

HARNEY COUNTY HISTORY PROJECT

AV-Oral History #80 - Side A

Subject: Rt. Rev. William B. Spofford, Jr.

Bishop of the Diocese of Eastern Oregon

Place: Pioneer Presbyterian Church - Burns, Oregon

Date: August 26, 1979

Interviewer: Karl C. Christ, D. D.

KARL CHRIST: This is Karl Christ, the Vicar of St. Andrews Episcopal Church in Burns, and I'm visiting with William B. Spofford, Bishop of Eastern Oregon. We're visiting together on August 26, 1979, in Burns, Oregon. And we're going to be visiting about the history of St. Andrews Episcopal Church. Bishop Spofford, I'd like to ask you first of all about your first impressions when you came to Burns, Oregon.

BISHOP WILLIAM SPOFFORD: Well Karl, I came to Burns, Oregon, actually the first time back in the 1950's when I was in Weiser, Idaho as Vicar. At that time Louie Perkins and his wife Katherine were the Vicarage family. And the Church was the second building that St. Andrews had had. It was a sort of a classical rural wooden structure. It later burnt down, as you know. Second time was when I first visited here as Bishop of Eastern Oregon after I was consecrated in January 1969. At that time the building, the new St. Andrews was reasonably new. It looked like most new buildings. Very sharp, sitting sort of in a non-landscaped field. A good deal of mud, obviously a work in progress, and in process. I remember my awareness in driving up to it; it was in a summer day, a very clear desert day. And I was aware of how hot the building was probably going to be with no trees at that time around it.

KARL: Where had you been? Where were you coming from at that time?

BISHOP: I think I was probably coming from Bend, where I had my residency, and where the Diocese and headquarters were. And as I say, I was on my first tour. So it must have been in February. And you know you can get great days in mid-winter here in the high desert.

KARL: Now how long ago was that?

BISHOP: That was 1969. And it was about a month after, or some-time the first month that I was Bishop.

KARL: Were you already pretty well acquainted with this area?

BISHOP: I couldn't say so. I'm like most people, it took me a long time personally to get -- well let me put it, to fall in love with the high desert. You have to learn to use your eyes and all your senses in this country. And the first time you see it you think, my gosh, how bleak and desolate! And then as you live with it, as I'm sure others have told you, and you yourself, as a experience, you find out it is very much a living desert with a great deal of vibrancy to it.

KARL: What kind of congregation did you find here at that time?

BISHOP: Well basically it was a congregation that was really the present congregation of people who had had; many of them had helped found the Church then 40 years before. And now it's 50 years old. People who had moved into town with the Forest Service or other governmental agencies. But mostly a pretty stable group. A few youth. And I think basically that is because the youth, you know, pass through and move on to, out of the county because of better employment or educational opportunities.

At that time the Vicar was John Warell (sp.?). He'd just come there directly from seminary. He was an older man, and he was functioning and trying to help the congregation. He felt there was a good bit of stress or concern about growth, or lack of

growth. And I had a feeling there wasn't a very clear sense of goal. Once you got the building, it was sort of a building as an end in of itself, rather than a building for a purpose of what I'd call a mission of ministering.

KARL: The Church is celebrating its 50th anniversary this year, having been established, or having its first services in 1929. What's your recollection and your understanding of the nature of St. Andrews Church over those 50 years?

BISHOP: Well I think being an Episcopal Church my feeling, or I guess my prayer and hope would be that it would be a community building Church, and a care taking Church. We're not aggressive about evangelism. How do you define evangelism? And I think you define it by trying to represent God's care to people. And trying to broaden people's horizons and visions. That's been a struggle partially because you have such isolated geography in Harney County, and in Burns and Hines. As the big world out there sometimes becomes either the enemy or irrelevant. And I think through the years St. Andrews congregation has, you know, struggled a little bit with what is their focus, what is their purpose?

Being Episcopalians we put a heavy concentration on the sacramental nature of worship, and the reality of God as an incarnate God in all of time and space.

KARL: How were you involved, or were you involved in any way in the present building that exists here now for St. Andrews?

BISHOP: No, I don't, not at all, it was here when I got here. And so it was something that, when I became Bishop I suddenly realized that when I came over here that this congregation was in a good bit of a mortgaged prison. They were taking so much of their income to pay off the cost of the building that ---

KARL: How did that come about, Bill?

BISHOP: How did they, well, I think it was because, when they had the fire in the original

building and they'd received their insurance check, and they went ahead and built the present building which was a fine structure, which has all the facilities that a care taking Church should have. But at the same time given the limited number of people, and the limited stewardship program it meant that they, by the time they paid the mortgage every month there wasn't much left over to pay the clergymen, or do Christian education, or do much of anything.

KARL: I think there is a little book now on file that has been presented to the library called, "The First Fifty Years", which documents of course a great deal of this history of St. Andrews. And so the facts are there. But it's my recollection from that book that the initial buildings were very much the product of a lot of Churches throughout the country that contributed to the establishment of the Church here.

BISHOP: Yeah, well Eastern Oregon, up until 1971, was a missionary district. A domestic missionary district, as we were called. For instance, I was made Bishop of Eastern Oregon not by election of the people of the Diocese, but by the House of Bishops of the Church, who chose me to come into Eastern Oregon to be the Bishop for these people. And therefore that was the old sort of building dependency style. We hope in the time of my Episcopacy that we've moved a little further towards self-determination for the local people.

KARL: How has the St. Andrews congregation been involved in your time with the Church in the Diocese or the National Church? Has there been contribution here, and a participation in the larger Church as well as locally?

BISHOP: Well a significant number of people in St. Andrews and from St. Andrews of course, attend Ascension Summer School at Cove, which is sort of the spiritual educational center of this Diocese. Cove being up by LaGrande, sort of on the lee of the Wallowa Mountains. At the present time a youngish lawyer in Burns, Duane Pinkerton is

the president of our Diocese Council, which means he holds the second most authoritarian job in the Diocese. He manages the Council, and it is the Council in which between Diocese conventions which meet annually, really is responsible for the life and program and the budgeting of the Diocese.

My leadership style tends to be a style of participation and collegiality. By that we mean use of all the book of clergy and laity in determining where this particular branch of the household of Christ should move.

Another person who surfaces at this point is Ruth Stewart, a ranch lady who now lives in Hines, who will be going to our Denver General Convention this next month, September 1979, as a representative to the Women's ... And that of course is giving good leadership, and good participation in the National Church. For a number of geographic reasons and I think sort of survival reasons, so much of the work that St. Andrews does, has to be done locally. Our concern is that they know about the broader Church and get motivated and understand it. And how does their mission in ministry, given what our principles of servant hood are, get applied in Harney County. This is done in many ways through relationships, good ecumenical relationships with Pioneer Presbyterian Church, and with the leadership of Dr. Karl Christ, as pastor vicar, and certainly through The Blue Sage Deanery which includes Harney and Grant Counties, and carries on all sorts of work.

One of the newest things we are attempting is to make Harney County sort of a, or The Blue Sage Deanery, both Harney and Grant County, one of the sort of pilot areas for our training seminarians. Our Church, like the Presbyterian and many others, is fundamentally urbane and urban in its orientation. And yet we recognize that the local parish is the heart of it as to where ministry really gets done. And so many of our candidates for ministries experience of the Church has been metropolitan or urban. And

it's very important, I think, and our Diocese does, to get seminarians to experience rural life.

KARL: Bill, you've mentioned The High Desert Ministry, this link between the Pioneer Presbyterian Church and St. Andrews. And I think you were instrumental in the effecting of that relationship at one point. You want to say a word about the history, how that came into being, and why?

BISHOP: Well Karl, I think that God moves in many ways and most of them mysterious. And he also moves out of necessity. And when I became Bishop it was pretty obvious that Pioneer Presbyterian Church was having very real difficulty in maintaining itself. The Pioneer, as you know, sits right across the street. Rather at the end of a different block from St. Andrews. Also at the same time, St. Andrews was having great difficulty in maintaining itself. And it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us that perhaps we could be more responsible stewards of the Church's resources by trying to work towards some kind of a ecumenical pastor. And so we entered negotiations on this with the approval and help of the Presbyterian Session and Synod and with vestry here and the Diocese Council, seeing whether this could be done. The advantages were, obviously, that instead of two congregations, both suffering very what looked like terminal illnesses, suddenly discovered that they could use a common pastor. First one in that role being Shep Crim, who was an Episcopal Priest, and we sort of have a gentlemen's agreement between the Presbyterians and Episcopalians that we'd sort of alternate ministers when there was a vacancy. For the last four years, Karl Christ has been the vicar pastor and has worked very hard. There are some difficulties with it. You have the difficulty of formation and tradition for instance. How does a Presbyterian help to form Episcopalians into their own tradition? And Karl and I have talked about this and shared it. I try to be a member of the team, my staff tries to be a member of the team, but that's difficult. But

that should be a challenge to the members of St. Andrews, that maybe that's their job, not Karl's, you know. He's their pastor, and enabler, and leader.

One of the difficulties we've always had because of the old missionary district concept is a certain dependency on ordained ministers. Well I'm one who believes that the ordained ministry at its best is an enabling ministry to help all baptized Christians who have their own ordination. Through that, to do their ministry if they do theirs. If they do, then the role of the ordained person falls into place.

KARL: Do you see this, Bill, in some way as a model that may be looked at by other situations that are somewhat similar, at least in terms of geography, and need, as being a viable model for other communities?

BISHOP: Well I would say yes. I would also say it is a sort of testing model, or touchy model given all denominations difficulty in accommodating themselves to the realities of Christ's command, that we all should be one. That's not an easy issue, because you're dealing with all of the historic realities, and often what happens when you get two Churches together, you end up with three Churches. You end up with the one in the middle, and then the two that were more rigorous on their own traditions. So you have to do it, you know, sort of easily, and with a good bit of commitment. I think, and I certainly pray that this one is solidified enough now, after about nine, ten years experience that most of the people who have related to this system in Harney County would say we never want to go back to a sort of totally separate relationship.

When you do it, you've got to confront issues of ministry, you got to confront issues of sacrament, you got to confront issues of formation, and all of these are very hard issues. I'm not sure that in a real intense way either congregation has really tried to wrestle with those deeper issues which keep getting battered around on the upper Church levels, and very theoretically there.

It seems to me if we're going to work towards Church unity of whatever kind, I'm not talking about one big Church. Because I believe strongly in unity with diversity, that we've got to have some test tubes, test situations where, you know, people can live it out. Say well is this helpful or isn't it helpful? And that's the only way that I can conceive of, of unity really coming about.

KARL: Looking at another direction in terms of your own experience, Bill, you come originally out of an Eastern culture and orientation. Isn't that right?

BISHOP: Yeah, I was born in Brooklyn and that's about as Eastern as you can get.

KARL: Was there any sense of real culture shock for you to become the Bishop of Eastern Oregon?

BISHOP: Oh, not really. I'd, for some reason for an urban guy who had worked in Philadelphia, and Boston, and Detroit; I got steered by the processes of Vocational Development into what is called town and country work, which I've always enjoyed. So I help train many of the priests of the Church at a national town and country Church training center in Roan Ridge, Missouri. And then my original move to the West was to set up that kind of training center in Idaho. Polly and I, my wife Polly and I had five sons, and I always quite somewhat selfishly found that I would like, you know, to raise my five sons in a rural environment. Not in any way because I reject the city. I think that God has his call wherever people live. But that, you know, when I first bumped into, say Idaho, well saw the mountains, and the canyons, and the ski hills, and the fishing streams, it didn't feel strange at all. And I like that. At the same time, I love to sit in the bleachers of Yankee Stadium, or go to the National Art Gallery, or whatever. But, I think that it's very important what these small towns such as Burns and Hines symbolize to our culture.

Most big cities that I know try to become smaller by setting up neighborhood areas, and so that people can become intimate and non-alienated. Most small town, I guess, try

to for financial reasons; try to become bigger. There's got to be, I think, some-where an optimal size of the community. Where as I think there's got to be an optimal size for a Church. I don't think a great big, most of the big Churches I know of work very hard to have a lot of smaller Churches inside of them. And most of the small Churches I know try to get bigger. I guess it's about somewhere between 400 and 500 members is an optimal size. Where you can really know people, and know where they're hurting, where they're rejoicing, where they're dancing, where they're dying, you know, the things that make the stuff of life.

KARL: Bill, looking at the difference in ministry, granting that people are people, you know wherever you go, how would working with the vestry of St. Andrews Episcopal Church in Burns be different from working with a vestry in an urban community or another place? Did you find anything specifically unique or different about the St. Andrews Vestry and people that was interesting to you?

BISHOP: Well I think that the vestry of St. Andrews, and this would be true in most of our rural counties in Eastern Oregon and that's mostly what we've got, you know, bring a different set of symbols into the meaning. The ranching symbols, or farming symbols, or wilderness symbols, a sort of isolationists symbol, that we built this land, we had to hack out the, any productivity. It's been a tough survival battle, and I think that's always underneath there. Where as, you know, working in some of the Churches I've worked with say in Massachusetts, where the Episcopal Church goes back to certainly long before pre-revolutionary days. For instance, Polly and I were raised in a Church that was built; it's a Queen Anne's Church in New Jersey. The oldest Church in New Jersey. And, you know, the Episcopal tradition is of long time. We celebrate here in St. Andrews, this weekend as a matter of fact, 50th anniversary of this Church. Well, you know, the Church where I was raised has celebrated 350 years. And then you go to England, of

course, and go to Canterbury as we did last year, and find out it goes back to the sixth century. And you get a sense of the recentness of the history here. And I think all of these symbols come into this kind of community. Then the other reality, is that given Harney County, I don't know what the square mileage is, but ---

KARL: 10,000 square miles.

BISHOP: 10,000 square miles. Well you know ---

KARL: 8,000 a little under 8,000 people.

BISHOP: Okay, fine, and 8,000 people in say New Jersey or Massachusetts is a village, you know. But here it gets maximized into a larger community with different, you know, different scales.

One of the things is, Karl, in the 10, 11 years that I've been Bishop, I've noticed, you know that Burns, you know, building a new library, getting housing for the aging, getting a new aging center, working with the 4-C day care center, which is a very, to me a very exciting ministry of education, reconciliation between Indians and Whites and so forth. And I thank God very strongly that St. Andrews has had leadership roles, as well as the other Churches in all of these areas.

KARL: I understand that there is right now under consideration a grant from the United Thank Offering of the Episcopal Church. See, if I recall correctly one of the very strong factors, even in the establishment of the St. Andrews Episcopal Church was made possible by this United Thank Offering of the Church. And now here isn't this true, we've got a possible grant coming to assist Harney County right now in its 4-C program?

BISHOP: Sure. And I think we often forget our history, you know, we think we've done it ourselves and there's no such thing as doing it yourself. For instance, last year, the Bishop Paddock Foundation, which I happen to be a trustee, Bishop Paddock having been the first Bishop of Eastern Oregon, gave a \$5,000 grant to the 4-C program. An

excellent request, a grant request was written by the Board of 4-C to the United Thank Offering. And it's our hope that within two weeks we'll hear that the women, because that's basically what it is, of the Episcopal Church, have donated \$10,000 to this work in Harney County.

And it's so easy to forget this, that where we are, is based on the giving, and the witness, and the concerns, and the love, and the blessedness of people who we don't even know.

KARL: One of the things you hear about rural communities and so on, is their difficulty in accepting change. Contextually in the Episcopal Church one of the things that was really happened now in recent years is the introduction of the new prayer book, and the ordination of women. How has St. Andrews fit into this picture in your ministry here?

BISHOP: Well it's certainly in what is called the new prayer book. Well it's not really a new prayer book; it's a new edition of a very old prayer book. And prayer books change all the time, and always have. And so people sort of get hung up in their own era. And I can understand that, they know what they know, and they get used to a familiar set of words. St. Andrews --- a lot of that depends on what the clerical leadership is teaching them and wants them to share. And St. Andrews by in large has had ordained clergy who were responsive to a newer form of liturgy, and more open form of liturgy, and more optional types of liturgy, therefore I think that, sure there are people who would prefer the Old King James English in most prayers, or the Thomas Crandler English, and it's great. I have nothing against that. The other options are also highly expressive of who we are as a Christian people.

Still the fact of the ordination of women, I don't think St. Andrews has really experienced it. All its ordained clergy have been male. We do have one ordained priest who is female in the Diocese. Most of the people in St. Andrews know her. I suppose

some think she's great and some don't, you know. But they think that about, you know, they relate to her as a person who has her own strengths and weaknesses, and they can respond accordingly. But I don't think that the femaleness by in large has anything to do with the acceptance or non-acceptance. It's a hot issue in a lot of places in the Church. But in Eastern Oregon, I've never found this. It would be interesting, actually if there were a woman priest in Harney County. How would people respond to her? Because I can conceive of if you're going to develop a team ministry, that one of the ways to build a team is to have a person of each sex on the team, so that people who can more freely relate to, and talk to, and confess to, and be absolved by a female, could have that possibility.

KARL: Bill, what special contributions do you feel, or unique contributions in terms of your own gifts, you been able to share with St. Andrews and Burns and this particular part of the community or the Diocese that are important to you?

BISHOP: Well to me, as you know, I've submitted my resignation after 11 years, in order to go be assistant Bishop in Washington, D. C., which is about as great a switch in geography and culture as I can think of. I guess that as I look back on the 11 years, I've lived up to the new models of ministry we've tried to introduce, the continual reinforcement that the Episcopal Church in the small community should be a care taking, enabling ministry and not a ordained ministry oriented situation. I think, I hope not insufferably proud that we've really tried to take the ecumenical command seriously. And that the body of Christ should be one. I think that certainly I have many rich memories of deep and good friendships, and certainly in Harney County I cannot think of it, except also thinking of the Steens Mountain and the bird sanctuary, and watching the grouse do their strutting on Easter morning with John Scharff. The many geographic greatness of this area.

KARL: Bill, you sign your letters ordinarily Shalom. Is there any special reason for that?

BISHOP: Yeah, Shalom of course in Hebrew means peace. But it doesn't mean absence of conflict. What it means is much deeper and broader than that, namely the whole concept of total peace. Of the total person, in a total community. The health, the body, mind, spirit, you name it, and so often when we hear the word peace, which is a lovely word also, and lovely concept, we're just thinking of war and peace. Well Shalom to the Hebrews, and now to many of us Christians means just the total togetherness with God. It's a rather mystical word I suppose, but oriented not individualistic, or even community, and that's where all my theology comes from, and that's why I like to sign my letters that way.

KARL: Well we want to thank you very much for this review, and history, and contribution. And I'm sure that the St. Andrews congregation, and the larger community of Burns and Hines and ...

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