

Ron Hobbs: *Wheeling's Ups and Downs*

(278)

Michael Nobel Kline: No, that's what we want to get on tape.

Ron Hobbs: Anyway, he was working for a -- He was a contractor back before the depression days in the late 1800, early 1900s here in Wheeling and built a lot of the Elm Grove area. Went broke. A lot of people did, you know, in the '20s. But anyway, at some time after that they were building -- If you've gone up the National Road, you've seen all that concrete archway that goes up along there, and then there's a place where McCullough jumped over the hill.

Carrie Nobel Kline: Yes.

RH: All that cornice work that's built along there like a hand rail. And he was -- He had a contract to build that, put that hand rail up. And there was a contractor from Baltimore who was in charge of whatever the general contract was. My grandfather was working on these forms to pour the concrete in, you know. He was a guy who worked with his hands. But anyway, this foreman was a young college guy. And he came by and he said, "You're not doing that right." My grandfather said, "The hell I'm not." And he said, "You're not doing ... it that way." And my grandfather says, "Why not?" And the guy says, "Cause you're not running this job, I am. You're going to do it my way." My grandfather says, "It won't work." And he said, "It don't make any difference. I'm telling you what to do. You do it." So he changed what he was doing, and he poured the concrete in and the whole thing slid down over the hill. This guy looked at my grandfather, he said, "How in the hell did you know that was going to do that?" He says, "Because I did it before, and it did it!" Which was the way it was done then!

(299) MNK: Boy, that's a real commentary on bureaucracy isn't it?

RH: Isn't it. Even in those early -- I don't know what year that was, but it had to be in the '30s or something, but '20s or somewhere back in there. I don't know when it was.

CNK: Some things never change huh?

MNK: You know these pictures no doubt?

(303) RH: Oh yes. I don't know the history. These -- These guys were cousins of my grandfather's.

MNK: Oh.

RH: And in those days -- I don't think they were all close because he wasn't in this business.
My grandfather --

MNK: He wasn't ...

RH: ... I haven't seen this one. This is a very old picture. I got a few pieces of glass, but I've had to buy them unfortunately. Nobody left them to me.

MNK: Do you -- Have you researched these at all? Do you understand some of the processes going on in this picture?

(313) RH: No, I really don't. I've only, only being a native and having heard, you know, people talk about it. You know, that were in the glass business. But that's, you know -- I've not researched it myself.

(317) RH: Okay. My name is Ron Hobbs. I think I'm currently the oldest Hobbs still living in the Wheeling area. My father, brothers and all no longer live here. Sister, et cetera. My grandfather was born in Woodsfield, Ohio, and spent his early days on a farm in the Woodsfield area. I was fortunate to know him because he died when he was 94. And my grandmother who was from Friendly, West Virginia, was a Moore. And she died when she was 93, so I got to know both of them fairly well. My grandfather has told me of his early days, and I don't know the exact dates of this. It's obviously pre 1900. Working on a farm, and his mother and father were not very well off and were farmers. And he had a number of brothers and sisters and so he was farmed out at the age of 12 to his uncle's house to work on his uncle's farm. He told me that his first job paid him four cents a month. And that once a month he was permitted to go into the city of Woodsfield and be paid and buy whatever he could buy for four cents at age 12. And of course they also provided him with room and board. And he's told me a number of stories about the house that he lived in and snow blowing through the siding and that sort of stuff in the wintertime. But he subsequently left the farming work. And I'm not sure what age, but

(338)

he -- I think it was somewhere around age 14, 15 or 16 that he went to work for what was left of the Pony Express. He rode a horse from Woodsfield, Ohio, to deliver mail to the Friendly, West Virginia, area. And the reason he went there was because there was a ferryboat cross down there. And he took that ferryboat to get mail across the river. And Friendly is where he met my grandmother who was a Moore. Some relation to a former governor we had here named Arch Moore. And I'm not sure what generation was related, but I think, if I'm not mistaking, that my great grandmother was a sister to Arch Moore's great grandfather. I'm not sure of that, but they both came from Friendly, West Virginia. Any rate, my grandfather did that for a number of years and then later married and moved into the Wheeling area. And I don't know the year or the age that he was, but my guess was probably in his early 20s, early to mid 20s. He got into the contracting business, and he settled in the Elm Grove area. Built a good bit of the housing in a section which is known as Overbrook, which is kind of left of Route 40 as you head east on Route 40. It's out near the, what now is a shopping mall area. But he went broke in the depression of 1929. And my father, of course, was around for those days as a youngster. And my grandfather, I think, only went through fourth grade in terms of education. So my -- He insisted that my father and his brothers get through school. And they got through what was then high school, of course. But he couldn't put them into college and as a result, my father wound up going to what used to be called Elliot's Business School in Wheeling, which was sort of a two year, learn accounting, learn a little bit about business kind of a school in the downtown area. And he became the office manager for a company know as R. R. Kitchen Company, which was a very large contracting firm in Wheeling that built such buildings as the Capitol Music Hall, and the Central Union Building, and a number of the other -- Ohio Valley Medical Center's original buildings. And R. R. Kitchen went broke in the '29 depression. And his company closed up because of his -- He died, and I'm not sure of the circumstances. Whether he was a victim of the depression or whether it was just age or what it was, I don't know. But Mr. Kitchen passed away and of course the company that my father managed for as office manager had to be closed and sold to settle his estate. And as my father went through that process, he tells me that he realized he was working

himself out of a job. So he went to Mrs. Kitchen, who was the survivor of Mr. Kitchen, and explained to her. And she said, "Well, what did you want to do?" And he said he thought he would get into the lumber business because he knew something about that from working with the Kitchen Company. And she said, "Well, if you want to do that, you can use the building for a year free to get started. Then you can turn around and sell it, buy it or whatever you can do."

(385) So that's what he did. He started his own company in the middle of the depression, which was the Hobbs Lumber Company in those days. He was -- He did very well. He was very successful in the company and it operated up until mid 1970s when it was displaced by the relocation of a major north-south highway. We couldn't find a site that had a retail access along with rail access because obviously all the products that came in there came by rail. Today's world they don't, but in those days they did. And that was in about the mid '70s. But anyway, he -- As a result of that, my father was in his 70s at that time and the state acquired the property. My father retired, and a brother who was a year older than I moved to the Florida area and got involved in the real estate development business down there. And so the company was closed. And it's -- Of course no longer exists because they built the highway right through the middle of it and cleared all the property. But that was -- That was my, my mother, my father's involvement in the community. And he subsequently moved to Florida, and he died five or six years ago when he was 84 years old. So -- But he had a very good and fruitful life in Wheeling. Loved the area. And my mother's side of the family lived over on the Island. Some of these stories that you pick up -- I'm not sure of the validity to them, but this is what I hear from them which I'm sure is what you're kind of interested in. My grandfather Hobbs at one time told me that he had an uncle who had gone out to the Texas, New Mexico area and had done very well in the oil business. And that came up because we got a card from somebody who stopped in a town called Hobbs, New Mexico. And my grandfather thought that that's where his uncle had gone, but he didn't know because in those days they didn't really keep communication with him. Then my mother's side of the family was a Ward family which essentially came from the

Uniontown, College, Pennsylvania area. Settled into Wheeling in the early 1900s over on the Island. They all left as a family. My mother

(421) was one of 13 brothers and sisters. All but two of them, my mother and her sister, remained here. The rest of them all moved to San Diego, California, in the early 1950s. I think they all went there primarily because there were jobs opening up in the defense industry, the airplane industry, et cetera. And they took my -- My grandmother and grandfather went with them. With the rest of the kids that went out there. Some of them are still alive out there. Which -- Of course we keep in touch with. But of course the grandparents are not. But that grandmother of mine had always claimed to be, and I never knew whether this was true or not, but she said that her mother had told her she was a direct descendent of Queen Mary of Scotland. I'm sure there's lots of people say that, but I don't know whether it's true or not. But her name was Millekin. And that's as much information as I really have about her family. I just know my great grandmother's maiden name was Millekin. She came from Ireland. She claims she was in some sort of a line that was in descendency from Queen Mary. Whether that's true or not, I don't know.

MNK: Interesting.

(439) RH: Yeah, it's kind of an interesting time. Then I, of course, I married a gal whose family roots are even deeper than mine here in town. Because my wife is first name is Sally and her maiden name was Franzheim. And her grandfather Franzheim built the home over in the Island which is now the national, on the National Register of Historic Places. It's occupied currently by McKinley Engineering Company over in the Island.

MNK: ...

(446) RH: Well that was my -- My wife's grandfather built that home. And my wife's father was raised over there. And he was in the china business. He had a company called W. H. C. Franzheim and Company which was located on Main Street. I can't place the building for you, but it's still there. And he sold china ware and so forth to people heading west, you know, through Wheeling in those early days. And then her other -- The other side of her family -- Her mother was a Whitacker. And her grandfather was a fellow named Albert Whitacker who's the guy who started the Whitacker Glessner Company which was the

forerunner to the Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel Company. So, my wife and I -- Our history goes back very, very far back in the area. So living in the area is -- It's something that you just don't know anything other than that. You know, you just know that living here has a lot of meaning for a lot of different reasons and a lot of connections to people that you recognize as having been related some way or other. So it's an interesting town from that perspective.

MNK: So your birth date is --

(466) RH: I was born in 1932. And my father was born in 1905. And I don't remember my grandfather's birthday in my family, the Hobbs family. But obviously he was born -- He died in the late '60s, sometime in the late '60s at age 94. So he was born back in the 1870s, somewhere in that area. And the -- Both sides of the family, both mine and my wife's, go back several generations, you know, right to this area. So we've watched it go through a cycle of a town at one time of close to 70,000 people down to what it is today of 35 or thereabouts. Basically, I think that what's interesting to me is that other than a lot less people here in town, the town really hasn't changed very much. Not only are the buildings and structures the same, but the activities that go on here are the same ones that I can remember going on here when I was a kid. Symphonies and Oglebay Institute, Oglebay Park, all that stuff. That's been going on long as I can remember. And I think my father would say it's going on almost as long as he can remember if he were here. But a lot of those kind of things that go on here seem to, seem to have survived. I think it's probably because the city has a, obviously a very rich history in terms of time, but it also was a very, very successful wealthy city. And I think that if the -- I don't remember the dates, but I know there was a period of 30 years in the late 1800s, the early 1900s in which Wheeling was the highest per capita income of any city in the United States. And I think what's occurred as a result of that is a lot of the wealth that was built up in those years is still here in subsequent generations in different names, different ventures and different businesses. But the wealth is still here. Witness the fact that a town of this size has the banking industry as large as it has. Which I think is testimony to the fact that those funds are still here.

MNK: Yes.

(503) RH: It's a -- It's an interesting cycle that the town goes through, I think, in that it seems to go through eras in which it goes down. And I guess this is maybe true to most towns, and I just don't know it. But in other times when it seems to start rising back up, then something happens to cause it to maybe fall again, but somehow it always survives. The things like the Wheeling Symphony started by a very generous lady here out of these same families, you know, that made their wealth in the iron and steel and pottery and china and glass business and so forth. Survives and does very well. One of the few symphony orchestras in the United States that's profitable. Why. I don't know. It isn't that it's so well managed. I think it's because people want it to stay here, and therefore, they support it and do whatever they have to do to make it stay. And that's been very, very true of Oglebay Park, which I've been associated with them for, directly since 1972 as a member of the Park Commission. In all the years that I've been there, the people of this area are just absolutely magnificent in their demand that that park remain first rate and that it do the kind of things that it does. They see to it that it happens. It's the only, as I'm sure you've heard, the only self sustaining public park in the United States. Perhaps in

(530) the world. I don't know that in the world because there's a lot of them you don't know about, but that's the claim that sometimes is made. I know it's the only one in the United States that's self sustaining. And the reason it is is not just because of the way it's operated, but it's because of the generosity of the people around here who support it and want to see to it that it is what it is. And it's obviously a key focus of this area. Families like the, the Whitackers who've been here for generations and were the forerunners of the steel business, particularly the local company that's still here. The Weiss family who was very active in this community for many years and were the founders of the Sterling Drug Corporation, America Home Products Corporation, were all started by old Mr. Weiss who lived here in Wheeling. And although he doesn't have very many relatives, direct relatives, here, he does -- There are some relatives of that family that are still in this area. And they're -- Like most of these folks around here, they are very generous. They are very supportive. They do whatever they need to do to make things happen here. And that's -- I

think that's a unique part of Wheeling, really. The fact that people don't have to be pushed, and they don't have to be run to the edge of brinkmanship, you know, in order to get something done. They just want to see it done and want to see it done right.

(558) And it's -- I think it's really what's made this Heritage Project really so much easier to do than a lot of us thought it was going to be. It was because the support here for the historical significance of the community is here. And those people who need to do things are very willing to do them. Nobody's -- Nobody, of course, wants to be disadvantaged and nobody should, but those people who, for example, who own property -- If they need to step forward and provide that property for something, they'll do so. But at the same time, nobody asks them and nobody expects them to do that at some disadvantage to themselves. But in a lot of communities, you wouldn't find that. People would say, "No, if it's valuable now, it's going to be worth more later, so I'm not going to do anything. I'm just going to sit and wait." But that's not the way they are here. They want to -- They want to see the community recognized for its significance. And I was walking down the street one day with a fellow by the name of Henry Schrader who's a local attorney here who's in his eighties. And as we were going past the Suspension Bridge, he was asking me about the Heritage Project and the Suspension Bridge and what was going to happen there. I was explaining it to him. He said, "Well you know, you see those round tin balls on the very top of the stone?" I said, "Yes." He said, "My grandfather made those." So that kind of historical connection is here. And that's very important to him that his grandfather had a place in all of this and participated in all this. And that's very significant event for him. And that's true with a lot of people all over the community, you know, that have that kind of a connection to the city and how it grew.

MNK: They can see -- They can look around them and see details that were actually fashioned by their forebearers and --

(591) RH: Oh, yeah. And they can go into this north Wheeling area where the Victorian houses are so well preserved. And a lot of people -- I think the Zane family, for example, which is, as you know, is one of the founding families of the area -- I think there's one of the Zanes still here that -- I don't know what generation this is now, but it's down a number of

generations. But they have an annual get together here of Zane heirs or something. And I think it's a large number. It's 120 or 30 people show up or something like that. But you can imagine that there are places where the Zane house was. And those people who want to know something about their family and background, they want to go see where that was. And once that occurs -- At least it's been my experience that that creates a tie, you know, to think that you had a great, great, great, great, great somebody who did something here. It creates a little stronger tie to somebody living in Los Angeles than it used to when all of a sudden he sees where his folks came from. And I think that's happened a lot in the area, and I think it's -- A lot of people who come back here do it for that very reason. As they're looking for where those roots are and what did those folks do and how did I get to be where I am. And it's a very good place to start. But it's a -- I don't know, it's a unique community, I think, in that respect. It's land locked in the sense that

(618) it can't grow too big. There not a lot of flat ground around. There's only the flat areas along the river and the hilltops where people live. So the days of being able to sit back and think in terms of giant automobile plants coming here, those days are over. They used to do that around here in the '50s and '60s. Economic development groups used to go out and try to compete for the Saturn automobile plant. That sort of thing. But I think people have now recognized that those really are not -- They're not real possibilities. They're sort of shots in the dark. And I think, as a result, what they've said is 'why don't we really take a look at Wheeling from the standpoint of its history and see why it became what it did, and see if we can capitalize and build on that.' And of course that's the whole foundation of the Heritage Project that's going on because it was because of Harry Hamm who was the editor of the newspaper a few years back. He had a very, very strong family connection to the area also. That he approached Senator Byrd about this concept of Wheeling becoming a national historic park. Kind of like Williamsburg. Senator Byrd thought, being a great man of history himself, what a neat opportunity to do

(646) something in the state. And they started to pursue that. We got it changed. We changed the direction on it a little bit in about 1989 or 1990 because what we realized was those places that do that like Lowell, Massachusetts and Williamsburg are places that

essentially they lock up at five o'clock and everybody goes home. And of course you can't do that in Wheeling. People would say, "What are you going to do, put a gate on the Suspension Bridge or on the Steel Bridge and close it down and just tell everybody they have to --." You can't do that obviously. So we devised something a little different which we call a self sustaining heritage area. And it has kind of caught hold nationally. The National Park Service thinks it an answer to a lot of their problems. Their problems are they get stuck with a large place that has historic significance and it gets turned over to them by some senate lobby group or whatever. Then all of a sudden, they're responsible for obtaining funds to keep it floating and keep it alive and keep operating it. And of course, they aren't always able to get those funds because as the power structure changes in the senate, the person who was able to divert those funds to it is no longer there. And the people there now are looking at something else, so the Park Service gets stuck taking care of it. So when we proposed this self sustaining concept, they jumped on that. They thought this was -- In fact, I think they were using it nationally in their staff meetings as the Wheeling Prototype is the way they referred to it. And now as a result, Senator Byrd, of course, who is the key behind this whole project, has been able to do those things necessary to keep the funding involved in it. And he's gotten the support of the National Park Service because it's a concept that they like. And that's made it a little easier for him to do this. And as a result, he's really -- He's really going to achieve, I think, in a very few years what Harry Hamm, who had dreamed about for his community. And that was recognition of the historic significance of the community. To build the future on the historic past. And that's essentially what we're trying to do. So obviously, it's a direction towards tourism, but at the same time, I think what it has done with the economic development folks -- It has caused them not to spend a whole lot of time looking for giant industries, but rather to focus on smaller industries that are more high tech, that are more -- Not so much labor intensive as much as they are high wage intensive. And those kinds of things have been very, very helpful to the community. Where to go from here. The -- I think probably some of the areas, you know, we're going to show in the Artisan Center when it gets completed. Obviously the glass and china industries are going to be

(705)

significant parts of that. Metal working was a major, major issue here and, of course, still is with the presence of the steel companies and so forth. You all may have not yet had the opportunity, but I'm sure you will if you haven't at the LaBelle Nail Works or the Marsh Wheeling Stogie plant, but when you can sit and envision -- I can tell my kids and my grandkids that covered wagons used to come through here. And they used to stop and stay for days and put kegs of nails on the side of them so they could build a house and put kegs of china on the side so they had something to eat off of. And bought all the material that was produced by the Stifel Company that was used to bag flour and stuff that they made dresses and so forth out. That all those things came out of this area as they went west on those trains. That's a little hard for a grandchild or a child to comprehend. That's a little hard for me to comprehend. But when I've heard my grandfather and those people talk about that, I realize that they, you know, they sat here right in the middle of it. And it's an interesting thought to think that --

(side 2)

MNK: Supply center for an expanding America?

RH: Yes. From my understanding -- And I'm sure you'll be talking with some of the historians, you know, have a more detailed knowledge than I do. But my understanding was if you were going west, you got on this road in Baltimore and you headed out west. And you wound up here because it's as far as it went. And when you got here, the merchants naturally assembled here because they knew you were coming, and they loaded you up with whatever supplies you needed to head west in. And you headed across the Suspension Bridge, across the Island, across the other bridge which is now closed. And then you were heading for the Northwest Territories. And that's essentially how the people got there. Obviously later the railroad stopped in here and brought, you know, people back and forth. But when you think of this as having been the furthest point west, and some of the significant events that occurred as a result of that. For example, there's a school here called Linsley which was started in 1814 as a private boy's school. The oldest school west of the Allegheny Mountains. The reason for it is because this was as far as you could get west of the Allegheny Mountains, and that's where Mr. Linsley lived. And he lived here, and he started the school, and, you know, that was it. That was as far west

(014) as you could go. So going to St. Louis, I think, was the next move on. And obviously St. Louis was a different trail to get there. You could go the southern route rather than this route to get to St. Louis. And eventually a lot of people got on the boats here and headed down the river to St. Louis and then went on out through Texas. Which I think is where my -- I think it's where my great, great uncle went when he got out into the New Mexico area. I think he came from this area, headed down to St. Louis and headed west because he heard about oil and all that other stuff. I'm sure like all the gold rushers and the oil dreamers, he wound up out there somewhere. And my grandfather said they never really kept in touch because in those days writing a letter was, I guess, a long ordeal. And you never even knew if it was going to get delivered, you know. So they never went back and forth very much because obviously it was hard to go visit somebody who was 2,000 miles away. But anyway, he said that that's where his uncle went, and he thinks he wound up in that New Mexico area. But the town -- The town not only had those kind of folks who were the merchants. And that's where, I think, my family really was involved in that in one way or another. And so was my wife's. But they also had the, you know, the folks who were interested in change. They were interested in government. Which is really why I

(029) think Wheeling became the focal point of the Civil War breaking off from the southern part of the states. I think the history people would tell you this better than me, but my understanding is that was critical to the Union's victory because they needed access to those railroads which were right here. And those railroads could be used to ship troops and arms back and forth to the areas that they needed to ship them to. Principally back into the east. And as a result of that, when Wheeling and the West Virginia left the state of Virginia, it became very, very important to the winning of the Civil War. So I think there were the kinds of people that you would have expected to be here when all that kind of thinking was going on, who were here also. Subsequently, of course, they drifted off to other areas and other places. But the gal who lived out in Monument Place in Elm Grove in Shepherd Hall was obviously very influential with the Washington crowd.

MNK: That Lydia Bogg?

(040) RH: Yeah, Lydia Boggs was a -- I, of course, don't know the history of her much at all except that having heard it told around here so many times. But she apparently was enormously influential with the Washington crowd at the very highest levels. Not only those who were responsible for getting the National Road here, which she was able to direct right in front of her house. Which if you think of that in today's world is a fairly sophisticated effort, you know, to have a major highway built in front of your house because you'd like to have it there. But they say that she was influential not only with those individuals who could cause that to happen, but that she was a key member of Washington society. And as that kind of a person living in this kind of a town, obviously she had some very, very strong friends wherever she needed to have them. And that, that to me indicates the significance Wheeling played in the history of the country in those early days. Not only was it a place where people had to, but it had some influence in the direction the people

(051) were going and what they did. And the railroads and the Sterling Drugs and the American Home Products that got started here, you know, obviously there were -- There was some great minds that created those things. And those great minds spent some time here. Did leave some offspring here. And some of that -- Some of that offspring is still around here. It's a -- I don't know, it's a town of a lot of mixed history, a lot of mixed blessings. But it says to me as a, just a person who's lived here for all my life, that it's a remarkable place to live because I don't know of any place that you can live today that has all of the opportunities that are here. And I see them as opportunities. Others -- Some don't. Youngsters tend to want to look at a corporate structure as an opportunity, but I think there's an enormous number of opportunities available here because I think people are looking for the kind of life that's right here. And this life is not something you can find in Los Angeles or Washington or New York or Atlanta or Baltimore. It's just not

(064) there. Getting around is difficult. I recall a friend of mine who used to live here. When he asked me -- He lives now in Los Angeles. He asked me one day how long it took me to get to Pittsburgh Airport. And I told him about 45, 50 minutes. And he said, "I drive that far to get gas." And I thought, you know, he isn't kidding. You know, from where he lives that's probably what he has to do. And that -- If you stop and think about spending as

much time to go get gas as I spend to get to an airport to, you know, go over seas or whatever. That gets a little ludicrous. And yet that all occurs here. And it is simple to get to the Pittsburgh Airport. And it is inexpensive to live here relative to larger metropolitan areas. And yet, you can do the recreational things that you want here, I think, as well as you can do them anywhere else that I know of. Obviously, there are better golf courses, bigger swimming pools, more tennis courts, but you can do all those things here. You can go to symphony concerts. You can go to theatrical productions. And it just goes on and on and on and on. And that's kind of unique all in a relatively safe environment. You can't say that about most of our cities.

(077)

MNK: That's true.

RH: Yeah. It's -- They're, they're very -- They're very different in a lot of areas. And if you travel -- You guys travel a lot, but as much traveling as I do associated directly with this project, it becomes very, very obvious that the assets that are available to you in this area far outweigh the inconvenience. Yes, you can be sad that if I open up a china shop in downtown Wheeling, how many people am I going to get to come in there and buy china. I don't have an answer to that question, but I think the good merchant finds a way to get them in. And that's what we're trying to do hopefully with this Heritage Project is give people a reason to come here and look. And once we get them here, the merchants better get on their toes because it's going to be their job to create an environment for those people to do something.

MNK: Can you -- That's great. Just wonderful general background stuff. Could you, could you tell us a little bit about your own first-hand perceptions of Wheeling beginning as far back as you can remember as a kid? What --

RH: Well --

MNK: If you've grown up here and that sort of thing?

(090)

RH: Yeah. I was -- You know, I started in a public school and that's as far back as I can remember, you know. The early grade days in a public school which is out here in the Woodsdale section of Wheeling. My father built a new home out in the area past Oglebay Park, and that's where we lived. And they would take us back and forth by car. Of course,

didn't have school buses then, you know, mid '30s. They'd take us back and forth to school by car and then when I got to be age, eighth grade, seventh grade, my father sent me to Linsley which was a military, boy's military school here, which was a wonderful experience. And I -- I'm really -- Wish it had never changed from what it was. It's no longer a military. It's no longer a boy's school. It's coeducational, and it's kind of like an eastern boarding school which is fine, but there was a 150 year tradition of a military school there that I hate to see leave because it had some significance. That was a wonderful experience for me. Being in that school. Growing up was a matter of spending most of your time at Oglebay in the summertime. You either worked there, whatever you happened to get a job doing over there. Or if you didn't work there, you spent your days in the swimming pools, on the tennis courts or whatever you could do. Marvelous, marvelous place to grow up. Yeah, there were kids in the south Wheeling area that -- Some of those areas that couldn't get up there as easily because their parents either didn't have cars or they couldn't take them up. But generally I saw them all one place or another. Usually found a way to get around somehow. But those kids generally were -- You know, they're all good kids. They just came from a different, different background. Growing up here was, you know, in addition to schooling, was most -- I remember most of it as being summers in which you spent an awful lot of time -- When you got old enough, of course, you were working. But until you were old enough to do that, you were either hanging around in the parks, working in the parks or doing something of that nature. In my case, I was cutting grass at home when I wasn't there, along with my brothers and sisters. But the growing up was a wonderful experience in Wheeling and I -- That's why, I think why when I got out of college, I determined this is where I

(102)

(116)

wanted my kids to grow up. I knew I had a good experience at it. And I think they also would tell you that they have had a good experience here, and hopefully their children will feel the same way. But it -- The opportunities to do things were virtually unlimited. We weren't restricted by distance. We weren't restricted by the inability to get somewhere because it was, it's a very friendly town. You could walk out on the road. I don't know about this today, but I know as a kid when I was in high school, you could put your thumb

out and get anywhere you wanted to in very short order. And people didn't hesitate to pick you up. And people -- Sometimes they knew you and sometimes they didn't. But -- "Where you going?" They'd drop you off. I don't know how that works today. I occasionally pick kids up. Not as -- I'm not as easy at picking adults up as maybe they used to be. But kids -- I don't, you know -- It doesn't seem to bother me. I just pick them up whenever I see them if they're going the direction I'm going, and take them where they go. And generally I found they're awfully nice. They're, you know -- They're wide eyed, wonderful kids, you know, looking for something to do. But I think that kind of ability to get around was always available to me. I -- My father -- I didn't have a car of my own until well, probably till I got in the army. So up till that time if I didn't bother, borrow my father's car or something to go out in the evening, I thumbed. Or one of the other guys I hung around with maybe got his father's car, and we went out dating or whatever we did. Schools were very -- We had several high schools in those days. Of course, we have only one public high school now. But we had, I think, four public high schools in those days. You knew a lot of kids from other schools. Played football and athletics against a lot of them, you know. As a result, you'd see each other in the park in the summertime. The same guy you were going to be knocking heads with in the football field, you know, in a few months. But it was a -- It was a great environment

(137) to grow up in. It was a --

MNK: What was the social life like for 15, 16, 17 year olds? Did kids used to go places together or did they, did they --

(139) RH: Well, I think -- When you're talking about in high school years -- I used to kind of run with my classmates. We weren't, you know, we'd go into bars like they were today. They wouldn't serve you liquor. I mean they just wouldn't do it. They afraid somebody, the parent or somebody, would catch hold of something. But basically we spent a lot of time in each other's homes. We would go down -- One fellow I know is a particular friend of mine had a pool table in his basement so, you know, we'd go there a lot. And just hang out in his basement playing pool. Maybe go home one o'clock in the morning or whatever and off we'd go the next day. I remember there were some beer joints. And I remember a lot of us

used to hang out in some of those beer joints. But I remember the guys who owned them were very, very strict. I mean they had no problem with you coming in there drinking at whatever age was legal. But you got too much to drink, they were apt to walk over and pick you up by the back of the neck and say, "Get out of here." Or call your father and tell you, "You'd better come get this kid. He's drinking too much." And I saw that

(151) happen a number of times. And it -- I think it was a -- The social life was -- That's what it was. Hanging out, having a good time. I don't recall getting in a lot of trouble. I recall smoking cigarettes and stuff when I shouldn't have been, you know. Which was something we hid. I'm sure we hid that as best as they do in today's world with drugs. We tried as hard as we could to not let anyone know we were smoking cigarettes. I can recall even times when people would take -- Even at my parent's house, who in their early years smoked. Kids would come up to visit me, and they would swipe cigarettes. And then we'd replace them with a different brand. Not realizing that, you know, that they would recognize the difference. You know, that somebody smoking a Chesterfield didn't -- We'd think 'what the heck, it's a Camel. What difference does that make?' You know, you fill half a pack of Camels. Somebody, "What's wrong with these cigarettes?" I know that --

MNK: They were all the same length.

(162) RH: Well, they were the same length and everything. And the same color and everything. And put them right back in the pack. I mean that was -- That was the extent of trouble, the kind of trouble that we really got into. I don't recall, you know, the picking them up and putting them in jail and so much of that sort of thing. But I think it's neat. I think a lot of that still goes on here. There's, there's sporadic spots where the real serious problems occur. The drug stuff, you know. I don't think it's as wide spread maybe as it, maybe as it is in other areas. And it's a problem here that needs fixed. But I think it really comes from inactivity. I think it really comes from -- When I went down to -- For example where I lived, when I went down to Woodsdale we had -- In the daytime we had basketball games and foot -- We just went somewhere and did something. And I see a lot of these kids today, and they stand. And they're standing on corners and, you know, that challenge that goes

on. That almost a hidden challenge that goes on between young kids is 'I can do something you can't do' or 'you can't do something I can do.' And pretty soon

(174) they're into a competitive effort that leads them into some areas that they probably shouldn't be in. Where we got into that stuff was get on the basketball court, get on the football field, get the ice skates, the roller skates, I'll beat you to the corner. And that was where it got competitive. But I think in today's world, they don't -- They don't -- There's not enough of that. There's not -- And it's not that there aren't places to do it. I'm just not sure that the, that parents push their kids into -- My parents used to say to me, "Why don't you go down and find your buddies and go play softball," you know. So I -- He didn't say, "I'll drive you down." When he said 'why don't you go find,' he meant get out on the road and thumb and find your way down and go where you're going to go and do it and come home. And you be home by such and such a time. And I knew what that meant, and so that's what I did. But I went down and found my buddies, and we played softball, football, whatever we could find to do. I think unfortunately that the kids aren't directed that way any more. And they need to be.

MNK: But you -- As a high school kid hanging around with your buddies, you had -- You had free access to downtown? To the bars and clubs and whatever?

(189) RH: Yeah. But I would say as a high school kid, not very much in the bars. If you looked like you were in the early grades in high school, they'd stop you at the door. Because one, they weren't looking for -- They weren't looking to have any trouble. Now if you were a, a big kid at a junior or senior high school and it was a little hard to tell whether you were in college or not, you know, you just walk right in and out of places. But I really think that, you know, although I remember kids who used to drink too much, and I remember some kids who got in trouble. I don't remember severe trouble. I remember somebody getting too much to drink and taking a swing at somebody because they were looking at his girlfriend. That sort of thing. But I don't ever really remember, you know, gang stuff and 'what are you doing in here, you shouldn't have that kind of a shirt on' kind of thing. I mean I remember guys challenging each other. A lot of it having to do with high school pride stuff. 'We got a better football team than you do' sort of thing. I remember a lot of

(202) that, but I don't ever remember out of hand, out of control street fights. And certainly no weapons. I don't think in all the years I was raised here I ever saw anybody with a weapon. Period. Any kind. Knife or anything else. I just don't think I saw one. Drugs, of course, we didn't know about them. But cigarettes and beer were the big issue. That was the issue of the day. And that's what everybody kind of hung around with was the beer and cigarette thing. The athletes tried to stay away from some of that stuff, but --

MNK: Wheeling had, had sort of this wide open reputation too.

RH: Oh, yeah. Well of course --

MNK: ... Brennen told us that a, that Wheeling was off limits to the, to the navy during, in the war years.

(209) RH: Well, in the days of Bill Lias when he was the gambling kingpin here. Of course, I was a little young for that. But I'm sure that there, that downtown was absolutely wild in some of those areas. He ran bordellos and bars and about everything else you could run. But he was a peculiar individual, you know. I knew him, not well. He's certainly -- He's old enough he wouldn't have been a friend of mine, but I knew him. And my father knew him well. And knew -- And used to do some work for him. But I remember a lot of times that I was told that when Bill Lias, for example, heard that people were coming to town with drugs, he would call the local prosecuting attorney and -- Or the prosecuting attorney would call him and tell him that they had reason to believe that there was some people in town here who were trying to get involved in the drug business. And Bill would say, "I will take care of it." And those people would disappear from town. And not a lot of words about it. And nobody knows what happened, but they left. And I -- Bill would have told you if he were sitting here today, that the kinds of things that he, that he promoted and that he operated were things that were going to go on anyway. But that he thought that the kinds of things, like the unnecessary drug business that was in its very early stages in those days, were things that would destroy people. And if he was going to be successful, (228) people couldn't be destroyed. They had to be active and able to do things. They used, they used to say, and I don't know this for the fact, that the gals who worked in the bordellos, that Bill used to insist on and pay for trips to the health department to make sure there

was nothing wrong with them. He insisted on it. I don't know how true that is, but I know he had a different -- At the one hand, he was a man who loved, believed and lived gambling. And the other hand, he was a man who had some sense of right and wrong. And he, and he wouldn't let the obviously wrong things occur around him. I'm sure he got into disputes with other people in the gambling business which were probably very distasteful, and some people may even lost their lives over it. I don't know. But I would guess if I had to that most of those people he was involved with were the people in the gambling industry. Some of them probably on the bottom end of it and trying to move into some area that he was trying to avoid. I remember one story about him that really, to me, kind of typified Bill Lias. My father, as I said, used to be in the lumber business, and my grandfather was a bit of a character. He was a little short fellow, and he worked very hard. (243) And he couldn't talk to you without swearing. He just -- Every other word was a swear word. It was just the way he was. But Bill Lias liked him because he worked hard. And when he got something done when he said he was going to get it done, he got it done. And - - So Bill liked that. Well anyway, he had called my father one day, and I must have been eight or ten years old, and asked him to come over to the race track. He wanted him to build a sweat room for the jockeys so they could control their weight. And Bill's style of doing this was not to get into any elaborate discussion. He would say -- I remember the conversation when he said, "Russell," Russell which was my father, "on top of that building over there, I want you to build a room. And I want that room so the jockeys can sweat in it. And when you get it done, send me a bill for it." And that was kind of the directions that you got from him as to what you were supposed to do. And he'd say, "You know what I want?" "Yes." "Okay. Get it done. Send me a bill."

MNK: Is that how he talked?

(256) RH: That's how he talked. He was very short, you know, sentences. Then he said at the end -- Well, when we first arrived there, he said to my father, "Tell your son to wait over there." And dad said, "Why, Bill?" And he said, "I don't talk good. I don't want kids to hear me talk." And I think it's because he swore a lot. And that was just part of his style, and he didn't want young kids to hear that, you know. So he made me wait. And of course, I could

hear him anyway where I was. But anyway, when they got all done with the conversation, he turned to my father and he handed him two passes to get into the race track. And he said, "Russell, take your kid in to see the ponies run." So he said, "Thanks, Bill." And we started walking toward the gate, and as we got closer to the gate, Bill yelled. He said, "Russell, don't bet the ponies. They run for me, not for you!" Which I thought that was a -- That was a -- That's Bill Lias to me. I've always remembered that because what he was telling my father is 'you're not going to beat him.' You know, 'so the horses work for me, they don't work for you.' Which to me was all, what racing was all about, you know! And I've never had an interest in gambling ever since then as a result of that, I think. But I think that was Bill. I think he really meant that sincerely. He was telling my father 'don't waste your money in there.'

(272)

MNK: This is great.

RH: He was -- He was a remarkable man that way. He used to -- He used to drive a big Cadillac. He was very heavy, 300 and some pounds. And he used to have a seat in the driver's seat that was on a pivot so that when he stopped the car, he would pivot the seat and then he could drop his legs out the door and raise up out of the car. Usually when you talked to him, he never got out of his seat. He just turned in the car with the door open, and just sat there and talked to you. And when you're through, you'd turn the seat back and pulled the door shut and off he went. But he was real character. Great big guy. Called him Big Bill and all that stuff. Everybody in town knew who he was. And I'm sure there's a lot of people around here didn't want to know who he was! But it was a wide open town. And that was probably, I don't know, '30s to the '40s. I don't know, the golden era, but somewhere in then. He operated a place called Zoeller's Steak House, which was one of the greatest restaurants you've ever been in. Of course the building's there, but the restaurant's no longer there. I think it was a great place because he had the big hitters here for the gamblers. And those are people who like to live a high lifestyle, and he provided it in that restaurant. And then they could take them upstairs where the card rooms were. There were no limits in Wheeling. That was my understanding. In gambling, there were just no limits. And Bill would back up whatever wasn't backed up. I saw him

(285)

one night in a -- This business of doing business with my father's lumber company carried on into my generation. And my father as he got older -- And I got one call one night about two o'clock in the morning at home when I was back working at the lumber company after I'd gotten out of the army. And Bill said -- It was Bill Lias and he, he -- You know, he didn't identify himself. He just -- When you answered the phone he says, "Hobbs." He'd call you by your last name. "Down at Billy's. Can you come down. I need something." That's the kind of a message you would get. And I had enough sense to know, because I dealt with him before, that he wanted something done down there. And I didn't -- You know, you'd have to go down to find out. So when I got there -- My wife said, "Where you going?" I told her. She said, "You got to be crazy," you know. I said, "No, it's just the way the man does business. He's up all night." You know, he doesn't --

(303) He sleeps in the daytime. So I went down, and sure enough, he was sitting down there at a place called Billy's Bar. And he was sitting at a table where they were gambling. And when I went in I told somebody, you know, that I was there. The guy at the door, and he went over and said something to him. And Lias, you know, this way, you know. He came over. I walked over to the table where he was standing and he said, "This place doesn't look so good." He said, "Panel it all and put a new ceiling in it and fix it up. Then you see him for the, when you get your bill." And this was the guy that carried his money, you know. This little fellow that followed him around that paid all the bills and kept track of everything. Most of it was all done in somebody's head. There weren't books that I knew of. But anyway, his instructions to me were to get some people in there and make the place look better which -- Two or three week's work, and you get that all

(316) done. And you -- You go down and knock on the door and this little fellow comes up. And you hand him your bill, and he starts counting out the money until he pays you everything he owes you. And then you go on back to work. And that's the way you did business. But while I was in there, I got -- He said, "You want to have a beer? Stay." This was two, three o'clock in the morning. So I went over and sat down, and I watched him because I had never seen the game that they were playing which was called Barboot. And it's a

Greek game, and I -- I'm told that it's the fairest gambling game that there is because you don't bet against the house. You bet against each other. And I don't really

(324) know the details of how it operates, but I know that before they will start to roll the dice, every bet that's down on the table has to be offset by another bet. And if it isn't offset, they won't start the game until it is. And what Bill did is he took all of the odd bets himself. So he would sit at the table, and there may be \$1,000 on one roll of the dice here on one side. And there may be \$500 on the other side or there may be \$20,000 on one side and \$5,000 on the other. If they were short 15 thousand, Bill would take it. Which meant that there was an equal number of dollars that were going to go back and forth between a winner and a loser. The house took one and a half percent of whatever was on the table. So the dealer was a very critical guy in this thing, and he would -- He would be able -- If I bet five bucks and I won 15, he would take one and a half percent out of that and give me the change back. And he would do it so fast, you wouldn't even know you got it. And you'd look at it and figure it out. By the time you figured it out, you realized that the guy really

(339) knows what he's doing. And of course, the bets were much bigger than that. It was a very, very large game. I mean 50, 100, 200 thousand dollars rolling on tables, you know. And Bill would cover the shortfall every time. But that was his style, you see, was to -- He didn't want gambling to be unlimited and at the same time he wanted it to be fair. And what he liked to do was to take a piece off of the top. That's what he liked. And that's what he did. And I think as a result, the gambler types that rolled in here out of Akron, Pittsburgh, Cleveland, New York, wherever they came from, they knew that it was a fair game. And they knew that you paid a piece of the pot for the action, but that you didn't have some dealer sitting over there who was against you. Because the dealer didn't care. The

(351) dealer just simply deals the cards or deals the dice or whatever he does. And you win or lose based on what comes up. And if you win, somebody else lost. If you lost, somebody else won. And the house took one and a half percent. And they all seemed to think that was fair. So -- It was -- To me it's kind of a, you know -- Bill was a -- Bill was a good guy, Bill was a bad guy sort of a thing, you know. Gambling was a good thing. Houses of

prostitution weren't good things, I'm sure. But if somebody was going to run it, I'm glad it was him rather than somebody else. That's kind of the way I always felt about it.

MNK: How was it that, that the group or the class or whatever it, the social class of people, the great industrial people with their beautiful homes out the Pike and ...

RH: How they got there?

MNK: No. How was it they, that they put up with this kind of wide open situation?

(363) RH: Well, that's a, that's a hard one to answer except to tell you that I am -- You got to remember, a lot of them owned factories. A lot of them had a lot of employees. The steel company, for example, it used to be at least maybe three large employers right here in the city part of the steel company. They're no longer here. Those plants are no longer here, but they were here. And they employed thousands of people in them, and a lot of those folks that worked in those plants -- I mean that was part of their life, is that style of living. You know, the gambling and the house of prostitution. That whole business was a part of their lifestyle. So when you say how did they let it go -- I don't know that they ever really tried to not let it go. I don't know that they ever sat back and said, "We can't abide that in this community." I think they said to themselves, "We just won't -- We won't be participators in it, and if it goes on, it goes on down there." And gradually it

(378) drifted into an area of the community which really started at the very bottom end of the business town, the business area of the town, and drifted into the south Wheeling area. And it was kind of confined to that area.

MNK: South of the creek?

(382) RH: Yeah. And somewhat to the north, but not much. Just -- It overflowed a little to the north end, but mostly south of that creek. And a lot of the folks that lived down in that area were working people. Some of them didn't have very much. And I don't know how the prostitution houses got started down in there, but I'm sure they came out of a sense of need or sense of somebody trying to create their own way to make a living. A quick way to make a buck as it were. And I'm sure the same thing was true of the gambling. But when you organize it with a guy like Bill Lias, and then of course when you acquire the horse track over there -- That was -- That was at one time -- I think it was a mile track, and it was

one of the great mile tracks in the country when he had it because he was one of these guys that believed in having a first class operation. And you get big spenders. And that's what he was after. So when he did things over there -- I remember one instance where my father went over -- He called him at one time because he said he had a, he had a duck pond in the middle of the race track that was full of mallards and stuff so -- Something for people to watch. And he didn't like it. And he said he wanted to take it out of there. And he said, "I'll get the, I'll get the lake out of there, and I want you to make a trellis." That's what he told my father. "That goes all the way down the middle of the track. I want roses on it growing. Roses growing all over it in the middle of the race track." And my dad said, "What kind of a trellis?" He said, "You figure it out. Make a trellis. Put it down the middle of the track. You understand me? Get it done." And that was kind of

(407) the conversation. So you're supposed to create something and do it, and hopefully it's right. And I'm sure his style was 'if it wasn't right, you never do any work for him again.' And it's questionable whether you'd get paid, you know. But that's his style of living. And what my father had enough sense to usually go back with sketches and show him 'we're going to do this, Bill. That look okay to you.' 'Yeah, take this out, change that,' you know. And that's what he wanted. And they'd built something and put it in there and -- But he wanted to make sure that people went over there, had a, not just could gamble, but went out of there with an experience that this is a wonderful place. It was very important to him.

MNK: First class.

(417) RH: Yeah. And it was. It was a first class operation. And it -- After he left, it went straight down hill.

MNK: What, what -- Bill Lias. Was he, was he brawn or was he brains or was he both? I mean, he came up -- I've heard he was running liquor by the time he was --

RH: Oh yeah.

MNK: Fifteen years old.

RH: Sure.

MNK: Was he all muscle and, and --

RH: No.

MNK: Was he iron or was he, was he -- Was he very, very shrewd or --

(425) RH: I think he was two things. I, I don't know about the brawn part. I know he didn't have -- He didn't have any hesitancy if somebody was, if somebody was doing some things they shouldn't be doing. He had no hesitancy at all to fix it. Whatever was wrong. Most of us wouldn't do that. Most of us, I don't think, would have the personal conviction even though if we were involved in something that was marginal operation. I'm not sure most of us would have the courage to face people who were competitors and back them off. Bill did. He did have that kind of courage. Now, yeah they all say 'you can stick a gun in a guy's face, and he'll do a lot of things,' and I'm not -- I'm sure that that was a part of the process, but I'm not sure I could stick the gun in somebody's face. But he could. Or he could say, "That will never happen again." And he meant it, and you know he meant it

(439) because he backed it up before. I think he was that. Plus, I think he was much brighter than people thought he was. He was Greek. His language was a little broken. Yet, I'm told, and again I can't prove this story to be correct. Somebody may tell you along the way. But that his -- When he married, the Greek tradition is that you, you must marry within your own social strata. And that when he married the gal that he married, Alice who just died here a year or so ago. Or this year as a matter of fact. They had to go all the way back to the family histories in Greece to find out if this marriage could take place or the church wouldn't do it. And as it turns out, he comes -- His family, the name, the Lias family, came from a very high level of Greek society. Now, that doesn't necessarily mean that he was a high level Greek socialite, but I think what it does say is that probably in the genes and in the education and in the tradition -- All -- Whatever made them what they were carried onward. And because he got redirected into activities like gambling

(461) and all, doesn't mean he didn't have a good head. Maybe he was a guy who wanted to take a short route to the top. I -- You know, I don't know what drove him, but I think he was a lot brighter than people thought he was. And I think, I think he understood people very, very well. He knew what made people tick. He knew how to get your attention. He knew how to get you to do what he wanted. It wasn't just a matter of typical today's political

person who buys his way or throws his weight around. That wasn't Bill's style. He was the kind of a guy who knew how to get your attention. Now, stories are told about cars blowing up and that sort of thing, you know. But he knew how to get your attention. And if he got it --

MNK: Whatever it took --

(470) RH: You paid attention. And whatever it took. Exactly. And that's what he would do. Unique guy I think. And today's gambler, you know, is well dressed. Today's gambling moguls are well dressed, highly educated. You'd never know where they came from. You took one look at Bill Lias and you knew what he did for a living. That was --

MNK: Tell me about that.

(477) RH: Well, his clothes. His style. He never, you know, you wouldn't see him running around in -- You know, this was a guy who was very wealthy. You wouldn't see him running around in business suits and stuff like that. You'd see him with peculiar kinds of things like a scarf wrapped around his throat. I don't know that I ever saw him in a tie. I'm not sure they ever made a shirt big enough to fit a guy that size, you know, cause he was huge. He was 350 or 400 pounds. He was a big fellow. And, and --

MNK: Excuse me just --

RH: Yeah.

(485) RH: Works down at the -- When I was down at the bank here, he works down at the bank in the trust department.

MNK: Oh yeah.

RH: Bill Paris is his name.

CNK: What did you say? How did Bill use to dress though?

(489) RH: Well, he -- You would see him in -- A lot of times I would see him wearing what I would call a scarf or some such piece of material, you know, around his neck. That sort of thing. Not, not like he looked like a, you know, a guy with a stickpin in it. He'd just wrap a scarf around his neck and stick it in his sweater or stick it in his coat and put his coat on, you know. And he was that way. And his clothes were always rumpled, and I think that's probably a product of a guy who weighs 400 pounds. But he didn't -- You could tell right

away when you looked at him. This guy is not in the clothing business. He's not a merchant, you know. He does something else. And whether you would have chosen gambling or not, I'm not sure. But I think you would have it you'd have seen him and listened to him. And he had big, fat lips, and he was always rubbing his thumb across his lip. I know he -- That was a -- I don't know why, but it was -- I think it's the way they counted money, I think, to make their finger wet so they could separate bills, you know. But he was always doing that. He had big, big heavy lips. But he was a -- I think I said he was a-- He was soft spoken in a way. I never heard him speak harshly or loudly. I'm
(508) sure he had to at some time, but I never heard him do it. But he was very short and very brusque in what he had to say. And I think that was a function of two things. One is his lack of knowledge of the English language. And I think two is he had a lot of people that worked for him one way or the other, and he just wasn't going to spend all day talking to them, you know. He wanted -- "You do this. You understand? You do it. See you later," and then he'd walk away. And when he would come back, he had a great memory to know if you didn't do it, he wanted to know why. And you better have a good reason or you
(519) either didn't work there any more or you went somewhere else! And he, he could make sure you went wherever he needed to get you to go.

MNK: Have you ever sort of reconstructed this ascent into the kind of power or control that he had here? Do you have any sense of how he -- Was there -- Was there a -- Was there a big city boss that --

RH: I think that --

MNK: He had to topple to get where he was?

(526) RH: No. I don't think so. I think where it was was through the prosecuting attorney. We used to have a prosecuting attorney here. His name was Tom O'Brien. And he was a very, very capable guy. Very good lawyer, later became a judge.

MNK: Frank's dad?

RH: No. Frank's uncle.

MNK: Frank's uncle.

(533) RH: Frank's dad was a -- J. J. P. O'Brien, I think it -- No, Frank's dad was Frank O'Brien Senior. This was Thomas P. O'Brien. And Thomas P. O'Brien's father was another judge here in town. It was sort of the O'Briens have all been in the legal judge business. But Tom O'Brien was prosecuting attorney here for probably 20 some years. All during this era. And I think -- I don't have any way of verifying this, but I've always understood that he had an arrangement with Bill. And his arrangement was that so long as Bill kept his activities within the parameters of acceptable behavior and that Bill participated with keeping undesirable elements out of town -- In other words, didn't bring them in or saw to it that they got out. That that was acceptable to the prosecuting attorney. Knowing full well that he was operating house of prostitution. Knowing full well that he was operating gambling emporiums or whatever, which were illegal. The prosecutor -- I'm not

(552) going to say overlooked them, but I think there was an understanding between the two of them that if you don't, if you don't infringe -- If you allow children in these places and I hear about it, I'm going to close you down. That's why I think Bill ran things as well as he ran them. Because I think he knew that if he ever got out of those bounds, the game was over. That's why I think the people that you refer to as the industrious who live out the Pike -- They had a prosecuting attorney to deal with. The prosecuting attorney was apparently willing to accept this because Wheeling was a growing, booming town in those days. And they're willing to accept it so long as he kept it within the bounds of what was acceptable. And I think Bill recognized that. He was -- Let's face it, he brought a lot of dollars into town. Not only in terms of the gambling and all that stuff, but the race track and all the other people that drifted in and out of here. And it meant a lot, I think, to the merchants. You know, there's a lot of folks that came here. But he still would not tolerate if any of his bar operators had kids in there, they -- They're apt to go across the river, you know, in cement boots because he, he just wouldn't tolerate that kind of stuff. He had rules, and that was it. You don't break them. And he was very strong. Plus, I think a little of this -- He was -- He was a good guy. I mean he was very generous to the Greek community. Built the church down here. He paid for it himself. They wanted a new church, and it was all built out of stones, beautiful big church. Bill paid for it because they

didn't have enough money to pay for it, so he did. He did stuff like that, you know, and he helped people. He was -- He was known for somebody that, you know, would walk up to a guy on the street, maybe -- I -- I'm not going to say everybody that was down on their luck, but maybe somebody he knew that wasn't doing so well. He's just apt to stop and hand him a thousand dollars and tell him to go get cleaned up and do something, you know. He was that kind of a person. Wasn't that way to everybody obviously, but I think the people he knew or people he wanted to help. Probably a lot of Greeks of his own religion, of people he knew from the church, you know, that sort of thing. But he was --

(592) He was an interesting guy that way. Doesn't make his activities right, but it's the way he operated them, I think. But of course, that was going on a lot of places. It wasn't just here. Wheeling was the only town that had gambling!

MNK: So it was, it was almost a microcosm or a metaphor or something for, for what was happening in a lot of ...

(600) RH: I think it was. I mean obviously I wasn't privy to going to a lot of those cities. I know Chicago was certainly no, you know, it wasn't the house of all churches. There was a lot going on in Chicago that was different and strange. The same with New York and Baltimore and a lot of other cities. I think probably what Bill did was simply brought that style and technique to a small town. And I can't tell you why he chose a small town. Family was here. I don't know why they were here. I don't know what brought him. That's before my days. And why he came here or if he was born here. I don't even know that. Margy Brennen probably would have known that better than I would. And he may have been born here. I think he's a -- I think his wife might have been. I'm not sure of that. I think Alice might have been born here.

MNK: Well, Bill proved that he was born here, right?

(615) RH: Well, I don't -- Either here or Toledo. But I meant is in this -- I don't know whether he was born in Wheeling. I don't think he was. I think he was born in Toledo. And why he drifted this way, I don't know. I mean maybe this an opportunity. Maybe it was a fate thing or something like that. But I think he came from Toledo. There's a fairly large Greek community in Toledo. And I think a lot of his folks that were involved here came out

of that community and came here. Why? I think a lot of them followed him, but he was -- He's obviously the kind of guy that's hard to deny, you know. It's not only his size, but, you know, you just don't turn a guy like that down very easily. He ask you to turn around, you turn around!

(631) RH: Dollars one night and watching the amount -- Zoeller's, of course, was a steak house. And it -- Some of us used to try to sneak in and out of that place because we thought we could get a beer and watch the gambling, you know. Sometimes you get in, some -- It depends on your age and all that other stuff, but I can remember one time getting in there with some guys and -- Must have been in college I guess. And I'm telling you, the -- You could just tell -- Look at the -- Take a look at the clothing and you could tell these folks weren't from here. And you ask a few questions and you find New York addresses and Chicago and folks from everywhere. And my understanding always was that the reason

(643) they came here was because there was no limit gambling. And, you know, if you wanted to get in a card game with Bill and play him for a million bucks, he'd play you. I mean, you know, he just, he just didn't have a limit on what he did. I don't know how much he won, how much he lost. I don't know anything about those, you know, those records. Never kept! And I'm -- Every -- I'm sure every court in the United States argued about that. When he died, I guess, he didn't have a lot. I mean, you know, from what I understand. But I can't believe there isn't a coffee can somewhere. I just can't believe it. I mean, what would he have done with it. You know, there's got to be -- There's got to have been enormous sums of money involved and where they went and how they got there, I don't know. But I mean this was the kind of guy, you know, as I told you -- You could do

(660) a -- I used to do, deliver stuff when I was working in the yard for my father, and they'd have -- Deliver loads of lumber and stuff, you know, to different places. And sometimes you'd deliver stuff to him, and they'd always tell you to go down to the office, and they'll pay you. And this little guy with a, you know, would start wheeling off these bills, and I've seen them pay bills for 25, 30 thousand dollars, you know. Just stand there and pay you right now. Now, I know a lot of this stuff was not, was a subject of all the tax problems that he got into. But where did all the money go? Had to be huge sums of money. I don't

know where it ever went. He's had a very tragic family life. His son was a lawyer, I think in Columbus. And somebody rolled a bomb in the door and blew him away. I don't know what that was all about. His daughter went to school with my sister out at Country Day School. And this is not a kind thing to say, but she looked just like him. Not quite as big, but certainly the same face!

MNK: That was Mrs. Holloway's school?

RH: Yes. She started that, yeah. The Wheeling Country Day School. But his daughter -- A guy showed up with his daughter one day who was a very good looking guy. And you would have drawn the same conclusion I would if you'd seen the two of them together is 'what is he doing there.' Because he wouldn't have belonged with her. And yet he married her. And I think he was obviously figuring he'd married into a pile of money, and he didn't know Bill very well! I don't know what happened to him. He disappeared.

I don't know where he went or why, but with Bill you never knew. And after he had left, his daughter had a child. And that's the boy that works here in town today. And she subsequently died, the daughter. And then his wife just died earlier this year. Bill's wife. So the whole family's gone except for this one grandson who's here in town. And all I know is that I don't know where all that money got in that family. I mean it's not here with this boy. I don't know where it went. And whether I'll ever know or whether anybody will ever find it. You know, you just don't know. Could be in Swiss banks. It could be anywhere I guess, but he had to have made enormous sums of money. You know, in those days the government was talking about fines of a million or two million dollars for his activities. That had to be peanuts compared to what he was involved in, you know. I mean this track over here -- They turned millions and millions of dollars a year that changed hands over there. And you know he kept a lot of it!

MNK: So the government seized the track then?

RH: I think they forced a sale. I think what happened was -- I have a little trouble remembering this -- Of course it's all documented, but it seems to me that they found him guilty of a number of things. Tax evasion mostly. And in -- When they levied those assessments against taxes, of course the government has a right to levy against anything.

And they just simply forced a sale of the track. And that's what forced the sale. And then they just simply -- They just commandeer all --

(tape 2, side 1) MNK: Let's see, at some point you went off to, to war. Did you go to Korea?

RH: I -- No, no. I was in -- I went off in '56 so that was all behind us then. But I wound up in Germany. I worked in code work in the army for two years at Heidelberg, Germany. Came back here in 1958 and went back into the lumber business that my father was in. Stayed there until I left and went with the bank in, I think it was 1981. Somewhere in there, '80 or '81. Started the banking business.

MNK: So for you though, things really changed in the '70s when the lumber business --

(007) RH: Oh, yeah.

MNK: Went under, so to speak.

RH: Yeah. It was a -- It was --

MNK: It was right out here?

RH: No, it was down this way south. And it was -- I'm trying to think of some --

MNK: Route 2 went over it then?

RH: Right over in back of the hospital on this side of the hospital was where it was located. So it was a wonderful business that he had started because it was a lumber company that was right in the middle of town. And that was very easy for the contractors and everything. Plus, the railroads went right into that area. So, obviously he had access to rail and, and vehicles. And as a result, when they tried to move us, we couldn't find a place to do that because there weren't any -- Railroads wouldn't sell you any property. And we were a logical buyer of their property because we used to take two or three hundred cars of lumber a year which was good freight for them. Particularly in those days a lot of freight had shifted to trucks. But anyway, we couldn't find a location where cars could get to us.

(017) They had places way out in the country, but we weren't about to head out there. As a result, we just decided -- Well, I didn't. My father decided that he was going to hang it up. And so he went -- He retired. As I said, my brother went to Florida. Then I stayed here. So I was the last one left in the family that stayed here.

MNK: Were the changes that went on in your own family with regard to the loss of the business --
Were there other -- Was Wheeling generally going through those changes?

(022) RH: I think in the, in the -- Not quite as bad in the '70s. I think the late '60s, early '70s, Wheeling was declining. It wasn't, wasn't just in our business. Our business was a product of a highway. It disappeared as a result of that. They didn't have any choice but to take our business where they were going to build the highway. And the problem with relocating us was unique to us. Most people wouldn't have to have both rail sidings and vehicles, but we did. I -- But I think there were a lot of businesses, and I think the reasons for it were that a lot of the larger companies were going down. Either moving, relocating because they needed more ground to expand on, and we didn't have it here. Companies that, for whatever purpose, were manufacturing differently. Remember Wheeling, Whitacker Glessner Company which originated the galvanized garbage can -- Obviously companies came into the -- Plastics came into the picture. Then Rubbermaid and all those companies got into the garbage can business. And obviously that impacted on their business. It caused layoffs. Work forces that used to work out in that east Wheeling plant of maybe six, seven, eight hundred people were down to a hundred, you know, making garbage cans and stuff. And then eventually it becomes, you know, becomes an economic decision for the corporations. Is it really worth doing this any more, and let's look at what the potential, future potential is. And if there's no potential there, let's get rid of it. Get rid of it while we can still get out. I think that's kind of what

(038) happened. That happened in the steel business. The '60s and '70s were very difficult times in the steel business. And that's a large employer here. Not only in Wheeling, but all up and down the river. Chemical business, which is essentially south of here, really doesn't impact Wheeling that much. Although there's people who work here. Coal business doesn't impact that much, although there are coal areas up here. They're, you know, they kind of come and go. But the manufacturing was a fundamental, you know, it was a fundamental business here. And the glass industry got impacted by foreign imports. Trade -- They didn't have trade sanctions in those earlier days. You know, to how do you stop the Hungarian glass from coming into this country. They didn't. And so it came in

and, of course, they obviously working at substantially lower wage rates over there. And you just couldn't compete with them here, you know. And as a result, these companies closed. And when you -- You know, Fostoria glass here, which was one of the major manufacturers. Imperial glass, a major -- They're -- All those companies had large, because they're labor intensive industries, had large employee bases. And of course, they closed. And when that happens obviously people disappear, you know, they start looking for work wherever they can find it. And we lost a lot of folks. I would guess we lost in that period of time, I suspect 15, 000 people moved out of here in those times, I would guess. Had it did, you know, it -- It has, you know, good news and bad news sort of thing, you know. When you have that happen, property values go down, which is not so good for you if you sit there and own it. But it is good for you if you're coming into town because what you can buy is a lot less expensive. And that's always been kind of the tradition here in Wheeling. It's a very inexpensive place to live, and always has been.

(057) Housing that you buy here for a hundred, you pay 250 somewhere else for the same thing. Taxes are starting to catch up a little bit here, but living here generally is very inexpensive. Cost of schools, those sort of things were very, very expensive in the Wheeling area.

MNK: I won't keep you very much longer. I wondered, though, how Wheeling is different, was different for your children growing up here than it was for you. How was it different from ...

(063) RH: I think, in the case of my kids, they started in schools here, grade schools, and I sent them away. In the '70s, Linsley, the school which was sort of to me, was at least kind of the focal point of the high school education here. Primarily, I guess, because I went there. But when my kids went there, it had changed dramatically, and the emphasis on military had become, it'd become like a sloppy army unit. They just didn't -- They were mixed up out there. They weren't sure what they were going to do. They didn't run it very well. And as a result, I think the educational standards dropped substantially. And so my kids who started there -- I jerked them out and sent them away. So when they grew up here, they grew up in the summers, you know, because they were away in the winters. But it was

different for them, I think, only in the sense that there weren't as many people, there weren't as many -- There was certainly the same sorts of things to do. My kids worked at the park in the summertime if they could get jobs there, you know, that sort of stuff. And pretty much did the same kind of things that I did here, and I think that's why they're all back here. My oldest son is here; operates a business. My daughter is here; works in town. My youngest son happens to work in Pittsburgh because he's in television business, and he works with one of the television stations up there. But they're all close to this area, and I think it's because -- I think it's the roots thing. I really think it's an

(081) important part of being near family. I think it's important to them. I don't think that's something I trained them in. I just think that's something that's becoming more and more important to kids today, is to be somewhere close to where their roots are. At least to some family. Whether they're, you know, aunts and uncles in some far off town, but at least somebody that they have an identity with. Because it's, you know, it gets very impersonal in a lot of places. And if it's not -- If it's not friendly, and a lot of places aren't friendly, you don't really get to feel a part of it. You can, you can come to Wheeling, as anybody that's been here would tell you, you want to work, there's plenty for you to do. And there's plenty of people loved to have you work. Plenty of, plenty of things for you to do. If you're willing to work for nothing, it's all the much better. There's lots of things for you to do. And they'll, they'll see to it that you keep busy if , if you, if you let it be known that you want to. And that's not true in a lot of other towns. You can't crack

(092) through the circle. I think you can here. If you're a doer here, if you're somebody who will go out and get things done, lots of folks around here would like to have you involved. But that's not necessarily true in a lot of other towns that you -- I don't care how good you are, how hard you work, it's just tough to crack into it, you know, they just -- You're an outsider, you're from somewhere else. I don't think you're an outsider in Wheeling very long. Particularly if you're trying to do something. I mean, obviously there's people that float in and out of here that don't want to participate or don't want to do anything. And that's where they wind up is sitting on the outside watching, but those who want to do something and -- You guys are probably finding that out yourselves. That when you're

doing something around here, people want to, they want to see you succeed. They'll help you do it.

MNK: That's right.

(100) RH: You know, but they -- If you don't have that approach, they don't care if you don't care. But it's -- And I think that's -- I think that's a lot of the area. I think that's a lot of the town, is -- Used to have a big sign in Elm Grove when you came in said 'Wheeling, the Friendly City.' And it's disappeared over the years, but I think it was a good sign. I think it was an appropriate sign because I think it always has been a city like that. They like people here.

MNK: We'd better put it back.

(104) RH: That's what we're trying.

MNK: Is the Fort Henry Club, is that -- Is that a significant organization in terms of understanding Wheeling society, do you think?

RH: Well, yeah because -- Only because it's a hundred and some years old. And it flourished in the days when the corporate entities here were large companies, made lots of money, did a lot of things in the community. And most of the people who were the movers and shakers in those early days were associated with it. It was nothing more than a men's luncheon club. That's all it was. It's -- In recent years, obviously we don't have the large corporate entities around here any more to make as much use of it, but as a result, it struggles. And it struggles because all those things are volume oriented. And you need X, so many members paying so much dues and, you know, that sort of thing to make them work. Now what they do is they kind of, you know, if you're daughter wants to get married and you want to have a reception there even though you aren't a member, they'll work it out for you because they need the revenues. But it's not a for profit business obviously. And it's a -- It struggles, but it was in the sense that -- I think the house was the -- I think it belonged to the Rankin family, and they were married into the Oglebay family. And that was, that was one of the fine homes at the time when it was originally, you know, in the community. I think it was Rankin, maybe it was -- I'm not sure. I think it was the Rankin family that lived there. But I know they were related to the Oglebays.

MNK: They were the ones who started it?

(125) RH: I think they built the house. And Oglebay either married one of the girls or, or one of the girls was his niece or some such arrangement. But he was related to the Rankins. And I think, I think Mrs. Oglebay was a Rankin. I'm not sure of that. But anyway, that's what that house was. And upon their death, they gave it to the Fort Henry Club with the stipulation, I think, that if it ever ceased to exist as the Fort Henry Club then the property would go to the Ohio Valley Medical Center. They wanted to make sure that it, you know, got used for something. So it was -- And so it was given away. But, yeah, I think it was a -
- In its earlier days more so than today. Probably up until some time in the '50s when the steel company was much more active here and had their sales departments here, it was a booming organization. And it didn't influence anything because all it was was a lunch club. But it, but it was significant in, I think, in those times.

MNK: Who were the people who would, might really know a fair amount about it or be good to talk to?

(138) RH: There is a guy in town here by the name of W. W. Holloway. He's in his eighties, about 80. He lives out in Atlas Road if you're --

MNK: We have interviewed him.

RH: Have you?

MNK: Yes.

RH: Well, his father, his father was the chairman of Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel in its heyday. And Bill worked for Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel as purchasing director for a number of years. And he was, both of them were presidents of the Fort Henry Club. And Bill's family was very heavily entwined in the history of the city. Both the Whitacker, Holloway, Glasses. They're all related. And so he would have a, a strong knowledge of its connection to it. But historically I don't, I don't know unless somebody like Beverly Flutie, you know, would -- She's the history buff that really knows the details. I -- I don't know who else to tell you that would know, but the guy that's the current president of it is a fellow by the name of Ben Honecker, who's a lawyer here in town, and he may -- You know, it's an old

family here, so he may, he may have -- He may have a knowledge of it that he could tell you, but it's a good place to start.

MNK: Great. Darling, is there anything we missed?

(152) RH: Can't be! I feel 105 years old.

MNK: I don't think you'd have a beard like that.

CNK: Well, we could spend another hour, but I think that's probably enough.

MNK: This was great. Did you have anything Charlie?

?????: No. We can --