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Interviewee: Hill, Shea

Interview Date: December 10, 2012

University of Houston
Oral History of Houston Project
Houston History

Interviewee: Shea Hill, President of Heights Woman's Club evening group

Interview Date: December 10, 2014

Place: Heights Woman's Club Clubhouse, 1846 Harvard, Houston, TX 77008.

Interviewer: Lindsay Scovil

Transcriber: Michelle Kokes

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Abstract:

Shea Hill discusses the current and future goals and happenings of the Heights Woman's Club in Houston, Texas. A brief amount of history of the club is discussed including the donation of the clubhouse land by Mrs. Cooley, the club flower, and the club motto, but the interview mostly consists of details surrounding current membership policies and current events such as the Witches' Luncheon, the Hortense Ward Award, and community donations. Hill talks about the two current groups within the club, the Heritage Group and the Evening Group.

UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON
ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT

Shea Sandefer Hill

Interviewed by: Lindsay Scovil
Date: December 10, 2012
Transcribed by: Michelle Kokes
Location: Houston Heights Woman's Club

Introduction (.37)

LS: My name is Lindsay Scovil and I am interviewing Shea Sandefer Hill and we are, it's Monday, December 10, 2012, and we are in the Houston Heights Woman's Club clubhouse. So if you can just kind of go ahead and state your full name and your position with the club first.

SH: Okay, my name is Shea Sandefer Hill. I'm the President of the evening group of the Houston Heights Woman's Club.

LS: And did you grow up in the Heights area?

SH: No, I grew up in Louisiana and moved to Houston right after I graduated from LSU.

Recording 2 (.37)

SH: ...evolved a little bit, and we've added a lot of things, too. More fun social things to try and pull in newer, younger members so we do food and wine events, the tea is new. We've had a fashion consultant come and talk about fashion at a certain age and what's appropriate and not, and that was a lot of fun. We're thinking of doing a chili cookoff next February...

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LS: So in everything you've done over the last few years what has sort of stuck out in your mind as a great memory or something that you are really proud of?

SH: In the last couple of years I feel like we have just really had a great momentum going; lots of positive energy, lots of new members. People hearing more and more about us in the neighborhood. Our PR person, we actually have a lady, she does the Heights Life Blog, Viula Torgerson.

LS: Yeah, I've heard of her.

SH: She's a member of the club and you know we courted her until she finally joined, and she is full of energy and now very active and well-connected. Yes, she does our Facebook page and our PR that we do for our events and things. She will write up stuff and submit it to *The Leader* and whatever is necessary. So I just think that it's really getting more visible in the community, and the marker is huge. And that was Anne Sloan working on that for years, couple of years in the making getting that done.

LS: Did you attend that ceremony?

SH: Yes.

LS: It looked like just from what I've seen that it was a great kind of community event, brought in a lot of people.

SH: It did. We had, we even had some council member here (I forget which one it was). Lots of lots of people who had been members over the years and just various people with Houston Heights Association, the city, and of course the State Historical Registry, I forget what exactly it's called, but lots of really positive press and just a really good feeling that we really saved a little piece of history.

LS: Absolutely.

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SH: You know you think about what the women accomplished and they didn't even have the right to vote and they managed to pull all of this together. It's pretty inspiring.

LS: Do you know anything about when the land was actually donated by Mrs. Cooley because what I've seen is of course women didn't have property rights. That's one of the things the club really fought for. So kind of how that was able to happen?

SH: It's unclear and I imagine that Mr. Cooley really did the donating on behalf of Mrs. Cooley. My understanding is it was around 1910 that the land was donated because, there were some disputes among the Heritage Group and the Evening Group as to when, but the clubhouse was built in 1912 so that's what we said, we're celebrating the clubhouse. But I think the land was donated in 1910. And how they did that I'm not sure. There is one of our events is and I guess it's a charity sort of. I don't know what you would call it exactly but it's our Hortense Ward appreciation, it's turned into a dinner it used to be a luncheon, but we award Texas School of Law. It's South Texas is the college and a scholarship... it's really not a scholarship it's a gift of \$500, and we allow the school to pick a female student who has shown that they are very active in furthering women's causes in the community and have already done that and are a recent graduate. The graduation... because usually they are taking tests when they are coming for the dinner, Hortense Sparks Ward was the, she was a lawyer. She wasn't actually a member of the club, but she helped charter the club and she was I think the 3rd female ever to pass the Texas Bar.

LS: I didn't realize she wasn't actually a member of the club.

SH: I don't think... there is no record that she was actually a member. I could be wrong about that but after reading it over and over again it... Anne would be able to answer that. Now when it comes to history take Anne's word for it.

LS: Right.

SH: Don't take mine. If I've contradicted anything, she will correct me.

LS: How many members are there right now?

SH: We have about 140.

LS: Oh, okay.

SH: It was less than 100 when I joined so we are doing really well.

LS: Are there membership requirements? Do you have to live in the greater Heights area?

SH: We have... we are not a "service club" so to speak. It's just a social club. We are seeking our non-profit status based on our community service work and the fact that we are scraping by to just save the clubhouse and the historical aspect of it, and we've been waiting for 12 months to hear of it but I hear it can take up to 18 I think.

LS: I heard it's a hassle.

SH: Yeah, so I think we will get it. I think it's just stuck in somebody's... It's sitting in a pile somewhere. But the question was...

LS: Any requirements, membership requirements.

SH: We don't. The day group or the Heritage Group requires sort of a referral I think (which is back from the olden days). But for us if you want to write us a check for \$100, you may never darken the door step again, we don't care. We would love for you to be involved, obviously, and especially when it comes to everything is a volunteer basis. Even our general meetings somebody brings the food and the wine and the décor if there is any, and I'll bring a door prize to auction off just to try to get people to show up for the business meetings are a little drier but we usually try to have some fun and a speaker or something.

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LS: Well I would imagine, too, especially since it sounds like there are a number of those ladies that are also part of the kids club, the neighborhood kids club, and I would imagine there is a lot of camaraderie really amongst everyone, as you are growing and building. It's a good sense of camaraderie together.

SH: And change is hard. You know it hasn't been all rosy. Because obviously you know we are the Evening Group. We are very sensitive to not wanting the Heritage Group to feel like we are swooping in and forcing change on them. We try to be very respectful of each other. Even though I think the Evening Group really is responsible for, we put more money in to maintain the club and so forth, they still do their part and they are growing as well. You know a lot of the evening group members have joined their group which is, I'm hoping one day that it just sort of evolves into one thing because their group meets once a month October through May so it's really, it could just be really the "ladies who lunch" or whatever you wanted to call it. But it would be nice, it would be less complicated.

LS: How often does the Evening Group meet?

SH: The Evening Group meets, we have the bylaws state that we have at least 3 general meetings a year. We try to do four just to keep people on their toes. We just had one in November I think.

LS: That's interesting because originally my understanding is they were once a week. It was a very different life back then to be able to get together once a week and do all these things in the group.

SH: Yes, and another point is obviously the Heritage Group no one really works in that group. Well I wouldn't say that, you could get away for lunch, but they meet from 10:30 to 12:00 or so

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once a month. The Evening Group we have a lot of people who have professional careers and that's why we meet in the evening. You know we have families and children.

LS: Do you know about what the age difference between the groups is? I'm sure there is a little bit of an overlap there.

SH: Yes, and like I said we have a lot of members who have joined the day group and vice versa. I say more the evening group going to the lunches than the other, but gosh I was just at the Heritage group Christmas party. I'd say their average age is over 60. Yeah, I mean Sylvia was sitting here at the table. She's 92 years old. Lots are over 80. Anne's over 70.

LS: That's right.

SH: And you wouldn't know it. She's fit as a fiddle.

LS: So do you think is that your oldest member, Sylvia?

SH: Sylvia, she probably is. We just had somebody pass away last week and she was a member of both groups. I actually knew her. She was a member of my church also over at Saint Mark's.

LS: That's sad.

SH: It is. You know, I was helping wash dishes after the Heritage group meeting the other day and one of the ladies, she was probably 70, and she was in there drying I was washing and they were just chatting and it's just ennobling and how they don't really, you know, they are friends the people that they can talk to about, "Hey remember when..." and all, and they are losing them, and it's so hard. I just... it really touched me that they still have this to do and staying active and social you know keeps them young even though they don't meet that often.

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LS: I've often thought that about the original founding members of clubs and as they start to pass on I would think that also the people who started something as they move on, that's got to be so hard for the people left behind.

SH: Yeah.

LS: The little gift bags or the bags that you said you guys put together for...

SH: For Reagan [High School]...

LS: The troubled kids, what kind of things were in there?

SH: Okay, these are kids that come from, I mean you can imagine. They, you have victims of rape and incest. You have kids that just don't have food. You know they are just, for whatever reason, they are identified in the abused. And so they have really basic needs, and one of the concerns is that when they... I'm sorry I don't know why I'm so emotional today. When they are let out for Christmas break, you know, sometimes the food that they get at school is the only hot meal that they are getting, so toiletries, you know some fun things. Saint Andrews Church brought over \$330 of gift cards that they had collected for various things, book stores, Kroger, iTunes, you name it. So they got gift cards. Every kid got \$15 I think is how it worked out with all the donations. Then they got, gosh, what else was in there? Little toiletry bags, shampoo, we had tables of mittens, caps and little fun stuff, sports balls for the boys. There were about 20 boys and 60 girls.

LS: Oh wow.

SH: And those were just the ones that they knew were going to the Christmas party. But it was great, but two of the ladies who run the program at the school came and talked to us a little bit about the kids while we were, you know mainly some other ladies and I wrote some cards to

put in there in the little bags. It was a lot of stuff. Gum and snack bars and things, you know they had a list of stuff that they wanted.

LS: Good, that's good!

SH: But it wasn't, there was nothing extravagant. It was basically just a little to get that healthy kid over the hump.

LS: Yep, and that still means so much.

SH: They had some things some lip glosses and some... Viula had been online with some other group she was involved and somebody just mailed her a box of samples from their makeup whatever that they did. It's crazy how people just, the generosity that just kind of pours out when you just ask and it happens. It's very, it makes you feel really good about the community and...

LS: Well you said that you've lived in Montrose and other neighborhoods. Do you find that the Heights is a more close-knit community, or does it seem to be a more Houston trait?

SH: You know, I think Houston's a great city. Montrose is I think, I didn't live in a real residential... I was in a residential area but not in a residential street. I was on Dunlavy. So I knew the people that lived in my apartment. It was an old house. It was converted into 5 apartments, and we were all really close except for the crazy guy that lives in the back. We didn't know him.

LS: There's always one.

SH: And I'm still friends with those people now, you know. The good times in my 20s and all of that fun stuff. But I, yeah, the Heights is just a different sort of, you know when Ike came through did you live in the neighborhood during that time?

LS: I lived in the Montrose area.

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SH: And I don't know how it was in Montrose but it was, you know we didn't have electricity for two weeks in a lot of the places. We did, ours came back on in less than 24 hours. So all of our friends were doing their laundry at our house and we were but everybody was sitting out on their porch and you just didn't have anything else to do because there was no electricity. And all the cell phone signals were sketchy. It was just a really nice feeling, and like Lights in the Heights, you sort of get that same sort of community feeling, and we do know our neighbors and we're not, I know people that are best buds with their neighbors and we have, we do know everybody around us and I know if I asked anybody for help that they would jump in and help out.

LS: Absolutely.

SH: I don't remember feeling that way in Montrose, but I don't really remember asking anybody for anything. But you know and once you have kids you will talk to anybody, I swear. You are just so bored for human contact and adult interaction. I really have a totally different personality then I did before I had kids, you know. You go to the park and just talk to anybody that looked like they were, they might have something interesting to say. "Have you talked to any adults lately?" "What's going on out there?"

LS: In the community in the Heights area I've been finding as I, you know I was mentioning that I'm writing this to people, some people know what the Heights Woman's Club is, most don't. Do you attribute that to anything?

SH: I think mainly I attribute it to the fact that it was sort of, the population was dwindling in the club itself and that a lot of, you know there were the sort of the urban flight back in whenever the 80's or whatever and a lot of the little ladies that come to the Heritage Group don't even live in the Heights anymore. They left to go to the suburbs like everyone else. So now you find with

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the Evening Group it's all Heights people. You know, it's people that find out about this little treasure and you know... the history once you learn the history of it you think, if you care at all about your neighborhood which most of us do, we live here because it feels like a neighborhood and you know you're not 20 yards from your closest neighbor. So sometimes it's a good thing. Sometimes it's not a good thing. But so I think that was the main issue and now that especially with you know sort of partnering with the Heights Kids Group on this one project, we had Santa at the club house where we also invited a lot of the families in the area, because Heights is really heavy on families these days. For a long time it wasn't that way. But so I think the demographics changed the club and everyone sort of brings on more and more people. Viula has been amazing at getting the word out. She will post everything on her blog and we have a Facebook page the woman's club does.

LS: I think it was a year ago maybe, I'm not sure when she joined, but I still remember her posting something on her Facebook page saying, "Oh, I finally went and attended my first Heights Woman's Club event. It was wonderful. I can't believe I haven't been a member." I still remember seeing her post that.

SH: Yeah and you get gosh with 140 of us have never been in the same room together at one time, but you know even at a general you get 30 women together and it's not going to be smooth as silk but you still, like my husband laughs at me all the time. I'll be complaining about this or that. I have to go to board meetings each month and I'm much more heavily involved then the general member. But he said, "I don't know why you want to do that if it's just going to cause you stress." "Because I like it!" "Why do you want to be around them?" "Because I like it. I want to!"

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LS: I completely understand. So kind of moving forward, obviously you said you guys are working on the 501c3 nonprofit status, wanting to do more obviously with the library as well, any other community kind of focusing that you are working on?

SH: Right now I don't know if the Sisters in Stitches are doing anything specific. We've done, they've done pillowcases for women's shelters. Oh yeah, we are getting ready to do something with Star of Hope I think is the next. I tend to try and steer them in the direction of women-centric activities. I think it's just a better fit for us. And especially no one is going to argue the Star of Hope is not a wonderful organization.

LS: Absolutely.

SH: But like I said, we've done like the toiletries like I said for battered women's shelters and that sort of thing, you know, but trying to stay more in the community. I think Star of Hope is in Montrose, isn't it?

LS: It's just outside of Minute Maid in downtown.

SH: Okay.

LS: So it's close, kind of near the eastern side of the Heights. How much does the club still look at history? Is the history of the founding mothers, is that really paid much attention right now or is a lot of everything kind of moving forward?

SH: We definitely, well this year you know we've kicked history to death I think. We had the Centennial Celebration that we did in September was sort of the last hurrah. We did a champagne toast here one Saturday night in September, and we invited past presidents to come and honor them with the Marechal Rose is the club flower and someone found pins with the yellow rose on it. So yeah we definitely the history and the Hortense Ward award. Yes, that is right. You know every year we put a big emphasis on that because it just goes to the root of

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everything the club stands for I think, empowering women and standing up for each other. You know, being there for each other.

LS: You mentioned the club flower. Is there a motto or any other of those kinds of things?

SH: Oh gosh, yes. We have I think now look I did join the Heritage Group also. They have, they do a lot more historical stuff then we do because like a lot of them can remember these people. So this is something that we recite at our general meetings but this is not specific to Houston Heights Women's Club as Anne will stand up and say every time we do it. It is a club collective that was written for all women's club sort of in the United States. This is accredited to this lady here.

LS: You recite that before each meeting?

SH: Now the Heritage group does it at every meeting. We do it at just our general meetings, and I've made them do that this year I don't think they... So we have laminated copies back there to pass out. Like I said this is the day group, this has some good information here. But I know there's other... okay the club colors are blue and gold and the flower is the Marechal Niel Rose. It's not a native to Houston or anything. It's just one of their original groups was I think a little garden group so that's probably you know, "back in the day" that's what ladies did was try to grow roses even in this completely inhospitable-for-roses environment and people still did.

LS: People still do.

SH: I don't even bother in my yard.

LS: I know that Mrs. McKinney at her home they had a rose garden. Her side yard was called the Rose Lawn.

SH: Yes.

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LS: I don't know if you are familiar with that. So I'm curious, I'm going to have to look into that see if may that was one that she liked.

SH: Yeah, so you are welcome to look and see. They are much more organized then we are. We are in the meetings, "Hey let's do this." "Okay who is going to do it?" "I don't know."

LS: Well they have been doing it for a while.

SH: They are more of the rule followers. We are more of the fly by the seat of our pants kind...

LS: You get together and have a good time. Now that would be Witches' Luncheon? Is that both groups together?

SH: No that's the evening group. Anything where drinking is involved that's going to be the evening group. We had one lady say, "Well maybe we should have three groups. I don't want us to hang a disco ball in the middle of the club house." Anne, and this is Viula, she will tell you her favorite moment because she and this other lady who shall remain nameless and Anne and Viula says, "It's my favorite club moment ever." "No I don't think that's going to happen. There won't be a third group."

LS: Like you are going to open it up late at night?

SH: Yes, why not?

LS: They are having a hugging contest coming up. That's cute. A hugging contest award. What does that involve?

SH: I don't know. I don't know if I will be able to make that meeting.

LS: Yeah, more details are not given. So do you... I know I keep going back to the history side, I'm sorry.

SH: No, that's okay.

LS: Do you by chance have any favorite, you called them founding mothers, is that right? Or just founders?

SH: The founders of the club?

LS: Past presidents. Somebody had mentioned to me “founding mothers,” and I didn’t know if that was kind of the term you used.

SH: I haven’t heard founding mother but founding members. We do definitely, somebody knows who they are. I know that of course it was Cooley and we don’t have any of that information. Well we may; I put something in here. A brief history. Which is probably not accurate.

LS: These are great little books. They will keep everyone informed.

SH: Well like I said, ours is not as we just have a brief history and then names and phone numbers.

LS: You guys are going to be on Facebook and email and all that kind of thing whereas you would imagine the Heritage group...

SH: They still do a phone tree. When I got the call last week when Neva Dupuis died. I was one somebody’s list to call. Which is awesome, but when do you have the time for that? I don’t even...

LS: Right...What is your favorite activity that you have done so far?

SH: I would have to... I love the Witches’ Luncheon. We’ve done it for four years now, and it’s really a kick in the pants. It’s a lot of fun.

LS: And everyone dresses up?

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SH: Oh yeah, and people will come every now and then that don't have a hat on and you feel silly. Because I kept telling my friend Heather was going last year. "You need to get a hat."

She showed up in blue jeans. "I felt like an asshole." I said, "Well I told you."

LS: You don't come dressed up without a hat.

SH: That's a lot of fun and this kind of... it's sort of empowering I guess to see all a room full of women with witch hats on. And we have silly contests for best hat and mostly it's just a get together luncheon. Wine, of course. But the porch party was really fun. A lot of fun. I enjoyed that a lot.

LS: Good.

SH: We didn't do that here, either. The Witches' Luncheon is always offsite.

LS: Oh, okay. I did not realize that.

SH: Yes we did it at Stella Sola for a couple of years. The first one was... where did Trudy do the first one? I think it was there. I can't remember now, when it was Bedford though and then it was Stella Sola for two years and Kris Bistro this year.

LS: Yep.

SH: But the porch party we did, you know we had four different porch hostesses and then people helped them make, prepare food and everything and you know go from house to house. That was a lot of fun.

LS: That would be a lot of fun. So you said you told your husband when he said, "Why do you do it with the stress?" And you said you loved it. What do you love about it?

SH: I don't know exactly. You know when I first, when I first met Melbaline I just lost my grandmother, and I'm from a small town so it's, I just I enjoy being around women and talking and just because that's how I grew up. We'd just go sit at somebody's house and sit and talk and

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talk and that's, I guess I'm just kind of social. So it's a lot of fun to me and I love to entertain and have fun parties and things like that. It's a great space. And you know one of the things we try to remind people, members, all the time is if you can conceive it you can have it here. As long as you invite every member in the club, evening group, you can do whatever you want for free, well your expense for whatever the party is, but people always step up and it's usually the same dozen or so people that help out just like in any other volunteer organization. But we are working on that. We are starting to get a little more aggressive calling people and asking them if they would be willing to ... because 9 times out of 10 if you ask people aren't going to say, "No" or they do say "No" and that's fine and you just move on down the list. We need to get better at that. But I don't know, I love Melbaline. I love Anne. I've enjoyed learning more about the neighborhood, and it just kind of felt like home when I was here.

LS: Good. Do you have anything else you wanted to mention?

SH: I don't know I guess like I said at the Centennial event, I hope that the difference that we are making now or the work that we are doing now helps the club stand another 100 years.

There will be 40-year-olds sitting around saying, "Who is this person? What is her picture doing up there on the wall? Who is that? Can't we move that for the party?" Poor Mrs. Cooley. I can never remember who she is. I always think that's Hortense Ward because that's the only name we ever hear really. I know she's even less attractive than Mrs. Cooley. As you can imagine one of the first women lawyers in Texas to be. Had to have been a pretty hardy woman. She even got divorced and remarried. She was scandalous.

LS: That's big. Well, and fighting for women's suffrage and all that. You weren't going to be the most popular person by pushing for those things.

SH: True.

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LS: I thought I was going to ask one last thing. I agree that it's interesting that so much has gotten the club to this point and now it's on those of you who are the leaders to take it to the next amount of time.

SH: After this year I'm going to take a break.

LS: Great and someone else gets to lead.

SH: I hope so, and you know it's hard to let go and I will, I will sit on the board as the past president for the next year. I will always, as long as I'm a member, I will be involved because whenever they ask me to do anything I always say yes, but it's a labor of love but it's also rewarding. I can't really explain why. I'm not sure, just the feeling of community.

End of interview

