

INTERVIEW #2

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Interviewer: TOM WILSON

Interviewee: BARBARA LAXSON

Wilson: My name is Tom Wilson and I'm doing an oral history with Mrs. Barbara Laxson who lives in the Burley community. It is May 12, 2015. We're sitting in the kitchen of her home, which is one of the original ones built by the Brotherhood back in 1898. Mrs. Laxson, I just want you to talk about your life when you moved back, when you moved to Burley for the first time, and what the area was like, and something about the people in your family.

Laxson: Okay. We moved here when I was nine years old, 1949. This house was empty at the time. It had been owned by a bachelor that was part of the Brotherhood. His family was. When he passed away, he actually left it to the church. There is a Burley Church. It was this house and a woodshed, a chicken house, a cellar, and three acres, and it was in kind of a dilapidated condition but we were so delighted that the Burley Church was willing to let us live in it. We were a family of eight, and really had no place to go at the time. We were looking for a place to live. My father had seen Burley and decided that it was paradise, and he wanted to live here, so . . . so they were looking for a place to live, and as we were a part of the church, we had been going to

the church before we even considered moving here to Burley. The blackberry vines covered the entire yard, and the weeds were up to the bottom of the windows. There was no bathroom, and we used an outdoor toilet. There was running water in the kitchen but no hot water. There was electricity but the wiring was the old kind. It was we believed comparatively safe . . . but anyway we moved in and gradually . . . well, my mother immediately got several bottles of Clorox and we started cleaning, and we cleaned and we cleaned. You could smell, you know, the age of the house and the fact that it had been empty for a long time. But we were thrilled to have a place to live. And we had a baby that was just one year old, our brother was just one. And so three years after we moved in, my mom took the test and became the postmaster for Burley, and the Burley Post Office was at that time down next door to the Burley Store, and she would walk to work. She worked there for 17 years. During that time my sisters and I . . . we were actually about . . . not quite a mile from the border of Kitsap County and Pierce County, and so we could go to either the South Kitsap schools or the Gig Harbor schools, and so we did trading off a number of times, and went to the different schools. And we would catch the bus, and it took about a half an hour to get to school at that time. And four years after we . . . no, I think it was maybe five years after we moved into this house, my mother's aunt in New Mexico passed away and Mama inherited \$3,000, so we were very, very wealthy, I guess you might say, at that time. Anyway, the Burley Church sold us this house and three acres for \$1,000, which was pretty wonderful at that time.

Wilson: So this would have been 19 . . .

Laxson: 1954. My dad changed the dining room to be the kitchen, and the kitchen became the hall and the bathroom, so we had a hot water tank. We could actually take baths in the bathtub, and this was exciting. We had a wood stove, which I loved. We loved wood heat. These were happy memories. Let me see . . .

Wilson: And your dad was a logger?

Laxson: My dad was a logger, and that's how he came to Burley, he was logging for Mr. Anderson, and so that's how he actually saw Burley and decided he wanted to live in this little valley.

Wilson: And Mr. Anderson was one of the founding . . .

Laxson: No, Mr. Anderson actually didn't live right here. He lived over in Pierce County, and he logged all over . . . but we had known him for many, many years. And so about the time my mom took the test to become a postmaster at Burley, my dad took a test to become an employee in the Navy Yard in Bremerton, so he worked there . . . he worked there the same amount of time that Mama did at the Post Office, for 17 years. And so my older sister actually was, she was almost graduated from high school by the time we moved in here. So she left home and went into the Army, and then it wasn't too long before my second sister went to Seattle and started working as a secretary, and so gradually my little brother starting growing up and I remember my brother . . . we, my sister and I had the bedroom upstairs, and we figured out something really cool that if we talked to our little brother and told him, "Would you go upstairs and

get something for me, and I'll time ya and I'll see how fast you go." And if he'd go a certain amount of time then we'd give him something. So we had him fooled. He did that for a long time just to be proud that he could do it fast. Then he finally caught on to us and that didn't last. But anyway, Burley was a friendly place. My mom knew everybody in Burley because they came to the Post Office. And the Burley Church at that time . . . over the years had many different pastors but they knew almost everybody in Burley, too.

Wilson: When I have spoken to the people at the Burley Church, they said that was . . . part of that church was part of the original building.

Laxson: It was.

Wilson: And the school district gave it to them so they could start a school over there.

Laxson: And it was a school . . . they had a school there in 1922. We have pictures of the school. The girls that live over here, their grandfather was a little boy up at that school, and she is 60 now, so that was a long time ago.

Wilson: What did you do around here for fun? What were your activities in the summertime?

Laxson: Well, actually we helped my mom quite a bit. She had a garden. She canned in the fall. We helped with that. But . . . we could go outside. We had a bicycle. We

loved riding the bicycle. I was kind of a tomboy, and the neighborhood boys would come and we'd play baseball out in the field. A neighbor had a horse, and he would let me ride his horse sometimes. There were a lot of young people in Burley in those years, a lot of children. There aren't so many now. They have grown up and left, but there were a lot of young people.

Wilson: When I look at the records of the original community, there was a lot of farming in here. Do you still remember any of those farms that were . . .

Laxson: Well, across the street was a dairy. I'll never forget the man of the family, when he milked the cows in the evening, he sang opera. I could hear him . . . you could hear him all over the place singing opera.

Wilson: Was he good?

Laxson: He was very good. He had a beautiful voice. I never forgot that. And over the years, the property was sold and divided up and they moved the buildings, so it's not quite as picturesque as it was at one time

Wilson: I actually got to see one of the books that was left over from those days. I think it had a date in it of 1901 or 1902 and it came from Chicago. Apparently the community had a lot of supporters from outside the area who would send in supplies, trying to bolster the conditions here for these people.

Laxson: Right. Because the people that started this actually were from Back East. They came to Seattle and then they decided that they would have these communes because they were really trying to spread socialism.

Wilson: And they thought because Washington state at that time was very, very progressive, and they thought . . . I've read the history, and they thought they would seed the area, but it failed. But the community is . . .

Laxson: Yeah, the community continued on, and the people, the people are the community.

Wilson: That's one thing that gets kinda lost, because everybody tells me the center of the community now is the Burley Store and the Burley Post Office and the Burley Town Hall, but it's actually the people. And, I discovered, it's the Burley Bible Church across Olympic, which I never realized until I spoke to you the first time, that Olympic . . . or all these roads were cut off when they built Highway 16, they actually extended . . . so the Burley community is actually bigger than what you think it is because it did go across the highway.

Laxson: Yeah, it covers a lot of area actually.

Wilson: How much of the, oh, you know, the Burley Lagoon now is pretty polluted, but in those days did you guys go out there and fish and . . .

Laxson: I don't . . . you know, the boys would be the ones . . . they used to, years ago, but they did fish in the Burley Creek.

Wilson: The creek that runs behind your home?

Laxson: By my property. A lot of people fished in there, and I don't know if they still do or not, but they did. But the fish come back to the bay, you know, through there, and now with them protecting the wetlands, you can't do anything anywhere near the water.

Wilson: And occasionally you'll see signs on the bridge over where it crosses on Spruce, as: "This pond is polluted. Do not eat anything or take anything from the water."

Laxson: Well, the population has grown tremendously, and then you can imagine, with so many homes in the area . . .

Wilson: So your mom, when she would go grocery shopping, would she go strictly, would she go to the Burley Store, or would she . . .

Laxson: Oh, no, we'd go to Gig Harbor, the grocery stores in Gig Harbor.

Wilson: There was one downtown that just closed awhile ago. It was like a general store.

Laxson: It wasn't a grocery store?

Wilson: Well, I think it was a grocery store but it was open for years and just closed a few years ago. Do you remember that store?

Laxson: Right down in old Gig Harbor?

Wilson: What's the name of that place?

Laxson: You know, my memory . . . I'm 75, so my memory isn't that great. But we shopped there for years, I know that.

Wilson: Actually I went in there a few times myself, and my memory is not much better, and I'm only 55.

Laxson: I think they have a drugstore there that is still there that has been there for many, many years.

Wilson: And I think they built part of the land they used, they built a park right in there, too, where the store was.

Laxson: Originally now, right there in that same complex, was a bowling alley.

Wilson: In Gig Harbor?

Laxson: There was a bowling alley there for many, many years, and my dad went bowling there, I had gone bowling there, and that was something that a lot of people participated in.

Wilson: Bowling.

Laxson: Yeah.

Wilson: I've been told that the Burley Olalla Road, it was the main road to Gig Harbor before Highway 16 came in. So if you wanted to go to Port Orchard, would you go . . . how would you get there?

Laxson: Oh, this road didn't extend past Burley originally. Spruce, that goes up next to my house, was dirt. It went up to Sidney, which . . . that was the main road.

Wilson: That was the main road? So Bethel Burley didn't extend past, didn't extend into town?

Laxson: No.

Wilson: Do you know when that was put in?

Laxson: Which one?

Wilson: Bethel Burley, when they completed it?

Laxson: Bethel Burley I think was 1925 is when it opened. Now this picture right here, that is Spruce. I think that turns on Park in that picture.

Wilson: Oh, I'm going to have include this picture in the final paper.

Laxson: That goes up and turns onto Park and that goes to the park over there.

Wilson: I read in the old documents that Spruce is one of the main places they skidded trees down off of the hill in the very beginning, and that's how Spruce actually became a road because it was a gentle hill and they could slide the trees down . . .

Laxson: And I wouldn't be surprised if Pine was somewhat the same, you know, being named after a tree.

Wilson: Did you go into Port Orchard at all, back in the . . .

Laxson: Oh, yes, we did. We went shopping in Port Orchard. I went to school in Port Orchard. I was in the sixth grade in Port Orchard.

Wilson: What was the name of the school?

Laxson: East Port Orchard.

Wilson: So none of the schools that are in the community today, like Burley Glenwood or Cedar, they weren't even there?

Laxson: No, they didn't exist at that time.

Wilson: Where was South Kitsap High School located at that time?

Laxson: In Port Orchard.

Wilson: About the same location?

Laxson: It's in the exact same location as it was when I went to school.

Wilson: Downtown Port Orchard now is . . . I don't want to say it's run down, but it has seen better days.

Laxson: It has, but then they're building it up, too. They are building it up.

Wilson: What was it like in the '50s and '60s? Was it pretty vibrant? Or has it always been . . .

Laxson: Well, I think they have quite a bit going for Port Orchard. They still work to have activities, you know, for the Fourth of July and different things. Actually we went to Gig Harbor quite a bit. Gig Harbor, of course, has grown tremendously. Peninsula High School is only right down here at Purdy and that's where I actually graduated. My older sister and I were the only ones out of our whole family that graduated from Peninsula.

Wilson: And you went off to college?

Laxson: In Bremerton.

Wilson: School of Nursing?

Laxson: Yeah.

Wilson: Can you remember anything downtown Port Orchard of the stores? Right now we have Safeway and we have Albertsons.

Laxson: Yeah, we had Ted, Bill and Mel, I think they called it . . . TB&M . . . and now they still have some of the stores that they had at that time. The courthouse was there, I mean, you know, that's our county seat. Then the little museum is right there on Sidney, and those have been there for many, many years, so they have a lot of buildings that are still there, in Port Orchard, historical landmarks.

Wilson: The Burley Store used to be a gas station? I've seen pictures with gas pumps.

Laxson: Yes. We actually had two stores and gas stations, because this yellow house over here was also a store with gas station at one time.

Wilson: I've seen pictures with the old visible pumps.

Laxson: Yes.

Wilson: So when did you leave the community?

Laxson: Well, I left . . . when I graduated from high school, I went to Seattle to work, so I was gone, but always came home. I'd come home on weekends. I stayed in Washington, so I came home a lot, but I lived in Seattle and worked, then I went to Alaska and worked in a children's home for a time, but I've always been around Washington. Always come back to Washington 'cause it's such a beautiful, beautiful place.

Wilson: What brought you back to the community?

Laxson: Well, my family lived here. I grew up here.

Wilson: I mean what made you come back and stay permanently? And when did you come back and stay permanently?

Laxson: Okay. I was married, and we came back from Mississippi. My husband was working in Mississippi for a year. We came back and I always wanted to have a place so I could live next to my mother and father and take care of them. So we moved a mobile home in behind this house in 1985. My husband and I were divorced in 1987, and then I took care of my parents here in this home until they passed away. But that was always my goal, and that one of the reasons I took nursing because I wanted to be able to take care of my family.

Wilson: What are the big differences between the community in 1955 say and 1988?

Laxson: Just different people. I can't really tell you what the big changes are. I have watched them happen over the years. You know, when things happen over the years gradually, you just kind of accept them. If you're gone for a long time and come back, then you notice them more.

Wilson: The Burley Store. When I first moved to this community it was boarded up, and you told me, when we were talking earlier, that your dad was really disappointed when that store closed . . . that was a good story you told me about your dad walking down there.

Laxson: Daddy passed away in 1990, but in the '80s he was so disappointed when that store closed because he just loved having everything the same, so when they opened up again, he would walk down there and even buy candy bars, anything. He wanted to feel like he was a part of keeping the store open. He was very sentimental about that

store, as a lot of people were, and it has been a place where people always know that they can go . . . if you have an interest and need to ask someone about something, they can go there and you meet your friends there, and the Post Office is the same way. You run into so many people in the community at the Post Office.

Wilson: You told me, when we talked previously, that your mom was in the Post Office when she was injured.

Laxson: Right.

Wilson: Can we talk about that a little bit?

Laxson: Okay, yes. It was down next to the Burley Store at that time, the building was. It was quite an old building that Mama was postmaster in, and it stayed there until 1969 when a car going about 110 miles an hour, driven by a woman that was drinking, ran out of control and jumped the ditch and ran into the vehicles there and then hit the corner of the building and knocked it over about four feet. My mother was standing in the doorway, leaving to the outside, and she wasn't hit, but it threw her back so that she almost went through the wall, and it injured her so badly that she had to retire. I think the safe, a 1200-pound safe, was thrown so that it went right through the back wall. That building had to be destroyed then, and they put a trailer in over here next to the Burley Hall until they were able to decide what they were going to do about fixing a new post office.

Wilson: And she was badly injured?

Laxson: Oh, she was very badly injured. We thought she was going to die, but she pulled through and she lived to be almost 92.

Wilson: At that time, there were no hospitals in the Peninsula area?

Laxson: Well, there was Harrison Hospital in Bremerton, and that was it.

Wilson: And that was probably about 20 miles away?

Laxson: Well, about 17-20 miles. There was Harrison, and then the Navy Hospital. That was the only ones around.

Wilson: Did they have the EMS service back then?

Laxson: You know, not a whole lot.

Wilson: How did she get to the hospital?

Laxson: Oh, she went by ambulance. They took her to the hospital. They found me . . . I was somewhere else in this area, but they called me and told me my mom was dying, and I thought that she was dying, and all my way in to the hospital that day, it scared me half to death. It took her quite a long time . . . she injured her back so she lost about

5 or 6", and turned out to be about 5' 9" or something like that, but she could never work again.

Wilson: There are a couple more small things I'd like to talk about, things about this area. I'm not sure how many times you traveled to Tacoma, but the Kitsap Peninsula, between the time that Galloping Gertie fell, and the new Gertie was built, was pretty isolated except for ferries. If you wanted to travel, you had a choice. Could you actually travel from here, as we can now, down through Olympia and back up, or was none of that . . .

Laxson: Well, you had to go, in order to do that, you had to go on Highway 101, go to Shelton and all the way around, and I'm sure you probably could do that then, but it would have been extremely inconvenient. So in order to get to Tacoma, we had to take the ferry from Gig Harbor to Tacoma.

Wilson: When you were a girl, were those trips to the really big city, were they like something you would look forward to?

Laxson: Well, I don't remember so much going over there to go shopping, truthfully. We probably went to Bremerton more. But they had tent meetings. I remember tent meetings. Oral Roberts I think came to Tacoma, and that was so exciting. We got to ride over on the ferry and go to the tent meetings. And we did go over there sometimes and go shopping . . . so it was exciting riding on the ferry.

Wilson: For a young girl I can imagine it would be.

Laxson: Yes.

Wilson: Now the Burley community, the Burley Bible Church . . . part of this history that I find really, really interesting is: When they did the Brotherhood, the original man who started it left the community, and he understood that the community needed something to hold it together, so he brought in two Unitarian ministers and for awhile they were successful in stabilizing the community, but unfortunately it didn't hold together, at least the Brotherhood. The community did hold together but the official Brotherhood disbanded. Now I was told that the Burley Bible Church started again in 1950. And to a lot of people that I have spoken to in the community, that is what held this community together through the '50s and '60s and up until today. It's another center of this community.

Laxson: Right.

Wilson: Can you talk about the place that the church plays in the community?

Laxson: Well, I believe . . . the church has always been the center of my life because I am a Christian and I believe in God, and so we started going to church, at the Burley Church, as soon as we moved here. Like I said, we had been going to another church prior to that. They had services over in the hall before the church, you know, they were able to use the building that they have now. It's always been there for people who were

in need and they could go to the pastor if they had problems, and even now they reach out into the community, and they have the DVBS, which is Daily Vacation Bible School, in the summer. They have different . . . and also the AWANA program which is for young people, and a youth group, and we need that for our young people, because life is getting very confusing in our world. And the church has . . . one time we went through First Aid classes . . . and we worked on those things, what to do in case of an emergency, if we had a disaster, which is a possibility, if we had . . . Mount Rainier erupted or we had an earthquake . . . and the church would be there for people if we had a terrible storm and had no power, they could come to the church and they would help feed them or whatever they needed.

Wilson: That's probably happened several times because we've had the storms of '84 and '85 and it seems like every five years we have another storm of the century, and out here, this community, we're on the end of the line for power. We're always the last ones to get it back.

Laxson: And when the wind blows, the trees fall and that does it. That's one problem.

Wilson: So the church opens its doors to the community, church members and non-church members alike is what I understand.

Laxson: Well, if there was a disaster, they would be willing to help, whoever needed help. I'm so thankful for that.

Wilson: What are your wishes and your hopes for the Burley community, if you can look out 20 years from now or 30 years from now. If you could . . . where do you see it? Do you think it'll survive?

Laxson: Well, I hope it will always have a community spirit and that people will care about each other. It would be, you know, with things the way they are going in our country right now, we have no idea what's happening in the future, but we need these communities . . .

(Sound of doorbell - pause)

Wilson: We had a visitor, Mr. King from the Burley Community Hall, just stop by, and he's going to sit in and listen for the last few minutes of our interview. So we were talking about what you hope the community will be in the next 20-30 years, that you hope it would stay together.

Laxson: Yes. I hope that they will have that community spirit so that . . . we want to be there for people when they need it.

Wilson: And the reason you're sitting down and letting me listen to your stories, and you have given me so many wonderful documents, is because you want this history preserved, it's important to you.

Laxson: It is very important.

Wilson: Well, Mrs. Laxson, I really appreciate your time, and it's been a pleasure talking to you.

Laxson: Thank you very much, Tom.

(end of recording)

VERIFICATION:

I make the following statement under penalty of perjury under the laws of the State of Washington and affirm that the following is true and accurate to the best of my knowledge.

I, the undersigned, do hereby certify that a recording of the foregoing transcript was given to me, that it was transcribed by me, that the transcript is as complete a transcript as could be obtained from said recording, to the extent that it was either audible or intelligible, that I have produced said transcript to the best of my abilities, and that any errors or omissions in the transcript are/may be in no way be an intentional and/or deliberate act of negligence by me.

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