

The Ravenswood Manor Centennial Oral History Project

Richard LANYON

Oral History: FULL TEXT VERSION

Interview Date: June 24, 2014

Interviewers: Jim Peters, Jackie Klein

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Transcriber: Jackie Klein, 2015

My name is Richard Lanyon. I am 76 years of age. Today's date is Tuesday June 24th and I'm in the breakfast nook of 4454 N. Manor Ave. and I am being interviewed.

My name is Jim Peters. I am 62 years old and I'm also in the breakfast room of 4454 N. Manor. Today is Tuesday June 24, 2014 and I am the interviewer. And our project, we are doing this on behalf of the Ravenswood Manor Improvement Association's Centennial Research Committee.

Jim: Okay, welcome Dick. I'm going to start off with some general questions. Let's start off with your occupation.

Richard: Right now I'm retired, but I'm kind of busy in retirement. I retired 3 and one-half years ago. I was with the Metropolitan Water Reclamation District and I retired as the Executive Director after being employed there for 48 years. I'm an engineer by education and training.

Jim: All right, thank you. When were you a resident of Ravenswood Manor?

Richard: Well, I was resident in three different periods. First of all when I was in kindergarten to 2nd or 3rd grade I lived at 4531 N. Mozart. That was during WWII in the early '40s. Then we moved away for a couple of years and we moved back to the Manor in 1947 and I lived at 2847 Giddings Street for a number of years until I went to college which was in 1956 or something like that. My first two or three years at college were in Chicago so I was a commuter student living at home on Giddings Street, but then I went downstate to Champaign Urbana and I was gone. But then I came back and I lived at 2847 Giddings Street after being married and we were there for about 6 months over the summer of 1961 and fall and early spring of '62.

Jim: So, to recap: 1942-45 roughly; 1947-1957 approximately; and 1961-1962.

Richard: 1962, yeah.

Jim: This may be a tough one, but what is your earliest memory of the Manor as a neighborhood?

Richard: My earliest memory is when I was a kid living on Mozart street probably before I started kindergarten. I remember my bedroom on the 2nd floor, looking out the back window over the yard and I played a lot in the yard and I also had a buddy named John who lived in the radio. And I remember standing by the console radio in the living room talking to John (when the radio wasn't on, of course).

Jim: Okay, so John lived in the radio in the Manor.

Richard: Yes.

Jim: Well that's a good early memory. You grew up here, so what were some of your favorite places to play both on Mozart when you were younger, but then later on Giddings. Were there certain parts of the Manor?

Richard: Well, on Mozart I was young, I didn't venture very far from home. I played mostly in the yard or the house. When I lived on Giddings Street my favorite place to play was along the river. It was such an adventure. And of course there were vacant lots in the neighborhood at that time. There was a vacant lot across the street from us and then there was a big vacant lot on the south side of Leland Ave right at the river. And of course at that time the Ravenswood CTA line ran along there; now it's the Brown Line. And across the river so I had a lot of excitement there. I guess there are 4 or 5 houses built there now so it was a pretty big area. We played ball there and lots of times we played down by the river.

Jim: What did you do down by the river?

6:05 RL: Well, things I would never tell my Mom. We'd sometimes go wading. We never tried to swim. Even at our age we could tell it wasn't safe or desirable. Then we'd swing on a rope across a limb on the big Cottonwood tree swing out over the water.

Jim: And hopefully swing back?

Richard: Yes, and swing back, oh yes . . . we never jumped, fell off the rope. And we also tried to build a raft one year out of old railroad ties but that didn't work very well because railroad ties don't float. One of my friends in the neighborhood was Kenny Penhill. He lived across the street from the vacant lot and they had a dock on the river—a little concrete platform. He and I used to sit down there and tell tall tales and fantasize about our life.

Jim: Do you remember any tall tales about people who had lived in the Manor before?

Richard: Well the only one I remember is the story that his father used to talk about their house being built by liquor barons in prohibition days and they would bring liquor into the house by boat on the river. Of course, to me I thought that was entirely plausible at the time.

Jim: Do you think it is plausible now?

Richard: Laughs . . . No.

Jim: Because now you know how the river . . .

Richard: Now I know how the canal system works and boats don't come in through the locks at Wilmette any more and they never did and so forth.

Jim: How about favorite stores? Did you have any favorite stores that you'd go to in the neighborhood?

Richard: Well, there was a candy store on Manor Avenue next to the El and if it wasn't right next to the El, it was the 1st door in from the El. And we'd often stop there for a treat when walking back to school after lunch. The other favorite store was Izzy's drugstore, which was on the northwest corner of Francisco and Leland.

Jim: Or I guess Eastwood.

Richard: I'm sorry . . . Eastwood, Eastwood, you're right. It's now or was a dance studio . . . maybe it still is. That was a favorite spot because I'd go in there . . . they had a soda fountain . . . I'd go in there for ice cream. My favorite drink in those days was a phosphate. I'm not sure I know what that is anymore, but it was sure good when I was a kid.

Jim: Why was it called Izzy's? Was that just a name?

Richard: You know, I don't know. The owner was Isadore or something.

Jim: What else was in that business district at the time? This would have been in the 1940s and '50s?

Richard: There were a couple of small grocery stores and cleaners. We didn't have a hardware store in the neighborhood. That's all I can remember.

Jim: Do you remember Manor Park itself? There used to be a building.

Richard: There was. It was a stucco building. Had some pillars out in front. And it was about the size of maybe a 2-car garage or so. It was never open on a regular basis, but once in a while when the neighborhood was doing something I guess the Park District would open it for the neighbors. I don't remember the inside of the building, though.

Jim: It was the old real estate office for the Harmon company . . .

Richard: Yeah, that's what I understand

Jim: . . . back in 1909. Then it stayed as a community center. Then, do you remember when they tore it down? Or did you just discover one day that it was gone.

Richard: Yeah, it was just gone. I don't remember when it was torn down.

Jim: It was torn down in 1947 or so.

Richard: I would have been off at college or away from the house a lot attending at Navy Pier.

Jim: Let's go back to school. Which schools did you go to? Let's start with grade school and then tell me how you got to that grade school, then high school and college.

Richard: Okay, well I started at Bateman School when we lived on Mozart Street. So I was there kindergarten through second grade. How we got there? We walked. It was a long walk and we had to cross Montrose Avenue, so Mom would usually walk with me and maybe get me across Montrose and then let me walk the last block or two to school. That I remember. Then we had a neighbor, a boy that lived down the block from us named Johnnie. He would sometimes walk me home from school. That was Bateman. Then when we moved back, I went to Waters School, which is on the east side of the river over at Campbell and Wilson. Another long walk, perhaps more adventuresome because you crossed the Wilson Avenue bridge to get there. And Mrs. Penhill . . . well, the Moms

would trade off driving if it was raining. We had to come home for lunch in those days. They didn't serve lunches at school and it was a long walk so someone would give us a ride and the Moms would trade off doing that duty.

Jim: So you'd rush home, have lunch, and then rush back to school?

Richard: Yeah. Either that or we'd walk one way if it was nice weather or whatever. But Mrs. Penhill had a Cadillac convertible and she'd put the top down when it was a nice day and it was fun to ride in her convertible. Let's see, and then I graduated from Waters School and went to Lane Tech High School down on Addison Street. To get there I would either ride the bus. I'd walk up the alley to Lawrence Avenue and catch the bus to Western and then transfer and go down Western or in really nice weather I would walk down California Avenue to Addison. I don't remember riding my bike to Lane, but I might have done that once or twice. And then I got to be savvy when I was a junior or senior and I realized that a lot of teachers who lived up in Edgebrook would find their way to Lane by coming down Manor Ave and California Avenue so I was able to hitch a ride if I could see a teacher I knew.

Jim: So you took the bus, you walked, hitched a ride. Never the streetcar or the EI? You never took either of those?

Richard: Well, we had electric buses on Lawrence Avenue. We had streetcars . . . we still had the green hornet streetcars on Western Avenue. But the EI didn't get us there. You could take the EI to Western and transfer and get on the trolley.

Jim: And then you went to school you said at the University of Illinois.

Richard: Yes, I started college at the University of Illinois at Navy Pier. It was a 2-year undergraduate campus and so I went there, I was actually there 2 and ½ years because I started in January and I switched majors after my first year, so I was able to stay there more than two years. Then, let's see, September of '58 I guess it was I went down state . . . or maybe it was '57, because I started in '55. Yeah, okay.

Jim: How did you get there? Same thing . . . did you take the streetcar?

Richard: No, no . . . I'd walk over to the Francisco EI stop and take the Ravenswood Line and take that down to Grand Avenue and transfer to the Grand Avenue bus, right into Navy Pier.

Jim: And for those who don't remember, that is where the campus was located – on Navy Pier.

Richard: Yeah, it was the north half of Navy Pier. The south half was still an active municipal wharf for shipping. The Ravenswood Line had these old wooden cars in those days with a little cupola and transom windows on the top. So during the wintertime it was quite a challenge because the heat was limited and if it was snowing out the snow would come through those transom windows that didn't close very tightly.

Jim: And in the summer?

Richard: They were hot. So I'd often ride out on the platform. There was a little platform, 'cause there was a platform on the end of each car with a little railing around it.

Jim: So you could ride outside?

Richard: Yeah.

Jim: Something that would not be encouraged today.

Richard: Absolutely. The conductors were very liberal in those days.

Jim: We talked about the Chicago River. How about Horner Park? Horner Park hasn't always been a park. It was a brickyard and then a landfill. Do you have any memory of Horner Park?

Richard: Oh yes, I do. I remember as a kid when I lived on Mozart Street a big wooden fence along Montrose and along California so you couldn't see. There were big gates I think on Montrose Avenue just east of California where trucks would go in and out, but other than that you couldn't see what was going on inside. So by the time I knew about it, it was a landfill, but I know in history it originally was a clay pit where they mined clay to make bricks.

Jim: Do you remember anything about the landfill besides the tall fences. Was there a smell about the landfill?

Richard: No, I don't remember a smell. I don't remember anybody complaining about an odor. And then later, the landfill was donated to the city or the Park District. They tore down the fence and made a park and it was landscaped and all that. They planted trees and put in sidewalks and made a big park.

Jim: And then a few years later they put in the field house and you had a project that dealt with that field house.

Richard: Right. The field house was built in the mid-late 1950s, because when I was a student at Navy Pier we had to do a term paper on a foundation project. So I went over to the construction site of the Horner Park field house and introduced myself and told them what I needed to do and they were more than willing to show me around. And they explained to me about the building, how this was built on a landfill so they had to have caissons for this . . . it was only a 2-story building . . . but the landfill was pressable material and they couldn't put a building on that so they had to drill down to hard pan and make caisson foundations. That was an interesting term project and the contractor I remember telling me about how the landscaping was sinking in spots because the landfill was subsiding and some of the sidewalks were already breaking up after a few years and some of the water lines to the water fountains had broken and so forth.

Jim: So, not the best place to make a park . . . an old landfill . . . from an engineering standpoint?

Richard: Well, yeah. If you took account of the conditions you could probably do it right, but obviously they didn't do that. They should have given more time for it to settle before they started putting in sidewalks and water pipes.

Jim: You mentioned before in some memories of different people in the neighborhood who spoke foreign languages. There was a German guy that got mad at you at one point.

Richard: No that was a Greek.

Jim: Oh, the Greek guys. Okay. And there was a French guy walking a dog.

Richard: Yeah.

Jim: Was the neighborhood filled with different language . . . foreign languages. Was it a mix?

Richard: No. There were families of different ethnic origin, but for the most part I remember everybody spoke English. And even the German and the Greek fellow they spoke English, but with an accent. But this one elderly gentleman, he walked his dog up and down the alley. He had a white beard and he always wore a nice fedora and he liked to talk in French. He told me he had been or was a French teacher and he taught me a few words so I could converse with him in French.

Jim: Because some of the census research that our committee has done reveals a wide range of countries of origin. Much different from what you'd expect in the neighborhood. Some people think that the neighborhood

would be dominated by German or some other group and it really was a mix.

Richard: Yeah.

Jim: But you don't remember that as a kid? It was just a neighborhood I guess?

Richard: Yeah, all kinds of people. They were all Caucasian that I recall. I don't remember any Orientals or blacks or Hispanics. Well, there might have been some Hispanic people living in some of the apartment buildings. But I didn't have any Hispanic friends like I did out in Englewood.

Jim: You mentioned the vacant lots. So there were a lot of vacant lots on the corners in the Manor when you were growing up?

Richard: Yes, on corners. Because of Manor Avenue you had a lot of odd lots along Manor Avenue. Triangular shaped pieces of ground. I suppose they were the least desirable to build on when the neighborhood was developing. But then there was the big lot at Leland down by the river, which was regular rectangular lots. I guess when the depression hit, building stopped, and so whatever wasn't built upon lay idle for many, many, years until WWII.

Jim: And how did people use these lots? You played in some of them, but did people use them as gardens or other uses?

Richard: Yeah. We had gardens, a lot of vegetable gardens. I don't remember too many flower gardens just for flower purposes, but mostly vegetable gardens.

Jim: So again, this would have been in the late '40s and early '50s and by the 1960s many of the lots had been built on?

Richard: Yeah, I remember when I was in high school was when the first time I would see houses going up on vacant lots. And then of course I was not around the neighborhood as much, not playing in the neighborhood as much, so I kind of lost track of the vacant lot inventory in the Manor.

Jim: And then you moved away in the early '60s to move out to the suburbs with your family. Was that something that was happening in the neighborhood? Was there a perception that it was time for families to start moving out of the city?

Richard: Ummm . . . No. I don't remember that at all. I was doing that. Well, actually my wife and I and our two children were living in the house while my

Mom and Dad we're traveling, and when they came home in the Spring . . . they had this motor home and they were driving around all winter long and they were down in the south . . . and then I found it not pleasant to be living with my parents so we moved into an apartment over in Ravenswood because I worked in Chicago and wanted to stay in the city. It wasn't until years later after living in Ravenswood for a while and then Rogers Park and then Evanston that we bought property out in the country and built a house.

Jim: What was the perception then of the city? Were there issues? I know there was once a proposal to build an expressway over the river and changing El service. Were you aware of any of those issues as you were growing up?

Richard: Well I remember talk about the expressway because everybody in the neighborhood was worried about their house being bought up. That never went anywhere. There was an issue about the River too, a federal project, I just remember some talk about that from my parents. I don't remember the details about it. The el service? I don't remember if there was anything about the Ravenswood El service being changed.

Jim: Big corner houses. As a kid what was your image of those houses? Who lived in those houses? The big houses all down the corners?

Richard: Well, that was . . . when I lived on Mozart Street I noticed that the house on the corner, like Wilson and Mozart, and then down at the other end at Wilson and Sunnyside, these bigger corner lots with houses that looked a little bit bigger and it was my perception that more affluent or wealthy people lived in the corner houses.

Jim: Any stories about them? Or stories of the people who lived in those houses?

Richard: No . . . I don't remember any stories.

Jim: No ghost stories, then, or anything like that.

Richard: No.

Jim: You mentioned in the oral history report you had written mortgage dinner. Could you explain what a mortgage dinner is and did your family have one?

Richard: Oh yes, we did. When my Mom and Dad bought the house on Giddings Street I remember it was some \$14,000 dollars and they took out a mortgage for

\$8,000 at First Federal Savings down on Dearborn and Madison and that was a big deal. My mother always paid the bills and kept the family accounts and she would always talk about paying in a little bit more each month on the mortgage. She wanted to pay it off. You know, back in those days debt wasn't a good thing to be under. And then when the mortgage was paid off they had a big party inviting a lot of friends over and put the mortgage papers in the fireplace and lit them with a match. It was a big deal!

Jim: And this wasn't just your family?

Richard: Well it happened regularly, yeah. Back in those days that was a big deal to own your own house, debt free, you know. That was an achievement!

Jim: What's the first thing you tell people, your friends, about Ravenswood Manor? If you run into somebody and you tell them where you grew up, how do you describe Ravenswood Manor?

Richard: Well, I describe it as a very progressive neighborhood. Most of the people seemed to be well educated. It was a dry community.

Jim: Sorry to interrupt, but why was it a dry community?

Richard: Well, each precinct would vote itself dry and that's what the precincts that composed the Manor did. There weren't any liquor establishments along the north side of Montrose or the south side of Lawrence. You had to travel a little bit to buy liquor and I also tell people that it was a community of . . . it is well planned, the houses were, the developer had covenants in the deeds of the houses where people couldn't . . . your house had to be of a certain size and so forth and you couldn't just tear down your house and build an apartment building. I believe that was at about the same time when zoning was just coming into vogue in the cities so it was pretty progressive.

Jim: Any sense of how the neighborhood has changed over time from the neighborhood you remember as a kid to what you see today?

Richard: No, over the years I've gone through the neighborhood several times and it looks pretty much the same.

Jim: Trees a little older?

Richard: Well, some trees are gone, Elm trees got taken down but other trees were planted in their place. Of course the vacant lots are not here anymore. They've all been built upon and I don't know anybody, but a couple people live in

this neighborhood so I can't say anything about the makeup of the neighborhood or the people who live here. Still feels like home in a way.

Jim: Oh, that's nice. You had two sisters, and one of the sisters is someone who I think people might know of, Ellen Lanyon. Could you say a little bit about her and her time in the Manor and her life as an artist?

Richard: Sure. Well I had two sisters, and Ellen was the oldest of the two. She was 10 years older than me. When we lived on Mozart Street she was in high school. She had started at Hyde Park High School before we moved into the Manor so she finished two years there and when we moved she became a junior at Roosevelt High School and finished high school at Roosevelt. She had an artistic talent and she had been taking classes at the School of the Art Institute while she was in high school on Saturdays and then when she graduated Roosevelt she got a full scholarship at the School of the Art Institute. She was recommended by her art teacher and she was also a very cognizant of her craft and she had a summer job one year where my dad worked in a foundry equipment company in the mechanical department and she was a drafts person and learned mechanical drawing. That helped her be a more precise artist, I guess. So, she finished at the School of the Art Institute and she was as a young woman very progressive in women and the arts and helping some of the independent young artists who formed galleries so they could display their work because some of the old time galleries didn't cater to the young artists. And then she was, when we lived on Giddings Street, she had finished her schooling at the Art Institute and was going out to the University of Iowa to get a masters' degree in printmaking. By that time she was married and after Iowa she had a Fulbright Scholarship at the University of London for a year. Over the years she had become an artist of renown and if you Google her name you'll find all kinds of stuff about my sister.

Jim: Any connection to the Manor? Did she ever do paintings or drawings of the neighborhood or the house?

Richard: She did. She used the Manor in some of her work. Wherever she lived she did the same. I remember she had a charcoal drawing of the Francisco el stop which I happened to have for a long time. I gave it to the people that bought our house on Giddings Street, so it stayed in the Manor. And she did, I remember she would make a Christmas card for the family every year using the house on Giddings Street as a graphic image for the Christmas card, or something with the house. And the house on Giddings Street, it was a 3-story house, when we moved in she had the 3rd floor. It was a finished 3rd floor, and my Mom always said we bought the house for Ellen because it was her studio, and my mother wasn't very happy when she got married and moved away, but so be it.

Jim: Would she use the studio . . .

Richard: When she was there, yes. She would sometimes have parties in the house, whether on Giddings Street or Mozart Street, with friends from the Art Institute, which always impressed me as kind of a scruffy lot (laughs). And I'm not so sure my Mom and Dad were happy to have them in the house hanging around, but they always had a good time.

Jim: Did they leave any artwork behind?

Richard: Well, yeah. I remember one time we had a party in the basement at Mozart Street and she and her friends came in and they cleaned up the basement and white washed all the walls and then they painted on the walls and they painted circus figures. I don't know that they're still there or not but I do remember vividly that this one painting was on the chimney of a strong man with a leopard leotard, you know, and bulging muscles and dumbbells, and of course in the base of the chimney there was a little access door for taking out the ashes and if you took the door off, on the backside of the door there was a little red heart painted.

Jim: No idea if that is still there?

Richard: I don't know if it's still there or not.

Jim: Any final comments to make? Any final characters we forgot to talk about?

Richard: No, not that I can think of. Characters . . . there were a few in the neighborhood, but . . . I remember the people across the alley, an elderly man with two young, grown sons and one son had a convertible and the other son had a roadster and they were just like night and day. And then the people across the alley moved here from Denver and they just couldn't stand the weather in Chicago and complained about it all the time. And then the people that lived next door to us on the west was an elderly man and woman who had been a city electrician and was now a bridge tender and he had a basement full of junk and his wife was always complaining about the junk in the basement and I found it very colorful.

Jim: Great stories. Thank you very much.

Richard: My pleasure.