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## Wendi Maxwell Oral History Interview

Wendi Maxwell  
*Raymond College*

Mathew Lin  
*Holt-Atherton Special Collections, University of the Pacific*

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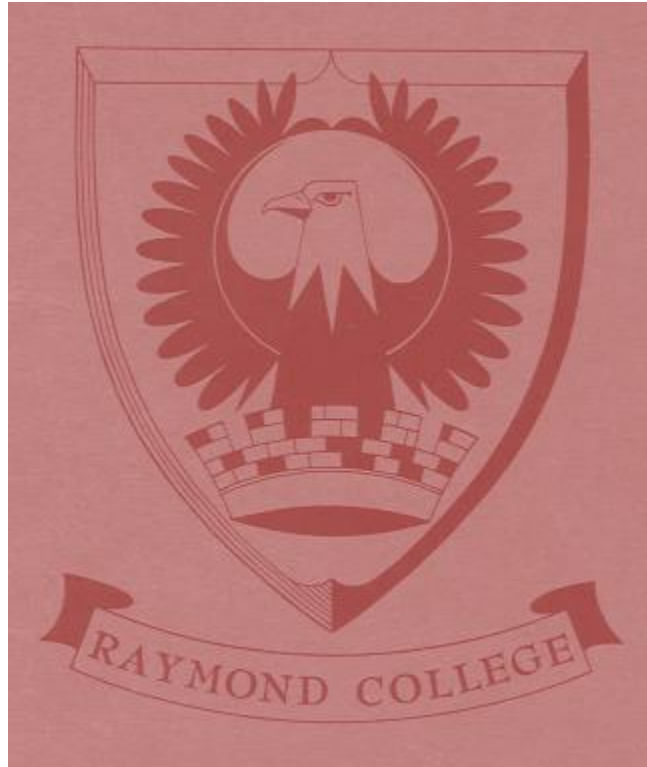
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RAYMOND COLLEGE PROJECT ORAL HISTORIES  
UNIVERSITY OF THE PACIFIC ARCHIVES



**Wendi (Burnette) Maxwell (1968-1971)**  
**Raymond College Student**

November 22, 2022

By Mathew Lin

Transcription by Mathew Lin University of the Pacific,  
Department of Special Collections, Library

## Wendi Maxwell Interview

Transcribed by: Mathew Lin

**Lin:** Hello, My name is Mathew Lin and I am interviewing Wendi Maxwell. Today is November 21st, 2022 and we are conducting the interview on the second floor of the library in the Raymond College study room. Hello Wendi, how are you? You may introduce yourself and tell us what years you were at Raymond College.

**Maxwell:** Hi I'm Wendi Maxwell. My maiden name is Burnette, so I am Wendi Burnette Maxwell. When I was in college I was a Brunette. I was there in the fall of 1968 and I graduated in May 1971. And I was around campus for an additional year because my boyfriend at the time was taking a fourth year in order to stay out of the draft. I am currently retired. Currently and permanently retired. I amuse myself currently by having a band and signing Jazz. However, my prior world was in Public Policy. When you have a job it's hard to say what category it falls in. I started working in Stockton State Hospital after college. And was fairly quickly promoted to a managerial position. Not so much because I was so fabulous, but because the hospital administrator wanted to spit in the eye of several other people. I worked at the state hospital for twenty five years. That was basically until the state closed the facility. During that time I ran the staff training department. I ran workers compensation, health and safety, a whole lot of personnel stuff, labor relations, contract negotiations, and was getting ready for my next career as a hospital administrator when we ended up closing. When we closed I transferred to the Department of Education in Sacramento. I was the continuous improvement manager for the department of education under superintendent Elaine Easton. I did that for about three years doing kind of internal consulting and stuff. Then I transferred over into the adult education system within the Department of Ed. I was a consultant in adult education for the next 12 years. And I did statewide and a couple national and a couple of internationally adjacent programs for the Department of Education. And after that I retired. And I have been a happy jazz singer ever since. I'm also one of the many leaders of the Raymond Phoenix Institute which we will talk about later.

**Lin:** What was your choice in picking Raymond College as an institution?

**Maxwell:** I had no choice. When I was in junior high my mom went to a Methodist's Women's luncheon. And President Burns was at that luncheon. He visited all of these tiny towns in the Central Valley and talked to them about his vision of an Oxford on the West Coast. And my mom was taken with that mostly because she wanted me to have a different social milling than what I had grown up with. She wanted upward mobility for her daughter. So she went up to President Burns afterwards and gave him a ten dollar bill and said I'm going to send my daughter to your school. At that time none of them existed so it turned into I'm going to send my daughter to Raymond. And put me on a mailing list. And then she told me what I was going to do. So I knew from Junior High where I was going to go to college. And I pro forma applied to UC [University of California] Santa Cruz because they had a cluster system. But I had no intention of going there and in fact when I got my early acceptance from Raymond I withdrew my app at

Santa Cruz. So my Santa Cruz was my fallback school. And I chose not to go there. I went to Raymond instead because my mom told me to.

**Lin:** What were your first impressions of Raymond College?

**Maxwell:** Well I went there in the spring before my senior year to visit. And my impressions were oh my gosh its brick buildings. Which, coming from a Central Valley Town, that meant there was wealth. And then I had a luncheon in the Raymond Great Hall which had stained glass windows. So for me it was a church. But a church of knowledge instead of a church of religion. And I went to some classes and they were lively and interesting. I saw a play that students had put on and the whole thing was just so alive and so urbane. You know it was just like a different world from anything that I knew where people grew up picking cotton.

**Lin:** What were your thoughts on the educational style of the Raymond teaching philosophy?

**Maxwell:** Well, I liked the idea of an intensive course load. I was a smart kid. Most of us were. If people weren't smart, they left. Not drummed out, but they got overloaded or tired or whatever. So most of us were pretty smart. And okay we're gonna do fifteen units, at that time I think a trimester was about twelve weeks maybe thirteen. So we're going to do fifteen units. And we're going to do everything that they tell us to do. Which means that I have to take calculus. I have to take history. I have to take things that I like, but I also have to take things that scare me. And it's like okay I'm game for that. So I took my classes knowing it was, you know, a hefty load. But what I hadn't realized was how much there was in addition to that. So my freshman year we kept journals and your journal was your musings across all over the curriculum for whatever courses you were taking so my freshman year, the journal theme was what is life. So when I had a physics class that's like okay what is life, what kinds of attributes do there need to be in the universe for life to exist somewhere else. When I take a biology course it's what makes something alive. When I take an organic chemistry course it's what the heck is DNA. Because it was still a relatively new concept. So that was an intellectual thread that you know you're challenged all the time. Then I was hanging out. There's only three years difference between anybody who's there except for faculty so I'm hanging out with you know people who are second year students and people who are seniors and we're all having Friday night parties with red wines and sourdough bread from Genova Bakery and Monterey Jack Cheese and we're listening to blues on the stereo. And we are talking about what is the life of an intellectual. Honest to god. We talked about the honor code. Because there was a pervasive and explicit honor code. And it didn't have rules so students were expected to understand what honor meant. And when it was that somebody was doing something that was completely inappropriate for our community versus when it was that people were just making decisions that were stupid or exploratory. So we had a lot of discussion about these abstruse philosophies. And the other thing you said about the curriculum and the structure. I loved the structure that they laid out all of these courses that I needed to take. And that the course was going to be tailored to us. I wasn't going to C.O.P [College of the Pacific] and taking a basic math course. I did have to go to C.O.P one semester for a French class because the French Professor was on sabbatical. And boy it was boring. And then I had no real anything to compare it to other than High School. But when my French Professor David Burke came

back, all of a sudden we were having French at David's house. We were learning about impressionists. We were listening to Opera. We read 19th century French literature. We spoke in French. It was hard. And I felt like I had landed in some sort of intellectual dream. We had the opportunity to take our classes as independent study classes. If you needed a Sociology class and you didn't like the one this semester you could wait. Or you could talk to a professor and say "Gene Rice, I need to fulfill a credit for sociology." And I took two units with two classes with Gene Rice as independent study. Both of them on the 50's. I studied 50's politics which was primarily the house on American Activities committee. And then I took a parallel class looking at beat poetry and literature. You know I was like that's so cool. And you guys are giving me credit for this. So I was very happy with the curriculum and the structure. We didn't have textbooks. I don't know that anybody ever bothers to mention that. I only discovered that people had textbooks in College when I was in my 50's working in the Department of Education and they were talking about textbooks. As an undergraduate. And I was saying "what do you mean? There's undergraduate textbooks for anything other than chemistry." And it turned out that yeah, everybody but me you know had a sociology textbook and we didn't do that. We had primary source materials. We could get them at the bookstore but at the lodge, The Raymond office, had a wall with like a little free library where people who didn't want to keep their books would just deposit them on the library wall. And so if you were taking a course you'd go over to the library wall and you'd see if your book is there and if it is you don't have to go to the library or you don't have to go to the bookstore. So that was a different sense of taking control of your own education that you just don't get if you're reading something out of a curated book.

**Lin:** Who were the individuals at Raymond that were most memorable to you and why?

**Maxwell:** Well, being a girl in her late teens, the most memorable ones were boyfriends but we're not going to go down that path. Most memorable was my favorite teacher Mike Wagner. Mike taught introduction to the modern world and it was I guess you'd call it a survey course. But it was whatever Mike wanted to talk about how he thought the world worked. He had an economics background. He had been an economics and policy advisor to some part of the U.S government during WW2 [World War II]. He was intense and focused and when he would talk to you or you'd talk to him he would focus on you like a baby does. That there's just no blinking. He's entirely focused. He is listening to every word that you say, every nuance that you say and he's also cataloging in his brain what you've said that makes sense, and what you've said that's bullshit. And then he calls you on it. He was the most exciting professor I had by far. I took his economics course the spring of my freshman year. And he told me that I was the first freshman he had ever let take economics from him their freshman year. So I was very proud of myself whether that was true or not I don't know. But you know you're at a college that has a history of what, five or six years so it could very easily be true. Later on, Mike got distracted by other things and my plan to basically be an Econ major was interrupted by his distractions. So I graduated with the same kind of broad liberal arts focus that everybody else did rather than zeroing in on something. Yeah that's my most memorable guy.

**Lin:** What issues were you most involved in while at Raymond? For example: civil rights, feminism, community activism or anything else you can think of.

**Maxwell:** I wasn't. I came from a town of 5000 people. My graduating class at high school was 100 people. So all of a sudden I find myself at Raymond where there's another hundred people. And I know all of them. And they're much more interesting and smart than the ones I left behind in high school. I don't know that I was aware of other things going on. You know I just hunkered down and I didn't even go to the library on campus. I just hunkered down and stayed in the quad and read a lot and argued a lot. I also found out within the last fifteen or twenty years that other people in college did group projects and were encouraged to work as teams. That was certainly not true for my education. Or at least the way I perceived it was argumentation. People call it socratic. But when it involves everybody in the room, it's actually argumentation. And I think that's why so many of us went on to become lawyers. But no, the current events of the world passed me by. I had been in Chicago one summer when I was in high school. There was a lot going on there. There was Civil Rights protests. It was the year before the Democratic Convention. There was a transit strike. I came back home and I was a card-carrying member of the young socialist workers party and I subscribed to eye of stone's bi-weekly newsletter all of which would be considered suspect commie [communist] kind of stuff. So I read an awful lot about political theory and you know international political theory. And was philosophically interested in what was going on in the world. But I didn't really have any friends who went to Vietnam thank god. So I missed most of that. Most of the women that I knew were all of an age where we could get birth control legally. So the height of the feminist anxiety was couple of years before I was there.

**Lin:** Has Raymond College met your expectations as an Institution?

**Maxwell:** We still exist. Pacific doesn't really have anything to do with us. But we knew each other. People intermarried. We knew each other forever. We'd have our own parties and Winter Solstice parties. And sixty or eighty people would come so we kept up with each other for a long time. In the early 80s John Williams, the Literature Professor, started putting together a database of everybody's contact information. And then he and Paula Shiel put together a group called the Raymond Associates. Which was not an official non-profit but acted as one. Kept control of the database, made information available to people. So after the University closed our College, we just kind of moved off campus. And considered and continued knowing each other and continued being in touch with each other. And we still do that. It's now morphed into a group called the Raymond Phoenix Institute because the Phoenix was our emblem. And that's a legal non-profit put together by a couple of our attorneys. John Dyer, David Wellenbrock and some other folks. The bi-laws basically state that we exist in order to continue conversations both face to face, in writing, and via electronic things. That we continue to have conversations on any object or subject or area of interest that anybody anywhere in the world would discuss. So because we're a non-profit. When we filed all our papers and stuff like that, but the projects that we do there, they're outlined really well on our website. But we maintain the database. We maintain an active email list that's non permeable to outsiders. [But I understand that John Oram signed you up. Which was not my intention but lucky you.] We had a listserv, we have reading groups. One of our reading groups, the one started by Mike Wagner and David Wellenbrock, started before the college closed. It's still going now. They celebrated their 40th anniversary recently. They called themselves the serious reading group. They were written up in Salon magazine once about ten years ago as being one of the oldest continuous non-fiction reading groups in the U.S. So we have that reading group. John

Williams is still teaching Faulkner to any Raymond Alumni who want to continue to study Faulkner. So they do that. They used to be in person but maybe they are virtual now. The purpose is to read books that are so hard you can't understand them by ourselves. For a while we had projects with Pacific and I was never involved in them. But we had a mentor program. We had a book program. We had a writing prize. Over the years we've done a lot of mentoring of the University of the Pacific but I'm not the person to talk about that.

**Lin:** What contributions do you feel Raymond has made to Pacific and or Stockton as a whole?

**Maxwell:** Well I don't know about Pacific because I don't really know what Pacific is like anymore. One of the things that I think is wonderful about Pacific is that it's small, it's collegial. I get the sense that students know and like their professors and are comfortable talking with faculty and vice versa. And we are all learners together. It's not an old-fashioned sort of thing where the professor is delivering truth from a lectern and everybody else is absorbing it. It's a much more modern style of learning and you got that from us, we got that from you. Everybody learned that together. In terms of the community, I hope that anybody who's listening to this stuff will go into the archives and find the copies of the Stockton Silver Hammer. The silver hammer was an underground newspaper in I want to say 71. That was edited and conceived by David Wellenbrock who is one of us. And had contributions from other people in Raymond and Callison and the community. And at that time folks were going to City council meetings every week. They were going to the board of supervisors meetings. They were going to the school trustees meetings for Stockton Unified School District. And they were reporting on that stuff with a lot of snark and tongue-in-cheek on the Stockton Silver Hammer. And so the College Community read that stuff and recently I've run into people in their 50's who got those papers when they were in junior high. And made the mistake of taking them to school and the teachers took them away from them. But for the time that I was there, there was no big gap between the school and I don't know about the rest of the university, but there was no gap between Raymond and the community. We did stuff, we went to restaurants, we wandered around. A bunch of people volunteered in schools. Did head starts. There were people in the earlier class who got their money together and went to the South and were freedom writers. We were of our time.

**Lin:** What did we miss in this interview that you would really like to talk about concerning Raymond College?

**Maxwell:** Wow. I didn't ask myself that. I guess what did we miss was what's the impact. There's two levels of impact. There's a level of impact on the College that we touched on a little bit, but there's an impact on who the students are. Where are they 50 years later? What do they do? We began the Raymond Phoenix Institute and wanted to do a survey about that, but the hot button issues have just kind of faded. We're all retiring and dying off so we don't care anymore. But I think outsiders would be surprised at the variety of careers Liberal Art students go into. First of all, people misinterpret what liberal arts is. They think it's a bunch of students sitting around reading novels and watching modern dance. And liberal arts as we experienced it meant that you're supposed to pick up a copy of Scientific American every month and read and understand one article. Separate from your class. You're supposed to talk about the life of an intellectual while you're getting drunk over cheap wine. There's all of this

stuff that's simply part of the community and it's part of the culture for that group. As a result, many many people went on to law school because when we got out of college none of us knew what to do so we went to graduate school. Pretty much everybody went to graduate school, somewhere for something. Tons of us went to law school. When I say us it's not me. I threatened to do that but realized I would have to be an attorney all day 5-10. So tons of us went into law school. And tons of those lawyers went into some sort of public service. Tons of people became teachers because that was a thing that one did. In the early 70s, mid 70s, there were lots of jobs for people in public service. So instead of getting out of school and going and becoming a programmer or a tech writer, you went and you worked somewhere in public service. You might work for the welfare department. You might work for the Department of Justice. But you were working for public service. Not only out of inclination but because that's where the money was. There was a lot of money for people to work in public service. You got to make an impact. There were a bunch of us that went into foreign service and had full careers in foreign service. Again, not me. But I only know one or two people that went off and became artists or musicians. One or two people went off and became actors. A few people became novelists and are pretty impressive. But a whole ton of us did serious middle class stuff. I have a couple of friends who still live on a commune. A well-established 40 year old commune. So yeah. That's kind of the impact. All of us wish that our kids could have gone someplace like this. But it wasn't around for a second generation. I think we raised our kids to be wide-read people. I think we raised them to question authority, not realizing that they were going to be the authority they were going to question. I suspect some of us even went into politics. But not a whole bunch. Not a whole bunch. We tend to be behind the scenes people. I forgot to mention that I spent half a year in India with Callison [Callison College]. So while I was not necessarily involved in civil rights or this or the other, I did take some time and lived in a third world country. At that point, What I learned was that for me, I wanted to work in a field that changed the circumstances under which people lived. I did not want to be a social worker or a psychologist or teacher. I didn't believe in helping individual people or picking up individual starfish off the beach and throwing them back into the water. What I wanted to do was I wanted to change systems. Every system I could get involved with. Late in my career I worked at the California Department of Education and I worked with a lot of local adults. Mostly California Adult schools in a few other states on how we could do english as a second language for non native speakers. So that they could better express themselves in the ways that they needed to in their communities. So instead of teaching English in a way that everybody has to learn all the nouns. This is a cat, say cat. What is a cat? That's a traditional way of teaching English, very unfortunate. Instead of doing that we sit with students who are adults and don't speak english and say "what are the things that oppress you the most?" What are the things that is biggest problem for you? I hear things like the teacher called my son a burro [Donkey]. The landlord cheated me on the rent. The police dragged my son out of the car. So we developed a curriculum and teaching methodologies so that we could help people communicate the things that were important to them. Instead of just the things that were academic language. I think I learned the need for that from going to India. I discovered the skills to do it by being at Raymond and being able to address anything and learn anything I needed to learn. And explain anything I needed to explain.

**Lin:** Thank you for joining me. If you have any more questions or anything else you'd like to add feel free to email or reach out to me.