

***Gordon D. Orr, Jr.***

Interviewed by Hallie Lou Blum on February 26, 1986 in Madison, Wisconsin.

Oral history tape number: 4

*This is an interview of Gordon Orr, on February 26, 1986, in Madison, Wisconsin by Hallie Lou Blum. Gordon, we would appreciate it if you could tell us something about Taychopera.*

I think it's best to go back in history a while. I'm not quite sure who did found Taychopera. I was not one of the charter members, although [I was] a very early member of the organization. Taychopera was established as a limited-purpose historical organization. Its purpose was primarily the identification and preservation of historic buildings within what was known as the four lakes area. The word "Taychopera" is derived from Indian [Ho-Chunk], a word meaning "of the four lakes." Robert B. L. Murphy was the first president of Taychopera and I followed as the second president of Taychopera. I am not quite sure of the order of the succeeding presidents after us, but the organization began to slide downhill. Perhaps some of this was this very limited purpose, a purpose which one associates with funding, and there wasn't too much of that available at the time.

*What year was that?*

I believe that I was president about 1970 or 1971. I can't quite be sure. I would assume that Taychopera started around 1968. It seemed to have very little life in the years following the presidencies of Mr. Murphy and myself. As the story unfolds, you'll see why this was one reason Historic Madison had a purpose.

Historic Madison, I believe, was more the child of the thoughts of Leigh Mollenhoff who, at least in 1973, was chairman of the Madison Landmarks Commission. Leigh had recognized the lack of community support organization for the Landmarks Commission and began to see that a void did exist in Madison – [one] that many of our neighboring communities had already remedied. This was a local historical organization – one that could be concerned about capturing the history of people, of events, of things that all contributed to the development of the community.

She [Leigh] assembled an ad hoc committee during the summer of 1973, made up of people within the community who were interested and had shown themselves to be leaders in some element of historical activity within the community. At that time Jim Sanborn, from the staff of the Madison city planning department, assumed the role of secretary for the ad hoc committee and was of great assistance to the group. During its initial meetings, the organization – the ad hoc committee, that is – asked Walter Scott to be its chairman and me to be the vice-chairman of this initial organizing committee.

The committee's responsibilities included establishing a statement of purpose for the organization; it included developing bylaws for the organization; it included establishing categories of membership and what the due structures should be; and then presenting this to a wider body of people in the community to see if, indeed, an historical organization was something the city of Madison should have.

Madison always seemed to have been lost in the shadow of the State Historical Society, in that their activities, their programs, were the ones that most people assumed "Well, it's part of Madison." But that's not quite true. They're interested in things of statewide event and we of local.

In the fall of 1973 Historic Madison was formally organized. The papers of incorporation had been properly filed, the affiliation with the State Historical Society had been accomplished, and the initial officers for the organization were elected. Walter Scott was everyone's choice as first president but Walter, because of health reasons, decided that it would not be a smart thing for him to accept. Consequently, I became the first president of Historic Madison.

During our first year the board and I felt that an important aspect of the work of the organization would be to develop some feeling of local expression and interest through programs. We carried on, as I recall, four programs throughout the year, culminating in our first annual meeting, which was held at the Louis H. Sullivan's Sigma Phi Bradley house, where David Mollenhoff was our featured speaker. David spoke on some of Madison's early history and a part that today is one of the chapters of his book on the history of Madison.

At that time Richard Wagner, who was our vice president, was elected to the presidency of Historic Madison. This started, I think, another very important activity of Historic Madison, and that was the publication program. Dick was very much interested in seeing that our newsletter, which was already underway and ably edited by Lynn Hermell [later, Lynn Eich], that it could be supplemented by a journal, an annual publication, with articles about the history of some aspect of Madison. It was our desire that this publication would not limit its contributors to those of great scholarly attainment but rather that we could open it to anyone that was interested in writing an article of some general interest for the journal of Historic Madison. However, we did have a stipulation that we were not interested in accepting articles that had been previously published. We wanted original publications.

We were able to work with people like Martha Kilgour, who admittedly had limited writing skills, but she had some marvelous bits of history on the role of her grandfather [Lew Forster Porter] in the building of the Wisconsin state capitol. Lois Stoller wrote on the Gates of Heaven synagogue and its architect, August Kutzbock. Again, she was reluctant to undertake this task. But with the able assistance of associate editors like Walter Scott, Kola Sonnedecker, and John Gruber, we could help aspiring authors to put together credible articles for the *Journal of Historic Madison*. It started small and modestly and has grown in its size and I think continues to be one of the accomplishments that Historic Madison can be proud of.

I accepted the editorship initially because I felt that this was the kind of project I wanted to see succeed for Historic Madison. But I didn't want to make a lifelong task out of it. Consequently, I said if I took the editorship it would be for a five-year period. No matter what kind of cajoling took place at the end of the fifth year I still was not going to say yes. John Gruber, who had been a very fine associate editor, agreed to take on the editorship afterwards. I think you enjoy a task like that. But if you carry it on too long you become wearied of it and any vitality that it has becomes lost. I guess, too, that having worked so closely with Walter Scott in the *Journal of Historic Madison*, and also in Historic Madison generally, his passing sort of saddened me in the tasks that were associated with Walter.

I think one of the other real tragic losses of Historic Madison was Lydia Lunney's death during the year of her presidency of Historic Madison. From the very start she had been one of the hard workers and a woman with good ideas and one that you always wanted to work with and help. We were all saddened by her tragic death.

Very early in the history of Historic Madison we were approached by Dave Hamell about undertaking revolving fund activities in historic preservation. At that time our bylaws did not include dealing with historic properties. Taychopera was still organized at the start and the organizers of Historic Madison were very careful not to encroach upon the activities of Taychopera as they were defined in their bylaws. Consequently, there were two historic societies in existence at the start – one dealing only with buildings, and that was Taychopera, and the other of the whole broad range of historic activities – archival collections, writing, research – and that was Historic Madison.

Now a third type of organization was being proposed. Perhaps it was one that would have

fallen under the bylaws of Taychopera; however, at that time Taychopera was beginning to slide downhill and I guess Dave was not interested in approaching them. We didn't feel that we could take that on without violating our bylaws or getting a change in the bylaws, which we weren't about to do as long as Taychopera existed. Some of this was because people that we counted on in helping our organization, some were also still associated with Taychopera, and some of our board members were also board members of Taychopera. Dave started the Madison Trust for Historic Preservation, although no real project came out of it until long after his association with the organization.

It still, I think, is too bad that there are two competing organizations in Madison, when all of the talents could be put together in a single organization and those interested in historic structure work could be on committees in that area. As a matter of fact, a large share of the people in Historic Madison are ones who have had a great deal of work in the community in historic buildings.

### *What about the role of Mapleside?*

The loss of Mapleside perhaps did more to foster historic preservation in Madison than any other single project. Its loss prompted the foundation of Madison's Landmark Commission. It was here that Jeff Dean, who then was working for the city planning department, sort of organized and spearheaded all of the necessary work to get a local ordinance for historic preservation. To this day I'm not sure that Mayor [William] Dyke was quite aware of what he was signing when the historic preservation ordinance went into effect. Nevertheless, it was certainly one of the important things that he did during his term in office.

Jeff Dean was also one of the original members of the ad hoc committee for the formation of the historic society. Jeff has a sort of natural tendency to be a joker at times. When we were sending letters out inviting people to become members of Historic Madison, he sent a copy of this to the president of Historic Madison, Incorporated, of Madison, Indiana, suggesting they become a member of Historic Madison. Unfortunately, the president of Historic Madison of Indiana didn't think it was too funny and wrote back quite a letter threatening lawsuits.

Walter Scott, who was then chairing the ad hoc committee, tried to tactfully answer this and then sidestepped the whole question by saying that shortly we would have a president who will then be able to address the issue. I think our final answer, after checking with Mr. Robert B. L. Murphy, who was an early member and supporter of Historic Madison, was that we didn't really have much to worry about legally. We went on to point out in a very nice letter to Historic Madison of Indiana that there were Madisons in Kentucky and Connecticut and innumerable other states and we didn't think that any one of us should feel that precious about our own group, but that rather we could support each other. That was the last we ever heard of that issue.

Our role with the State Historical Society has been one that I think most local historical societies in Wisconsin have assumed. That is, that the Historical Society has been more than willing, through their department of local history, to work and offer advice, provide publication assistance, [and] get you on mailing lists for material. It's to our benefit to have an affiliation with them. Consequently, as we wrote our bylaws, we always tried to be certain that everything fit comfortably into the organization of the State Historical Society's system. Thus, we did affiliate with the State Historical Society as soon as we were organized.

We also, by virtue of that, became a local affiliated society with Dane County Historical Society. This [affiliation] has been one where some of our board members and other members have been very active members of the board of the Dane County Historical Society. Yet sometimes we find it kind of hard, because our interests are essentially of historic Madison [and]

they aren't of a general county-wide area of interest. Thus, we can't always get excited about a historical marker going up in DeForest or McFarland, and [we] rather tend to have our allegiance to the city of Madison and its own historical society. Granted, the historical archives of the Dane County Historical Society are a very valuable asset to Madison and to all of Dane County. One of our presidents, Don Lamb, also served as the president of Dane County Historical Society. I was on their board for a term of three years, I believe.

Some of the early members of the organization who played quite a role, at least during my years with Historic Madison, were people like Bernie Schwab, who was the director of the Madison library and served ably as our treasurer. [Bernie] also always had a room available for a meeting of either the general membership or of the board, whenever we wanted it.

One of the very fine meetings that Historic Madison had, and, again, I'm not quite sure whether this was [during] my term in office or Dick Wagner's, was when we had a sort of open house at the Walter Scotts in Hickory Hill. This was what was one of our meetings. We just toured their grounds and saw their marvelously restored home and the sort of miniature arboretum that Walter and Trudy had developed. We just enjoyed their hospitality no end. As a matter of fact, it may well have been one of the best attended meetings we had. It was a nice afternoon, there were refreshments available, and everybody was in a very expansive mood. It just showed what all of us have always known about Walter and Trudy – that they're a gracious host and hostess for any kind of an organization.

Anna and Phil Fox have always been strong supporters of the organization, and Phil has often been on the board of Historic Madison. I recall one time when I was editing one of the issues of *Historic Madison* I had an old photo of downtown Madison. I showed it to Phil and asked him if he could write a caption for this. It was in the area where he knew something about, [had] relatives [who] had lived there, and that sort of thing. Lo and behold, I received a whole article back about the people and the things that had taken place in this part of central Madison. It was one of those sort of bonuses that you don't normally expect.

Fred Heeston came in as president a little later and was one of these sort of unknown comets that burst upon the scene. I don't think he was known to many of us to have been dedicated to local history. All of a sudden, once he took hold, he was one of the most dynamic individuals you could find – so bursting with enthusiasm all the time that you just wondered where he had been until you had found him. He accepted the presidency of Historic Madison for two terms.

When you mention the probationary period, I sort of strike out on that. I can't quite remember exactly what it was all about. It seemed to me that they wanted to be sure you were a viable organization before you had full affiliation with the State Historical Society. I don't think most of us worried about that too much. We were enjoying what we were doing, we thought that we were doing as much – if not more – than about any other historical society around, and we probably felt we were having more fun doing it so that we didn't worry too much about that.

We certainly had a lot of meetings that were of interest to us. Now, sometimes they might have been sparsely attended and other times rather well attended. We had one meeting in one of the rooms in the state Capitol building when Martha [Kilgour] talked about her grandfather's [Lew Porter] work. It sort of seemed like she was pulling everything out of the old family trunk that she had found. Here were letters from well-known artists that had had a role in the state Capitol building. We just sort of sat there and enjoyed it.

It's probably very interesting to watch a transition in some of these organizations as more and more people become aware of what history does mean in our lives. For a long time it was sort of thought of as an old foggy's activity and [that] this wasn't something the younger

generation had much to do with. But very fortunately we're beginning to realize what part our heritage plays in our lives and we're beginning to understand and see this earlier in our life [rather] than just when we're about ready to pass away. Consequently, having younger people come in and take leadership roles in the organization is, I think, a rather fulfilling experience to those that helped found and work in an organization [in those earlier days] when you didn't see the support coming from the younger generation. Now it's there. They're hard workers and they have a lot to offer. Probably most of them have better educations than most of us have so that they can offer a lot to the organization.