

The Ravenswood Manor Centennial Oral History Project

RUTH ROBBINS

Oral History: FULL TEXT VERSION

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Interviewer: Jim Peters

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What is your current occupation?

I am retired now.

And what was your former occupation?

I was an administrative assistant to the president – well, each successive president – of a union called the National Association of Broadcast Employees and Technicians. It was known as NABET – just the initials, and, their offices, when I first was hired – were in Chicago, New York, and Toronto, and then gradually the Canadians were not with the group. It was a very small office I was the only quote "girl" at the time, and gradually I hired someone to work with me. But I worked for the president – but we had elections I think it was every 4 years – anyway, whoever was elected successive president, I was secretary to that person. And then there was a union secretary – a man – in the office for whom I worked, also. At the beginning there was the 2 men and myself.

What year was that?

I was hired in, mmmm, it could have been 1954 or '6? and I worked there until 1992, when I retired – past retirement age.

So there was first radio but, when you were hired, and there was TV?

That's right.

How long have you been a resident of Ravenswood Manor?

I was 6 years old when my mother and father I moved here and I've been in this house ever since.

And who owned the house?

It was a family, or a couple I think their last name was Miller. I have an abstract with all that information, and I gave a copy, or, I gave the original to Sulzer Library so it's in there and the house was built by them and for them in 1922. And then my grandmother, who somehow or other got interested in real estate, bought the home and told my mother and my father and me that we had to move here. They were – we were – were living actually on Spaulding [Avenue] and Eastwood [Avenue] so we were in the neighborhood, and then my sister was born the next month after the family moved here.

So you moved here when the house was only 2 years old? She had just bought it?

That's right.

And what was her name, your grandmothers' name?

My grandmother's name? Eva Dveres, D-like Denver-V-E-R-E-S, and she came from, as I told you, from Russia in 1905 with 5 children, and by 1922 she [laughs] was very interested in buying property. She had no money – I don't know what she used – but she bought this.

A smart lady to buy real estate.

Yeah, well, not so smart – she bought property in Florida under water. [laughs]

What's your earliest memory of living in Ravenswood Manor?

Well my very earliest memories were of my girlfriends, and they lived, some lived across the street. A few of them lived on my block. And they were my age and we would play on the street which was – I don't think it was even pebbles or anything – I think it was a mud street at that time. And we would play, that was part of our play. I mean, we would run across the street back and forth, play games like, there's a game called '3 Feet across the Mud Puddle' I think, '3 Feet across' something. So, you know, it was was a really rural neighborhood. I didn't know it was a neighborhood at the time, but that's....

So it felt like a place far from the city?

Well, you know, the only other place I knew was this one in Albany Park. I didn't feel like I was in the country, I didn't know the history of this area until I got interested in finding out for myself but it was a very safe, um, we didn't think of the word 'safe', um, parents didn't worry about their children playing outside or coming in at a certain time, or things of that sort.

What were your favorites places to play besides in the street, did you play in the park?

We played in our respective backyards. We played – those of us, my friends who had front stairs, like the one almost directly across [the street] was my very dearest friend. She just died less than a year ago and we would – it was the age of movie star magazines – and we would clip our favorite movie stars and come with a big cardboard box, and then trade off who wanted what, like baseball cards or something. And then, the big thing was to go to Buffalo Park – the little triangle here, which, at the time, as I've told Jim, had this huge statue in the middle where the ring is, and there were 3 big, big buffalo heads carved of one face, uh, or 3, one faced that way and one that way and one that way I guess....

Yes, so, (representing) the 3 streets. [Manor Avenue / Sunnyside Avenue / California Avenue]

Yes, the 3 streets, yeah, the 3 streets, and that's why it was called Buffalo Park, and I don't think anybody knows that anymore.

No, no, I think that's been lost to history.

....And as I also told Jim, my friends and I, maybe like one other little friend and I, would put our dolls in their buggy and take an umbrella and go to the park because there was water trickling down from the buffalos – where that water originated, in the basin I guess – and that was a big thing because we'd go under with our umbrellas and our dolls.

When I got a little older – old enough – I would go to Welles Park and play on all the ___[garbled]___ y'know.

So the idea of the umbrellas is to protect your dolls from the water?

Well, yes. And it was fun! You know, it was like, I don't know what we thought – I guess we made up stories about why we were there and why we had our umbrellas.

That fountain was taken down in the '40s I think.

Yes. And the more I think about it, if I could exist this long that fountain shouldn't have crumbled in the '40s. I think they made the buffalo heads too big or something. [laughs]

And the Park District, I think, took it down. It was deteriorating.

Yeah. But that was such a nice easy little walk, and it was fun to be there, and there were benches around it.

Were people upset when the fountain came down?

Yeah. Oh yeah. Uh, it was mostly children, I mean, it wasn't like people like grown-ups went to the park. If they happened to be walking along they might sit on a bench. But it was mostly the children. And there were – almost every house, well, 3/4 of whom had young children – they were newly married or young families which it is now again, which is very nice.

Oh so you've seen a change? It started out as families and then..."

Oh yes, that's right. The people on both sides of me were older people and it wasn't until, oh, I don't know, maybe 15 years ago that younger married couples moved in. And now I've got 2 darling little children next door, a 2-year-old and an infant. And, uh, so I've always known the people on either side of me very well. And we've been very lucky, they've always been very exceptionally nice.

You said that you played in Buffalo Park and then later Welles Park, how about shopping – were there any stores you liked as a kid?

Oh, well, when I got old enough to go, you know, for my mother to give me some money to go to the grocery store right on Montrose [Avenue] – where the senior citizen home is – there was a big empty lot and then we would cross that lot and there was a grocer, and a meat market, and then at the corner of Mozart and Montrose was a drugstore and a soda fountain, and that was wonderful. We used to go there and have our sundaes and things. And that man, he had that store for many many years. And then opened up the one at, I think at Sacramento [Avenue] on Montrose, called Black's. Those are all gone.

Did you ever go to these stores up by the L station, or did you mostly go to Montrose?

Yeah. Not when I was little or even in grammar school so much, but later there was a very nice grocery meat market there and a few other stores but that wasn't really where I shopped too much until I started actually going to work and taking the L at the [Francisco Brown Line] station.

Which schools did you attend? First grade school, then high school?

The grade school was called Newton Bateman [Elementary School] and it's on Richmond [Street] and what would be Berteau [Avenue], I think. It's still there. And that was a very genteel, very nice, school with, you know, old fashioned – well I didn't know they were old fashioned – but the old fashioned kinds of teachers that you really minded and learned from. It was a good school, very nice.

How did you get there? Did you walk?

We walked, yeah. Yeah, usually there was somebody else or sometimes – when we were very little – our mother walked us to school, and there were a few of my grade school kids who took the street car. I don't know, they must've lived just a little further, like at Western [Avenue], and that was a little, uh, it was an open-sided like a trolley car, the street car then, with long benches and you could wave to the people you knew as it went by. [laughs]

And that was along Montrose?

Yeah, mm-hmm.

And then how about high school?

I went to [Theodore] Roosevelt [High School] – well the first year I went to Von Steuben [Senior High School]. That was a rule at that time, you had to have your first year at Von, if you lived in this area, at Von Steuben. And then I went to Roosevelt but when I was little and lived where I told you that I lived – at Spaulding [Avenue] and Eastwood [Avenue]– we could see Roosevelt school being built 'cause it was way back then. And those were the 2 I went to: grammar school and Roosevelt. And I went to Wisconsin.

Did you walk to Roosevelt or did you then take the street car?

No, I never took the street car. I think I walked. I'm pretty sure I did, yeah.

And then after you graduated from Roosevelt you said you went to University of Wisconsin?

I didn't graduate there, I mean, I didn't finish, but, I did go to Wisconsin.

Was that unusual for women at that age?

In my family? Yeah.

Well, my mother and father were both born in Russia too, and Grandma came here in 1905 and my mother enrolled here in night school to learn english and took her 5 kids with her, and it was written up in the paper at the time! They lived on – I think they lived on – Maplewood [Avenue] but in the Humboldt Park area. Somewhere over there.

Was there something that you studied in Wisconsin in particular?

No, I wasn't into anything special at the time. It was Liberal Arts – I think they called it. But I was always interested in history. And I did have a good – I had a Russian professor for Ancient History that was very good.

So, do you have any memories of the Chicago River? good memories? bad memories?

Yeah. Yes. You asked where I played. We always wanted to go down to the river and play and our parents didn't want us to 'cause there was no barricades or anything, you could just slide down into the river [laughs] but we would take little walks and go to the river. I love that part of The Manor.

Did it smell back then?

I don't remember it smelling.

But you never swam in the river?

Oh no. No, no. [laughs] No. We went to Lake Geneva to do our swimming and Lake Michigan.

Do you have any memories of the area that's now known as Horner Park?

Yes. Yeah. The reason I was told that the reason my grandmother after she bought this house with the sole purpose of my mother and father moving here, was because she was told – that was the brickyard, you know – and she was told that was going to be a lovely park, and she wanted whatever grandchildren she was going to have to have that park to play in. And she died before, before she saw it.

Because she bought the house in '24 and it didn't become a park until '40-something?

But they started working on it a couple of years before – in fact, we would go over there, so I think after the brickyards were cleared out because they didn't clear them out, and the alley got full of ___rocks?_rats?___. And people would dump garbage in there and then the city came along and cleared it out. And then there was some period that I know we would play in that area, so, I can't remember. It must have started to be clear.

At the corner?

Yeah.

Do you remember anything about the brickyards?

Just that was another place we were not to go to play.

So you had a lot of places not to play, the river, and the brickyards?

Yes. Yes. but the one place that we did play was the empty lot where the senior citizens thing – in winter they would flood that and then we would ice skate on it. I didn't do very well but we would ice skate on it.

Were there other vacant lots around?

Yes. The adjoining one on this side of the street was a vacant lot and our friends, the Smiths, who lived in the yellow house at the end of my block here owned part or bought part of that land and built a doll house a huge doll house for their twin daughters and my, they were my sister was younger 6 years younger, they would play there. I have pictures of them.

Oh, in the dollhouse?

Yeah.

You said you rode the street car, any other memories of the L or the street car?

Yeah, the L to go downtown, which was a big thing. We would get on the Ravenswood L – it wasn't called the Brown Line at the time, I don't think. And I remember that the, I used to love to kneel on the seats and look out the window and they were all the cane – my knees always had marks from the cane seats.

And they were all open, they were open windows and such, was it hot or cold?

Yeah, yeah. I hadn't even realized it but sure they were.

And that's how you probably got to work as well?

That's right. I got to work there for many many many years and then finally in the years when I had my own car decided it was nicer to drive to work and at that point finally they built the underground gara[ge] – I worked at Jackson and Michigan right across from the Art Institute – and they built that first underground, I would just go up the stairs right into my office.

You started at the radio technicians' [union] in the '50s?

Yeah.

Did you work someplace before that job?

Yes. I worked, well, I wasn't really equipped to be much of an office worker – didn't think I was going to be working in an office – uh, but, I worked for ad agencies in general offices, typing and stuff.

Which ones?

2 or 3 different ones. I worked for the publishing company that did Ladies Home Journal and McCall's, I think, or one of the other magazines. I worked for them. I had jobs of that sort for a couple of years at a time.

And you always took, until you started driving, you always took the L to work?

Yeah.

Did most people do that or did most people drive?

Yes. Oh yeah, sure. You met everybody you knew on the platform.

When did you buy your first car?

The first car in the family was my mother bought a Chevy at Chevy agency at the corner of California and Lawrence Avenue. And at that time they gave her 2 – I think it was 2 – weeks of

free lessons to learn to drive. And, so for a long time, I bought my first car probably at about when I was 18 or 19 or 20. I don't remember.

Okay, so that would have been in the '30s?

Yeah. And I learned to drive in what was Budlong Woods. I mean, you didn't have to pass a test. I didn't take any lessons from anybody but friends. [laughs] And that was, of course, a stick shift.

So you learned to drive on a stick shift?

Oh, definitely, for many years. Yeah.

Do you remember foreign languages being spoken? Obviously your grandmother spoke Russian – but, in the neighborhood – other foreign languages?

Yeah. Mostly German. 'Cause this was pretty much predominantly German, and, even then, yeah that would be about the only other language I heard. It wasn't Hispanic, or anything, certainly wasn't French, may have been Italian. I don't know.

Were there other Russians in the neighborhood that you remember?

We – you asked my religion – we were the only Jewish family in this whole California Avenue from Sunnyside here. There're probably some in the Albany Park area 'cause I think a lot of them settled there. There were wonderful delicatessens, but, absolutely, when I went to school, I was almost always the only Jewish person in the class. And, [laughs] remember there were 2 wonderful Irish brothers – one was in my class and one was a year ahead of me – their last name was Costello – and they used to take the Jewish holiday off all the time. [laughs]

Really? But later, in the Manor, it seems like there were a lot more Jewish residents?

Yeah. I wasn't ever, uh, I don't think there were a lot more, really. There were, of course, like Henry Horner for whom this (park) is named, I mean, he didn't live here, but there was much more of that feeling as I got older.

And as you said there were a lot of delicatessens and things on Lawrence Avenue?

On Lawrence, yeah. Oh, they were wonderful.

Do you remember the big corner houses that were in The Manor? [Were] there stories

about who lived in the corner houses?

This one at this corner, the big yellow one also went up – Sid Luckman the football player lived there and that was our big claim to fame.

Do you know why he came to this neighborhood? any idea?

He was through with football at that point. No, I don't know why he came there. Uh, who else lived here?

You said there was a big corner house at Manor and Wilson [Avenues]? It was really impressive?

Yeah. Oh I loved that house. I didn't know anybody, I've never known anybody who lived there. Those 2, and of course the, there's a couple of houses on Windsor and on Sunnyside at the end right at the river that have been there for probably a hundred years – I don't know.

Right.

And then there's that famous story that you know – everybody knows – that the rum runners used to use the river and deliver the food, uh, the liquor up there.

What do you think of that story?

I love it! I hope its true!

Oh, I know who the other...uh...oh, the wonderful artist, oh...you knew him....

Oh, the man who lived near here who was in the garden club for many years. Right! I think we have his name.

Yeah. There's one other name that I can't think of right now. And Rocco. Rocco Johns.

Yes, who was a music composer.

Yeah. Those are the 2. But the artist,...was renowned,...it was a french name.

Phil Renault. Phil Renault, who lived on Leland.

Yeah those were the 3.

So, what do you remember about Phil Renault?

That he was very handsome. [laughs] The garden clubs we stopped and talked with him and he was a very gifted artist and he really died quite young.

Do you remember mortgage dinners when people paid off their mortgage they would have a big neighborhood dinner?

No. [laughs] I know my family didn't.

They never paid it fully off, or...?

No, no, I didn't even know what a mortgage was.

You mentioned Sid Luckman. Were there other colorful or unique characters in the neighborhood?

Well I think I told you that in that house where Sid Luckman lived, but before he did, there was a family I'm pretty sure – The Millers, – Millers – and their son, Adam, was about my age he may have been a year younger so I knew him, and at one point all of a sudden there was this big fuss because someone had taken a shot at papa Miller and didn't kill him – didn't hurt him – he had a big belt buckle that deflected it, and that was a big story. And I'm pretty sure they owned that lovely house across from the park [at the north end of the 4400 block of California Avenue].

I think so. They moved there in the '40s.

Any idea why [someone had] taken a shot at him?

No, I think it was some business dealing, but I don't know what it was.

Somebody had mentioned a Captain Carter – does that ring a bell? He had a big flag pole in front of his house on Wilson [Avenue] and he had big patriotic meetings in the front yard? And there was a guy named Little Al Temminer (*sic*) who ran a chain of record stores?

No.

And then Abe Saperstein – who founded the Harlem Globetrotters – lived here?

Yeah. Yeah. That's right.

And somebody said some other Cubs baseball players lived here?

Well. I was, that was not, I am still not a sports fan, so, I wasn't impressed, apparently.

Do you remember any specific neighborhood concerns, you know like voting the neighborhood dry to not have liquor, or closing the L?

I think there were but they didn't impact on me at all. Nobody in my family drank except kosher wine at Passover. [laughs]

Okay, or, any building an expressway through the neighborhood, or closing the L stations – do you remember any of those things?

No. Not enough. No, I really don't. I don't.

For the 50th anniversary they had a big party I think, to celebrate...

Yeah, they did and there's that wonderful booklet! That is, really, that should be reissued.

I think we are, we're going to put it on the website.

'Cause I have one.

I think Mr. Bjorkland did a history that was published? Did you go to the dinner? Do you remember anyone who went to the dinner?

No.

That would have been 1964, I think, when that happened.

No. I know they had the celebration.

So is there a favorite thing about living in Ravenswood Manor? What would you tell people, 'cause you've lived here a long time.

Well, I think it's just gotten better and better! I didn't realize how lucky we were that Grandma didn't buy a house on Kedzie Avenue or someplace where I wouldn't want to be living. This has just gotten to be The Place. [laughs]

Your grandmother made a good decision?

Yeah.

What do you tell your friends when they ask 'Where do you live?' How do you describe?

The Manor. I live in The Manor. Since this whole thing has come up for the 100th anniversary, I've gone into great detail. [laughs]

How would you describe the neighborhood changing over time?

Just the fact that the much older people are no longer in this world, I don't think. Almost every house now in this block on both sides has young children, and they're young people, and they're interesting, and good neighbors, and they keep the neighborhood looking wonderful.

Was there a time when people didn't leave and so it just had older people, and young families just wouldn't come here?

I don't think this was a spot that young families even thought about. It was settled for so many years with the same original homeowners so it wasn't until they start dying out that younger people start moving in and even then I think that's much more prevalent now than it was maybe even 15 years ago.

[—Other questions now from another interviewer—]

You said you learned to drive at Budlong Woods?

Mm-hmm.

When you first became aware of Budlong Woods, was it still mostly a farm?

It was just a lot of empty lots with sidewalks, kind of where they were hoping people would come and move in. But it was empty, so it was very safe for a novice driver.

...golf course later...?

No. I don't think so.

Where did you buy your first car? You said you bought your first car at 20 (years old)?

It was a Chevy dealer, but I don't think it was the one on Lawrence [Avenue]. It had to be in some automobile area not too far away. When my sister started buying her cars, she ended up with a Volkswagen green Beetle. And by then we were both in our 60s – more than that – and I know the first time she drove down Montrose, a car drove up alongside of us and the cutest young guy said, "Way to go! WAY TO GO!" [laughs]

Otherwise you were a Chevy family?

No, we were, yes, but then I graduated to Toyotas.

Oh so you made the changeover, Chevy, Toyotas, VW?

Yeah, and then (my sister) Elaine got her cars.

Anything else?

I have that abstract of this whole area that's in the library [*Conrad Sulzer Regional Library*]. I think it's just wonderful that you're doing all this commemorative work. And it really needs to be done right now, I think.

Followup questions:

You mentioned Nancy Keith candies before, which originated in The Manor?

Yes, that drugstore that I was talking about – the one on the corner, Montrose – sold penny candy. And all that stuff, Baby Ruth. Snickers. But there was this silver beautifully-wrapped bar and it said "Nancy Keith" on it. And it was the most wonderful candy – I mean it was really gourmet candy – nothing like you would buy in a drugstore. And the family lived on either Richmond or one of the streets, and they made the candy in their house. And, in addition to the bars, they sold box candy you know, assorted candy, whatever you want. We would go to their house and sit and wait for them to fill the candy. And they had this big covered thing in the living room that kind of scared me. It was the cover over a harp. And, I know when I was younger, I used to not want to go and sit with that.

And then they moved to Evanston and still were in the business on Greenleaf Avenue on Ridge or off of Dodge, actually. Did you, anybody know about...?

...I have been looking.

Well, I always had a very expensive taste for chocolate. [laughs.]

You mentioned that you went to movie houses in the neighborhood?

Oh yes. The Alba was right at I think at Kedzie and Lawrence. It was between Kedzie and Kimball, but I think it was closer to Kedzie. The very first movie that I remember seeing there was Peter Pan and it was [laughs] a movie star that I think never got to be much more than in that movie. That was the first movie I saw there. And then after that, that closed and we went to the Terminal which was on the other side of the street closer to Kimball. There were the 2 movie houses for years and years and years.

And your dad...made ladies handbags and had a showroom at the Merchandise Mart.

Yes. That's right.

And what was the name of his company?

Robbins, like my name, and Staufert, his partner – who designed the handbags – was Staufert, S-T-A-U-F-E-R-T, and, their little signature was 2 little robins.

And they sold...?

They sold, well, their main customer here was Carsons [Carson Pirie Scott and Company] and they had exclusive rights – Carsons had – to his handbags. And when I went to grammar school all my teachers were so happy when they'd have me in their class because they knew at Christmas they would get a handbag.

Well, thank you very much for all the time and the great stories. This will be at the Library of Congress.

Now THAT I will tell my friends! How do you get access to it then, do you have to go to Washington?

No. Online.

Do you remember the community house that was in Manor Park?

Yes, I do. Very well.

What was it used for?

Well it was used for meetings. I don't think it was ever a voting place. But, it was used for the community to have meetings. And all those lovely trellises that are up now were built by a young man who lived 3 doors down, Scott.

After the house was torn down,....

Yeah, that's right. And Eastwood [Avenue] was closed off – that whole thing. They did a good job on that.

They did. It looks nice. And you mentioned that your tree is still out front. What kind of tree is it?

Somebody just told me it is a Silver Maple.

Which, I think, is one of the trees that the original developer planted.

Yeah. There's one branch as you come in I'd like to get it cut. I've called the city over 2 years now. And they say their backlog is over 2 years they can't come do anything. But one big big branch on this side fell last – about a year ago – and they had to come out because that was across the sidewalk.

So that tree is as old as your house?

Yeah, yeah.

Alright. Well, thank you.

[--End--]