

OAKWOOD ORAL HISTORY PROJECT TRANSCRIPT

Stewart Woodard moved into Oakwood in 1972

Interviewed by Liisa Ogburn on December 1, 2011 at his business, Stewart Woodard Galleries at 715 West Morgan Street.

Liisa: If you could just say something so I can check out the levels on this.

Stewart: Okay, I don't know what to say. I don't know what you are looking for.

Liisa: Okay that is fine. That sounds fine. Let me just adjust this up a little bit. Anytime you put your coffee cup down its going to make a big noise.

Stewart: Okay.

Liisa: If you could introduce yourself.

Stewart: I am Stewart Woodard; I am probably one of the original people to move into Oakwood when it started to come back up. My first house, I think I bought in 1972 or '73. It was 504 Polk St. Where Sim Talton lived.

Liisa: Did you immediately buy or did you rent before that?

Stewart: No, I bought it. Frank and Delaney, that lived next door, they had bought it when it came on the market. Then through a bunch of us who were friends, we all moved over there about the same time. Ronnie Ellis, Eric Ennis, and Bill Makepeace, Corinne and Jerry, I forget their last name. We all moved in about the same time or within a year of each other.

Liisa: Were you friends with them before? What caused you to go into Oakwood?

Stewart: I was ready for a house and it was the most economical thing that I could find, plus I fell in love with the neighborhood.

Liisa: Describe the neighborhood visually, walking down Polk St at that time.

Stewart: It was a slum, basically. Frank and Peggy Delaney, on the corner of East and Polk St, had a very neat looking, very charming house. A young couple across the street on the corner. Jerry and Corinne, I forget their last name, had a very neat house. Basically everything else was slum. The house that I bought... it only had one bathroom, only had a claw foot tub in it and a commode. The lavatory was in the kitchen. No heat, no air conditioning. It was basically a slum; the house across the street from me actually had cars jacked up on cinder blocks in the front yard.

Liisa: Do you remember what you paid for that first house?

Stewart: Yeah. \$7500.00

Liisa: You think '72?

Stewart: I think '72 or '73. I was 22 or 23 at the time.

Liisa: Your sister mentioned that she and her mother would come up and help you work on the house some days.

Stewart: Yes, they helped paint. I did most of the work myself and my partner Jim Cash. We did just about everything ourselves. My family including aunts, uncles, and cousins would come and help paint and strip the wall paper. In fact, the only thing I had done professionally was the hardwood floors, of course heating and air, plumbing and rewiring. All minor repairs and stuff we did ourselves, just because of economics.

Liisa: That was a time when the city was considering putting the north-south freeway through there. Was that the case when you bought or right after?

Stewart: It was kind of going on at the time. There was still a threat that they would take it.

Liisa: What do you remember about that time, among the folks you met that lived there?

Stewart: I am trying to think. Houses were so economical at that time; no one felt that if they did it you would really lose money. We put up a little bit of a fight as I remember. We got signatures from everybody that we knew opposing it. I really don't remember very much about that.

Liisa: Ronnie Ellis, I believe, mentioned that, that was one of the things that motivated the Candlelight Tour, was to bring people around the city to see these historic houses.

Stewart: Yes, also and that little bit of money we made those first few years, gave us a little bit of money to help in putting flyers and sending postcards, but mainly flyers to send out and sign and send back in. The first tour was to help cover postage and whatever we could do to fight it, in a small way.

Liisa: Were you in the first Christmas Tour?

Stewart: On the first Christmas tour, because I had just moved in, I have to think back. I had moved in, in August and three days after moving in, had a fire, so I had to move back out for, I think, two months and then got back in and actually, my house served as the tea room for refreshments that first year. We made home made cookies, did some type of tea and cider. It was kind of set up like a tea room.

Liisa: Do you remember anything about that Christmas Tour?

Stewart: No, actually that was the one, that it very lightly snowed that day. It kind of made it real festive.

Liisa: Were you in the courtroom, when they made the decision about the north south freeway?

Stewart: I don't think so; I don't think so, no.

Liisa: Were you involved in making the flyers and sending those out.

Stewart: Oh yeah, we all did that as a community project. I think we met at, some at Valley Henderson's house, Bill and Ames' house, I remember.

Liisa: Tell me about one of those meetings.

Stewart: Gosh, I really don't remember. It was mainly conversation, and writing, and filling things in, good food and drink, and conversation. It was as much social as it was political.

Liisa: Now when Oakwood has barbeques, the picnicking, or other events, probably there are easily 200 people. How many people would you say come to those events?

Stewart: Well over the years, I was there for ten years, over the years it grew. Every year after the Christmas party, we would have a wrap up party that night. I think the last time I was on the tour, it was probably two years after I was the tour last time, the wrap up party was at my house, for everyone that worked on it. For that party, we had over 100 people. Of course, I was there when we started the athletic club, probably at the average meeting we would have 50 people, after it got going and more houses sold.

Liisa: Tell me about, who came up with the idea fro the athletic club?

Stewart: If I remember, I think it was, one of them was Bobby Dudley and Clark Dudley. It kind of happened when we were doing a, it snowed, and we were doing a soup party at some ones house, and it was decided that we should do it once a month. We would call in the Oakwood Athletic Club, where everybody would like to bend their arm and drink, so that was our exercise.

Liisa: (laughs) You lived in two different houses in Oakwood.

Stewart: Yes, I lived in, I think it was 504 Polk and then I actually sold it and bought a larger house on East St. I don't remember the name of it, the number of it. It was just around the corner, I moved everything on a wheelbarrow.

Liisa: What are some memories from that time, that early time of living in Oakwood?

Stewart: That was one of the greatest times of my life. I don't know how it is now, because like I said, I haven't been there in a long time. It was a real neighborhood, where you walked the streets and sat on front porches on Sunday afternoon, and talked and chatted. It would just accidentally end up being a party someplace. It was very social; it was a very great time, for that time in my life.

Liisa: You said at a point houses actually started selling.

Stewart: Yeah, I think I was the first house to be restored and resold. I think I was. I paid \$7500.00 for it and I think we sold it for \$34,000.00. I think that is right. The second one I bought was \$17,500.00. Here again, it was just to pieces, it did have heating and air, but we had to redo it. It was divided into two apartments.

Liisa: There were lots of apartments and rentals in Oakwood at that time.

Stewart: Oh yes, it was full of them. Like I said, it was not some very nice people that lived in the neighborhood, but slowly it was cleaned up.

Liisa: Where were you before Raleigh?

Stewart: I am originally from here, from Lake Forest actually. Raleigh was always home. When I finished school, I decided Raleigh was where I wanted to be. I came back and rented an apartment and then discovered Oakwood.

Liisa: Oakwood also, there were also a number of gay men at that time who really came into the neighborhood and reclaimed it. How did you find, of the state of North Carolina, that was one of the few...

Stewart: It wasn't a big issue. It wasn't a big deal. It wasn't a big deal. It was part of life. Of course, the gays were the first to move in, then all the younger couples started moving in. People with teenaged children. I think it just had to do with all of them, a love of older houses. They all had to be redone.

Liisa: Any other big things, the Candlelight Tour started when you were there, the Athletic club.

Stewart: The Athletic Club, and different, and all kinds of fundraisers. The carousel thing that we did to raise money for Pullen Park carousel. Which I think was 25 years ago, the first time it was restored. I can't remember what we made. I think the Athletic Club and the Christmas Tours were the main events that I helped start and continue on till this day.

Liisa: Absolutely.

Stewart: I have been back, once or twice for the Athletic Club and I guess it was last year when they started the home coming, where they invited a bunch of the older residents, that were there years ago.

Liisa: Right. The Garden Club, was that going on when you were there?

Stewart: Yeah, but of course, you know that was the ladies' thing. I wasn't very involved in that. I just remember that was kind of run by Valley Henderson and Mrs. Rodout and I can't remember who else, but mainly Valley Henderson.

Liisa: Did Ames Christopher also have a garden club?

Stewart: Not that I know of. Ames was a very serious gardener and very beautiful grounds and worked in them all the time. We had lots of garden parties and different events down there for different charities. I don't remember much about what. Then there was Harvey Bumgarden Rose garden, which was always beautiful and wonderful. Not very many houses had "gardens."

Liisa: Other memories that you have from that time, I heard that Sir Richard Black lived really close to you.

Stewart: Yeah, Richard lived in several houses out there. One time, I guess the first house Richard moved in, he was out my back door. I was here and he was here. We kind of shared a backyard together. It was kind of, it was just wonderful, wonderful, wonderful, years. Deciding to leave was a big decision.

Liisa: What caused you to leave?

Stewart: I wanted to be in Hayes Barton. That within itself.

Liisa: I have heard the stories from Ronnie Ellis, Eric Ennis, Richard Black; those are the ones that immediately come to mind. Of course has mentioned you, everyone has mentioned Ames Christopher as being very key. Any other memories that come up from that period that are different from how-

Stewart- Just the fact that it was a true neighborhood where you depended on each other. In the summer, afternoon walks, when you got home from work and just sitting on everybody's front porch, and conversation, more and more would walk by and you would kind of gather in little groups. There were several, what do we call them? Rumming dinners, where we would do it. I just loved the social aspect of it. The closeness and the Herrings and Matilda Matthews, Ben and Philip, and there are so many people that I am still close too.

Liisa: Betsy Buford was supposed to do the interview, but she has been caring for her husband, but she-

Stewart: Of course Betsy has been over there forever and Mary Lou, it was just great. Not enough good things to say.

Liisa: Great. Any other memories that come to mind that you would like me to touch or that is unique to that time period, or unique to that neighborhood?

Stewart: No, it was just comraderie and a sense of a true neighborhood. Where you could go borrow a cup of sugar. We would even, if some house had been featured for some party or some magazine, we would kind of put some, we were all young, we would borrow stuff for photo shoots form each others houses. It was great.

Liisa: You mentioned there was a fire at your house that was probably before you got to know other people and could rely on.

Stewart: Yeah the night of the fire, I had only moved in for three or four days and there was a big change in temperature and it was actually on the back porch from spontaneous combustion. I was having a sit down dinner party. Someone looked out the window and saw flames in the windows of the house next door. We thought it was the house next door, only it was my house on the back end. (Laughs) It didn't burn badly. One bedroom got burned and the back porch burned. All the new wiring got burned out, that is why I had to move back out.

Liisa: You didn't know many neighbors at that point, but did they help you out in any way?

Stewart: I knew all the neighbors, even the renters you knew. You knew all the neighbors the minute you moved in.

Liisa: Did they help you during that period?

Stewart: Yeah, as best they could as I remember, in bringing food and helping clean up afterwards, and being very supportive. Valley Henderson and the Rideouts and Bill and Ames. And Ronnie and Peggy and Frank and Jerry and Corinne, and god what was that other young couple's name? Missy and...what was her husband's name? I don't remember. And then of course a lot of the old resident who had been there forever, I mean like, the Young sisters that lived down the street who were Jimmy Stronach's mother's sister who had lived there their whole life and Mrs. Stronach and the Radouts and...

Liisa: I've interviewed a lot of those folks, actually, that you've mentioned.

Stewart: Gosh, what was the name of that woman that Ronnie bought his house from? His second house. Can't remember, but you knew the old residents, too. The only ones you didn't know too well were the ones at the houses that were kind of slum-ish.

Liisa: Thank you.

Stewart: Sure.

Liisa: Any other memories that you'd like to add?

Stewart: Oh, there's so many, but not anything that comes out. The main thing that always just stands out is just the feeling of the true neighborhood and the people and the closeness and the fun and then when anybody would move in and was fixing up their house, everybody kind of chipped in as best they could with their abilities.

Liisa: Yeah, that's lost.

Stewart: Do you live over there?

Liisa: I do. I live on Person Street. I live in the McCloud's old house.

Stewart: Okay. You know Barbara and Jim? Or BK as she goes by now. Yeah, 'cause they had what, three houses over there?

Liisa: Great. I'm sorry. So you mentioned that people did step in as best they could after the fire. Any other example during your period, whether it's happened to you or someone else in the neighborhood, that kind of encapsulates...

Stewart: No, because it was mostly a happy, carefree life, and if a neighbor had trouble for whatever reason, everybody kind of stepped in and was very supportive. There wasn't a time of bad things happening. It was mostly positive.

Lisa: Well, thank you. I appreciate it.

Stewart: Sure! If I think of anything else- (end)