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Interview with David Milholland, Part 2 (audio)

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Portland State University

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Portland State University Center for the Moving Image
Oral History Project

Narrator: David Milholland (DM)

Interviewer: Heather O. Petrocelli (HP)

Date: May 31, 2011

Location: NW Film Center, Portland, Oregon

Duration: 00:57:03

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Transcribed by Carolee Harrison, July 2023

This interview is part 2 of 3 with David Milholland. Heather O. Petrocelli interviewed individuals affiliated with PSU's Center for the Moving Image as part of her Master's thesis, Portland's 'Refugee from Occupied Hollywood': Andries Deinum, his Center for the Moving Image, and Film Education in the United States (2012) <http://archives.pdx.edu/ds/psu/9138>

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HEATHER PETROCELLI: This is Heather Oriana Petrocelli interviewing David Milholland on May 31, 2011, in Portland, Oregon, at the Northwest Film Center. David, do I have permission to record you for the Center for the Moving Image oral history collection?

DAVID MILHOLLAND: You do, for the second time.

HP: Exactly. So, last time, we talked a lot about your filmmaking and specific films. I was hoping to delve just a little bit more into—you used the term “social universe”—happening at the time.

DM: Sure. I also think I want to mention a couple more films or film-related things that came up. One of the things that happened when I first got out of college—there was literally no work. We were in a recession. That continues to be the case, as we have noticed today, but there are all these ups and downs in an economy that affect somebody. It was quite possible that I would have ended up in a... I was the last finalist, but not the winner, of a job doing community

development work that was similar to what I had done in the Peace Corps for the neighborhood I lived in in Southwest Portland. I came within a whisker of having that, and that might have put me inside the world of neighborhood development, the bureaucracy of the city, and it could have been very interesting, on those kind of quirks. So instead, I really focused a lot more on film as a career, as a way to do interesting projects, and it wasn't exclusively that. I think a lot of people end up with a skill set that doesn't necessarily move them into the next thing just because of a quirk, and the economy was a factor there.

There was another real downturn that happened when Jimmy Carter was president. It was a peculiar time. We had rampant inflation; we had 11-12%--the highest inflation that I know of in this country in my lifetime—and we had hostages in Iran, and there were all kinds of things that were wrong. But at a certain point in time, Jimmy Carter and his team drew on the model of the WPA, and created the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act, CETA. Because I'd been doing this film projects all along, I ended up getting a job with CETA, with a group called Traditional Arts Services. Traditional Arts Services was a folk music group here in Portland that had been doing work in Portland and were linked to the world of folk music in Seattle. They were bringing acts up from primarily the middle and deep South that were in the world of the blues and country-politan, bluegrass; they brought up a Norteño act, they brought Sweet Honey in the Rock; a real interesting mix of things, but all people who in some way or another were currently extensions of traditional music or were working with traditional music to express more modern concerns. Everybody expresses the concerns of their time.

I was hired to do videography. It was a strictly video focus... no, that's not exactly true. We did both video and film. They had been doing films, and I did just a couple of the films that were captures of people's picking style and fiddling style. They were little half-hour films that would show you how to... Mance Lipscomb, how he played the fiddle and the guitar, etc. The same thing for a number of practitioners, Black and white. In addition, when they brought up Lidia Mendoza, this woman from the norteña tradition of central and southern Texas—norteña being the north part of Mexico—Texas was Mexico not all that long ago. California was Mexico really not that long ago. It was really exciting, because I had my Spanish, so I did some translation.

At a certain point in time, we got a small amount of extra money—probably from CETA, I don't remember how that exactly worked—but we did a little film, I believe it was just short of half and hour, on Elizabeth Cotton. Elizabeth Cotton had been doing... the famous song that she wrote, "Freight Train"... "Freight Train" may come out of a deeper tradition, but she's given credit for doing that song. She performed around the public schools in Portland, and she was here for probably the better part of a week. So we had a team that went out and captured her in performance, doing workshops with kids, mostly in the middle and primary; I don't believe

that any of this stuff happened in a high school. It was an exciting project, and it again was an extension of working in this field.

In that same time period, there was a project that happened in McMinnville and Yamhill County. At that point, Tom [Taylor] was involved in a way that I can't quite remember, but he may be... he was the point person for helping suggest that this was something that I could be involved with. We were working with young Latino gentlemen in that particular case to build some video skills, and working with a community development agency in Yamhill County. These young men basically learned how to shoot and edit a little piece of film. That was another thing—I think that was a real exciting project; I don't think that they went on to anything necessarily further. It was an employment opportunity rather than necessarily a start of... I don't believe any of these people went on to major film careers.

But Tom and Andries [Deinum]'s philosophy was always that community development and community concerns were at the heart of what this was about. So this whole notion of—the phrase that you said—say one more time what I said?

HP: The social universe.

DM: The social universe. Working within the universe of the people that are here surviving, doing interesting things, doing things that are truly unique; that was sort of what was thrown up to us as the possibility of what our work could be. There was less of a focus on writing and developing fiction film scripts. Not that some people didn't do that, and there was no discouragement, but that wasn't... The core of things was really to do work within the known community.

In a sense, it was an extension, for me, of what I had been encouraged to do in the Peace Corps. That's why I really bonded with Tom and this community in that early period of time. In the Peace Corps, our training in Puerto Rico before I was in Guatemala, was all about sensing a felt need in a community. These are sort of throwaway phrases that can be bullshit, but essentially they aren't, because they mean that you can, over a little while in a place, hear from people what it is that they really want to have happen. If you're able to respond in some way that enfranchises them, that's really exciting. If you have people learn a skill, or if you have people realize a goal. In my time in the Peace Corps, I was involved—even though it wasn't my assignment—I was involved with the creation of ten elementary schools. And that's a lot! And that had an impact that continues. When I visited again, after I'd gone maybe three different times, I visited again in the year 2000, and in the cases of the places that I went to, they don't necessarily have the same physical school that I was involved in constructing—that was what

my opportunity was, that I recognized. People came to me. After two had happened, then three and four happened, and so... Similarly, I was very, very interested in things that would enfranchise people. It wasn't just about self-expression. I think that there's nothing wrong with self-expression, and I'm very interested in that for myself and in what other people do, but I think the idea that sometimes what you're doing is plugging into the sense of a community is a really...

That continued to reverberate. Part of what I was interested in talking about today is some of the extensions that come out of that mindset. I think they came out of what especially I sensed Tom really was bringing to this community, to the table. Here's an example: this is the last issue of a long... [sound of pages ruffling] this is volume eleven, so this is the decade and one of a magazine that basically... of the four people editing it, as the years went rolling on, Jim Blashfield and I were too. This is a classic Blashfield-type image. [turning pages] Here is the decade that gone before: so here are the forty covers of this, four a year for ten years. So this is very far afield from the notion of film—or is it? A design and idea that you can capture something in design that basically expresses the talent of a place, the issues that are on people's minds—all that stuff—isn't all that distinctive; I don't think that documentary film and journalism and creative journalism are all that far afield.

Two of the people who were involved with this for a long time—Jim and I—neither were a founder, but I was involved by the third issue, and was involved through this issue. At some point in time, Jim had his highly successful run with Talking Heads, Michael Jackson, Joni Mitchell, and Peter Gabriel, Paul Simon, etc. He went off at that point in time to do that, but he kept plugged in; we shared an office in the building where he suddenly had a large, very active studio doing these productions. I worked on a couple of his projects doing some filming, some research. There was an overlap. What I was trying to say from the beginning was that you can kind of see—just in these first four, if we can look at it—[opening pages] these three issues are not four-color; this one is four-color but it doesn't really. And then suddenly Blashfield shows up. So I'm here, and then Jim is here, and he designed all the way through... [turning pages] this man in a bunny suit, that's just classic Blashfield dada, craziness. He was involved probably through this issue, something like here: this is sort of a takeoff on a Talking Heads image. At a certain point, then, I believe that from here on I art-directed the rest of these. So art directing, which is both responding to written text, encouraging written text, but also working with many, many artists, that essentially is not that distinctive from the world that we were involved with getting into film.

I really think that the Film Center—part of the reason that it, to me, is still a vital model, is that you didn't necessarily measure people or set people up to even measure themselves in terms of

whether or not they had just dozens of projects in the can. It wasn't saying that there was anything wrong with doing commercial work or doing work that basically was a way to survive. There was no discouragement from that. But it didn't encourage that as much as it used the ability to shape projects so that they extended the community into a better place. One can say, well, how did journalism do that? It's not necessarily clear that it does. A community survives on all kinds of other things. You can have great journalism or a great film tradition, as they did at the end of the Dubček period in Czechoslovakia, and still have heavy repression come rolling in. They aren't necessarily the same thing. I think part of the reason that we have that strong, rich, do-it-yourself creative community here is that there were real roots, and I think that the Film Center is part of that root.

Another thing that I was involved in, [rustling paper] and I just brought a couple examples here, but this is a newsletter that I was involved in. Here's a story, "Co-ops slide through the eighties." So this is *Willamette Leak*, a complete design takeoff on *Willamette Week*; this is the *Flaxseed Kernel*, which is obviously a *Wall Street Journal* takeoff. We did *Bs.*, B-S, as in *Ms.*, M-S *Magazine*, and the *Natural Enquirer*. And I used this as a design platform to learn typefaces, to learn design tricks, and to also continue to be involved with something I was interested in. I had worked in co-op development in the Peace Corps; that was my assignment, and food co-ops, agricultural co-ops were one of them. So I got involved with Food Front right away; I was in that community. It's where I met my partner, with whom I had a long-time relationship, raised a child, and also had a child. So food has been a defining element.

I'll just mention it briefly, when Tom was, as a host, a part of this community, he also, as he got involved with his third wife Marie—Marie was an incredible hostess and a very, very talented chef, and also a really exceptional actress. She did work in the theater, and the world of food and the theater of food and the theater of the mind, the theater as expressed through film, the theater on a stage—they're not all that far apart. I really think that a lot of the food-related stuff, when Marie's services happened, I was one of the people who spoke and said, You know, I really give Marie a giant place in the development of this food community. At one point, Marie created a little bakery. She was doing some of the most extraordinary... she had a sun-dried tomato bread and nobody had made a better such thing since she did it. Only so many people knew what the fuck that was, cared what it was, were ready to pay an extra dollar for a loaf of such a thing—but it was like wow. This woman is actually really inventing things; she's not just simply turning out the same thing that twelve other parties have.

I really think that the distinction that happens between what your [...] activity is and where things go is intriguing. Finally, I brought a couple of little things. I won, in 2004 I believe, the Stewart Holbrook Award for significant activity in literary affairs in Portland. So I've been a part

of the literary community. To some degree, my slide to doing literary-related stuff very definitely relates to the *Clinton Street Quarterly* and the activity I did there. I'd always been a really avid reader; I'd written a certain amount here and there in all kinds of contexts; edited many different newsletters for food-related publications; Jim Blashfield and I edited the printed matter magazine for the Media Project, for which we were both board members and founders of for a long period of time. To ratchet forward, this was a project that the State Library—and I worked with several partners in choosing a selection of 100 books to represent the first 200 years of Oregon literary activity; that is, post-... we have several books here that are about early Native American issues and world, but essentially it's works in print. I didn't design this, but I worked closely with John Laursen, who was the designer. John and I have been involved in lots of projects that have a design component.

Finally, I just brought this thing just as a way to keep this sort of extension. This is a little postcard I just stumbled across and re-issued. This is my son Zak Margolis' drawing when he was 12. He did a series called the "Not Funny" series, and so there are four postcards. You can have that. The reality is that Zak is proceeding in a very film-focused, video-related career and has been doing that since pretty early childhood. His uncles were significant role models who worked with him shooting home-movie type stuff. It was fun. He got involved with film as early as those things with his uncles; when he went to Jefferson High School he was in their television program; and in a sense, he was also raised in that creative community in Portland, which wasn't exclusively film. Zachary helped me deliver *Clinton Street Quarterly* and drove with me; I remember a couple times driving with him all the way to Seattle to put our issues we were printing of *Clinton Street*—at its peak, 65,000 copies, which was a pretty significant publication, especially a left publication. It's a creative publication that isn't as politically focused as it's about a range of issues, with politics always present.

I guess that is an around-the-horn kind of way of doing it. I could drop names of other things, but for my money, all the arts really are in one big sea. They float together, and film's one great strength is that it tends to be a comprehensive way to get in. Writing and film are the two ways—music certainly can also talk about any subject matter—but I think writing and film use a spectrum of talents and ways of making things come to life, of capturing things. My interest in this broad range of things predates my doing anything at the Center for the Moving Image. But essentially, it was a real step forward to be able to do work that was designed to communicate fluidly, to capture things visually, to maintain continuity; all the kind of things that are basic film skills. It really helped me a lot in terms of developing an editing style for print. Although I read voluminously before I ever did anything to do with film, it's one thing to do that and another thing to learn how to pace things as you do with editing; to learn what kind of jumps you can make, where things might work and when they don't. A lot of it comes from not just reading,

but watching lots of film. Also, learning the actual skill, and what it takes, and making several films. I was really ready to do that, and I think lots of people can do it without that mix of skills at all. I don't think it's a requirement, but I think it was a great element of developing that.

I've continued to be the president of the Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission. Our programs have included the program that we did with Andries, and things that related—Tom Taylor was one of the participants of that. Lots of other projects that sort of link back to this world, that is an expression in film. We've also, again, done maybe seven or eight programs with the Film Center that have had to do with the films that were inspired by or written from or developed from John Reed's material. Films that related to William Stafford and a number of other projects. So I kept my connections to—and when I was meeting, as we met just two weeks ago, a week ago, about an archive, Bill [Bowling] was still saying, What programs are we going to develop?

Currently, I'm involved with a real exciting project that we are finishing on David Douglas, *Finding David Douglas*. Jim really encouraged me, because I had asked him questions about it—I just haven't had a video camera through this period of time—really, it would have been a smart thing to have, and they definitely got cheap enough that it wasn't a big thing to have one. But I didn't have any real sense of how I was going to use one, and as this project came into consciousness, I said, That would be a really good way to be involved with it, to have a sense of how things are developing, and also to rebuild that skill. I always felt that I was reasonably competent at composing shots and capturing things that worked in the films that I did shoot, and that I edited from other people's work. It was an exciting thing to have a home camera, not the highest-quality professional camera, but still, the lowest level of professional camera or the best consumer camera. My little Canon actually was probably the source of 20 to 25% of the footage in that film. I didn't do the major interview stuff; I didn't fly to Scotland, Hawai'i, drive up into northern Canada for those shoots, but I did, on the other hand, get a chance, at a point when we decided to have a premiere, they really requested that strongly in Scotland because they had invested money. So it's a multi-country investment project. I did have a chance to go see that film shown for the first time to any audience in Perth, Scotland. So that was a benefit that came out of that role, and immediately after that, ended up finding myself with my camera in Greece and Turkey, which was kind of fun too.

OK. It's wandering, but I think it all is about something, and anything you want to steer me toward or away from, we can do whatever you want.

HP: You had said something that related back to your time in the Peace Corps—I believe you said you came back and lived in Portland from 1970 on?

DM: That's correct.

HP: In the Peace Corps, they sent you for a felt need in the community?

DM: There were two things going on. The Peace Corps... I went in at the very end of the LBJ period, just before and as Richard... so I was there under both LBJ and Nixon. In that period of time, things shifted. In a Democratic government, in a Republican government, there are different points of view. They aren't necessarily contradictory. People thought that Nixon, who had been defeated by Kennedy in a tight election, might be—that might be one thing that he would just simply get rid of, because it had been clearly identified with the JFK administration. But he didn't do that.

Our training was in Puerto Rico. They trained together two groups, one that went to Panama and one that went to Guatemala; I was part of the Guatemalan group. The group that went to Panama was trained more on the basis of community service, finding something that people were interested in and then work that vein. We got some of that same training, because some of the same staff that was training those two groups—we were about 40 people in each group. Our group was targeted for doing co-op development, but in the middle of that, they also enunciated this idea of: if you find yourself with something that you perceive to be this “felt need”—and again, like I say, a phrase is meaningless until suddenly the real thing appears. I felt that person after person, because I was working with a lot of people in both the agricultural co-op and the credit union/credit co-op that I was involved with—as I was meeting these people and getting involved with various aspects of the community—there was a North American, a Boston Irish priest there in that town, there was a member of a Protestant group that had translated the Bible into this unique language. I was living in Aguacatán, Huehuetenango, Guatemala, a village that has, according to some people—the linguists at that point anyway, they may have revised this since—have said that it is the oldest version of a Mayan tongue; that all the others seem to not necessarily descent from it; there may be a proto-Mayan that's prior to this particular tongue, but it's the oldest one, just the way that they can trace languages. It's a single community that has the language.

Anyway, being in that community after we had the training—we had three months of training in Puerto Rico—it wasn't much after I got there that lots of things exploded, both with the co-op, the credit union and the agricultural co-op, but also people started coming to me. I was there a block from the center of town, living right on the main street that was the main east-west corridor for our connection between Huehuetenango and the Verapaz world way off to the east. People would stop in and see me, or they would see me in the market, or they would see me here and there, and they would come up with these ideas of what they wanted to do. It

wasn't just schools; I was involved with a large water project; I got involved with people who were some handicrafts and helped them get their businesses built up. I was just interested. At the same time, I found that no matter how much I worked at doing things, I still had plenty of time to read. I read voluminously there, and created a large collection of Guatemalan textiles, as two of my friends did along at the same time. So my visual sense was really being nurtured by this incredibly dynamic weaving and crochet and appliqué-style work that was surrounding me. We traveled all around the country building these collections. Working on ten different schools meant that I plugged into ten different communities to help them raise some money to help them build the projects. Working on a water project meant actually learning a little bit about basic water engineering and making sure—and that project, I had a chance to see it in a completed state a year after I... they weren't quite done when I got it going, but that same community had had a school; they built a school with some of the money that I helped obtain and some of the advice I gave them. After the school was there, they said, We have another real, deep need. We're wasting days and days of labor in every family to haul water. So that's how that came about.

I came to CMI... I came to my senior year of college at Lewis and Clark already having done some pretty amazing stuff. Not amazing in terms of changing the world on a global level, but if you do a lot of very focused projects in a specific community, you learn a lot, and people have—if you did the right things, and some things work well—all the schools that we sought money for were completed and then staffed; that was a very big success. We also had crazy things. We had somebody who stole essentially—via a fraudulent check and some other bullshit--\$20,000 of the garlic in the community. That was their primary export crop, and so it took... I flew with two of the co-op members before that transaction all the way to Costa Rica and Panama to see if we could figure out how to do direct sales. I got all the way to Panama. The three of us went to Costa Rica. I found out that we were dealing with the mob in New Orleans and it wasn't going to be a casual thing to sort of make sense of it! Then we started dealing with a gentleman who was himself the mob, who basically took this—and it took seven years after the initial transaction, five years after I was gone, for them to finally get the money back from a government unit, that was the bank that had allowed this check to happen and allowed this transaction to take place. It took years and years. So that was a failure on some big level, and it affected a lot of people. It wasn't necessarily my fault, but it was... if you get all the good things to happen, you've gotta be aware that you are involved in some things. I was there the day this garlic was loaded onto this Spaniard-Cuban-Guatemalan's truck; I was also involved with visiting attorney's offices in Guatemala City, talking with people about how can we put really intense pressure on this man, his family. He was a house of cards in a hundred ways. Really a big learning experience.

I came back having had rich experiences. The credit union—the treasurer of the credit union who was a golden boy until he wandered off with 5 or 600 quetzales, exactly equal to the dollar, of the co-op’s money, to have a brief affair with a young woman who was a juice seller on the side of the road! This man went from being one of the father’s favorite young acolytes to being a *persona non grata* who had stolen money from his fellow co-op members. I always liked Diego, but the fact of the matter is that temptation comes along in lots of places. That was a failure, but not in the sense that the co-op died because this guy... it was painful for him, and it was a tough thing to sort out. The next thing you know, I’m back there three years after the time I was in the Peace Corps and then ten years after, and that credit union was going like crazy. So it actually became a very successful business after a certain point. Problems happen.

HP: With all those experiences—going back to this—you’re returning to Portland and returning to college. Clearly, compared to many of your classmates you’ve had a wealth of varied experiences. Looking back at 1970 in Portland, I can think of Kent State, and Cambodia, and all the unrest—the things I’ve seen in the CMI film *The Seventh Day*—what was it like at that time? Could you feel a need in this community?

DM: I got back, and I wasn’t involved with *The Seventh Day*. I arrived just after that had been completed, and the energy of that project continued to whirl around the CMI. It was in that same exact period that a group of people in the acting community, working at Portland State, hatched the idea that became the Storefront Theater. Storefront Theater was a giant force in our community, and many of the people that I was friends with were actors in Storefront. Another theater that got set up in that same exact period, right at the start of the 70s, was Slabtown Stop. I knew people in both of those, and there was an overlap between them. It was a very, very tumultuous period of time. The Vietnam War continued; I was involved in a number of protest marches. I remember walking around the Benson Hotel with Richard Nixon on, let’s call it the 13th floor, he was up there someplace! And we knew he was staring down at us, angry that he’d come to what now has been more recently called “little Beirut.” There was plenty of activity there. I wasn’t excited about our country. I did not want to go to Southeast Asia and kill people, and for me the Peace Corps was a viable and very responsible alternative to that. I didn’t want to be irresponsible; I didn’t cut off my finger and race off to Canada. I didn’t do crazy stuff to try to get out of that. I just thought that this was a reasonable thing to do.

From my point of view, it was a time that it was really good for there to be Americans doing something different than just simply killing people. I think any day is a good day for people do that. This is a rich and complex country, and there isn’t any reason to see it as sainted, but there isn’t any reason to see it as exclusively and totally soiled. It’s a more complex kettle of fish than that.

I'm really intrigued with, and was intrigued during that period of time, in terms of how easily one could work with this film experience. I was very plugged into the theater world at Lewis and Clark College in my senior year. My girlfriend was an actress there; she was involved with the mime world. She was in plays that were in Slabtown Stop. The first production in Oregon that I know of of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, she was in that; she was then in the cast of that movie with Nicholson in it. This is a young woman who was in my little film poker night; Lan Fendors was suddenly there—she still receives the royalty checks annually, I believe, from that project.

So they were not that far apart. There was a ferment up here of what I think was... as I took that first class at CMI, the idea that you could make film, just having been part of it... not everybody had home video cameras. My dad had taught me to use a still camera, but he was not really yet doing that much home movie kind of stuff. We don't have home movies. Lots of people were; lots of people were shooting 8-millimeter and Super 8 kind of stuff for that. But it wasn't something that I had grown up around constantly. My dad started doing more of it after I wasn't there, and I can't remember if he shot a little bit of footage when my family visited me when I was in the Peace Corps. They were the only family that visited by land from the United States to Guatemala. Guatemala is immediately south of Mexico, and they drove from eastern Washington—Moses Lake, Washington—all the way there, ten days, to meet me in a plaza at the very southern part of Chiapas state, right north of Guatemala City. I said I would be there to meet them at noon on a Saturday, and they were there at 1:15. That's a long way to go, to have anybody... No one else did that drive. Lots of people flew to visit their significant child, or cousin, or whatever, but my family made it all the way there.

I guess I was raised in a family—my parents were both educators, and there was a lot of reason to be an educator. I've done quite a bit of teaching, but not exclusively... I did some teaching at CMI, but mostly very low, introductory, this-is-how-you-splice and stuff, it wasn't like I was teaching theory about it, although that always comes up in some way. I thought that through film, and through communication in print, you could do as much and have more impact by just magnifying the number of people that saw what you were doing. When you're printing 65,000 copies of a magazine, that's a lot of outreach. That's 100,000-150,000 people that are seeing those words, those images, and looking forward to the next one, and that seems to be how that works.

I guess the Peace Corps thing left me prepared to do this, and CMI was a creative platform to just leap forward to be able to work in community affairs, political—doing those TV spots for political candidates and political issues—I worked on two campaigns for public power here that

to some degree was just a reflection of things, that it was a community of people that I was plugged into that were interested in that issue. There had been successful public power in eastern Washington, where I was a child, and so I thought that model was a good one and that we should have that here. We were up against more deep-pocketed organizations than we were able to take down, but we actually mounted two really good campaigns to try to put that issue... I did the television spots with Kimbark MacColl, who was one of the major... a headmaster at Catlin Gabel [School], and the man who wrote a two-volume history of Portland. He was willing to be a major figure in the sort of hierarchy of Portland power to speak out for public power, which most other people weren't feeling free to do that. I thought that was an exciting thing. I was able to go in, as I had in other cases, and do a television spot that actually was part of a campaign. Doing something like that doesn't win you an election; all it does is give you a chance to at least be a part of the dialogue about that issue. We've had private power here a lot of decades, and we do get electricity delivered well here; it's not like it's *the* life-changing issue of the time. But there were plenty of reasons why I thought public power would have been a better thing. Just because you have a good idea doesn't mean you win; sometimes you don't.

Lots of people are still willing to debate whether the demonstrations against Vietnam had any impact. There are lots of other forces that might have been at play there. But I do think any time you put pressure on a political situation, even if it doesn't produce the change you may have wished to have happen, at the same time it's that very pressure that finally adds up, and suddenly something shifts. It may not be the single factor, but it is *a* factor, and people that have a vested interest in something else happening suddenly can't go away from a history of people saying something different should take place. Eventually, over time, things that are now considered basically established, as women's rights across a big spectrum, rights of people in a variety of minority groups, the idea that Indian tribes should be at the table in all discussions of the future of our state and states around the country: that wasn't established particularly well very recently ago. Those shifts have shifted. They aren't necessarily perfectly expressed; there's plenty of economic inequality that's still here. But I think being part of things that make those changes has been an exciting part of my life, and film was one of the primary ways I learned to use tools that could speak to those issues. The leap from being a reader and being a filmgoer to using print and film to express ideas wasn't a big one.

HP: The Oregon Cultural Affairs Commission—when did you actually found that?

DM: The signal event to get things rolling wasn't when we founded it, but it kicks things off. In *Clinton Street Quarterly*, we published a wonderful story that my colleague Walt Curtis, the unofficial poet laureate of Portland—and I've done a variety of projects with Walt, even before

we ever did that—but the two of us kind of came together. He wrote a wonderful story in *Clinton Street's* pages on the poet Hazel Hall. Hazel Hall was here and died in the 1920s; she was a crippled seamstress; she spent many years of her latter decade and a half of life living in an upstairs apartment in northwest Portland, on NW 22nd Place. That story was something I got real excited about; I encouraged Walt to write something else like that, and the next story he wrote of that sort was on John Reed, who wrote the book *Ten Days that Shook the World*, he wrote that book that we selected for this 100-book list, *Insurgent Mexico*, and I was very familiar with his writing, because I had read *Insurgent Mexico* and thought it was thrilling. I don't find *Ten Days that Shook the World* as thrilling, but it's actually a very respected... the *New York Times* placed that book in its top three most important pieces of journalism in the 20th century. Something like that—maybe it was the fifth, but it's right at the very top. So that's somebody that was born here in Portland, Oregon, who seemed pretty significant.

So on the heels of running a story on John Reed, a very exciting story that Walt wrote and I worked with him on, we decided to stage a celebration of the 100th anniversary of John Reed right here. So that was 1987, and we actually had significant linked events, including an event where a wreath was laid on John Reed's plaque right in the walls of the Kremlin. Norman Solomon, who was somebody that was a colleague of Walt's—and mine, but especially of Walt's—had reason to be near there. I think he had something happening in Finland; maybe he had a talk in, for all I know, in Moscow. We helped him get the extra... gave him a little bit of money to be there to cover that. I was interviewed for an hour on Radio Granma from Havana about our celebration, in Spanish. That's kind of crazy, to have a person born in Portland being celebrated a hundred years later, and suddenly have linked events. We also had some linked events happening in Colombia. So we were plugged into things, and there'd been a reverberation about that.

About six or eight months later, Brian Booth, who also created Literary Arts here, and Walt and I met in a coffee shop that is now where the Fox Tower is. There was a little coffee shop that was in that building, and we met and we hatched the idea for doing something to do—possibly several things—one of which was to create a memorial for John Reed, a physical memorial. We also talked about other people in whom we were interested who were creative figures. So by 1988, we actually started having meetings in Brian's offices, and they were in a new building subsequent to the beginning of that. Several people that were involved right away have stayed involved, essentially, since 1988, so we can do the math—it's 23 years this October 22nd, which was... or, October 22nd would have been 1987, so we're almost at a quarter century of that creation.

The thing that's been interesting about the Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission is that we really didn't—although we started with a lot of focus on writing and literature, and we've actually stayed very focused on the history of the spoken and written word—right away, I knew, because of the things I had done already, that film would be part of it. One of the things we did in staging things clearer in that early period was to also do things with the Film Center, to have showings of films that were based on the work. We also did events in 19... so 1987 was the centennial; ten years later in 1997 we were staging the first John Reed/Louise Bryant multimedia festival honoring the woman who was wife, who was also a very creative journalist in her own right and had a very rich career, both with and later than John Reed, because John Reed died young.

We then went on to do programs across a large spectrum, around anybody that was in the creative arts. We focused on music, theater, architecture, and the whole range of interlinked events, and went on years and years later to do a program—this was two years ago—on Kimbark MacColl, who was the person who did TV spots for public power. He wrote these two great histories, and history writing is a branch of writing; it's not considered the same as fiction or poetry, but it's another really significant branch of writing. A person who does that well deserves to be paid attention to. The Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission has done events that have included a real significant look at the Works Progress Administration and related FDR New Deal programs in the arts here. We've done seminars on John Reed, Louise Bryant, C.E.S. Wood, Hazel Hall, William Stafford, and we've hosted and sponsored many, many film screenings, not just with the Film Center but in other contexts. Probably 150 programs on different creative figures.

To me, it's all one big cloth, and that film comes up again after all those years I'm doing programs doesn't seem odd; it seems pretty indicative.

HP: As someone who's had their pulse on the cultural history of Portland, do you notice significant shifts and changes, and does it seem to flow and make sense, or have you seen abrupt changes compared to the 70s, 80s, 90s, and now?

DM: Well, what's exciting about being in a place where you have some continuity is to see that every generation "throws a hero up the pop charts"—that's Paul Simon; that's a piece, I think, of a video that Jim [Blashfield] was involved with that I actually shot some of. I shot two still cameras for the "Boy in the Bubble," and "Boy in the Bubble" is another song on that *Gracetown* [sic], Memphis Tennessee.¹ Anyway, that album. So I think that music has had ups

¹Jim Blashfield created the official video for Paul Simon's 1986 track, "The Boy in the Bubble," from the album *Graceland*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Uy5T6s25XK4>

and down in terms of who and what style of music is being performed. But there has been a history from when I was first around of it being easier to have bands in bars here, than it was—for reasons I don't totally understand—in Seattle or Vancouver. Later on, they got some legal shifts that allowed that to happen. So there was always a generator here for bar bands and college frat bands and this that and other thing, to be able to make interesting music here. Not everybody went on... we've had more recently, more people have gone on to significant things.

In film, the idea that you could have a significant film community doing interesting work without it being something that had a massive nationwide or worldwide impact is really interesting. There's no reason that everybody has to be... you can still have really exciting filmmakers in a culture that isn't famed for film, whether that's a national culture or a regional culture of a specific place, doing interesting things. It wasn't totally unrelated to the community that the most significant film career that's come bouncing out of Portland—not exclusively bouncing out of Portland—was Gus Van Sant. Gus was working on a Northwest Media Project-administered grant to Penny Allen to do the film *Property*. So he was the sound person doing *Property*, and he went then immediately into—or soon thereafter—to making a film based on Walt Curtis' work *Mala Noche*. So it's a local start to a career.

Then, in the pages of *Clinton Street*, we did a big feature on that successful film, and one of the things that Gus took along as he went—it had no impact, but it's still an extension of community—as he went on with his 20 video copies of *Mala Noche*, and scattered them around Hollywood to get money for his next projects, *My Own Private Idaho*, etc., he basically head-started his career right here. And that he's gone on to a truly international career is really exciting, that he was the first recognizably out gay director in America is an extension of a place where people could be more comfortably out gay than they can be in some other communities. We haven't necessarily had as wildly out gay a world as San Francisco has had, but it's been a significant thing here.

I think that now, having maybe a dozen bands in the last decade have national/international profiles, isn't totally unrelated to the way that bands sort of ground things out here. But there is, as the world of music companies controlling things kind of faded away, we suddenly had people from regional platforms be able to be more successful. You don't necessarily have to just be recorded in Nashville, L.A., or New York to have success; suddenly, you could be starting from a more distant place.

I think that there is more activity happening here and more people have been drawn to this place than was the case, but really people were coming here all along to be able to do interesting things. Portland has had a history of having people live communally for low rent,

and it also has had a lot of people doing things that allow you to get on stage. The Film Center and other institutions rose up on the heels of, or even briefly concurrently with, CMI, so film training has happened here, and suddenly... there was always some dance, but it's ramped up to having several national companies.

I think that part of the gestalt of Portland that I find exciting, and I think it continues to the present time, is that there are ways that you can know people in many different versions of creative endeavor here in a way that—certainly, people who are musicians are gonna hang around with musicians, and symphony musicians may or may not be plugged into the latest group doing death metal or something like that—but essentially they still sort of swirl around in the same place. There may be a maximum, and we may have come close to reaching it, of the number of people that can survive doing creative self-expression, but I suspect that we are really not at that point yet. I think that we may be closer to having maxed out on the number of people that can start a brand-new brewery here, but I don't even know that that's tapped out. And essentially the food culture that's here is an extension of creative endeavor: I'm going to do something that turns me on; I don't think that somebody that creates a beautiful cheese label in Portland, in Portland metro, in Eastern Oregon, is necessarily all that distant from the same creative ferment that's part of here. One of the board members of the Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission for its first two decades died recently, Marian Wood Kolisch. She's a granddaughter of C.E.S. Wood; her son Pierre Kolisch is one of the best chevre producers in Redmond, Oregon. So the links are not all that distant.

I find it really intriguing, also, that in Portland we've not only had this tremendous influx of people drawn here, but many people have continued to find it a comfortable place that are part of second or third generation of creative expression. Henk Pander's sons Arnold and Jacob have had rich careers as graphic artists and now as filmmakers, and they've been doing film—Arnold more than Jacob, but basically they've been doing that. There are at least three or four contributions of those two guys with their film orientation in the pages of *Clinton Street Quarterly*. There are several other people who... Martha Gies, who was the longtime director of the Northwest Media Project, sort of shifted from working in the film world to being more interested in writing, and Martha is somebody who has maintained a friendship with many of us over a long period of time; her work is there. So that overlap stuff is everywhere, and I just think that that's going to continue to be why Portland is a real exciting place.

There was also another thing that happened, and I mentioned it a little bit, but many people here are into sharing equipment. People who have creative needs because their van was ripped off and all their music equipment is gone... there are people that step into the breach in almost every creative field that help people get back on their feet, or that allow projects to happen

without everybody having to invest massive amounts of hardware, equipment that may or may not be something that has a long life. Technological changes keep swirling around us. That's... pretty good?

HP: I'm going to change the tape.

[end of Part 2]