

Margaret Brennan

Wheeling's History

Michael Nobel Kline: Will you start out by saying, "My name is Margaret Brennan."

Margaret Brennan: Oh, okay. What else do you want me to say in terms of who I am?

MNK: Well, just, just to get your name.

MB: Oh, okay. My name is Margaret Brennan.

MNK: All right. Again, please.

MB: My name is Margaret Brennan.

MNK: And you, you were born?

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MB: I was born in Wheeling, West Virginia.

MNK: And the date of your birth?

MB: November 11, 1943. I was born during World War II.

MNK: And the address where you, the address where you grew up?

MB: I was born at 3727 Wood Street. I was born at home in South Wheeling and grew up there until I was about thirteen years old. And then I moved to Warwood and reside there till this day.

MNK: Okay. Well, we're, we're up here at The Point Museum today, and I wanted to, to ask you to talk a little bit about what we see when we stand up here at The Point.

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MB: One of the things I see is 1769. When I stand at a place with a vista like this, I always am drawn back to the early days of this valley and this settlement. And I try to put myself in the place of the Zanes and to imagine what it would have been like when all you could see were giant trees with huge grape vines clustered above them. And when you could see bountiful deer and all the animals of that frontier period. And when you could see nothing but green and river. And when you were the first to be here and to actually lay claim to this land, how exciting that must have been. And also the fact that the forest was so dense that the Zane brothers had to go high. And I'm reminded of that when I come to The Point that in those days you couldn't have gotten a good view unless you went high and really looked out through the forest and saw the river and saw the island, that beautiful, big island

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covered with trees. And to know what it felt like to be some of the first to do that and to be able to say this is my land, this is what I want. And to understand why Ebenezer said, "This is paradise for me." And to remember that this was the frontier. That the river was by treaty the edge of the western frontier. That across the Ohio was Indian country, was the Ohio country. So this was the farthest any white man could

go. And to understand that these Zanes then were true frontiersmen because they, like the later western frontiersmen, were the trailblazers of their era. And that why Wheeling was so important, it was one of the first cities in Virginia to be established on this river and at the edge of the frontier.

MNK: Now the name Wheeling comes from?

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MB: Well, the name, spelling of the name has changed over the years, but it is a derivation of an Indian word. It's so unique. There are only two places in west, or in the whole country, that I have ever found the name Wheeling. Here, of course, and Wheeling, Illinois. And we suspect it was named by a Wheelingnite or at the suggestion of a Wheeling, West Virginia, person. Because the name means place of the head or place of the skull. A rather gruesome derivation. But understanding that in the very early days as the French and the English were fighting over the Ohio Valley and as more and more white trappers, traders and also potential colonists were coming through, the Indians were very nervous about all of the white men traipsing about. And they decided to make a statement to warn off people coming into this area, especially with the idea of staying for any length of time. So they

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captured one hapless trader, took him to the mouth of Wheeling Creek, which you can see down south there, put a stake in the ground at the mouth of Wheeling Creek, cut off this poor man's head, impaled it on the stake looking out toward the river. And this was a warning, an early no trespassing sign that said to anyone else who had any ideas of staying here that this could happen to you so keep on going.

MNK: Wow.

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MB: And that was through an Iroquois. The first derivation was an Iroquois name, ... and it was translated into the Delaware. Wheeling is a derivation from a Delaware Indian word which means place of the head.

MNK: Fascinating.

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MB: It is fascinating. As you look at and you remember from those days of 1769 how hard it was to clear this land, how important it was to be near the river. If you were going to set up a city, that would be a perfect place because of what was happening in the--

MNK: Say that again, because of what was happening.

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MB: Well, this would have been such a perfect place to be on the Ohio because of what was happening in the country. And because the Zanes were shrewd. They had a, a vision of the potential for this area. It wasn't any stroke of luck that these men decided to put their lives on the line in this particular piece of ground. And how hard it was for them to clear this horrible dense forest. It was black as night in the forest. You couldn't see daylight until you cleared it out. The forest was the enemy in those days. They burned it mercilessly. They, they torched the forest to try to clear the land to get their place of community. And how Wheeling grew very fast because of its wonderful location. It had a very early, fast growth. And to, to try to realize, to try to say 1769 and then to envision the small wooden cabins and then how gradually

they, they built them up with a sturdier, you know, using the wood and later

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on the stone homes. Mostly wood, but and then--You just try to feel yourself down through the years and to, to remember the land is always here, but how things come and go it's remarkable.

MNK: Is this a, a picture over here that speaks to some of that early time here? This is 1849. This is--

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MB: Eighteen forty-nine. When you look at the Valley in 1849 it's remarkable how very organized and very built up it is for a--You know, we're talking a very, before the Civil War. This was a very important city, as we know, early on. The 1830s were one of the boon time for Wheeling. With the coming of the National Road in 1818, we already had small industrial growth. But that really gave a launching pad for new industries, more industries, more people coming perhaps with the idea of going west and saying, "This is the place where I can make my home and make a decent living" and staying here. So the 1830s were a tremendous time of growth in this area and into the 1840s. And then of course with 1849 you had the, the Suspension Bridge. We know what that meant. And it was one thing right after another. '49 the Bridge, '53 the railroad. You know, just imagining what that could have meant to a small city. Just

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people, hoards of people coming in from all directions.

MNK: What would, would have been some of the earliest industries that, that you might have seen if you had arrived with the National Road in 1819?

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MB: Well, in 1818, 1819 it was just really getting started. The road is the reason that it, it was a jumping off place for industry and for people. And some of the basic things--We have, we have a good location obviously and water. But also we have the ingredients for the making of iron, and the ingredients then for the making of steel. We have the ingredients for the making of glass. I mean you have to have certain things. These things just don't happen by themselves. We had the coal. They had a very important coal resource. They used to dig right into our hill, right into Wheeling Hill. It's all mined. Just have, you know, dig in, find your coal, just any old buddy or whomever could do that. And then later on the gas resources. We had gas in this area until it was depleted. So the natural resources were here, plus the transportation. So you put the, those together and you have the beginning. The old Top Mill, I believe, began in the 1830s.

MNK: The old?

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MB: The old Top Mill. It was one of the first nail making mills. It was up in North Wheeling at the edge of North Wheeling, what is now River Road. The old Top. And it, it made nails. It preceded LaBelle. Big, big mill. And you had glass houses springing up very early on. You had Mail Pouch Tobacco in the 1850s. No, that would be Marsh. I forget, '40s or '50s. Mail Pouch later on. You had the nail industry taking off. You had LaBelle in, I believe, '52. Again, the ingredients were here so that these industries could thrive. The pottery, LaBelle Pottery. All these early industries went in certain directions because of

the resources of the area, the natural resources.

MNK: For the--It was also a supply city, wasn't it, for, for western traffic?

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MB: Yes. Of, of demand, of people coming through. Anybody with any sense could see people needed things to build as to supply themselves with as they took off either up or down river or across the National Road. And so supply industries--Today we're saying our country is becoming a service country. Well, Wheeling was a service industry city, you know, very early on. We saw a need and we filled it. And so you had the tremendous nail industry where, you know, just tons of nails were going west. And, and people have said, you know, every house that was, had a nail in it from here to who knows where was a Wheeling nail. The glass that you needed to build your home or to eat, to, to drink from. Anything that was usable in those days for that type of thing could be made here in Wheeling.

MNK: Wagon works too, I suppose?

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MB: There were early wagon works. One of the, the things I wish we knew more about was the steamship company, the Phillips Steamship Company, because that was very early and made tremendous steamers on the Ohio. They say some of the finest boats on the Ohio for people to travel where they needed to go. Just, you know, any number of things. The wagon works, which I think is interesting, into the Civil War, which is a whole other area. But, again, it's significant that the, the Wheeling Rosecrans Ambulance, which was extremely important in the history of the Civil War. One of the most horrible things happened, happening in the Civil War was the medical chaos. And one of the worst parts of that was they could not get the men from the battlefields to care off the battlefields. The ambulance--There were no ambulances to

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speak of. And so there was a great need. And General Rosecrans was in our city. He designed the ambulance. They put out the bids, and the Wagon Works of Wheeling just must have had a heyday turning out these ambulances which were sent all over Virginia, all over the battlefields to bring the wounded to the aid station. So that was just so, so significant.

MNK: What else happened during the--Well, let's, let's back up a little bit to--

MB: Betty?

MNK: Talk about Betty a little bit.

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MB: Well, I really greatly admire Betty Zane. I think to consider it didn't need to have been a woman to bring the powder into the fort. Three men volunteered at the Battle of Fort Henry in 1782. But it truly was a fight for the death. I mean the group that came against the fort, almost 300 enemies you might say, wanted to destroy this settlement. They wanted to destroy all the settlements along the rivers before the main peace treaty was signed to end the Revolution. They felt if they had control of the land, and if their-- They knew what was going to happen. The white people along the edge of the frontier were not going to stay there very long. They were going to jump the river, and something was going to happen to, to bring them west. And so the Indians and, and the British too, they wanted to contain the settlements or

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destroy them. They wanted to wipe out Wheeling. And the way they could have is if they ran out of gunpowder. In those days you didn't not, you did not fight battles longer than one day. That was the usual time. This went on for two and a half days. Most unusual because they were determined to get rid of these settlers. And so if someone hadn't brought that powder--Lucky that it was there from Ebenezer's block house to the fort. Once they couldn't fire guns they could walk into the fort, kill everyone, and that was the end of Wheeling, Virginia. And who's to say what would have happened had the settlers not been able to survive that onslaught.

MNK: So at the, at the crucial moment what did Betty do?

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MB: Well, Betty was only sixteen, about sixteen years old going on seventeen. And she was in her early days kind of a tomboy, I think. She could shoot. She was no shrinking violet. She could run. The early stories say she was very fast. And being that young, and also thoughtful, she realized a woman would have a better chance of the powder than a man. And so her own brother, Silas, was in charge of the fort. Her other brother, Ebenezer, was over in the block house with the store of powder. And Betty was able to talk Silas into letting her go out in the middle of a battlefield with three hundred fighters and to try to bring the powder back. And of course the element of surprise worked in her favor. A woman was nothing in a fight obviously. Obviously too, they knew when she came back that something was up, and so they let loose with

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everything they had trying to kill her. It's a wonder she wasn't shot dead at that time. It's a wonder that she made it at all. And so it, it truly is a credit to her that she was fast, she was able to run, run the gauntlet, you might say, and to have the guts and courage to, to even want to do it and to be able to do it and to actually save the day.

MNK: So that was a, that was a new turning point for, for Wheeling then, to survive?

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MB: I think once the Indian Wars were over, once the Revolution, once things settled down--They really expected that it had settled down before 1782.

MNK: So once the, once the Indian Wars were, were over?

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MB: In 1782. Then the settlement continued to thrive, continued to grow. The Zanes came with many other friends and neighbors, and they fanned out all over the valley. And for all the reasons that you would expect the fact--The river is just key to the whole thing. And the fact that the natural resources, Wheeling continued to grow as a community to the present day, with its highs and lows.

MNK: As the new century ushered in, 1800s, what, how, how much had it grown in, in twenty-five years from a--

MB: ...

MNK: Okay.

MB: I have no idea!

MNK: But by the, by the 1830s anyway--

MB: Yeah.

MNK: It was, it was really a--

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MB: It was a thriving--It was a very important--In the '30s, '40s it was a co-major city of Virginia with Richmond. It was an industrial center. It was a different city than Richmond obviously because it was a western city as opposed to a, a eastern tidewater capital. But it was an extremely important Virginia city and had an awful lot of commerce, of wealth, and of industry.

MNK: Let's talk about, let's talk about the Suspension Bridge now. It was, it wasn't just a bridge, was it?

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MB: No, it was a dream. And I've always--There are certain people you'd like to talk to, and you'd like to talk to some of the Wheeling leaders who fought for that bridge. That's one thing that I admire about our, our forefather ancestors. They must have been fighters. I--You know, the National Road was supposed to have gone to Wellsburg. For whatever reasons it came to Wheeling. Who knows, there may have been--

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MNK: Well, well could--Let's back up a little bit and, and talk about some of the theories about why the National Road came here.

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MB: Well, I, I--It was--I think part of it was--It seems that I remember that it would have been shorter to go to Wellsburg. I think part of it was the fight that the Wheeling people put up. They went to DC, and they had of course Henry Clay on their side. And once you get a man of his stature speaking for you, I think that had a great deal to do with it. You know, I, there may have been other things involved, but I, I think it was just tenaciousness. They wanted the road here. They, they fought Wellsburg for it, and they won. And the same with the bridge. They wanted that bridge built. And in those days there were very few suspension bridges in the whole country, and still fewer people who could build them. The same people were building them and learning all the time. It was a very new technology. It was almost a trial and

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error technology. And we got one of the best. And the two best were Robling and Charles ... Junior. And Charles ... Junior beat out Robling for the right to build the bridge. But it had been in the planning for a very long time. They had to raise the money. They had to get the person. They had to convince all the powers to be that this was a good idea because a suspension bridge over the river had never been done before. And so it was, it was a real shot in the dark and a vision to build this bridge. And when you look at it today it's remarkable that it's still there knowing the story of how it blew down five years after it was built. Part of the reason it blew down is because they didn't build it right. They did the best they could at the time. But when a big wind came down the Ohio it was too much for the bridge, and so it flapped a while and then it just

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fell into the river. And when they rebuilt it they modified it so that it wouldn't do that again. And so it was a learning situation.

MNK: And what did the bridge mean then?

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MB: Well, I think, as we see today, it became a symbol for Wheeling. But also there was a back channel bridge before there was a Suspension Bridge. So it was a clear shot over to Ohio. And when the Northwest Territory was developing you can imagine what it meant in terms of that's another place to stand and to, to hear the rumble of the Conestogas as they went across that bridge by the hour going into Ohio, the settlers into that area. It just, an enormous important link for Virginia into the Ohio country coming right through our front door.

MNK: That's nicely said. And then the, right on the heels of the bridge, of course, came, came the B, the B & O.

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MB: The B & O. And the years it took to build that--If you know anything of railroad building, it was a tremendous chore to get across the mountains. And the fact that it was coming from Baltimore to Wheeling, Virginia, my goodness. I mean we were the other end of that great railroad. It just, it was just so tremendous. That's another place I'd like to relocate back into history and to have been there when that first train came in. When they had the huge banquet and toasted themselves. And, and everyone that had worked on the railroad all those many years, because it took years and years and years to finance and, and the manpower. We look today at the road bed, and we take it all for granted. And we've lost the, the railroad tracks and, and--But what it took to build that, that resource to this city is unbelievable. The Irish and the

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other immigrants who worked on it. And the fact that it came into the city did tremendous, it was an importance in, again, helping the city to continue its boom. And of course we know the McLure was built for the railroad. No small measure, Wheeling Hospital in 1850. They knew the railroad was coming. They knew approximately when it was coming. And people were getting ready for its arrival. The fact that we have a tremendous medical tradition here too. We had good doctors in Wheeling. We didn't have quacks; we had people who went to medical school, which was virtually unheard of in that era. And that they put a hospital here. There was no hospital between Pittsburgh and Cincinnati. And we had one. And so that was so very important and also helped to keep people here, to attract people here. I read recently where in

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the 1840s Wheeling was a city of accidents. And it truly was. You had all the railroad construction. You had the industrial accidents. You had a lot of child labor in the city, children getting hurt. There was a great need for a hospital and for good doctors, and we had them.

MNK: Great. So during the, during the Civil War then, Wheeling was in a, in a position to produce a lot for the war including, including the ambulances?

MB: Yes.

MNK: It, it didn't see a lot of action. It was never burned to the ground or--

MB: No.

MNK: It was never--

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MB: We were lucky in that--We were really an occupied city because we had the troops here, the Union Army. And we had Camp Carlisle, a training base and mustering in base, for Union troops. So we were in a fairly good position. We didn't really have a lot--Although there was a threat of Morgan's Raiders coming by one time, and everybody got in boats to go out and track them down and fight them off. But that didn't occur. But we had a very important training camp for four years here in the middle of our city. And that certainly helped to stabilize things. But Wheeling was a changed city after the war. Before the war it was a sleepy southern town growing, yes, industrial, yes, but a, you know, a different, genteel city in its own way than after the war when we had gone through so much turmoil and heartache. Because a section

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of Wheeling's population remained staunchly loyal to Virginia and to the southern cause. People were literally driven out of town. They suffered greatly. They were ostracized in the city. Some were arrested because they would not take the oath of allegiance to the Union. There were, there was a lot of, of ill feeling and heartache in our city at that time. And that's one of the things we need to remember. That the war was fought between civilians right here in Wheeling, not just on the battlefields. Another question is how many slaves did Wheeling have. We had hundreds of slaves in the city and on the outskirts. There were people who were held as slaves in Wheeling. What happened to them? What were their lives like. We need to remember the people too that walked our land as slaves and to think about that in terms of our heritage.

MNK: But at least as far as its infrastructure was concerned Wheeling emerged from the war unscathed and--

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MB: Right. Unscathed and as important as ever because it became, of course, the first capital of the new state of West Virginia. So it was a very important political center now as well as industrial. And that had a great deal of meaning. It was not to last, and it probably should not have, because in those days a lot of the capitals in, for example, Ohio, that moved two or three times. The capital was not centrally located in Wheeling, obviously, because of the panhandle and extreme northern exposure. And so eventually did have to move out of Wheeling. Although they fought that tooth and nail. We know it came back and forth, and there was a reason. Because the Wheeling fathers fought again for what they considered for best of their city. And Charleston outfought them. And, and it needed to be more centrally located. But during those 1870s, 1880s, into the high Victorian, Wheeling flourished, just

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flourished as a center, a city of industry, also of the arts. Beautiful artistic programs in the city. Great shows that were brought in. The early circuses. I'd love to have seen Ponny Bill's Wild West Show. And

also we had Buffalo Bill Cody's, nationally, internationally famous show. Everybody came to Wheeling; it was the place to come.

MNK: And then--So then this post-war period was, was a, was a segue into the, into the, socially at least, into the Victorian--

MB: Yes.

MNK: Era. Have a seat.

MB: Oh, that's all right. I'd rather--Well, I'd rather stand.

MNK: Okay.

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MB: The Victorian era, we, we--One of the things that's good about Wheeling is that we have so much linking us, physically linking us to those early days. And we have a lot of Victorian architecture heritage. And the German traditions, the English, the, the Welsh. The early traditions coming through and into the Victorian era where we are today connecting again and reconnecting with those people in a very vital way and trying to understand their lives and being able to walk in their homes and to rethink what it was like to have lived in the 1870s when Christian Hess built his home. In the 1880s and the 1890s.

MNK: Who were, who were some of the memorable industrialist in the, in the post-Civil War era? Who were--Such as Schmulbach maybe or--

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MB: Well, yes. Henry Schmulbach was an important industrialist. And he was into everything. Henry was a German who had an acute business sense. And he was into banking. He was into buildings. He was into, of course, the brewery. And he was into estate planning. He built his beautiful home out at Roney's Point. He was a very important Wheeling industrialist. Antoine Raymond, another compatriot, German man. Building up, again, another big brewery. These two men. And very influential in the city. And very generous benefactors. And of course Schmulbach building the, the great building that is still there today, building it around 1907, the Schmulbach, which became the Wheeling Steel, Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel Building. When you look out at the skyline and you see that building, it is our true skyscraper. It dominates. And this is the point to appreciate that and to remember that that

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man had a vision. That is a big building. It took a lot of money, and he had a lot of money to build it.

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MNK: So you were, you were talking about the, the breweries.

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MB: Well, the breweries were huge. They were the biggest in the whole state, and they employed a lot of people. And of course when Prohibition came through in the '20s it must have been devastating to think of the jobs that were lost in this area when they shut these things down. Just cut them right off. And my mother was a small child in South Wheeling, and they lived across from one of the larger bars in the city. And she remembers the people coming with every sort of container the night before Prohibition went into affect. She said they were streaming--

MNK: Could you say that again. She remembers--

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MB: She remembers people coming to this bar with every sort of container the night before Prohibition took affect, filling up anything they could carry and carting it home because that was the end of it. And, and it was just awful. For the city of Germans and Irishmen it must have been devastating.

MNK: And that, that was also the period of the First World War then.

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MB: Yes. The First World War we had quite a few people from Wheeling, quite a few young men. They had--My mother, again, told me how she used, they gave out--And so many people remember this knitting needles and yarn. And they darned, I'm not sure what, socks or something for the servicemen. And as a little girl in school she remembers doing that. And she remembers going down to the train tracks and watching the troop trains go through with some of her friends, people that she knew on the trains. And that happened, of course, how important the railroad was in this city into the very modern era when World War II taking so many of the men out of Wheeling on those trains from the B & O station.

MNK: The post-World War I must have been another period of growth up until the Depression.

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MB: I'd have to think about that. I don't know much about that era.

MNK: So after the war the boys came home and there was a whole, nationally there was, there was great changes going on.

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MB: Right. And I think any small town is a microcosm of national history. What happened nationally was Wheeling's history as well in great, great extent. It was the Roaring Twenties, the flapper era, and we roared here. They had Charleston contests; my mother won one. They had the expanding stock market. A lot of people made a lot of money in Wheeling. And they also had the crash of '29, which was as much a crash here as anywhere else. People jumped out of Wheeling windows when they lost their fortunes. And so it, it--Everything, the ebb and flow of history, is, is seen right in Wheeling. The Depression, we had lines. We had the food lines. They lined up at 13th and Eoff Street at the Sisters of St. Joseph back door. And they would give out sandwiches and soup each day to to men who, and the women, who needed food.

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And I'm sure that happened a lot of other places in the city. So we went through the Depression with the rest of the country doing most of the same things. Our only salvation, of course, was that we did have a strong industrial base. And so perhaps it did not hit Wheeling quite as hard as it may have hit other farming agricultural places because of our factories. But it certainly did hit here in many, many ways.

MNK: Nineteen thirty-six is sort of cited as a, as a peak year, I think. That would be--

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MB: Of the Depression.

MNK: No, of, of Wheeling history. That was--Wasn't '36 the highest population?

MB: Now that I don't know. I don't know when the highest population was. I think into the '50s we were

in the sixty thousands. In fact--Let me think about that. I just read that the other--

MNK: What about the, the World War II era?

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MB: Well, the World War II era was, again, a microcosm of what was happening all over. The men in the long lines rushing to the, to sign up for the Armed Forces. Of course the devastation of December 7, 1941. Everyone has their story of listening to it on the radio. The extras echoing all over the street corners. And of course what that would mean to the people in this city. And what it meant was across the country, and also to Wheeling, a real boon because of the industrial needs. That's what, as we all know, got us out of the Depression. It wasn't really anything particular that the President was able to do. It was us getting into the war and fueling those factories. And we know that Wheeling Corrugating, Wheeling Steel, what they made. Our Wheeling Steel products went all over the world. And Wheeling's name became known

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for, for those products. And we, we made shells. At Benwood we made the pipes for the bombs. Over in Martins Ferry they made the millimeter shells. You know, all over this valley was a war economy, and it was good for jobs. And of course the ones who weren't here were away fighting. And we gave a lot of people, you know, to the war effort, and men as well as women. And we have to remember the WACs, the WAVES, the nurses that also went in this time. FDR came here in the '30s. He and Eleanor were in Wheeling when he ran for president. And of course when he died I'm sure Wheeling was suffering as well as the rest of the nation.

MNK: World War II, probably as much as any other event in the, in the city's history, changed the role of women, didn't it, because--

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MB: Yes, I think of, and women here went into the plants. The Rosy Riveter was very much a Wheeling distinction as well as in other areas of the city. And men were hesitant at first to, to accept the women as you would expect, but it did work out. They did gain respect. They were much needed, of course. And at the end of the war it was very hard for them to go back into their former roles as the little wife and mother when they had been welding steel beams together. And across the country it did change the women's own perception of themselves and their own abilities as well as the country's idea of what women could do, which is all kind of clichés, but that's okay.

MNK: No, that's fine. So now we're coming into a, a period of Wheeling's history that you can begin to remember yourself.

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MB: Yes, the Fabulous Fifties.

MNK: Fabulous Fifties.

MB: And it was a good time for Wheeling. Our population was still high, now just starting to go down. Because with the falloff of the industrial needs of the war things were beginning to change nationwide. And we, of course, as part of the great steel valley were going to see that change continuing with the loss of heavy industry and jobs. And the labor movement, we have to remember also, started in the '30s. And

with our tremendous labor history here with Valentine Reuther, the Reuther family, nationally famous, and a lot of others. We have very early roots in the labor movement. They organized very early on the Wheeling industry. And that was a factor in helping effect good wages. But also in perhaps scaring some industries away from Wheeling

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because they knew our reputation. So the '50s were growth years in many ways for the city. They were fabulous here as they were in many other places. And into the '60s it continued. I don't know what to say about the '50s.

MNK: Well, let's jump over to talking a little bit about South Wheeling and the, and the neighborhood where you grew up and some of your recollections of that.

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MB: Well, South Wheeling, of course, is known for the great LaBelle ironworks and also for the glassworks. The North, the Hobbs ... and the Northwood. And I grew up about a block away from the glass factories, although they were torn down at the time I was playing in the streets and alleys. But my mother remembers. She lived right across from the Hobbs factory when it was going, rather it was Northwood at that time. And she remembers the great slag heaps. The kids used to love to play in the great slag heaps. And my uncle fell one day and got a good gash on his leg from--If you fell around those glass factories, you could imagine you'd get sliced up pretty well. But South Wheeling is a heavily industrialized area and also a very populated immigrant area. A lot of the Irish drifted to South Wheeling. And there were little Irish communities,

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which is--My family is Irish. Then the Polish drifted down. The Russians, the Greeks. Center Wheeling mostly Greeks, but the various immigrants had their little neighborhoods. And South Wheeling was very much a populated immigrant area.

MNK: So what was it like growing up with kids of all these different backgrounds?

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MB: Well, my mother remembers in World War I there was a very anti-German feeling when she was a little girl in 1917. She was young, and she remembers that they would call the German children Huns, "You ugly Huns." And she--The Reuthers grew up about two blocks away from my family, and they were forbidden to play with the Reuthers because they were German. And I'm sure that happened to a lot of other families. So the immigrants mirrored what was going on in the era of the times. I don't remember much. We just all played together; we didn't think much about where we came from. We were just little kids at that time.

MNK: So in the, what, mid- to late-'60s then, Wheeling really begins to, to its decline in industrial terms?

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MB: Oh, see I can't, I can't really speak very well. I'll tell you, Dave Javersak could speak to that. I, I don't have--

MNK: I have some ...

MB: The background. Yeah.

MNK: Whatever you could say would just supplement what was already said.

(582)

MB: I think the whole shifting of the economy, the '60s, the '70s, the '80s, what was happening in the country would have a direct effect on what was happening here. And the steel industry was beginning to change, the heavy industries. There was much more competition from abroad. Japan's post-war economy was beginning to heat up and so was Germany's. And they were both our main competitors overseas. And they began--We perhaps took them for granted. And all of a sudden they were building newer, better ways of turning out steel and turning out cars. And turning out many things that we thought we were the only ones that could do that. And so I think we were blind sided in many ways and our, and our industries took a heavy hit from overseas

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competition. And for various other reasons I don't know!

MNK: That's good. And--Wheeling in the, in the '50s and '60s of the downtown and, I suppose, the late '40s, '50s, and '60s, the downtown was really humming, wasn't it, when you were a kid coming up? Do you remember that, what the streets were like?

MB: No, I don't.

MNK: And the downtown section?

(608)

MB: No. I do remember my mother, in the '30s, the '40s--Of course one of the big things they did in the '20s and '30s was take railroad excursions. They had very cheap railroad excursions. You could go anywhere. And they had the Pullman cars and, and the whole--And that was, that was a wonderful thing for them to do. And she took many trips to Atlantic City. That's where a lot of the Wheeling people went. They had regular trains every summer to Atlantic City and to, to other points I'm sure. So that was a big thing. She remembers going to shop in town on Saturday, a major outing. The white gloves, the hat. You dressed up. And you saw everybody in town because everybody was there. It was kind of a traditional shopping day with all the acrutriments. A very serious proposition. And how much things have changed from that time. But

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in the '30s and '40s that was the way things were done. And it was true. Without the mall the downtown was the in place. And that's where you did your shopping. That's where you saw people. And that of course was where you saw movies and, and the vaudeville that preceded the movies.

MNK: Can you, can you talk about Christmas time downtown? Do you remember that?

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MB: One of the things in South Wheeling, of course, was Coeey-Bentz. And Coeey-Bentz was always noted, it had one of the first animated window displays in town and probably the biggest. It may have been the only animated window display for many years, but I was young so I didn't go checking the others. But as a child that's where we went to see the animation. Oh, that was so marvelous. And they had a

marvelous toyland, a big toyland at Cooney-Bentz. And Santa Claus. And that's where we met Santa Claus, and that was a yearly tradition for the South Wheeling people.

MNK: What is, what is Wheeling like now in the, in the modern era? And what, what about all this heritage activity? What does, what does--

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MB: I think Wheeling today is still trying to redefine itself. I think we're still groping for an identity. I think all of a sudden it's hit us that we have half the population that we have had in the past, around the '40s and '50s. And I think we're looking to, to deal with that reality, not to expect something to happen that will not happen, but to find a way to be a vital city in a new and visionary way perhaps. And I think trading on your history is a good thing if it can have meaning for the present people to remember the past and to understand how a city grows and how it is a part of everything that happened throughout our history. And so if this, if the Heritage vision, the development is done right, it could perhaps have a very important impact on the city of Wheeling.

MNK: So that we don't repeat the mistakes of the past?

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MB: Well, some things just happen, they're not really mistakes. Some things you just can't change; you just have to kind of go with what's happening. And some things obviously you wish you had done differently. And that sometimes you don't find out until ten or twenty years down the road, and you look back and say, "Gee, I wish I had made a different decision there." I can speak to the Catholic tradition.

MNK: Okay.

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MB: As you look down the Valley, one of the most prominent spires in the city of churches, and we do have some gorgeous church buildings, is the cathedral, the Roman Catholic cathedral, St. Joseph's Cathedral. And that building looks a little different than it did when it was built in 1924 to 1926. In the 1970s the red tile, ... dome was changed. And they put on, what I consider not as pretty, a silver dome. But that cathedral is a Romanesque, limestone building that is a very beautiful and unique church in all of West Virginia. And it was built by Bishop Swint. It is on the site of the original St. Joseph's Cathedral, which was torn down around 1924, but had been built around 1847. So it was, there was a need for a new church. That whole area where the cathedral sits, that whole block, it could be called the Catholic block. The bishop's, the old bishop's

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house, the rectory, is behind the cathedral up on 13th and Byron. And it was built around 1900, a very beautiful mansion of sorts. The Cathedral Grade School is on the other end of that block. And then coming around you have Central Catholic High School. And very early on the Catholic church--Because of the German and Irish immigrants the church had a strong presence in Wheeling going back to the 1820s right after the National Road. Some of the Irish--

(side two)

MB: Interesting story. Money in those days obviously was hard to come by. And the leader of the fund

raising, he was a very good fund raiser who unfortunately ran off with all the money after he had raised it, which was a great blow to the Catholics in the city. They did get more money, built this church, St. James Church, on the site of the present YWCA. And it stood on that site until Bishop Whalen came here in 1846, I believe. He saw the need for a bigger church, and he bought the land where today the present cathedral sits. And he built a, another church there in 1846, '47.

MNK: Can you describe the interior of the cathedral in a way that would make people want to go look at it?

MB: Well, it has tremendous fresco-type paintings which are--

MNK: Can you start by saying, "The interior--

MB: Yes.

MNK: "Of the cathedral?"

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MB: The interior of St. Joseph's Cathedral is really quite a striking church in many ways. It's big. It's Romanesque. Right then you know it's not as airy or as light as a gothic church would be. It has thick walls, small windows. But the windows are very beautiful stained glass by very renowned Bucks County stained glass maker. The images on the walls are done in a fresco-type relief by, again, another very renowned German artist. They are of a Byzantine nature, so it's rather unique. The organ in the cathedral is quite imposing. The altar, the marble it's, it's built as a cathedral, and it looks like a cathedral church. It's quite a beautiful edifice and one of, I think, the most unique Romanesque churches in the state.

MNK: Can you speak a little bit to the closure of, of, what is it five churches this year?

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MB: I don't know how many. Well, it's been many years in coming. Wheeling is not alone. When you lose population it affects every facet of life. It affects your schools, and it affects your churches. And when you lose urban population as the people have continued to migrate to the suburbs, it affects what happens in downtown parishes. This has happened with, with very emotional results in Pittsburgh and Detroit and Chicago where a lot of ethnic parishes have had to be closed or for otherwise parishes. And it's happening here in Wheeling. It is a very hard situation. But the loss of population in the city, plus the fact that the Catholic church has a small amount of priests to staff the state of West Virginia, and the largest growing part of the Catholic population in West Virginia is in the Eastern Panhandle, the outskirts of

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Washington, DC. So they need to send the priests where the people are and redistribute the resources of the diocese. It's hard on Wheeling because we have been the center of Catholicism for many years. We are used to a lot of priests and a lot of churches. This is the first time that things have really tightened up, and I think it is going to, to take some getting used to in a new, new era. The fact the tradition of the ethnic parishes is very old. All over the state there have been Polish parishes, Italian parishes, a quasi-Irish parishes. And Wheeling, of course being an immigrant city, has had these. That type of ethnic parish has dwindled pretty much in recent years because of the mixing of cultures and the loss of some ethnicity. But it's very difficult for St. Ladislaus, the Polish parish, to downsize, to close St. Mary's, which was kind of

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an Irish parish, has completely been closed. The small church of Sacred Heart in the northern part of the city, North Wheeling, has lost population. That will be closed. Blessed Trinity on the Island, for staffing reasons and other, will be closed. And St. Joan of Arc, which is out on National Road. And this is very difficult to lose five churches in a city. Is a very difficult situation. And it's happening now, and people feel it very strongly.