

Interview with Susanne Steinem Patch
The Town of Chevy Chase Oral History Project
Interviewed by Kathie Rabinovitz on February 23, 2004

INTERVIEWER: My name is Kathie Rabinovitz and I am interviewing Susanne Steinem Patch on February 23, 2004 at her home at 4106 Leland Street, Chevy Chase. Sue, how long have you lived in this house in Chevy Chase?

PATCH: We came to Chevy Chase in 1954. My husband bought the house actually in 1954 one month before we were married. We were married the seventh of August that year, and we were here—

IN: And that house that you bought the year 1954, where was it located?

SP: 4118 Woodbine Street. It was a two-bedroom house. It was a very deep lot, about two hundred feet deep and it ran through almost to Oak Lane.

IN: Okay, and how long did you live in that house?

SP: We lived there ten years, and during the course of which we had six children.

IN: In that house?

SP: In that house.

IN: Okay, in a two-bedroom house.

SP: That's right. That's one of the reasons we decided to move.

IN: I can understand why. And how much did you pay for that house in 1954?

SP: Seventeen thousand five hundred dollars.

IN: When you sold the house ten years later, how much did you sell it for?

SP: I don't remember exactly how much it was. It seems to me that the price was around \$23,500.

IN: Now, when you sold the house in 1964, where did you move?

SP: We moved to Leland Street one block over. I remember some of our concerns when we moved from Woodbine to Leland. We felt that Leland was a much busier street and we were concerned about the safety of the children and walking to school and all those things.

IN: What made you decide to move to Chevy Chase, when you first moved to Woodbine Street in 1954?

SP: Well, I think that this basically had more to do with my husband than with me because I was from the mid-west and my husband was a native Washingtonian, and Chevy Chase was always a desirable name. I also think that he felt that it was a plus on your record if you had an Oliver phone number.

IN: When you first lived in your house on Woodbine Street, who were your neighbors?

SP: Facing the house, Mrs. Wall was on the left. Her name was Prunella Wall and she took an interest in each of the babies as they came along and explained to us a lot of nature things like why squirrels have two trees. One was the one where they hatched the squirrels, and the other was sort of a training place. She had lived there for a very long time. I think her husband worked for the government, although at the time we knew them, I believe they were separated. On the right side were Richard and Florence Saunders.

IN: And when you moved here onto Leland Street, who were your neighbors and they may still be your neighbors today.

SP: As you face the house to the left was the Alpers. There was Jerry Alper and his wife and three sons. Janet Alper was his wife. Her mother lived there as well, and they had three children, Jonathan, Alan and Andrew.

IN: And the Alpers on your right side—excuse me, the neighbors on your right side?

SP: On the other side, that house changed ownership two or three times in rapid succession, but when we were first there, the DeAngelis family lived there. Certainly very close to the time that we moved in, the Kolkers moved in and he was a psychiatrist. There was some buzzing in the town, I think, about having a doctor's office in a residential area, but because he was a psychiatrist and only had one patient at a time, they let it go through. His wife, Marielena, was I think a native of Mexico, but went to school here. Jonas, here, his family was from Baltimore. Then they had I think four children. There was Luisa, Adam, Claudia and Jason.

IN: Okay. Do you know how many families lived in your house before you did on Woodbine Street?

SP: The only people I know who lived in our house were the people from whom we bought the house.

IN: Do you know their name?

SP: Yes, Hillsman. Roger Hillsman was Assistant Secretary of State for Southeast Asia and it was his home and his wife's. I don't know how many children, but they had one child I know named Ashby, because he was a friend of one of my children.

IN: Had they changed the house on Woodbine before you moved in any way, do you know?

SP: You mean before I moved in? No, not that I'm aware of.

IN: Did you change the house at all, after you moved in?

SP: No, the people who really changed the house are the people who have it now.

IN: Do you remember who lived in this house before you moved in, on Leland Street?

SP: Well, now the people I'm talking about, the Hillsmans, that was this house.

IN: Okay, the Hillsmans lived here on Leland Street.

SP: Leland Street.

IN: Okay, and they didn't make any changes to the house that you're aware of.

SP: Yes, I think that they changed a few things. The ceiling in the living room was lowered, which we couldn't understand when we came in because we thought high ceilings were desirable. But you can see from the ceiling in the dining room what the whole house was like.

IN: Now, did you make any changes?

SP: We built an in-law apartment in the basement for my mother soon after we moved in and put an addition on the back of the house in 1989. We also remodeled the kitchen in 1989. We have--one thing, can I say something?

IN: Sure.

SP: I don't think, for reasons I don't fully understand, that members of my family are completely happy with my broadcasting this information, but Roger Hillsman, when he was here, had the area under the front porch rebuilt to qualify as an air raid shelter. So we have to my knowledge, the only air raid shelter in the area.

IN: That was a big part of life in the 1960s and early '50s, the air raid practices.

SP: There was a concern with the Cuban Missile Crisis. Okay, well, that made a big splash in the life of this section because people were concerned about whether somebody might drop a bomb or something, and it translated into some amazing things. The school one day notifies all the parents that they were going to let all of the children go home on a particular day at a particular time and the parents were asked to keep track at home of when they arrived, so they could see how long it would take them, in case of an emergency to get home.

IN: That's very interesting. What kind of neighborhood events do you remember from the first years you lived in this house? Was there any special event either that the town did or that the people on Woodbine Street did, when you first moved here?

SP: Not really, at this moment. I'm sure there are things, but nothing leaps to mind. I am trying to think whether there were any carnivals or—I don't think of anything, but perhaps it will come up again. There were carnivals for muscular dystrophy.

IN: Now, when you moved to Leland Street, I know there's a whole history of your block, the 4100 block of Leland Street, and I know your family was very instrumental in that part of that history. If you could tell us about that?

SP: Well, the warning is or the notice is be very careful what you do, because you may be starting a tradition. [laughter] One of the things—I'll explain how one of the things started. Our children were, the smaller ones were due to go to school and so we decided to give them, make this a special occasion a banana split party. So we had a banana split party for our children. After about a year, we did it again, only other children who were friends of our children came, and then I think the next step was that some of the parents came and it built to the point where it was a block party and everybody on the block came, and we still do that. We had a banana split party last fall.

IN: Oh, okay, is it a potluck dinner? Do people bring food for a meal?

SP: Just banana splits. Everybody—well, this has become tied to something else. When we started—in order to tell people about the banana street party, when it was going to be and everything, we started a newspaper, partly me getting our children, and Claudia Kolker involved.

IN: Is it Hillsman?

SP: No, not a Hillsman.

IN: Kolker?

SP: Kolker, yes. They started this Leland Street Sunday News and then they did it themselves for two years, which was a lot because they were like eleven and twelve when they were doing it. They had an educational advisor, sort of, publications advisor, Joel Lloyd, who lived on this block, and who sort of coached them on how to do a newspaper and what kinds of questions to ask. When they got hard up for news, they would sometimes say, "Have you bought anything new lately?" and as a consequence there were some Leland Street Sunday Newspapers that were filled with toasters and other purchases.

IN: Were you part of the Leland Street Coop, also?

SP: Yes.

IN: Could you tell us a little bit about—do you know how that got started?

SP: Several people had heard about them, and it's in my mind that one of the newspapers, a national newspaper, had an article about someone else doing one. Sylvia Jones, who lives on this block, was certainly involved. We started going down to the

wholesale market down by the railroad station. Well, actually we started by talking about how we wanted to do it and how much money we felt we had to stay within for people. So we asked, let's say that ten families were doing it, and one week two of the families would go shopping together for the produce.

IN: What time of day did they have to go down to buy the produce?

SP: We went down, early enough so it was early rush hour traffic. Not as bad as it got, but it was busy. We would go down and park by the Warehouse. What we tried to do—people didn't order things. People who did the shopping were relied upon to pick out something that they felt was a good buy or that people could use that was commendable, and that is what was purchased.

IN: Were you involved in the town government at all?

SP: It seems like I was, because we were one of the founders of the Leland Street Coop.

IN: Do you have any memories of your children going to Chevy Chase Elementary School? They went to Leland Junior High School? They went to BCC High School?

SP: Yes.

IN: Any special memories? I know you talked about the bomb test that they did in elementary school, how long it took them to walk home.

SP: Yes.

IN: Are there any other kind of memories like that you have of either the years in elementary school, junior high school, high school?

SP: There was a time, I don't know exactly what the time was, it was sort of a fad almost to create some educational opportunities for children between the holidays and school starting again around the end of Christmas period. You nod at me all the time, I feel as though I've said the right comment.

IN: No, I just—[chuckles]

SP: Anyway, they—now what am I talking about?

IN: Just anything that you remember that happened.

SP: But I got started on something just now. Oh, about the schools, BCC and Chevy Chase Elementary, a number of them had courses that you took during vacation periods. I remember particularly because I was asked to teach a course on gems and minerals for Chevy Chase Elementary, and I wanted to teach, but I didn't want to be pinned down too much. So I did give a course and I called it Gems, Minerals and Surprises.

IN: And this course was for students, parents?

SP: Students.

IN: Students.

SP: It was sixth grade that did that.

IN: And this was during vacation time that you did this.

SP: Yes.

IN: Okay.

SP: One of the surprises was I had a toaster and it broke, and when I opened it up I saw that there was mica in it, which was there for particular reasons relating to the heating structure of the mica and how it behaved. So I took that and we opened it up and I showed them some of the practical uses of minerals.

IN: Okay. What are some of your favorite memories of being outdoors in the Town of Chevy Chase?

SP: That doesn't—I mean, lots of nice memories here, but being outdoors in particular, I don't recall.

IN: Then what are some of your favorite places in the town? Outdoors? Indoors?

SP: Well, I spent a lot of time at Leland Junior High School, which now of course, as you know, is another name. I was involved in all of the kids' schools. At Chevy Chase Elementary I was a room mother for my eldest child and then I found that you can't do that—you have to be a room mother for each child. So by doing the first one, I committed myself to six. We would be called upon to go for field trips, to the University of Maryland farm or whatever. Also, I was active in the PTA and one time the PTA wanted to thank the teachers for their participation in some program, and they took them out to lunch, but they had to do something with the kids because it was during a school day. So some of us who were in the PTA took over the class for that period. I remember in the room, the children were—usually when there's a substitute teacher, the discipline was very bad, but my discipline was very good because I called each child by name, and they didn't realize that A, I knew it because they were friends of my children and B, that I only called on the ones I knew.

[chuckles]

IN: Were your kids in Leland Junior High—were some of your kids or any of your kids in Leland Junior High when it moved and they tore Leland Junior High down here in our neighborhood and then they went to school over at Westland? Were you involved in that at all?

SP: No, because they just missed it, I'm happy to say.

IN: Right, right. Anything else that I haven't asked you questions about that as we were talking came to mind that you'd like to add to this interview?

SP: My immediate reaction is I'm sure there are lots of them. My second is, but what are they? I was active in the PTAs at all three levels and I'm not sure that this is one that should be given by name, but the fact that after my—by the time my youngest child was ten. I changed course myself. I went to law school and I became a lawyer and while I was an intern with the District Court Judge in Montgomery County, I was present at one of the cases, which involved an assistant principal of Leland and his wife. This was a divorce case, and when I was in the office, the principal, assistant principal, who knew me from PTA, said, "Is there any particular reason why you chose this session to go to?" and I said, "No, I was told by the judge I should go wherever he went and study his career that way." It was funny because it was a conflict between the two. I'm not sure if that's an appropriate insertion.

Then when the kids were in senior high school, I worked with Jerome Marco.

IN: The principal at Walt Whitman, yes.

SP: This person now, who was at BCC, is now at Whitman and I met him later on in connection with one of my grandchildren. Sorry.

IN: That's okay.

SP: Lost the end of my thought.

IN: That's fine.

SP: Anyway, oh, at that time it was when drugs were first beginning to become a problem in the school and they formed a committee with representatives from the faculty and from the parents and from the students to try to determine what could be done to keep this from progressing. It was interesting because it seemed to me, after I had been on the committee a certain length of time, that the students that were on it were less interested in stopping the drugs, than in finding out what we were planning to do about it.

IN: Did you end up drawing up a policy of any kind from that committee?

SP: No, I don't remember that we went—at least when I was there—that we went all the way.

IN: Okay, anything else?

SP: Probably, it's a long time ago. I mean, how much do you want?

IN: Anything that would be a significant part of the history of the town, whether it's through the school system, through the neighborhood.

SP: I used to—I'm just trying to think of something. There was—this is tracking the same material, but I was a member of Chevy Chase Women's Club and one of the things that I did for them was to do a history of the area. That was—I don't remember all the material that came out, but I think that for example, Rock Creek Park was purchased originally by the Chevy Chase Land Company because they were looking for rural—they wanted to preserve rural areas around the place where they were selling land, in order to encourage the growth. That came out of the club, my knowledge of it came out with the club.

IN: Okay. Well, I thank you very much. It's been a pleasure talking to you. You certainly helped with the history of the town. Leland Street is a very important street in the town, with some of the traditions the street has established. Again, I want to thank you and really do appreciate it.

End of Interview