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Oral History Interview on West Hartford (with video)

Susan Hansen

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Consent form: HansenSusan_consent20110722.pdf

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Location: at the Bishop's Corner branch, West Hartford Public Library

Recording format: digital video

File name: HansenSusan_medium20110722.m4v

Length: 00:16:03

Transcribed by: Katie Campbell

Additional files: n/a

Abstract: Susan Hansen (born 1957) responds to a racially restrictive covenant in her suburban neighborhood, inserted by the real estate developer in the 1940s, which prohibited non-whites from residing in many of the homes in her present-day neighborhood. She reflects on her decision to move into West Hartford in the 1990s for its public school system, and the advice she received from friends and coworkers to buy a home only on the north side of the town. She also discusses the historical value of finding these restrictive covenants and emphasizes the need to teach this often-forgotten aspect of the North's history of racial segregation in history classrooms.

Additional comments: Submitted as part of the [OnTheLine web-book](http://OnTheLine.trincoll.edu) by Jack Dougherty and colleagues (<http://OnTheLine.trincoll.edu>).

Speaker key:

CS: Candace Simpson

SH: Susan Hansen

JD: Jack Dougherty

[all comments by transcriber in brackets]

CS: So what's your current address?

SH: My current address is 86 Ledgewood Road in West Hartford.

CS: And when did you move into that home?

SH: Eleven years ago.

CS: And what do you remember about moving day or looking for houses, or that whole process?

SH: Looking for houses eleven years ago was before the real estate market collapsed. I would be

in a house, looking at it, thinking, "this house is perfect," you know, in West Hartford, I was determined to be in West Hartford. They were just selling instantly. Someone would be showing me the house and then say, "Oh wait, we just got a bid on the house." So I thought I would never really get to move into town. And I had just gotten a job here so I wanted to live in town. The house that I'm in is right behind Webster Hill School and the people who owned it felt that it wasn't moving quickly. Now it had been on the market maybe a week when I saw it, and that was a slow turnover time. They thought people didn't want to live next to the school because they were afraid kids would be hanging out, making noise. Having the school as a neighbor is just the best part of being there right now. [00:01:06]

CS: How do you like being around the school?

SH: I'm only home one day a week, but I love... I'm near the kindergarten playground. I just love seeing the kids out there. When I moved here, my son was actually attending Webster Hill and so I put a gate in the back of our fence so he went out the back door, he went to school, it was an extension of our backyard, I didn't have to put my own swing set in, he went to their swing set. It's just... It's like having a park almost. I mean the kids don't hang out. Kids don't use it on the weekend or in the summer vacation. It's just a big, quiet, lovely place for us to enjoy. [00:01:44]

CS: And do you remember anyone recommending that you look at homes in West Hartford, or...? You said that you were really set on living in West Hartford.

SH: I was set on West Hartford. I lived in Beacon Falls previously. We were looking for a better school district. My son has some special needs. So I was looking to move into either West Hartford or Wethersfield at the time to get him in a better school system. Then I got a job in West Hartford, so I just thought, "Well, this is providential," and started house-hunting. My new colleagues at work immediately had advice for me about which side of town I should live on. And I was like "Why?" "Oh, well, better schools, better schools." I said, "Well, how can the schools be that different in one, you know, school system?" "Oh, no, no, you want to be on the north side of town." Well, I couldn't afford the north side of town and I... Ledgewood just look like the neighborhood I grew up in. It had a very cozy feel. I loved the house right away. [00:02:42]

CS: So, as you know, we are doing this project called "On The Line" and we are showing people different maps that have to do with housing and other lines between, like, cities and suburbs. And so, this is a screenshot [screenshot and sample document from "Race Restrictive Covenants in Property Deeds, Hartford area, 1940s," interactive map from UConn MAGIC, http://magic.lib.uconn.edu/otl/doclink_covenant.html] of a race restrictive covenant map, and these flags mark developments where we found a significant amount of race restrictive covenants in the property deeds. And so one thing we were very, very curious... so we clicked on one of them and we looked here to see the language here. If you would, would you just read that out loud for us?

SH: [Reading from the map pop-up] "No persons of any race except the white race shall use or occupy any building on any lot except that this covenant shall not prevent occupancy by domestic servants of a different race employed by an owner or tenant." And it's dated June 10,

1940. [00:03:44]

CS: So what are your initial reactions to that?

SH: I'm shocked... I mean, I... This doesn't even... I can't even comprehend it right now. It's not something I would have expected in Connecticut at all at that time. You know, I was born in the '50s, so I've seen a lot of change, you know, in my lifetime, in how races are treated, and I've seen the fight for equality. But I grew up believing that the problem was in the south, as we do. I'm from New York. New York was, you know, the focal point of the world. When you grow up in New York, you learn that New York is. But, no, when you mentioned that you'd come across a document like this, I'm like "What?" And it's kind of appalling to think it's my neighborhood. [00:04:39]

CS: DO you ever remember hearing about this or is this a first time you've heard about it?

SH: I never heard about this. The only thing I heard about... Someone was saying that a neighborhood, not indicated on your map right here by any of those flags, but someone said that part of Elmwood was built specifically to be like lower income housing for, I'll say, non-whites, and it was some deal worked out with Hartford. I mean, I don't... And they didn't have details and they were just kind of rambling and I thought, "I don't know." [It was] before my time so I don't really give it much thought. But no, I never heard of this. I never this happening anywhere, really, in Connecticut or this part of the country. Like I said, grow up in New York and when you heard about problems, it was "Well, that's the South. You know, they still have this horrible segregation, but we don't have it in New York." At least superficially we didn't have it in New York, but certainly when I was a kid, you noticed. [00:05:43]

CS: The way that we found out that you lived in this neighborhood... We thought it was a pretty funny coincidence because I had just spoken with you like days before... We looked at... We looked at this and this is the property deed. And so there are some other rules listed here. This little mark is where we got this language from. So there are some other rules that are listed in that, and this is the original document. And so attached with that came this map. [Screenshot and sample document from "Race Restrictive Covenants in Property Deeds, Hartford area, 1940s," interactive map from UConn MAGIC, http://magic.lib.uconn.edu/otl/doclink_covenant.html] And this map, there weren't any houses built yet, so this all goes by lot number. So you live somewhere here. So you live at 86, so that would have been 51, lot 51.

SH: Right, right. [00:06:40]

CS: This would have been you right here [pointing to a lot on the map] And so...

SH: And I know my house was built in 1938. [00:06:47]

CS: So do you... Seeing these documents, so you think that... Because the way that we found these documents is that they are still in the public record, they are still... a trail of property deeds, and you just look at the previous owner's deed and the previous owner's deed. Do you think that this sort of language, this racially restrictive language, should be stricken from that trail, or do

you think that it should stay?

SH: [sighs] I would say that it needs to stay. That's historic record. I mean, if you take it out... [coughs] excuse me, my allergy voice... If you take it out, you lose its... I think it's very valuable. I mean, I'm horrified by it, but I think this is a valuable... a valuable little clause. They teach a local history class at the two high schools. I mean, my son took it. He never came home with anything like this, and I think this is something that people should know, because there are people still living on my street who were here then, who must have been fully aware. No, we need to know that we were being idiots up here too and it wasn't somewhere else. It was here. It's still here. Not in writing any more, but certainly it's still here in a lot of attitudes in the town. As I said, I'm a native New Yorker. I grew up with a lot more diversity. I found Connecticut, when I first got here, a little unfriendly even to me, like "You are not from Connecticut." But the attitudes in this town are really kind of shocking. Not just racial difference, economic difference. There's quite a strong mindset on both sides of town. It's almost like Farmington Ave has this invisible barrier, which I don't understand. I honestly don't understand. But no, I wouldn't strike it, it's history and we shouldn't be proud of it, but we have to know it was there. [00:09:01]

CS: And would be able to identify any other long term residents of this neighborhood that might be interested in talking with us?

SH: I'm thinking... Mr. Rowlson...

CS: How do you spell that?

SH: R-o-w-l-s-o-n. Or actually, Mrs. Rowlson. Mr. Rowlson passed away. But they have... it's this larger lot [points to map], I'm sure. They're in a big, big house right there and I think they've been there since it was built.

CS: And that would be 109 Ledgewood?

SH: Yes. Yes. Who else has been...? Well, you already talked to the Painters. I think, well, there's been a turnover. He may be the only one who's been there, and the Painters, who have been there, you know, that long. I am only the third owner of my house, which I found interesting. I found that very interesting when I moved here. I thought "A house built in 1938 and I'm only the third owner?" But the first people stayed there until, I think, '64, and then I got it from those other people. And I just assumed "Wow, they love the neighborhood," you know? But I found it unusual. And even my neighbors are all... most of them grew up in West Hartford and are now just living a few blocks from where their parents had homes, so I took that as a good sign when I was coming here, that people liked the community. Now I see things like this and it's like "Oh were they just trying to, like, stop anyone else from getting in?" [laughs] You know? But yeah, Mr. Rowlson. [00:10:50]

CS: Okay. And if it's okay with you I'd like to ask some factual questions about yourself.

SH: Sure. [00:10:55]

CS: So what year were you born?

SH: 1957.[00:11:00]

CS: And in your house, who lives with you?

SH: My husband and my son, right now. [00:11:05]

CS: And do you have any other...

JD: Just going to... Maybe you should clarify on tape the non-enforceability background. The, sort of, historical context of... they were and then were not enforceable. And then if you just also clarify that official her house is not covered by this, but she may have figured that out with us, about when the house was built and when the clause was written. You want to explain that?

CS: Yeah, so these race restrictive covenants in the property deeds were pretty popular in the... in 1940 and then they were ruled legally unenforceable in 1948, so even though we can use that as a rule, we can't enforce that rule, it's still there. That's why I asked, "Do you think we should remove it given that it's not enforceable. And also, we found that there... I circled some houses here, and these houses correspond with the lot numbers. So 11, 14, 15, 16. I believe, that's what... 11, 14, 15, 16. And so this covenant applied to those houses specifically, so although it didn't apply to your house, it's still your neighborhood, it's a part of this larger High Ledge Homes development, so we thought that it would be pretty interesting to you to see something that's going on in your own backyard along with the playground that you have there too.

SH: Right, right. So this was in effect for about eight years? And it was a Supreme Court decision that overturned it. And do you know, I mean, were people locally, like, trying to fight this or people just... This just seemed like an acceptable part of their deed?[00:13:06]

CS: I don't know about locally, if there were any protest to it, but...

JD: We've seen newspaper clippings that refer to complaints about restrictive covenants, but the federal case is what drove it. That was Shelley v. Kraemer. The other thing we've been trying to figure out with this particular neighborhood here is why does it only cover some lots and not others? And actually you, you may actually have just helped us fill in a little piece there. I think our guess has been that some homes were built and sold, that sounds like yours, 1938. And then... but there's other lots left over. The developer may have actually exchanged it. So we have a couple different dates here. It's owned by R.G. Bent, and this is surveyed in 1937.

SH: Right, okay.[00:14:04]

JD: And they are all lot numbers, we assume, then because that's when it was converted over, and yours might have been one of the early homes to have been, perhaps, bought and sold, or, you know, built and sold. But then the actual deed, it's to [Edward F.] Hammel of High Ledge Homes, Incorporated, so it's a different entity that is taking over, perhaps, the rest of the land and trying to sell that.

SH: Right, right. [00:14:26]

JD: And we understand that these restrictions, including the racial one, were, you know... Real estate developers are trying to sort of find incentives to sell homes, and this seems a plus for their target audience: white families with money. That's our guess.

SH: And it's probably a good guess, because if your circles are indicating houses that... See my next door neighbor is circled and I know their house was built in '42. So...[00:14:55]

JD: So that makes sense. We'll have to figure that out for sure. Okay. That's very helpful.

SH: So this was incentive. I mean, I understand it, but it's ... I can't even put it into words. When I got your email, I was like "What?" you know, I was really quite ill thinking about it, but it's there and it's interesting that we don't teach our own history fully in our own schools, you know. We are very good at criticizing everywhere else and everyone else but we'll gloss over our own mistakes just to make it all... Especially these days. I think they're... what they teach our kids about the history is just getting all glossed over to make it look like we never made any mistakes. But you learn best from your mistakes, which is why I said "No, you wouldn't want to ever take this away so no one could look back and see it," because people should see this, it should be stuck right in their faces really, like, "Look at this." [00:16:03]