Tremont Oral History Project
Leech21032003

Interview with Bob Leech
Interviewed by Joy Campbell
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8:20am, Seven Hills, OH

Joy Campbell: It’s March twenty-first, the first day of spring, and it’s eight twenty in the morning, and I’m interviewing Bob Leech. Ok.

Bob Leech: Ok.

JC: The first thing that I need you to do is say your name and spell it for me please.

BL: Bob Leech, I go by, it’s Robert J. Leech. That’s L-E-E-C-H.

JC: What are some of your early childhood memories? And you can get into whatever you want.

BL: There’s a whole lot of things. I lived in the projects from fifty-one, south side, let’s go into that in a second. The south side from fifty-one until I got married in sixty-five. So I went all the way through school, Tremont to Lincoln. We lived there thirteen years and it was—we were poor but everybody was poor and it was a time when it wasn’t fashionable to be poor. Now there is a whole lot of social programs and those things that weren’t available when I was growing up, which is great for the people now, but at the time everybody was poor, so it really didn’t matter. South side was interesting in a lot of ways, again south side, it was almost, it’s a term that I think the PD came up with I believe, this Tremont. Most people who lived there never considered them Tremont area, it was the south side of Cleveland and they were very proud of it. There was a, of course, a bad element in the area, and they were South Side Boys or South-siders. Of course those guys robbed the stores, and stole the cars, and it was quite—. Most of the guys, I would say in the fifties who lived right there, West Fifth Street or the project area, actually east of West Fourteenth Street, didn’t turn out real well. At Lincoln when I started in the seventh grade, there were I think over nine hundred kids and we graduated with two-sixteen. That’s a lot of people who fell by the wayside for various reasons. A lot of guys went to work; culture didn’t stress education, as you well know. So out of the two hundred and some that graduated from Lincoln, very few of that number went to college, which is kind of bummer really, if you think about it. Of course, it was the Vietnam era too so a lot of guys were drafted right away. I got drafted but I had joined the Naval Reserve and later switched to National Guard so I was very fortunate in that respect. A lot of guys didn’t come home, which was really sad. But it was kind of sad in that respect that the guys who didn’t go away, seemed like the poor are always caring the war, which is another step we could get into for hours I suppose. It was fun growing up in the projects because there was lots of things to do, there were a lot of kids to play with. I wanted to bring up that plaque by the way can I do that? There is a plaque behind me, we are being recorded here it’s kind of funny. George Chandick and myself, George Chandick was a schoolteacher at Tremont for, I believe, something like thirty-two years. Anyhow, he got me into sports. I was a very shy kid, which is kind of unusual because I later became a councilman, but he got me into sports and I’m still into sports, I still play two hard ball teams. He was instrumental with a lot of kids lives, he took a personal interest in them, and I guess he wanted to steer us right basically. He wanted to keep us in school, so all the way through school he would keep in touch with us. He also ran a community center, which was really great. That was after school, and I think at that time Tremont School, I have it written here somewhere, I think Tremont was the largest grade
school in the state. In nineteen fifty-five, I wrote it down, there were eight hundred and forty six kids enrolled at Lincoln or at Tremont. And of course Cantius was only a couple blocks away so we had that there school too so there were a lot of kids. He ran a community center Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, which got me into basketball, which I’m a professional referee now. I also play two hard ball teams but, it was a lot of fun as far as the recreation center because it kept kids busy and off the street.

We were latch key kids before it was a term, latchkey. I came home from lunch with a key around my neck from the third grade on and I opened the door, made a can of soup, and went back to school. And after school, of course, you came home and went to the rec center--. To the Tremont Community Center actually. But that was before they had school lunches and all of those good things. Now it is fashionable to be poor, we would have had a lot more benefits had we lived there now. And also college would have been the same thing, there would have been a lot more scholarships for us. I later went to Cleveland State and CSU, I did not graduate, I got into sales with the Plain Dealer, I did pretty well.

George also, I’m going to go back to George Chandick. He and I met again after I moved to Seven Hills and he and I got elected in nineteen, January first nineteen eighty to city council which was kinda neat. And that plaque talks about pupil and teacher, which is kinda cool. I have been councilman for twenty-one years, which is a record in our city. No has ever had more than seventeen years, so it’s kinda cool. Anyhow the projects were really fun, I mean we talk about sports and George or course got me into that, but back in those days Clark field was a dump, it wasn’t, it wasn’t like it is now. They redid the whole place in the late fifties, but they had two ball diamonds, but it was a great place to play and you had hundreds of kids. We had a club when I was a little kid, we had a club that was kinda select, because one of the things we did was, of course the Clark Avenue bridge was there, and underneath was a cat walk, which was merely two twelve inch by two inch pieces of wood that kinda supported a person for a while I guess and all the pipes, not the gas lines but the electrical lines and stuff like that went across the bridge to Pershing, or course the near side. And one of the main features that we had to have as far getting into the club was to walk on that catwalk all the way across the bridge. Which, my son and I went there, this was when they tore it down back in the seventies, and we walked on top of the bridge and we talked about, you know that we had done this underneath the bridge, and especially when you get around the area over by the Cuyahoga River, you’re about one hundred and twenty feet off the ground. As little kids you don’t fear like you do when you get older. But there were only four us in the club and thank God that none of us got hurt, but it was kinda a stupid thing. You do things when young. That area by the way, it’s kinda important, that area didn’t have many men around, so there wasn’t much of that kind of influence on us. So during the day, we were really on our own, I mean really on our own. Of course the early fifties, the Korean War was going on, and right down there, there is two huge buildings that made tanks, which is kind of interesting. They are still there now; I don’t know what they are used for. I think they are just warehouses, but it was kind of cool because they loaded the tanks up on the railroad and sent them off to the war of course. So we played army, that was big time, you know, we played guns and army. And there was a sand quarry there, right next to the Clark bridge and of course, we went to the Army Navy Store down on (), and we bought the helmet, the belt with the ammo pouch, and the guns we had of course, Roy Rogers was big time at that time, you know. But it was kind of fun, you know. And that was growing up. The other end of Clark field, there is a ball diamond now, was, of course, almost a swamp. But that was interesting too because there was a lot of vines and stuff down there and of course everybody played in it. But, growing up down there was unusual, there were two kinds of people, the takers and the hard working people. A lot of people just knew where to get the free clothing, or the free handout and food, and stuff like that. My mother was kind of a proud person so we didn’t do that. Sometimes I resented it but later it was probably the best because I knew that if you wanted to do anything, you got to do it yourself. And I think that kind of attitude, with all of the different nationalities of the area made us harder workers. In that area, you can look it up, I believe there are more churches in that one square mile than anywhere in the world. Not just this country, in the world. Because when the immigrants came over, they all built the church of course, it was very
important the community grew around the church. The projects themselves were built on land that St.
Theodosius had owned. And they owned all the houses going down that hill there, I have a map
someplace that shows that. West Fourteenth Street, of course before that time, you were talking about
this lady born in the twenties, West Fourteenth Street or course was really more fashionable than Euclid
Avenue at one time. And all those big old houses became two and three and sometimes four families.
But that was a very, very fashionable area. The nationalities, I think at one time there were one hundred
and fourteen of us who were either first of second generation European or some other country. We did
represent, pretty much the world. I don’t know where you want to go with this.

JC: Well that leads me to my third question, when did your parents move to Tremont and why did
they move?

BL: Parents is not a word that you use in Tremont, South Side. There weren’t many parents. I mean
you had, again going back to what I said earlier, it was a matriarch society and the fact that most of the
women who were there were either the husband left them for various reasons, there were a lot of people
who were widows in war, for instance World War Two. So if there was a man around, he was usually a
drunk and I’m not talking about just living in the projects, the South Side in general. Men were
something that were unusual and having a father was almost a detriment rather than something that was
good. Learning to be a father, I was afraid to be a father later on, we got married kinda early, but it was
five years before we had my first son Mickey, and after I had him for four years, I thought this was
pretty neat so we had two more. But there weren’t a whole lot of married people. But we moved in, in
fifty-one my mother had lost her home in Florida, that was before air conditioning, she was down in St.
Petersburg. She had a house where my dad had taken off when I was just about six months old. So I
going down and living in the projects, which was really a housing development was a very poor area. The
rest is history.

JC: Do you want to tell me the name of the projects where you lived because we discussed--?

BL: Yeah, Valley View Homes it was called.

JC: Ok.

BL: Built in thirty-nine, there is like half of it still there now. But of course, our place is gone.
Going back to work, that is important because there was a lot of Ukrainians and Polish people and they
were really hard working people. A lot of people worked in the mills of course. And it was merely just
walk down, they didn’t have cars. Cars wasn’t a luxury, we didn’t have a car until I was ten years old.
And we didn’t have a telephone until I was fourteen, which is kinda strange. But if you wanted anything
you knew that you had to go out and get it. From the time I was eight years old I started shoe shining on
West Twenty Fifth Street, which is kind of fun. And I was a shy boy; this is kind of unusual for me to
say that because I became a public speaker in a lot of different areas. So I would go from bar to bar
asking guys would you like a shoeshine for fifteen cents. That was a pretty good price back then. I
worked mostly all day on Saturday, Friday nights of course and then Saturday nights. On a good day
you would make five, six dollars, which was big time. So I bought all my own clothes. Usually you had
a pair of pants that lasted all the way from September till you got out of school in May, and it was up
around your kneecaps by the time you got out of school. From there I went to work at the Westside market and a lot of people did and I had various jobs. I remember one, I worked for a meat company and you had to go down to the lockers which was like thirty below and the doors were so heavy you had to wait for someone to come down and open the door because there was no way a ten year old could open the door. The worst job I had was I got two cents for a small basket and five cents for a large basket. People on the outside would take their garbage basically and just throw it over their head and there would be a huge mound all the way down the alley and also out on Lorain Avenue and I would go through that garbage for those baskets which I wouldn’t do on a bet now, but anyhow. So you learn how to work and I had newspaper routes all thr--. I had the Cleveland news route, The Cleveland Press at the same time, which was a lot more customers, The Press.

JC: How about your neighbors, could you describe what your relationship was with your neighbors and did you work with any of them? Were there younger kids that lived around you?

BL: Yeah, the projects of course were overrun by a kid, that’s what was so neat about it. You know if you wanted to get a ball game together it was really easy, I just walked around and in half and hour you would have ten, fifteen people. Then we would first start playing ball over across the street, we would play rubber ball when I was like eight. And of course the homerun fence was the fence right there, if you hit a homerun a lot of times you would break a window, that’s ok. There were kids in almost apartment there were very few dingle people, I mean that was not designed for, it was mostly families. Everybody had two or three kids. That’s why it was so neat I think. Everybody was poor and there was no status. You didn’t know better. Not having a car was just something that most people didn’t--. Very few people had cars. That was a real luxury.

JC: I know you said you guys got ball games together, but where did you mostly play like right out in the middle of the street or--?

BL: There was that empty lot across the street on West Seventh. Of course it is not there now. It was a cinder lot. I mean cinder lot; it was basically a parking lot. And then the outfielder had to play on the sidewalk going down hill; it was kind of neat so if a car came a lot of times it hit the car, that was a foul ball actually. It was a little different. Then we moved down to, down the hill. There was one diamond by the railroad tracks and then we started playing a lot of years there. And then later on as we got older Fisher Foods had a good program that they sponsored at, Tr--. Here we go, in the South Side there at Tremont field as you call it. It was Clark Field back then and they had a guy from the city of course be the umpire and pitcher, it was kind of fun. And then I got into sports, as a matter of fact, sports probably saved my life. There was a couple of friends of mine, Jackie Brooks and another girl and I just can’t remember her name all of a sudden. There was factories around the area too. And off Houston Avenue there was a, behind the houses right at the beginning of the projects, there was a big company a () company and I was supposed to be with them the day that Jackie and --. They were playing on that and they took a broom and they lit the end of it and they threw it in the tank and of course they found their body parts all over the neighborhood. I mean it was--. Exploded of course, and it was two days before we graduated from sixth grade so that would be about nineteen fifty-seven. And he was one of my best friends of course. We all went to school the next day and of course they let us go home because everybody was crying. But that was a little tough. That was probably the most traumatic thing that happened as a kid. I saw his eyeball actually hanging on a fence, which was pretty sick. I went out for a baseball team, which I made that day, so baseball saved my life. Bicycles were a luxury too, which was kind of funny. Most people didn’t have a bicycle, if you did, you went up to Kenny’s on Twenty-fifth Street and he had used bicycles of course and he kept it in repair and kept it going for us. A lot of years it took me shoe shining and doing papers to buy that. Talking about down there off the projects there
was a ball diamond, but we used to hop trains there. It was a big switching yard and roundhouse that went underneath Clark Bridge and we used to go down there and hop trains. We would ride the train when they would be switching and you would stay on it until it went all the way down and then it would hit the other ones and hook up with them and you were, also this was the club, you were brave of course if you would stay on because the impact was just bam, bam, bam, bam. A little crazy again but as kids you do stupid things.

JC: Where did you go to church? Or did you not go to church?

BL: Well I did. I was very, very fortunate to--. A group of people from Saint Mathews Lutheran on Scranton started a mission back there in nineteen fifty-five and I later married the ministers daughter which was a queer move on my part [laughter.] They would bus us up to their church and that was really kind of a lot of fun. Most people in that area were Catholic, the nationalities people, the Ukrainians and that sort of thing. That was pretty successful and they started the mission down there, right there at Starkweather and Professor came together. And that was very, very successful, they had over one hundred and twenty kids there all the way through the fifties and well into the sixties after I moved out of there. There was a lot of us in that area were confirmed in the church and of course we got into a social group called the () League. I think out of that group probably nine couples got married which I kind of neat, including my brother. He married a South Side girl from down there.

JC: Did you also go to church with your neighbors; was it a big thing where everyone in the projects was like you?

BL: No, they filled two buses but it mostly people right from the () homes who went to it. Of course a lot of people didn’t go to church. It seemed religion was more important outside of the projects than it was in. I think most of the people in the projects to tell you the truth were atheists. You know, if they did go to church they didn’t attend very regularly. That’s an interesting question.

JC: What were, getting into more of your teenage years, where did you go on dates as a teenager?

BL: Oh, that’s interesting. Merrick house, settlement house, right there on West Fourteenth Street, had a big influence on a lot of us. They did have a day care camp during the summer where they would take us to different places which was kind of fun. But it was only for a few hours and it was only for a couple weeks. We played a lot of basketball there too. As we got older I would take girls actually on the bus. I remember going to the Ice Capades when I was about twelve. I was always a lover [laughter.] I had a steady girlfriend from the time I was about eleven years old on. As I got into high school, maybe I was a little foolish in one respect but I wanted to get out of there. I knew I was poor and I really didn’t care for it. It’s a long way from South Side to Seven Hills, believe me not just miles either. So I didn’t want to date many girls from Lincoln because I really didn’t want to end up in that thing where, you know, the--. You know what happened, a lot of guys got the girl pregnant and they had to quit school and they had kids and three dogs and, you know, that’s a life style that I didn’t want. So I tried to date girls from outside school when I got into high school, like ninth and tenth grade. No one had cars, if someone had a car we double dated or something like that. Going to the show, the Garden Theatre, the Southern Theatre up on Twenty Fifth and Clark there that was big time. And I was so poor as a kid. As a little kid I used to--. I would tell a girl hey, let’s go to the movies Saturday, I’ll meet you inside. I was a knaver already by that time I guess. So it would save twenty-five cents, it was a quarter then. And twenty-five cents was big time. But I would buy her a box of candy or something. That was a nickel back in that day. So I wasn’t a complete cheap skate [laughter.] But it was fun. And then in those days though too, you had the trolley still going down Twenty-fifth, which was really cool. I would walk to
the Garden from there, of course we walked to Lincoln, and that’s a couple of miles. Later on when I would make a little more money we used to walk downtown also, I’ll get to that later. It would be really big time to take the bus downtown and to the trolley and go across the high level bridge of course and look down at the river. That was highlife that was big time. And then of course my mother was kind of cool, she went to the zoo all the time, they had a beautiful swimming pool a big round pool and I learned how to swim there actually. Of course it was free then and that was very, very nice. That was a big outing for a Sunday. I also started selling programs at the stadium. In nineteen fifty-six I started selling programs at the stadium. I still sell programs at the stadium now. I don’t do it for the money anymore, I do it because I have been there for so many years, it’s like part of me. And I also, I made a lot of money over the years; I used to make two, three hundred dollars a game. But back in the fifties and sixties you made three, four, five, six eight dollars, but you were also done selling at the end of the first quarter. So you would find a seat and watch the rest of the game, which was really cool. And I did baseball of course, so I have a room in fact of just memorabilia that I got from the stadium. I worked there for all of those years and I later worked in the clubhouse, the visiting clubhouse. And I have a lot of bats and Mickey Mantle actually gave me a bat one time. It was before it opened and he wanted me to cut his sleeves and my oldest son, his name is Mickey by the way, so you see where my love is at. So I have a batting cage in the back yard that I still use. That bat I still have of course, but he was my idol and I couldn’t believe it, I was shaking like crazy, I thought I was going to cut his arm off or something or other. That was really cool you know. And a lot of us worked at the stadium, some of the older guys sold programs and they got us interested and I didn’t even know how to count change you know when I first started down there. I was just a little peewee kid. But that was great and it was a good influence on me and it brought me out of my shyness. I was a terribly shy kid. But to be able to sell programs you had to be a little bit forward.

JC: Did you ever go to Lincoln Park? What were your memories of Lincoln Park? Did you guys go there a lot? And were the bathhouses still there?

BL: Yeah. Well the bathhouse was kind of a cool thing and of course I guess it started because a lot of the houses at the turn of the century didn’t have plumbing. That was there and where people took the showers. Females and males, there were two sections of course. Bathhouse wasn’t quite as popular as Merrick House. Merrick House had a beautiful indoor gym and I went there, but we would usually go there on a Sunday. As a matter of fact, my brother and I used to go up there and we would take a shovel and shoveled the snow just to shoot baskets. I still referee basketball now, by the way. And that goes back to Chandick; you know I said earlier, so he did have an influence. Lincoln Park was cool. When I did--. When I was able to buy my first bike that was great place to ride because it was a pretty good size. And they had sidewalks, there was a big X through the middle and there was a little spray pool in the middle there. It was really kind of fun and--. My mother would go up there too and she would take her () and read and we would just fly a kite or something like that. Then they put in the swimming pool about nineteen fifty five and of course that was pretty big time, actually having a swimming pool, I mean that was a lot of fun. So we did that and then we used to take our bikes up there after school or in the summer after we ate dinner. It was really a lot of fun.

JC: I’m kind of jumping around here but what are some of you memories during World War II or during Vietnam?

BL: I was born at the end of World War II, nineteen forty-five. You know what is funny about World War Two; there were a lot of veterans that had lost legs and that sort of thing because they seemed to be everywhere. And it was great growing up because they would tell you stories about it and of course in the early fifties, of course we would, with the conflict in Korea, the Korean War and that is
how we got into buying all of that stuff and playing army. Kids don’t do that now, you know they don’t play guns and stuff. There were a lot of, of course on TV, there were a lot of programs with Roy Rogers of course and Three Musketeers and a whole lot of things. So playing guns was big time and playing army of course too. The veterans were fun because they all had tattoos and they all told great stories. Boy could they drink though too which was also kind of fun [laughter.]

JC: How about when the Inner Belt project cam through? What were everybody’s thoughts about that?

BL: Well when the Inner Belt came through I took a movie of it actually. They knocked the projects down, the section that I lived in and also Houston and below. I have that movie yet, but I had been out of there a few years already and the area was changing too when I first started living there it was almost one hundred percent white. And by the time I graduated from Lincoln in sixty-four there were some black families in the area. About the time they knocked it down, I think that it was sixty-nine, I’m not quite sure when it was, it had changed over to that. And quite honestly the projects were more of a transitional place; you didn’t live there your whole life, although I was there quite a long time actually, thirteen years. Most of the people lived there five or six years and they would move out to you know West Thirty Second Street or someplace there off of Denison or Detroit rather. A lot of people that I grew up with of course moved out or got married and started their own lives. There are a lot of them there still now, but I was really sad because they of course tore that down and I thought of all the fun as kids that we had growing up. And it was a good culture because there were so many influences on you and so many people that you got to know and you worked with all kinds of groups and it was just fun, it was just really fun. I don’t think that we realized we were poor, we just made the best of it.

JC: What was the South Side like when Carl Stokes was elected mayor of Cleveland? What were some of the thoughts, or how did people feel?

BL: “Let’s do Cleveland Proud,” remember, that was his slogan. Actually I got a little bit on his campaign, I passed out literature for him when he did run for mayor. You got to remember that the south side was very, very ethnic and the people were quite honestly very prejudice and not going to make any bones about it. I don’t think, you know you had different pockets of course but I don’t think a lot of people were into the movement and such and the civil rights thing. I think that was very slow coming, the N work was very big of course--.

END OF SIDE A; BEGINNING OF SIDE B

BL: Make sure you mention the paper rags guy; he was still around when we were kids, the paper rage guy. As a matter of fact there was a book about him later on. The guy who went around buying rags and paper and stuff like that, it was kind of fun. He had the () old horse you had ever seen in your whole life. He was kind of a fun guy.

JC: You could talk about him more right now if you want.

BL: The paper rags guy?

JC: Yeah.

BL: All right. He would come around and of course he was kind of a fun guy like he was a real old guy like that. I couldn’t believe that he bought at that time old papers. Of course the school had paper
drives all the time and also they used to have stamps, it was long before your time. They used to give sales stamps out and you made books with them. Eagle stamps books and then you would go down to May Co. and redeem them of course. The paper rage guy was almost a legend there; there was a book about him that came out later. He would go around there and everybody knew what day he would be there and they would sell him there old, a few cents of course, scrap stuff that’s all he did. He had the oldest cart and horse you would ever see in your life. I felt sorry for the horse pulling his darn cart but, it was fun.

JC: Did you have anymore to touch on with Carl Stokes?

BL: No, because I really, I was already married a few years and I bought a house a couple streets south of John Marshall School, Liberty Avenue and I was already. I thought I was doing pretty well already, and I was financially. And I was going to school nights, I was driving a school bus mornings and then I was working a full time job. I was going kind of crazy in those days but I wanted to get away from the projects, you know what I mean. But the racial thing was real. It wasn’t something that you know you had a big diversion. And of course they called out National Guard the night he was elected and I was in the Guard Unit and they expected huge riots if he had lost. I don’t think anybody ever talks about that. That was tough days it was tough days. I think slowly people’s minds changed like that. Let’s be very honest a lot of people down there never change their attitude about blacks and that’s a shame because they added a whole lot, and I think that we are a whole lot better off as a country with the changes that we have made over the last forty years. But it didn’t come easy, and didn’t come slow, and it certainly didn’t come without conflict.

JC: The next thing that I want to touch on and I know that you want to talk about is why did they change the name? And I’ve also heard, I’ve also heard that it was called Lincoln Heights.

BL: Yeah Lincoln Heights, that was a very old name. That goes back to when it was a fashionable place ok. Fourteenth Street, they had a name for it and I’m trying to think now, it wasn’t Millionaires Row because that was Euclid Avenue and they had a name like that but I think in the forties they were still calling it you know, it was still the South Side. People were proud of that. You know, you get into nationalities and everybody brings something to the table and I think that is one of the diversions that people have learned a lot from. I dated a Hungarian girl that, her mother made the best goulash in the world. Tremont, right next to Tremont, here we go, the library right by Tremont school they used to feature the different nationalities and I still remember the Ukrainian eggs that they would color and I guess they still put articles in the paper about it every year when Easter time comes. You know, they had, most of the people did that. I mean they had classes like that and they were well attended, they showed people how to do that. Actually I took the class later on, it was kind of fun. I made a couple of ugly looking eggs, but hey it was fun. But the diversion in the nationalities was so great because you learn so much from other people. I do have to mention that a fellow named Dennis Kucinich lived down there in my era. As a matter of fact, I think that he and I are the same age. I don’t know where you want to go with this but Dennis was not a well-liked person. He was the kind of guy, a lot of people, and I got to know the guy real well, but I know him very well politically now, he was the kind of arrogant person that people wanted to walk up to and sucker punch for no reason. I mean that’s really something, he was just very arrogant, you know. And later developed into a very fine individual of course he is in Congress now. At that time, he went to Cantius and he made a big thing about him being on the football team. Cantius only had a very, very small student body and he made the football team because there was only so many, everyone who went out made the team. I don’t think that they had a full twenty two man squad, but he bragged about that and we thought you son of a gun you. Anyhow it was interesting that, that same era--. There was a lot of guys that turned out well you know I still see a
few friends that are around. My brother is doing quite well. Quite a few of my friends went on to college, but I got in the better group. You know, you had your hoods, your jocks, and then you had your academics really, but the preps or something like that. And I went from being a jock and I was serious about my future so I was a little bit of a mix between both but I played a lot of sports. Those guys that did well did really well. But most of the people I’m afraid didn’t and that’s really kind of sad.

JC: The next thing that I want to go into is just school. Where did you go to school for grade school, middle school, high school? And then we’ll just start there.

BL: Well, I started at Tremont of course way back when and being a shy kid, I had trouble I really did. I was a slow learner as far as reading. I would be afraid to ask a question if the teacher brought something up, I was afraid if I didn’t understand it, I wouldn’t ask. So I got behind, I put myself in a real eight ball. I had a teacher in fifth and sixth grade Miss () so I later went down after I was married and wanted to visit her and I looker her up and I think that I was the only student that she had come back and visit her which was kind of cool, she lived down in Vero Beach. But she got interested in me and she said you could do a lot better and she knew my family history, and she was one of those kind of persons too that took interest in the kids. She would take kids on picnics on the weekend and that sort of thing. She did a lot of private kind of counseling like, and she got me past being a slow learner and she worked with me. I ended up with pretty decent grades in high school, I was not an A student but I worked very hard for a B. I think she taught me that you have to work hard at it and it does make a difference what you do with your life. You know you can become something. I was afraid that I was going to live there the rest of my life and that scared me. That really scared me. And she took an interest and showed me and all of a sudden--. As a student I was a very poor speller of course most guys are and on Fridays, I would be sick about twelve Fridays a year--. Anyhow I would miss, but she worked with me so I would learn how to spell, and she made it a whole lot easier when I got to Lincoln in the seventh grade and went from Lincoln all the way through. I think teachers at Lincoln were special in the respect that they knew who we were, they knew the backgrounds that we were coming from and they saw the dropout rates and I think that must have scared them. My mother had a mental breakdown when I was a sophomore in high school, I was just turning sixteen, I was still fifteen yet and I like to brag about the fact that I finished high school with my brother on our own. People talk about working their way through college; we worked our way through high school. Which was a little unusual, you can’t do that now of course. Anyhow, where was I?

JC: Working your way through college.

BL: Oh yeah, I almost quit school and several teachers counseled with me and everything. My counselor said how about this, we set it up where I would go to school the first four classes in the morning. I would go to my four majors in the morning and then I would go to work. I worked at Higbees at the time, I would work forty hours a week and go to high school. So again, going to sleep was not a thing that we did a whole lot of because we worked so darn hard. Came home at ten o’clock at night and did our homework till two or three in the morning. That was tough without a parent. Our grandmother loved with us for about three or four months but we kind of drove her crazy, our life style. She had a break down and they took us right out of high school to see her over at St. () and she spent the next thirty-five years in various homes and such. So it was tough. And I always thought that she was going to get better and she never did. But the teachers there did have a special interest in the kids because they really tried to encourage us and they did everything they could to make sure that we stayed in school and Miss Simpson, she was a teacher for years she was a real character, she was an English teacher, anyhow, she was a real character, she used to have a canoe and she would go to school with this canoe and--. So everyone would make fun of her of course. And she had glasses about three inches
thick that she used to peer out of and squint her eyes. She was a real character. She was good for us you know. The real shame is that so many kids had to drop out. And you know some guys joined the service and that too. A lot of girls got pregnant and that was a real tragedy I think. Because they got off to life on the wrong foot. They weren’t able to like I did; I went to Tri-C for a while and then I went to Cleveland State for six or seven years, nights. I never did graduate. But I didn’t need it I was in sales. I didn’t feel I needed it. I don’t want to offend you any. College in those years was a real luxury, I mean very few people in that area went on to college. If you were making a hundred dollars a week, you were really doing well. My first job out of school was at the Plain Dealer I was making eighty-one dollars a week and I thought that that was big time I was really--. My wife was making seventy-nine and she was working for () and she was offered a raise, and in those days, she turned it down, in those if a woman made more than a man it was very embarrassing to the guy so she actually turned the raise down. Now I don’t think that I would have her do that but she didn’t even tell me until years later that she did that, she turned the raise down because she didn’t want to make more than me. Whatever, so the rest is history.

JC: What sports in high school did you particularly participate in? And were sports big?

BL: Sports were big, we were never that great because we were small. Most of the better jocks got scholarships to Ignatius to tell you the truth. A lot of guys went over there. John () from the Lincoln Park area he was probably the best athlete that we had out of that area. I played football a little bit, I wasn’t that good, I didn’t have a football background really I didn’t learn the plays. I played a little bit of baseball and basketball but again I didn’t play my senior year for instance because I was working you know. But sports were big in those years. I referee games now and I think it’s kind of a shame because in those years the Friday night game would pack the house so to speak at that small little gym in Lincoln and that was the in thing to do. That was you date, you know on Friday night I wouldn’t be working, and even though I didn’t play anymore I was very resentful. You know I was very good in baseball I still play now. I play on two hardball teams, but I was very resentful because I didn’t play and I had hopes of playing big league ball and I did have some tryouts later on. I played when I was drafted, I went into National Guard, I went through basic training, but my job was playing for the Army baseball team. So I was very good and I played with guys who were signed by their organizations. I hurt my arm and by the time I got out, they must have found out, they didn’t even want to talk to me anymore. It was fun; I was resentful that I couldn’t play all of those years, my junior senior year. I still play now because I love the game. And again that goes back to Chandick and I want to give him a lot of credit because he was good for the area. He used to always talk about, George used to always talk about the Robin Hood of Lincoln Park. Did you ever hear that from anybody? There was a guy I guess who was kind of like an old bum basically and he did some hard time but he, he helped a lot of people out. He would rob the rich and give to the poor. George, I spoke with him a couple of weeks ago after you called and he said don’t forget him. There was a balloon man too in Lincoln Park and he used to sell balloons and that was kind of fun. They sold ice cream of course. It was a fun area to grow up because there was so many kids, there really was. My kids didn’t have that kind of a thing you know. Parents had to drive them to this activity or that activity. My mother never seen me ever play a game of anything. We went to all our kid’s games and all that stuff. But in that era you played sports, you did it on your own, on your bicycle.

JC: Did they have any female sports?

BL: Oh geez, oh geez. No. No not at all. Cheerleaders and that’s about all really. There wasn’t even a volleyball team. There was not even a volleyball team. You know I’m not real big into women’s basketball. I’m not saying that as a slam on women, I just don’t have the history of it like--. But there is an enormous amount of professional referees that won’t do a girls game because it is a different level
really, it’s a different game. I’m afraid in those eras women didn’t do that, they really didn’t. It’s kind of a shame because they missed out on a lot of fun too. It was unheard of to have a girl play softball. Nobody played softball in the projects. That’s funny.

JC: What was your curriculum like in school? Did they offer certain classes like typing for women?

BL: Yeah, most of the girls were all programmed to be a nurse or a secretary. I mean that’s your lot in life. It’s a whole lot different. My wife was fortunate that I was making pretty good money. She didn’t have to work until I think my third kid was born and she wanted to go to work. She was a college graduate. But most of the girls back then--. We had a general business course and I took a book keeping course because I knew that I wanted to get into business and I wanted to have a little bit of background too. There was a college prep course and that was your curriculum all the way through. Of course some of it was harder, but most of the girls didn’t take that. They would take the business course because you know careers weren’t there. They really weren’t there. A lot of them, even my sister in law became a nurse. Most of the girls got jobs at a store or a secretary or something like that. You guys are very lucky now, I mean seriously. You didn’t think about it. Even my daughter and her era, she went to a four year--. To Bowling Green, she graduated. My two sons went to John Carroll and I’m very proud that I paid for their education. In our era it was unheard of for a parent to pay for education. Even with the school, you went part time and of course you worked a job to pay for it. So sending my three kids to school was probably my greatest achievement. Only because my wife and I worked very hard to make sure that they would get the proper education and they are both doing real well. I mean all three of them are doing real well. But she would have never had those opportunities had she grown up in my era. That’s really a bummer.

JC: Yeah it is. I wanted to ask and I’m jumping back again to where you lived. What were you sleeping arrangements like? How big was the place you lived in?

BL: Well we just had a two bedroom suite and my mother had one room and we had, my brother had our own and we had bunk beds. As a matter of fact, I still have mine left and it’s quite old. We were poor we were very poor. There would be a kitchen and we would also do the wash too. You had a washtub and a sink. After my mother became ill I could still see my brother doing the wash. He did the wash, I did the cleaning and I went to the store and all of that stuff like that. He did the cooking. We ate a lot of Dinty Moore dinners out of the can. We ate a whole lot of peanut butter and jelly. We ate a whole lot of macaroni and cheese. But I could still see him, there with the old ringer wash thing with boots on because the wash thing had a bad leak in it of course and we would get about an inch of water throughout the kitchen. And we were constantly mopping up like that. Seeing my brother with shorts on and a pair of boots doing wash was a pretty funny sight actually. It was very small but quite honestly it was very warm, it was very nice. We had steam heat and the apartments were very, very warm. And that was a real big advantage but in the winter there were no dryers, so you would have to hang up the clothes in a little alcove that was toward the kitchen table. And we were constantly mopping up like that. Seeing my brother with shorts on and a pair of boots doing wash was a pretty funny sight actually. It was very small but quite honestly it was very warm, it was very nice. We had steam heat and the apartments were very, very warm. And that was a real big advantage but in the winter there were no dryers, so you would have to hang up the clothes in a little alcove that was toward the kitchen table. It was a very, very small kitchen and the clothes would hang there and drip down and get everything wet of course. The table wet. It was clean, ok, it was clean, it was warm, it was small and like out front of the projects in front of each block there was a strip of grass basically like eighty feet by twenty feet or thirty feet and we would play wiffle ball out there and touch football games and things like that. So there was a little bit of greenery there too. As a matter of fact in the back yard I still have one of the cement statues that used () in front of our house, there would be an animal, like a yard ornament thing and I bought one after they tore it down, I bought one. It is something that I’m very proud of. Because it is like seventy years old actually. But the apartments were neat like that and all but most people were really kind of cramped. None of the placed were bigger than four bedrooms and most of them were two or three bedrooms and there would
be, two, four, six, eight, ten to a block of the project building and in very close proximity so there were a lot of kids and everyone had kids so--. Older people who were retired or something, there were very few of those.

JC: Where did you grocery shop?

BL: Store were kind of neat. I think within a half a mile there used to be twelve of these little corner stores and they all had such a great selection of candy bars, you couldn’t believe. And of course baseball cards, which we got into big time