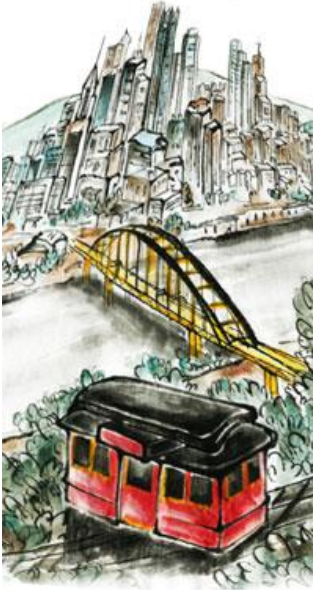


Pittsburgh Oral Histories

Pennsylvania Department
Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh



RD

Interviewed by Barry Chad

Interviewed at her apartment in Oakland

06-22-07

Transcribed 11-06-07 – 11-10-07

Reviewed by phone 01-03-08

Interviewer's Note

One of the fun things about Pittsburghers is that all real Pittsburghers are "historians." Never argue with them about the history of their city or about what constitutes the boundaries of "their" neighborhood. Neighborhoods change; neighborhoods don't change. Childhood rhymes and jump-rope rhymes and the call of the man who would mend your broken umbrellas. Street vendors, door-to-door salesmen, horse-drawn wagons, the Fuller Brush man. A less suspicious, a more open time.

Interview

bc: Have you always lived in Pittsburgh?

RD: Yes. Actually I grew up in Lawrenceville, which was a wonderful place to grow up in years ago. My parents bought our house when I was only 16-months-old, my mom tells me. On Liberty Avenue. I grew up at "3821." We were below the Bloomfield Bridge at 38th and Liberty and the Bloomfield Bridge is [at about] 45th. I love the way Lawrenceville was laid out. Liberty Avenue was the "high street." There were cross streets. And then you came down to Penn Avenue which ran exactly the [same] way as Liberty ran. Penn Avenue—and then there are cross streets again—and then you go down to Butler Street. I would call where I lived "Upper Lawrenceville." The Boys Club was in "Lower Lawrenceville" on Butler Street. Do you know that restaurant on 36th and Liberty that used to be a church?

bc: Church Brew Works.

RD: I lived right up there a couple of blocks away from that. I hate that Church Brew Works and I will not go in there because [the Church] sold that—and I know they're selling a lot of churches and I guess they have to.... But, I didn't like the idea that they were actually—I was never in there, but I understand that they were even brewing beer at a side altar. I didn't like that.

bc: Well, to be honest with you, they're brewing beer at the main altar. They have, of course, taken everything out, desecralized the building.

RD: I don't care.

bc: That's exactly how my neighbor feels about it too.

This is interesting because the area you've described—I was never sure whether it was Lawrenceville, Bloomfield or The Strip.

RD: We called it Lawrenceville.

bc: Where were your parents from?

RD: My parents grew up in The Strip District. My parents came from Italy, both families. My mother's family and my Dad's family came over together. They came over—I'm not quite sure, but it must have been—at least 1892. My Dad was born here. Daddy was born here and he was born in 1896. He was born in Pittsburgh. His sister was two years older. She was born in 1894, also in Pittsburgh because we have the Baptismals and everything from the Italian church. The Italians ran up to The Hill to have their kids baptized. Daddy was the first generation and I was the second. A lot of Italians that I knew didn't come until later.

bc: What did your father do for a living?

RD: He was a glazier. He put glass in windows. He worked for Commercial Sash & Door Company. Do you know where [Iron City] Brewery is? There's a bridge there which goes up to Polish Hill. Right below that bridge is where Commercial Sash & Door Company was. If Daddy was here, he could tell you all about working for a dollar a day in the mill before he went to the Service. Daddy was in World War I. I think he was about 24 when he went.

bc: A dollar went further then.

RD: Tell me about it! If you want me to put this in the oral history, I'll tell you when a loaf of bread was only ten cents and you could get a nice pound cake.... Do you know the Ward Baking Company? That was down on Liberty Avenue also. You could go down to Ward's and buy baked goods. They had a pound cake—I think it was twelve cents.

Daddy was in World War I. He did go overseas. He served in France—the battle of the Argonne Forest. [Soldiers then] wore leggings. Sometimes they wouldn't take those leggings off for days and days and weeks. He was in the trenches. And I think this is a darling story: Daddy was over in France. He always said he was a little bit behind what they called "the front." He had a shrapnel wound. And do you know that he did not want to report it—he could have gotten a purple heart, I guess—because he didn't want his mother to worry. Daddy was the dearest, dearest man.

People say that I [use] the same words all the time—"cute" and "fantastic." So you're going to hear those words a lot.

bc: Everybody that I've interviewed has favorite phrases that they're comfortable with. Many of the people I've interviewed have told their stories before—to friends and family—so they have those stories, the telling of those stories, pretty much down. It's just human nature to have a repertoire like that.

RD: Another nice story: Daddy was over in France and a little band comes along and guess who was in the band? His brother-in-law! My uncle Tony. Isn't that a dear story?

bc: That is something: there you are—3,000...4,000 miles away—and, from a different unit, lo and behold! there's family!

[We talk briefly about the chronology of when RD's father took up the occupation of glazier.]

RD: His whole life [he was a glazier]. And my Mom would say, (that was in the midst of the Depression)...he made 15 dollars a week...my Mom would say, "Why don't you look for another job because you're not making any money." (You know how people go from one job to another today?) People didn't used to do that. Daddy stayed there. At one point he was working "week about"—he worked one week and one week he was off. That's how bad things were. That's when I was a kid.

bc: Your mother took care of the home.

RD: Yes.

bc: You had brothers and sisters?

RD: I had a brother and a sister.

I lived on Liberty Avenue until I got married in the early '40s. My sister was unmarried. My sister died at a very young age. She was only in her fifties. [She and my Daddy shared the house.] My Dad called me and said, "I'm coming to live with you." I said, "Okay, Daddy." He lived with me from the time he was 82 till he was 93. (Now these things do not happen today. Everybody has to go to a nursing home: "I don't want to be a burden to my kids." I don't like that. I know there are some times when the nursing home has to be, but there are some times when it doesn't have to be.)

I spent a lot of my life at the library. My aunt took me to the library to join: I was five, [RD says with great pride]. I could write my name and I had to sign my name. Back then we had ink pens—you had to dip your pen [in an ink well]. And sometimes you would get fuzz on the nib of the pen and I had fuzz on my pen and I messed up the "i" in my name! I remember that [about my first visit to the library]. I loved that library and went there so much as a small kid. That was a long walk from my home to the library, but, back then, people walked. Today, people don't walk. We walked.

[RD talks about the innocent pleasures of her childhood.] What do kids do today? They're always on the go.

bc: Where did you go to school?

RD: This is a nice story: What is now the Brew Works was St. John the Baptist Church. That's where I went to grade school through high school. The high school was a girls' school. I think they closed it in the '60s. It started out as girls and boys. But then, when Central Catholic [High School] was built, they took the boys out of our high school and they went to Central and then it was completely girls. And you know what was really wonderful about our school? Back then, when people had to travel on the streetcar, girls came from even the North Side on the streetcar to go to our school. And the South Side. And Oakland. They all came to St. John the Baptist High School. [It was in the charge of] the Sisters of Charity.

My husband and I, we lived in Baldwin [Borough] for 45 years. We moved from Lawrenceville to Baldwin. You know how people would go out on Sundays and look at properties that were for sale? My husband hated to do that. Well, I was

reading *The Pittsburgh Catholic* and there was a little ad in there for apartments here in this building. So I said to my husband, why don't we go over and take a look? We're not interested in buying. Just look. It's something to do. Well, he fell in love with it and I'll tell you why: he went to Oakland Catholic when it was a grade school. He broke a stained glass window once—not on purpose. A ball went through it and his dad had to pay to have it fixed. [My husband] fell in love with these apartments because he went to school right here and he remembers when this building was the end of the streetcar line. So we decided to move here—just like that!

When I met my husband, he was a night clerk at a hotel downtown. It was during the War. He was only a kid. When we got married, he was only 18. And then he went to work at Webster Hall when it was still a hotel.

He was ambitious. He did different things. He had a truck route. He worked for a subsidiary of Kraft Foods. He had a truck and he delivered to stores—cheese, and so on.... He was a big earner. Not that he made a lot of money, but he sold a lot of cheese.... After he worked for Kraft, he had a pretzel route....

bc: Let me come back to you. When you graduated from high school, what did you do?

RD: It's the War, right? And I thought, What should I do? Should I join the WACs [Women's Army Corps]? (I'm sitting around, doing nothing. Daddy said, You have to do something. Now when I think of it, if I'd have said, Daddy, I want to go to college, he would have sent me there. Duquesne [University] was only 300-and-some dollars a year.) So, at that time, Robert Morris [University today] was just starting out and they had a little secretarial school. So, [my father] had this man come out to the house and I got registered at Robert Morris Secretarial School.

bc: They came out to the house?!

RD: Yes, and the tuition was exactly the same as Duquesne—in the 300s. We could pay it by the month, 15 dollars a month. I went there for a year. They were in the Law and Finance Building downtown. And then, of course, they branched out.

There was a public stenographer in the Law and Finance Building and she was just a young woman; she was only about 25-years-old and her name was Marie Bordy. She had this suite of rooms that she rented out to different companies—Philco, J. K. Smit and Sons, that sold industrial diamonds. In other words, when companies would send somebody—a salesman or whatever to Pittsburgh, they wouldn't set them up in a big office. Instead, they would come to Marie's and she would rent out a little office to them and she would do their secretarial work. (She needed somebody. So, she contacted Robert Morris and the school sent me up there.) I worked part-time for a while until she decided to hire me [full-time]: 15 dollars a week. That's how I met my husband.

One of the young men, Everett Coons, he was from Buffalo, New York. He was out of college and he got this job as a sales representative with a folding box company. (They made boxes that could be folded and put together.) He took a little office at Marie's. Before he got a place to live, he was living at the "Y." My husband was also living at the "Y." He was not living at home. He brought my

husband-to-be up to the office. My husband-to-be asked me to go to lunch the next day.

I said, I'll have to let you know.

(I always went to lunch with my girlfriend, who was also in the Law and Finance Building. She was with a finance company—Personal Finance.)

I called her and I said, This kid asked me to go to lunch. What should I do?

She said, It's a free lunch, isn't it?

I met him for lunch and, you know, I never had lunch with my friend again. He decided that he had to see me every day; and he saw me every day till the day we got married. He was only 18 and I was 21 when we got married.

When I found out that he was only 18, I said, I can't go with you!

And he fell on the floor and he started to cry.

What could I do?

But, you know, he was so grown-up for his age and because I was so short, I guess, everybody would say that he was robbing the cradle when I was robbing the cradle.

And Everett Coons was out Best Man.

So that's our story.

He went to Central Catholic [here in Oakland] but didn't finish.

He had this pretzel route, but he sold it. And then he decided he would get a real estate license, which he did. He went on to sell insurance; he had an insurance license. He also sold investments. He was a go-getter. He just knew how to go out and get business. He never sold in Baldwin. He never sold to friends.

If someone knocks on your door today, people have a blue fit. They don't want to open the door. They're afraid of anybody that comes to their door. Back in "the old days," people went from house to house to sell stuff.

bc: The Fuller Brush man.

RD: The Fuller Brush man and what we called "the moonshine man." The moonshine man sold bleach. (We used it call it "moonshine.")

bc: Your living room is so bright and cheerful....

RD: And this is all my parents' furniture.

bc: Really?

RD: When Daddy came to live with me, he said, Should we call the Goodwill?

I said, Daddy, what are you talking about?

When my mom bought this couch about 65-years-ago, she immediately covered it with a slipcover. So Daddy had that slipcover on all that time. We had it the whole time we were in Baldwin and it's been reupholstered since....

[We look at family photographs: baby pictures, Holy Communion pictures....]

Here's a story: We had a garage back on Liberty Avenue. We never had a car, but we had a garage. Daddy rented the garage out, but he used to keep stuff in there too. There was a family and my father worked with this man at Commercial Sash & Door. And they lost their home. So Daddy had a lot of their furniture in the garage. And when they left, they forgot to take this picture of the Sacred Heart [of Jesus]. Look at this picture with that beautiful mahogany frame.

Here's a story about my Mom: My Mom and her friend, Lillian Brady—they were our neighbors—we lived next to each other growing up. Growing up, naturally, our moms didn't work—they were home. Once I was grown up and married, my Mom and Mrs. Brady hung wallpaper. Back then everybody had wallpaper. The guy who would usually be the paperhanger was a drunk...and he wouldn't finish a job or whatever....

When people were having trouble getting the paperhanger to come back, people came to my mother and Mrs. Brady and said, Could you paper for us? And my mother and Mrs. Brady did it and did it for free a few times.... Everybody said, Why don't you charge? Finally, they wound up charging eight dollars a room, and they would do one room. Then they decided they may as well do two rooms a day. This was in the '40s. And the two of them would carry their paperhanging plank. They would come down off Liberty Avenue...they knew people all over Bloomfield, Lawrenceville.... We called them "The Girls." Mrs. Brady was a woman of about my size. My Mom was a little bit taller, and she was the paster. They had a big board and they would paste the paper and then Mrs. Brady—we called her "Aunt Lil"—they would have a ladder on each side of the room with a plank going across—[Aunt Lil] would get up on that ladder and she'd have that brush and go straight across the whole ceiling to the other side—because they used to paper the ceilings [as well].

bc: Did your father object?

RD: No, because when they did only one room, they were home at lunchtime. But he wouldn't take any of my Mom's money. And that is how we got all this furniture. She would get the cash from her paperhanging and put it in the cupboard. Then she would go down to Gimbel's and shop.

bc: Is the china closet [in RD's living room] from Gimbel's?

RD: Yep.

bc: So, your mother and her friend—they knew what they were doing—this wasn't like Lucy and Ethel?

RD: No, they were really good at it, very very good at it.

[We continue talking about door-to-door salesmen.]

RD: Here, I'll show you something that I bought. People used to come to your door selling things. Here's what I bought from one guy: a jar opener. That was in Baldwin so that's at least 45-years-old.

bc: [reads:] "Jar Wrench" ... "Wizard Jar Wrench."

I'm thinking about TV now. Ralph Cramden and Ed Norton, on "The Honeymooners," they were into hitting it rich by selling these kinds of things....

RD: Even back 45-years-ago, when people would come to my door—I guess I was a goof—I'd go to my door and say "Hello" to the people and see what they wanted. Many people—even back then—when someone would come to their door, they would hide behind a curtain and pretend that they were not home because they were just afraid. But, you know, you can't live in fear. And I won't live in fear.

When I was a kid, the ice cream man would come around and he had a high brown cart and he had a horse and we called him "Joe Blow." He sold ice cream.

(He didn't sell cones.) You had to bring your soup dish out. And he'd give you so many scoops and that [determined] how much you'd pay. We had a poem—and I don't know who made it up—

'Joe Blow broke his toe /
Riding on a buffalo /
When he came back /
He broke his back /
Riding on a railroad track.'

There was a fishman and he was Italian and he had a little open truck. He had a triangle hanging and he would hit that triangle and my Mom would go out and buy her fish. Then there was a little old man and he was about my size and he seemed so old and he carried around this wooden...it's hard to describe.... And he would sing this:

'Keys, locks, umbrellas to mend /
Keys, locks, umbrellas to mend.'

He'd keep saying that over and over. That meant that he could make keys, fix your umbrellas. I don't know if anybody ever talked with him or bought anything from him. He would come down my back street where I lived, Clement Way.... And, do you know who I hated? The potato man. He had this horse and wagon and he was so noisy and my daughter was trying to have her nap in the afternoon and he would come rolling down that alley and making all that noise. And then he'd be yelling "Potatoes! Potatoes!" He had these metal [containers] that were a peck or half-a-peck and he would fill them depending on what you wanted. In our yard all we had was one tree. Nobody had a yard with flowers. We happened to have a tree in our yard. But Mrs. Morin who was about four doors down from us, she had a big yard and we thought it was so wonderful—with all that grass. And, when the potato man's horses would "do their business," she would come out and get the horse manure. I guess she aged it and used it in her yard.

bc: Once you started raising a family, you stopped working, I guess.

RD: Oh yes, because my husband didn't want me to work. Once I got married, I didn't work anymore.

bc: Since your family's grown up, what are your hobbies and how do you keep busy?

RD: I volunteer down at the parish archives. In the past I've taken some courses at Pitt [University of Pittsburgh]—a poetry course, an English course, the Civil War, World War II. Boy, ask me anything about World War II.... I loved it, I loved it, I loved it. But I haven't done it this past year.

We have a book club in our building. And, if I run out of books, I have to run to the library because I have to have something to read.

My friend, Miriam, who is 91, in my building, she is the most marvelous woman. (Everybody ages differently.) [She has native intelligence.] She's a natural smart person. She encouraged me to start doing crossword puzzles. We call it "our homework." We do the "Jumble" every day, the Crossword, the Crypto-Quik, and the Celebrity. We do that every day. She can look at that Jumble and get the answer in about two minutes. She is so bright, she is so bright.

bc: You lived in Baldwin for a while, but Pittsburgh, Western Pennsylvania, Lawrenceville, is where you grew up; and now you live in Oakland. How have they all changed in your lifetime?

RD: Well, I don't know about where I grew up on Liberty Avenue. I've gone over there by bus to visit a friend who passed away recently. We'd grown up together. When I'd go over to visit her, I'd say, Let's walk around the neighborhood. We'd walk down to St. John's and the different places where we'd say that we "loafed." A lot of people that I went to school with—but didn't know real well—a lot of them are still living there. Liberty Avenue looks exactly the same to me. It doesn't look worn-down or anything.... Friendship Avenue [in Bloomfield] looks exactly the same as it did when I was growing up.

I wouldn't give up the way that we grew up for anything. Do kids know how to play hop-scotch [or] "Release the Captive".... No, they don't know anything like that, do they?

bc: Hop-scotch, maybe. Jump-rope definitely.

RD: Jumping rope: a kid would be on each side of a long rope, and we'd say,

'All in together, girls /

Never mind the weather, girls /

I see a teacher /

Laughing at the window.'

And then you would count—one...two...three...four....

You'd try to stay in there the whole time while you're jumping.

Kids don't do that. [Today] they have to be going somewhere every minute. Or they have to be on the computer.

bc: Did you ever drive?

RD: I'm not emancipated. I never drove. My husband got mad. Just because he was teaching me and I went up on somebody's lawn. So what! so what.

I walk a lot.

Before you go, let me tell you about singing:

We used to buy song sheets. They were all different colors of paper. Sometimes they would be orange.... There'd be three or four pages and they usually came in colored, rough paper—nothing fancy. And all the songs of the day would be on there. That's how we learned the words to the popular songs. They cost, probably, a quarter. I'm not sure. And I don't know really where we got them.