

Tremont Oral History Project
Chandick04042003

Interview with George Chandick
Interviewed by Joy Campbell
April 4, 2003
6:10pm, Seven Hills, OH

Joy Campbell: Ok, we are going to get started. So the first thing that I need you to do is just say your name and spell it into the microphone please.

George Chandick: Ok, my name is George J. Chandick, that's last name spelled C-H-A-N-D-I-C-K. Former mayor of the city of Seven Hills. And a teacher at Tremont school for twenty-four years.

JC: My first question for you is just memories, anything that you can remember, good, bad. You can take as long as you want.

GC: If you are talking memories in regards to Tremont school. Twenty-four years brings a lot of memories and a lot of students that have passed through the building since I was there. And probably the most memorable thing that I can remember is the community center. I don't know whether or not Bob Leech (another interview) had mentioned the community center but the community center involved the entire Tremont community. Approximately eight hundred and fifty kids were involved in the community center that started at four o'clock in the afternoon right after school and lasted until ten. Now from four o'clock till six it was the elementary school children. And from seven o'clock until ten we had the teenagers there along with the adult program. Perhaps maybe you would like to have a little bit of background as far as the Tremont area is concerned. It is not just you know the school and the recreation center because there were other recreation centers in the area. But the Tremont area really years back, many years back, was developed because of the immigrants coming over from Russia, Poland, Ukraine, and they came over because of the steel mill and they had an opportunity to make money there. There wasn't too many houses that were constructed in the area. But they managed to rent and they made a half way decent wage working at the steel mills. And if these things you have already heard let me know.

JC: Oh you can continue.

GC: No, have you heard that?

JC: Uh huh.

GC: Ok, so that kind of background will probably build up to the type of children that attended Tremont School. The children were made up primarily, when I first started in nineteen fifty five, of Polish, Ukraine, Russian, () Russian they called them, and also a smattering of Puerto Ricans that came in a little later on before the project was developed. The school was

originally a high school back in the late eighties early nineties. And then it became a junior high school and then after about fifteen to twenty years became an elementary school. The elementary school was from kindergarten through sixth grade, they didn't have a middle school. The middle school the eighth and ninth went to Lincoln junior high school and then Lincoln High School, which was located on West Twenty Fifth I believe. And the kids that I had in physical education, I taught physical education there after I left John Adams. I taught at Bee Hive School. This is all physical education classes. And then I moved full time to Tremont in nineteen fifty-four, late nineteen fifty-four early nineteen fifty-five because they wanted a recreation director there. I was a supervisor on playgrounds; I had forty-eight playgrounds in the summer time, as a regional supervisor. So they wanted a community center director there and I was a community center director at Grace Mount also. Grace Mount elementary school, which was on the east side. And from there they needed a community center director at Tremont and when I moved there and when I first started at Tremont it was a good situation because being a teacher there and physical education you had the opportunity meet most everybody that was going to school there in the classes because they all came down to physical education at least once or twice a week. Even the kindergarten children so you got to talk with them and before you know it, you have them becoming involved in the community center. There was approximately between five and six hundred kids that attended Tremont School at the time from kindergarten through sixth. But we attracted kids from St. John Cantius School, from, there is another elementary school that is located right by Lincoln Park I can't remember the name of it. These people also came, these children also came to the community center from four o' clock to six and then of course the teenagers from seven o' clock to ten as I indicated. What kind of activities did we have there? Well we had a multitude of activities; we had pool tables there for the kids, we had two gyms, a boy's gym and a girl's gym. We had a lunchroom there. I don't know if you had the opportunity to go through Tremont School.

JC: No

GC: Well you ought to take that opportunity if you're interested I'll talk to the principal and see if it's possible for you to take a tour through the building. There is three floors and most of the activity of the recreation center took place in the basement area and we had a lunchroom there. These kids you had to remember, and I'll show you some pictures, are, they weren't poor but they weren't rich. And they all had great personalities. Some of them couldn't speak good English because of their foreign born parents and they came to the community center and there we had hot dogs for the kids, we had a pop machine there. A multitude of things for the kids to eat because we knew from four o' clock to six either their parents were working or they came from split homes. That seems to have been the way things went in the Tremont area at the time. The father made a couple of bucks he left the mother all by herself and these are the type of children that we had that attended the community center. And we took good care of them until they went home and then the teenagers came. And the teenagers we had snacks for them and things like that that they probably would not have been able to afford had they went anywhere else. And for the adults we had Polish movies that we showed in the auditorium. The auditorium sat seven hundred or six hundred seats there and we showed them movies, Polish movies that were rented by the instructor for us. Then once a month we had a special event, for Halloween we had a Halloween party, for Christmas we had a Christmas party and we had two Santa Clauses. The thing was so big that we had one in the front-- One from the North Pole and

one from the South Pole. And the kids would go from one place to the other place and we would hand them out a bag of candy and a bag of popcorn and stuff. The place was packed; I mean you couldn't get a seat. Everyone was standing around as you can see when I show you the pictures. The Halloween party, the Christmas party, and then we had the talent show. Once a month, we had something special for the kids. And this went on for as long as I was there, twenty, about twenty-four years. And it was the largest community center in the country at the time. We serviced more children than any other community center in the country. It was written up in a couple of the papers. But, you know there were other community centers available in the area. They had the Lincoln Bath House, most teenagers went there, and they also had the Merrick House which had a nice gym there and they took care of some of the kids from that decided instead of going to Tremont they went there. So there was enough activity for the kids to attend something that was beneficial to keep them out of trouble, most of them anyway.

JC: Basically what you are saying is that it is very, very community oriented around there? Did you get that feeling from just teaching and being around? Because it seems like a tight knit place but at the same time very separate because either the Polish are here and the Russians are here.

GC: There was a group that we tried to form called the Tremont Growth Association and that started way back in nineteen fifty-six I believe. And a fellow named Dr. Kmiack, who was a pastor at Pilgrim church or he had a dentistry I can't recollect, but we got together with the McCafferty who ran the Merrick house and we got together with a fellow by the name of Rough from the Lincoln Bath House and then there was a project too that they built down at the bottom of the hill closer to the steel mill and we tried to form a Tremont Growth Association so that we could coordinate everything that was going on and know what the kids were up to. Pilgrim church also had a once a week or once a month community center in their basement to try to bring the kids that didn't enjoy certain activities so they went there for dancing and things like that. But that growth association grew into what I think is now the Tremont Association and that is located I think on West Tenth Street.

JC: I want to touch a little more on school. What subjects did they--? Were there certain things that boys should take and girls should take? We've gotten the idea that some of the girls were just to take the short hand and typewriting, that was further back. I don't know what kind of classes were offered.

GC: You have got to remember that this was elementary school now and short hand was not something till high school and typewriting was something that you could get at Lincoln Junior High School. But typewriting is not like it is now where they have got computers and stuff, from the third grade on, or the second grade on. Now they have computers all over the place at Tremont now. It was a standard elementary school where teachers would teach either the third grade boys and girls mixed together and at that time when I taught physical education they would split the classes, the girls would come down and then the boys would come down a period later. So it was not geared for classes to be for the girls or classes to be for the boys. It was either mixed except for physical education.

JC: Was there ever any trouble between the children; was it hard for any of the children to filter into the schools because of language barriers or anything like that?

GC: They used to have English as a second language for the Puerto Rican children. Not so much for the Polish children or the Ukrainian children or the Russian children because they had St. Theodosius, one of the largest Russian churches and it's a beautiful church, they had English classes that they had there too. So they if they could only speak Russian, or broken Russian, or broken English, they were taught smooth it out at the Russian church. The Ukraine probably had the same thing I know the Polish did. They had their own paper that came out in the community it was produced and they had reporters and everything else for the Polish newspaper right there in that area. As a matter of fact, St. John Cantius is a Polish church, so there was a good many that lived in the area that were from Poland. The University Inn, I don't know if you are familiar with the area. Have you visited the area?

JC: I have not gone down there; I've seen maps of the churches.

GC: You have to go see it, and if you are interested in seeing it I'll take you for a tour there when you have got time. I know that you are working two or three jobs and I know that it is very difficult to be able to hear somebody that has been involved for almost fifty years telling you what had taken place back there, back then, when you haven't even seen the development since that point or even seen the inside of that school, which they wanted to close by the way. They wanted to close it last year, the Cleveland board of education wanted to close it after they put in a million dollars of windows and everything else so they wanted to close it and there was a big uprising from students that had attended there and from the teachers. To close the school--. It's really a historical place and well kept, well kept. And putting that much money into it and then to want to close it.

JC: When you did your community center activities, did a lot of what you did focused in Lincoln Park?

GC: No.

JC: Just in the community center or did you take the kids to the park at all?

GC: Well I was the director so I had--.

JC: So you had people working under you?

GC: Yes. So if they wanted to take the kids to Lincoln Park--. Well you have to remember the swimming pools did not open till school closed. So it would be useless for us to take them for swimming there. We did have some occasions where we had a worker that would take them to play softball there. They would do that. Or take them for a walk, a nature walk in Lincoln Park. As you know, Lincoln Park now and in the entire area is now, has changed, it is almost like an art village, it's beautiful. People have come into the area now that are talented in art and sell their art paintings and whatever they did in the Lincoln Park area.

JC: Can you explain reaction that you got, or had heard from people, about the Inner Belt Project? How did that affect the area?

GC: Now you are talking about seventy-one? Well seventy-one--. That is why you almost have to come and see the area, go there and see the area. It brought a lot of people through the church at West Tenth or Fourteenth, West Fourteenth was known as the street of churches. So now when you take seventy-one it goes right off of Fourteenth or you can go downtown. So that brought a lot of traffic through there and it brought a lot of people that left the area and that attended churches. Pilgrim church, there is about two or three Catholic churches there, Methodist church. But that whole street was loaded with churches and people that had lived in the Tremont area attended those churches and after they made a few bucks and decided to move out to the suburbs, the churches attendance declined. What happened when that road came in, it brought the people, not all of them, but a lot of the people back into the community like St. Theodosius and Pilgrim Church which is a beautiful church by the way. And they have a beautiful organ and another church across the street that also has a beautiful organ. That street did bring the people back. There is an old story about a restaurant there called University Inn and Sokolowski's, there is a Polish family there. Have you been there?

JC: I have not but I was going to interview Bernie Sokolowski.

GC: Well when you want to do that let me take you there. Because Bernie Sokolowski was this big when I first went there, I have been going there for almost forty years. I know since I was teaching I have been going there. But the Sokolowski's the mother and the father, Bernie's mom and dad, Bernie's father his father--. It was really a bar at first and when Mrs. Sokolowski's father died he took over, Bernie's father, the bar and he married Marion. And Marion and the two of them took care of the bar and she served soup and just little meals that people wanted to eat. And then they got the idea then, when they built that bridge that went across and tied seventy-one downtown. The workers didn't have a place to eat so the father built a part where you could go through the restaurant; it was kind of like cafeteria style. He had all kinds of food there, Polish food and that's how the restaurant got started. Because of that road going through. That is where she got the idea. As a matter of fact, she was talking to me years back and said the food in () didn't go from that restaurant they were going to open up a funeral home. So there was a big difference from opening up a funeral home to opening up a cafeteria-style restaurant, which is almost seventy-five years old now. Bernie Sokolowski and his brother and his sister, they all work there, and their kids. So that's a beautiful place to eat. They are open Fridays and Saturdays now and it's worth it.

JC: I think that it is interesting that you touched on some positives because we have been getting mostly negatives from people about it.

GC: Negative?

JC: Yes, because, about the Inner Belt, especially from the older crowd. I interviewed someone who was over eighty and she was torn up about it because she said that it broke up the neighborhood. A lot of people had to leave.

GC: Leave?

JC: Because their houses were taken.

GC: Oh yes, there was a lot of houses--. You see I could give you negative points. They used to have an asphalt place that was right across the street from Bernie Sokolowski's place and it was down by the river that caused a lot of pollution. Air pollution, you would smell it there. Well Bernie and his brother were very active in getting that place removed from there and saving a lot of the pollution that was in that area and as a result there was a lot of positive things that happened because you had a development then of some apartments and buildings that are down there now and very exclusive. So that is a positive angle. And then there was a bridge, the Abbey Road bridge, it was about a year and a half maybe two years that that bridge was down. That didn't help because a lot of people couldn't go across from West Fourteenth to cross the bridge to go to the market and to get to West Twenty-Fifth so there were problems there.

JC: How did people end up getting to the market because of that?

GC: They would have to go to twenty-fifth street and they would take Clark Avenue to West Twenty-Fifth, turn right on West Twenty-Fifth and you hit the market. But that was a round about way of getting there. Or they could have gone over to, I don't know if that's--. They could have gone that way too, but there is a couple of streets where the church is that you could go and probably hit past where the bridge was taken down. I'm trying figure is that was--, maybe sixteenth. West sixteenth I think it was that you could have done that and gone across--.

JC: Why did people--? Why do you think most of the people started leaving? Was it just because of money or do you think that they left for other reasons?

GC: Well they () to the suburbs for two fold reasons. Money was one, they were making a halfway decent salary and the second was bussing. I'm sure that you wanted to hear that [laughter.] A fellow by the name of () felt it was very important at that particular point in time to bus children from the east side to the west side and the west side to the east side. Which as everybody knows was a disaster that started in Boston and became a disaster. A multibillion dollar disaster that cost tax payers and a lot of the people who had been very happy to live in the area to move to the suburbs whether they could afford it or not. And when they moved to the suburbs, now that mom and dad--. Dad was just working mom was home with the kids and now both work in the suburbs so you got the latchkey kids that came into suburbs. This caused a lot of the people that lived in the area that were secure in the area to move. And those that stuck it out are still there.

JC: When they built that project, we've heard a little bit about the project, how did that change everything? Did that make more housing for people you know needed help or did it bring in sort of a new crowd of people? I'm not too familiar with it but I know that Bob Leech lived in the projects.

GC: Yes he did.

JC: He told me that it was fun because there was lots of kids around for him to play with, but he said that it was hard.

GC: It was difficult times because it brought in a mixture of people that probably never, those people that were living there from the very beginning never had that experience before because now a lot of the black people moved in from the east side and I can remember one in particular, the first one that moved into the project. The Avery family, a beautiful family. Two brothers and one of them graduated from Baldwin Wallace, a great athlete for Lincoln- -Lincoln High School. And he was brought into the community and he was an asset for the project and as a result there were others that moved into the area and mixed with the white kids but there--. They started to have problems, race problems that caused a lot of turmoil in the area that was more or less alleviated later on.

JC: How was it when Carl Stokes, when he was elected to office, do you think it helped the community at all? Was there any changes made by him? Was there a big uproar because I know that it is quite ethnic down there and usually it's different? I mean obviously that was an absolute ground breaking decision.

GC: I don't know that the Carl Stokes era brought the projects or the change in the projects because he took over Ralph Loker who was the mayor before that and Carl started a lot of good things. His intentions were good. I happened to have been one of the campaign managers for Ralph Loker, so you will see that in the pictures. But when Carl Stokes took office, I don't know that that had too much influence as far as moving people around, ethnic people hear or there. Or whether the bussing had anything to do with him. It came from Boston and it was the thing to do and it took a judge to persist to do these things. As a matter of fact, at that point in time I was a councilman taking a course at Cleveland State. The campaign manager, one of the campaign managers for Carl Stokes and he was my instructor. He was very, I don't know if he is alive yet, but is very intelligent person and I know that if Carl Stokes had people working for him like that he was on the right track. How he got off the track later on I don't know. That is neither hear nor there. But to answer your question whether or not he had an influence down at the projects, to my knowledge as an instructor down there, a teacher and a recreation director, I don't think so.

JC: Why do you--? This is kind of an open-ended question. Why do you think, this community seems so tightly knit, why do you think that is?

GC: Now or before?

JC: Before. Even now. It's kind of like their own little--.

GC: Well years back they were tightly knit because they were mostly poor. Now a good many of them that stayed are now financially stable because their houses are now paid for. They are well on their way to retirement themselves or close to it. They have security. Now the opposite has happened. All of these people are moving in. Two hundred fifty thousand dollar apartments and condos and houses and their kind of living is the opposite of being poor. But they are classed together now because they are rich, they have got money, just like in Ohio City. When they first started Ohio City those who want to experiment a little but living close to the big

city, they move from their houses in the suburbs to a house in Ohio City and pay a half way decent amount of money to renovate a house that may have been a hundred years old. But they just wanted to do that because they had the money to do it. If you wanted to bring classes together, the class now is they have money. In my era teaching down there didn't have money you ran into kids like this (referring to a picture.)

BREAK IN INTERVIEW (looking at pictures)

GC: There was a march of dimes we had and we had--. There is mayor Loker and there is a couple of councilman they used to come and watch. Then there is the two Santa Clauses dancing with one of our dancing teachers.

JC: How many kids would you get involved in this talent show?

GC: As many wanted to.

JC: So you would have a ton of kids sometimes?

GC: Oh sure, we took as many as they wanted. Violins and everything, we had our special shows where--. That was a group I taught called the Tremont Highland Flingers. They used Highland Fling at football games.

JC: Another question that I want to touch on that Bob Leech was really adamant about talking about was why the name was changed from the South Side to Tremont? He said that they used to call it the South Side--.

GC: It is still referred to as the South Side. Why it was called the South Side I'll never know because it's not a south side. But if it is a south side, it was called a south side of Tremont. Because Tremont extends quite a ways but yeah it is still called South Side. Bernie Sokolowski has a song. He writes songs and songs that concern South Side.

JC: Did you know anything about the South Side boys? Bob Leech talked about the South Side boys and said that they were a gang of kids that would go around and cause trouble? I was just wondering if you could elaborate on that because I just thought it was--. I don't know.

GC: There are a lot of the students that I had in school that are still now in Lancaster serving time, a lifetime. But they came to the community center and I was able to control them. There weren't the drugs that you now know. They would smell (). You don't know what () is. () is a paint derivative and they put it in a plastic bag and they would put it over their head and sniff it till they came high and their brains would scramble. They would do that. As a result of that one of them--. At Lincoln Park a lot of that stuff took place, nasty stuff. You know like shooting a guy through the cheek and saying Merry Christmas for a quarter.

JC: So they really were a serious problem then.

GC: If you are talking about serious problems, you got serious problems now. But the difference was you didn't have the publicity of violence as you do now. I mean violence took place but it wasn't blown up to the point where someone couldn't take care of it in a hurry. Yeah we had kids were violent, but they were frightened if you knew how to handle them. But a lot of them are in jail now, but not as many as the beautiful kids that came out that. I mean when you count the number in twenty-four years that I had in school and in the community center and in teaching there is no comparison to the number that is still in jail. But the ones that are in jail are serving because of violence and killing.

JC: But mostly I mean all of the kids were probably great kids.

GC: They pulled themselves up despite the hardships that they endured as a kid. I had special events where I had an Olympic star come in, a gymnast.

JC: We have about fifteen minutes. Is there anything else about the community center that you wanted to share because it will be posted? Actually talk about sports for me. How big were sports around there? Did lots of kids enjoy sports?

GC: I ran the basketball program there and--.

BREAK IN INTERVIEW (looking at pictures)

GC: Now with the community, and everyone of them (kids in the pictures) came to the community center and this was their haven and this was their home away from home and they didn't have to worry about it--.

END OF SIDE A

GC: It was a home away from home and it was a place where they could relax and feel free to do what they wanted to do under the rules of the community center.

JC: Was Lincoln High School pretty good at sports? I want to touch a little on sports. How were they as far as the city? Did they win a lot of city championships when you were around? And did they take a lot of pride?

GC: That one kid that you got there, Pitch (referring to a picture) and (), those two, there was a lot of--. Yeah if you wanted to say whether they were a competitive school, yes they were a competitive school. When I started in nineteen fifty-five and we had the program in basketball for--. There was no girl's basketball at the time, but there was a lot of sports for the boys. I think that Bob ran track, I'm not sure what else he did. Maybe a quarter of the kids that were in the boy's gym class tried out and made the team over at Lincoln, junior high school and Lincoln High School. There were three schools that fed into Lincoln High School. I don't know if you are aware that it is no longer Lincoln High School, it is called Lincoln West and it's a larger school. Lincoln High School was not a large school at that time. And they had a small gym but there were a lot of good athletes that came out of it sports wise.

JC: Do you feel like a lot of people took pride--?

GC: I will say one thing that Lincoln to this day has a, it is called Lincoln Sports Alumni Group, they meet once every two years and it's all the athletes that went to Lincoln. And they meet over here at St. Michael's, they have an area there where they cater food and they all get together. There is about five hundred people that go there, all athletes so they still stick together. They invite me every so often so I go.

JC: Every so often?

GC: Well you know I go once a year or whatever once every other year maybe.

JC: Well it seems like a lot of people took a lot of pride in this community especially with the community centers, even to this day.

GC: They have a lot of memories of it. (Looking at pictures) You're saying about pride in the community. Yeah back then there was a lot of pride in the community and they () why there is pride in the community because they all had the same--.

JC: Background. Well is there anything else you want to add or I think that we can just about wrap it up?

GC: Well unless you want to know more about the school, well you know about the school. One of the things that they did back then in the school when the sixth graders graduated, which I thought was unique, all of the, the entire school would line the hall, the first floor hall just before the auditorium, and they would all line the entire length of that hall along with the teachers and the custodian and everybody else and the sixth grade students, the graduates would go through that line and it would go on the inside of that aisle and everyone would be applauding them from the kindergarten all the way to the fifth grade along with the teachers. Until they got to the auditorium and they all sat down. A lot of them remember that. I went to one reunion and they remember that quite a bit. There is a lot of very successful people. (Looking at pictures.)

JC: Did they do anything special for like high school graduation? Did they just hold that at the high school or did--?

GC: You mean proms?

JC: Proms or you know commencement?

GC: I'm trying to think, they probably went some place for their commencement exercises. I have never gone to one so I wouldn't know. But would know if he went to a commencement exercise. You know all those things cost money.

JC: Did they have to wear uniforms to school?

GC: Yes--. No, for the Highland Fling they did. And the Highland Fling costume was made by volunteer parents.

JC: Wow. But they didn't have to wear uniforms or anything like that?

GC: No, no uniforms. They dressed casually the way you see them there is the way they dressed when they went to school. Some say that graduation is really promotion they call it.

JC: Well I want to thank you very much for doing this interview with me.

GC: No problem. But you really ought to Joy, you really ought to get to the community. There is a number of places that I could direct you to or take you to if you want I can do that at your convenience. And () is one of them, it's a bar but there is a lot of history because that () has been there for years, years. It is right on the corner by Tremont. That's one thing that probably don't even know that that whole area was designated at one time to be a college area.

JC: I did know that actually, I did.

GC: Literary, College, that was the names of the streets in a triangle right by St. John Cantius Church.

JC: Wasn't that because Rockefeller was going to come in and--?

GC: And there was another, this is an interesting story too. Attached to Tremont School for a number of years was a home, I don't remember the exact name of the home, but it was a home for children whose parents were in the process of getting a divorce. And they would house the kids there. There was bedrooms and you know cots and stuff and they would feed them and then they would go to school at Tremont School because it was attached to the school. And I can remember this one particular case where I had the kids in the community center and also in the gym and there was a brother and sister and apparently their mother and father were in the process of getting a divorce and they weren't going to award the kids to either one at that time. So they moved them into this house, the home next door. And the corridor, you could see where the kids play outside, like a playground where they could get out and exercise for the kids that lived in the home. Well it was the day before that these, this brother and sister weren't in school, my gym class. The brother was a sixth grader and the sister was about a fourth grader or a third grader and the day before and I'm looking out the window and it was sort of raining outside, it was drizzling. And here's this brother and sister who were shipped to this home and the brother has got his arm around the sister because the sister is crying and he's protecting her. And I'm looking out the window and I'm knocking saying what are you doing there and they came up to me and said that their mother and father were getting a divorce and they didn't know who they were going to go with. There were so many cases of that at that home through that window that I had the opportunity to see that sadness you know in the kids. Kids, one-day happiness and the next day (). At that time.

JC: A lot of broken homes then at time?

GC: Yes.

JC: Ok, well.

GC: You got enough?

JC: I believe I do have enough, but I want to thank you very much. The pictures were great pictures.

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