk a little bit about that? It sounds like it's a natural progression.

Ruth: The one incident that I recall very well was the house on Person Street and Oakwood Avenue and it's the, I think it's the northeast corner and it's the Carrie something house. His first name was Carrie. He was an insurance executive in Raleigh, a magnificent turn of the century, about 1900, transitional, I'm going to get wonky here, transitional Queen Anne colonial revival house with a magnificent wraparound porch and stained glass that looked like Louis Tiffany might have done it. It was a splendid house and two men bought it and immediately one of the men began adding earlier stained glass windows and earlier big brackets that had come from a house that had been demolished in downtown Raleigh. It offended me because it spoiled that beautiful original architectural design of the house and I didn't want Oakwood to start developing in that way where people took wonderful example of a particular style of architecture and started gawking it up. The term, I did not create, invent this term, but the term, it disturbed other people to, so the

term for this new style that had been created on the Carrie blank house was homo Baroque. Well, I was disturbed enough about that as setting a precedent that I wrote a letter to the editor of the News and Observer decrying that trend and talking about what made Oakwood great which set off a firestorm in the neighborhood between the people who were supporting the idea that you could alter your house any way you wanted to and the people who wanted to preserve and restore the houses in their original designs. I recall a meeting of the Society for the Preservation of Historic Oakwood where people separated into factions and they were defending one side and the other side. I believe that might have been about a year before I moved out of the neighborhood and the conflict really, really disturbed me. I'm not the kind of person who likes to get up in a situation like that and fight. So, I did my fighting with the letter to the editor and then just set back and let other people sort it out. And I suppose that was one of the issues that probably led to our being a local historic district with an architectural review board, but I was kind of in the process of leaving at that point so I don't quite know the exact sequence of events.

Peter: That's a great wrapping together of that and those issues. Go ahead.

Liisa: I was looking to you.

Peter: Because its germane to your body of work, cemeteries have always been something that's important to you. Tell us about that.

Ruth: I fell completely in love with historic grave markers during my field work one day down near Lillington in Harnett County near Wake County. I found an 18th century brownstone sculptured gravestone kind of in the shape of a human torso with a face and I went back a few weeks later to take a picture of it and it had disappeared from the cemetery. That set me off on a quest to document, to photograph and document historic cemeteries all over North Carolina, and I had a two year grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities to do that and the result of that was my book Sticks and Stones: Three Centuries of North Carolina Architecture. I guess I'm now still the gravestone queen.

Peter: We come to what probably is the most productive question that we can ask in an interview like this and that is simply are there any other spots that come to mind, any emotions, any events?

Ruth: Well, I'm just so struck by how far Oakwood has come in over 40 years and when I moved away from Oakwood in 1976 I really thought that it had just about reached its potential. It was glorious at that point and I never had any idea how much more growth was going to be possible for the neighborhood and it just, the neighborhood keeps on finding new frontiers to conquer and it is maybe the most wonderful historic district in North Carolina.

Peter: Thank you.

Liisa: Thank you very much.