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Richard J. Daley Library Special Collections
Oral History Interview
Edward Burke
City Hall, Chicago Illinois
July 22, 2014

Interviewer: Marie Scatena

Q: This is Marie Scatena. It's July 22, 2014, about 11:30 a.m., and we're speaking with Ed Burke in his office at City Hall in Chicago. Thank you, Mr. Burke for granting this interview.

Burke: Thank you for thinking that I have something relevant to add to your project.

Q: Well, as maybe one of the longest-running aldermen, served under seven mayors, is that correct?

Burke: Eight, actually.

Q: Oh, eight mayors, excuse me. That's very impressive, so I'm sure we could do this for days. For the record, if you could tell us your name and when and where you were born and whatever you'd like to share about your early life.

Burke: I was born in Chicago on December 29, 1943; grew up in a neighborhood of Chicago which, at that time, was referred to as Visitation. It was a highly Catholic area. It was the largest Catholic parish in America in those days, in the 1940s and 1950s.

My father was the alderman of the area beginning in 1953 until he died, after a brief illness, on May 11, 1968. And then I succeeded him as the Democratic Committeeman on July 1, 1968, and was elected to the place on the city council on March 11, 1969, and I've represented the 14th Ward since that time until the present.

Q: A lot happened in your life in a short period of time, with your father passing and you assuming his role. What was that like to live through all of that change, and a turbulent time in the city as well?

Burke: It was a turbulent time in the nation. I was a Chicago cop. I was a senior in law school, planning to get married, which we did on May 25th. My wife was the inventrix of Special Olympics, which marked its 46th anniversary two days ago. And I was studying for the bar exam, which I took that summer. I became the Democratic Committeeman, so it was a rather hectic period of time.

Q: How did you get through that? That sounds like a phenomenal amount.

Burke: It seems like a fog now.

Q: Does it? Yeah. Well, I'm curious about transitions— the transition you made from assuming your father's role. Can you remember a story from that time of going into the office?

Burke: He was ill. He was diagnosed with lung cancer in February, and then of course the disease spread. It was inoperable. And as I indicated, he died on May 11th. And some of his political associates felt that I should succeed him as the Democratic leader in the neighborhood.

I was only 24 years old, and became then the youngest Democratic Committeeman, and now, as I think back on it, the longest-serving Democratic Committeeman. But if it wasn't for Richard J. Daley, I never would have become the Democratic Committeeman. He was the one that made it possible.

Q: Did your father have a relationship with Mayor Daley then, or Richard J. Daley? I guess let's go back a little further. When did you first meet Richard J. Daley?

Burke: As near as I can recall, it was at a St. Patrick's Day parade back when the St. Patrick's Day parade was on 79th Street. It was the South Side parade. And I probably was about ten years old. He was elected mayor in 1955.

My father was elected to the City Council in '53, two years before Richard J. Daley became mayor. So my father, by that point, at the time of his death, had served on the city council for about 15 years.

Q: So you kind of grew up—you were steeped in this growing up, the politics of the city. Would you say that's true?

Burke: I would say that's true.

Q: Aside from the St. Patrick's Day parade, do you have any memories of awareness, like wow, this is the mayor of Chicago?

Burke: Well, my father took me to a lot of political events and neighborhood gatherings as I was growing up, so one might say I was doing an internship at his knee for a long period of time.

Q: That's an interesting way to grow up, to have all of this education, hands-on education, before you—

Burke: It's an education that isn't imparted by books. And I'm not foolish enough to think that I got elected at 24 because of any great skill or talent that I had. I was elected because I was my father's son, and people respected him and were willing to give me the benefit of the doubt, that if Joe Burke was a good public official, maybe his kid could carry on in the way he would want.

Q: Were there any issues that you inherited from your father that were dear to his heart, something that he really felt strongly or passionately about that you also did?

Burke: I think he was passionate about taking care of his neighbors. And I think he was a person who did not have the benefit of any great formal education, but he certainly was well read and self-educated. And in a certain way, I think he tried to live out his aspirations through me. He always wanted to emphasize the importance of an education.

Q: Speaking of that, could we talk a little bit about your education and where you went to school?

Burke: My grammar school was the local parish school, Visitation. I graduated in 1957. I went to Quigley Preparatory Seminary, which at that time was located at Rush and Chestnut on the Near North Side. It was the preparatory seminary of the Archdiocese of Chicago. I graduated there in 1961 and then went to DePaul University, where I was a major in sociology, and I finished college in three and a half years.

I went on the police department February 15, 1965, and at the same time began my law school education at DePaul College of Law. I was a night school student for three semesters and then switched from the night

division to the day division and worked on the police department in the afternoons.

Q: I'm thinking about that trek from your neighborhood all the way to Quigley. That was a long trip.

Burke: It was.

Q: You had to go across the city, didn't you?

Burke: I used to walk to the streetcar on Halsted Street at 53rd, catch the streetcar and go up to 63rd, where we could catch the 'L.' And many times we'd ride the el to the end at Loomis so we could get a seat and do our homework on the way down. So then we would take the 'L', which, of course, became the subway, to Chicago Avenue and walk from Chicago Avenue and State to Quigley, which was, as I indicated, at Chestnut and Rush.

Q: That's an interesting choice of school.

Burke: It was a good education. And in those days we went to school on Saturdays. It was set up under the French system. Our days off were Thursday and Sunday. We went to school Monday through Wednesday and then Friday and Saturday.

Q: That's a much more balanced way to learn.

Edward Burke

Burke: Well, it was the European system, I guess, that was imposed on the minor seminary by George William Cardinal Mundelein.

Q: And then you didn't go on, you went to DePaul then.

Burke: I did. I left the seminary and went to DePaul.

Q: What was DePaul like in those days?

Burke: Not like it is today. It was strictly a commuter school. There was no housing for students. But it had a great Chicago tradition of providing a college education to working class people in Chicago who might not otherwise have an opportunity to go to college.

Q: And you were a policeman, then, through law school, so you really were busy.

Burke: I was.

Q: Was there a program that the police department supported going to...?
Am I misremembering something?

Burke: The then superintendent of police, Orlando Wilson, was interested in the ways in which he could get a more educated police force, and so he decreed that if those of us who were in school stayed in school, we could be assigned to a steady watch. Instead of going around the clock from

days to afternoons to midnights, you could remain on a steady watch to accommodate your class schedule, which was a big change in attitude at that time.

Q: I'm just trying to envision going to school and doing such serious and difficult work as studying law and then doing such serious and difficult work as a policeman. How did you make that work?

Burke: The hardest part probably was during the first few months of my time on the police department, when I was in the police academy, because we started early in the morning, and then I had to be at DePaul at 6:00, so to try to squeeze in some studying between the time the academy was over and the time classes started at night was a bit of a challenge. It got better after that.

Q: Did a lot of policemen do that?

Burke: There were not very many policemen in college or law school at the time, but some of the people I do remember from my College of Law days were John Stroger, who was a night school student when I was there, and Mitchell Ware, who ultimately became a deputy superintendent of police and a judge. But he was not in the Chicago police. He was, at that time, in the state police.

Q: I'm curious about your evolution as a police officer and how you merged the legal aspects of it together, partly because you've written this wonderful book about a police force.

Burke: *End of Watch*.¹

Q: Really a tribute to all these folks who are sacrificing their lives and doing service. What did you learn when you were doing that book?

Burke: I felt that it was something that needed to be done as a tribute to those women and men who lost their lives, and the families that were left behind. And interestingly enough, it had never been done anywhere else in the country. It would seem to be a logical project for someone, but nobody ever did it. So we've gotten an awful lot of very positive and complimentary comments, especially from families of the officers whose stories are contained in the book.

Q: To get back to Richard J. Daley and your relationship with him, as a policeman did you have contact with him? Did you know each other?

Burke: I knew him more because his son Richard M. Daley and I were both students at DePaul at the same time, and we would commute to school

¹ *End of Watch: Chicago Police Killed in the Line of Duty, 1853-2006* written by Edward M. Burke and Thomas O'Gorman chronicles the sacrifices of 526 sworn officers of the Chicago Police Department and was published by Chicago's Book Press in October 2006.

together. In fact that photograph there is election night March 11, 1969, and you'll see, standing next to me, is a much younger Richard M. Daley.

Q: Tell me more about that photograph. That was election night?

Burke: Election night, March 11, 1969. At the 14th Ward Democratic headquarters at 4713 South Halsted Street.

Q: There's a lot of smiling faces there. What was that like that day?

Burke: It was a happy night.

Q: It was a happy night? Do you have a story from that night that you can share?

Burke: No. It was a long day—a typical Chicago election. I had seven opponents, and was elected with, I don't know, maybe 87% of the vote, something like that. It was a time in Chicago politics when the machine ruled on election night.

Q: So it was expected that you...?

Burke: Oh, sure.

Q: But happy nonetheless.

Burke: Absolutely.

Q: I'm curious about the day-to-day workings of the ward, representing the people in this ward. How did that work? Did you go into work every morning and sit at a desk, or did you go out?

Burke: A combination thereof. Now I make it a practice to be in the neighborhood every morning, and I'm available to constituents. In those days, back at that time, we also used to have office hours at night. Every Tuesday night was set aside for constituents to come in and seek the response of the alderman, for whatever their issue was. And of course you've got to remember in those days patronage was king, and so much of what the alderman, the committeeman did had to do with finding political jobs for people.

Q: So people came to you looking for work, basically?

Burke: Correct.

Q: And then what was your rapport with the precinct captains?

Burke: We had a very effective grassroots political organization. Every precinct was covered. Many of them were experienced and had done political work for decades, and those were the ones that, of course, were my father's associates who supported me after his sudden death.

Q: So this is pre Internet, and I'm imagining the communication network with all these people. Was it telephones, people calling?

Burke: It was door-to-door. Passing out literature and getting people to the polls on election day, and distributing sample ballots. It was grassroots, old time politics. Not something that takes place anymore.

Q: It seems like it was very effective.

Burke: It was effective in Chicago for generations.

Q: Do you feel like it was a more effective way to build community than, say, using social media or the Internet?

Burke: Well, it's so different, isn't it? People would know their next door neighbor. They would join groups, whether it was the American Legion, or the VFW, or the Knights of Columbus, or the Ladies' Sodality. And in our neighborhood everything revolved around the parish—whether it was the Boy Scouts, the Cub Scouts, and athletic leagues. There was a bowling alley in the basement of the school, and there were bowling leagues, and May processions, and altar boys, and choir boys.

It was just a concept of joining, and people lived next to their relatives, or in close proximity to their relatives. My grandmother and my aunts all lived in the neighborhood. People walked to school, walked back home

at noon time for lunch. Moms were stay-at-home moms, they weren't working. There weren't any air conditioners, so people's windows were open. On hot summer nights, people were out on their front porch interacting with other people in the neighborhood. It was a different time. None of which exists anymore.

Q: You're making me think of how the city has changed so much, as all cities have, and of the losses and the gains from that. I'm wondering what you think the gains are.

Burke: Well, the gains are that probably people have more expendable wealth. But they certainly don't have more expendable interaction with one another. And I think families have suffered. And certainly out in some of the areas of Chicago the family structure has broken down irrevocably.

Q: To get back again to Richard J. Daley and the idea of building community, do you have a story or a memory of a time when you can remember where you could really point, oh, this is great, the way that he has made a cohesive group of people, maybe unexpectedly, in the neighborhoods or even in the city workings?

Burke: You might want to talk with Tom [Donovan] and probe that issue with him. He was probably the closest person there was to Richard J. Daley in the last years of his life. And I'm thinking you might want to ask about

the marches through the 11th Ward by Martin Luther King and civil rights groups, and how they organized neighbors in Bridgeport to resist any temptation to engage in violence like what happened in Marquette Park.

Q: When this was going on, do you have a memory that you could share about that, like where were you when, in '68, you had that personally sort of explosive and transformative year? Could you talk a little bit about that?

Burke: I was a cop during the horrendous riots on the West Side, where virtually the whole West Side was burned down. Richard J. Daley received a lot of national criticism for his shoot to kill order. But the truth is the city was swept up in anarchy, and nothing short of strong police action would be a deterrent to those who would burn down not just the West Side of Chicago, but the entire city of Chicago.

When you think about the way the city's geography exists, it's interesting to note that Richard J. had a plan to save the downtown area. And it was a very simple one. The way the Chicago River runs here, it pretty much isolates the downtown area from the West and North Sides, and the only way to get into the central business district is on bridges. So all one had to do was order the bridges raised and there was no way for

anyone to cross. It was like a medieval moat that protected the castle of the downtown jewels.

The one exception is the South Side, where there is direct access to the Loop, but it can be easily shut off. So in effect the West and North Sides could be shut off by raising the bridges and concentrate the police personnel on the south end of the Loop to prevent any rioting that might exist on the South Side and spread to the downtown area. But there were no riots on the South Side. They all took place on the West Side.

Q: Were you on the streets at that time?

Burke: I was.

Q: It sounds like that was scary, dangerous.

Burke: Well, I think we were ill equipped and not very well trained, all of which changed later on.

Q: So when you were a policeman, did you walk the streets or did you have a squad car?

Burke: I actually did walk a beat on Van Buren Street from Michigan Avenue to Clark. I was assigned to the First District, and then later on I was assigned to the State's Attorney's office, which was a very educational experience for me because I got a chance to work with lawyers who were

prosecutors, some of the finest lawyers I think who were ever assembled in a legal office in Illinois.

Q: Do you have a memory of that, a story maybe you can tell us, that maybe you had an 'aha' moment, or something that just sticks in your mind?

Burke: I remember one older cop that I was assigned to work with who gave me a piece of advice, and he said, "Kid, you better be careful whose ass you kick on the way up the ladder, 'cause you never know whose ass you're gonna have to kiss on the way down." A lot of wisdom in that observation.

Q: [Laughs] You were 24 years old at the time?

Burke: Actually, less than 24. I went on the police department when I was 21.

Q: Oh. I think it's fascinating that you've had these sort of parallel educational experiences, the street corner education and the formal education, and really quite interesting formal education that's European almost, in a way.

Burke: Yeah, in those days four years of Latin, three years of Greek.

Q: Yeah. Interesting to think about it in terms of world view and what makes you love a city and makes a person love a place so much.

Burke: Well, it is. I'm fond of observing that Chicago is the most American of American cities. And Mayor Emmanuel has, should I say, borrowed that phrase from me and uses it quite often.

Q: Could you explain that a little bit more, though?

Burke: I think we have a rich immigrant experience here in Chicago, and clearly we have benefited from the rich tradition of culture that was brought here by so many different immigrant groups. And it truly made Chicago a city of neighborhoods. Not only in terms of their food, their language, their religion, and their dress, but in terms of their compassion for the plight of others.

I think Chicagoans have a tradition of being open and welcoming to people, and it may well be because of the stumbling blocks, the struggles that they endured in their own homelands, whether it's the Irish, who were oppressed by the English, or the Germans who fled, in many instances, because of religious intolerance, or so many other groups of immigrants.

Q: When you say immigrants, do you include migrants, the migration of particularly African Americans from the southern part of the country? Is that what's been your...?

Burke: That, of course, occurred much later in the city's history. Although there were African Americans here in Chicago in the later part of the 19th century. One might not expect that, but there were African American firefighters, there were African American police officers.

And of course on the South Side the African Americans were all Republicans until FDR. That legacy of the Abraham Lincoln emancipation was alive and well in Chicago politics. Big Bill Thompson, who of course was a three term mayor of Chicago, and maybe the most notorious and most corrupt mayor in Chicago's history, was a beneficiary of the loyalty of African American voters on the South Side.

Q: That word "Republican" is interesting.

Burke: Incidentally, he was the last Republican mayor of Chicago.

Q: What years were those?

Burke: His last term was 1927 to 1931, and then Anton Cermak was elected and served until 1933, when he was assassinated. Two Chicago mayors have been murdered in office—Carter Harrison the elder and Anton Cermak.

Q: As a policeman, did you ever feel like that was a possibility, our mayor could be...I mean, your sense of history, obviously that was something

that you've always had in your studies formally. Did you think we could have—

Burke: I don't know if it was something that was in my mind, but clearly it was something in Richard J. Daley's mind because he always was quite careful about the police officers that were assigned to provide protection for him. He grew up, remember, as a contemporary of the Cermak/Kelly-Nash political machine.

Q: It almost feels like that was a foreshadowing. Now it seems like a foregone conclusion that somebody would have security around them. Some of the literature that's written about Mayor Daley is that he overdid it, but in this day and age it seems like less is...

Burke: Maybe as he worked here in this building as a young man, as a clerk for the city council, he would have been privy to firsthand knowledge about the threats to Cermak. There are some that think that the mob arranged for Cermak's murder.

Q: And some think that Roosevelt was the target.

Burke: Most historians have written that Roosevelt was the target, but there's a sufficient amount of evidence, in my humble opinion, to dictate that the other theory has a solid factual basis.

Q: I know you don't have too much more time, so I was wondering is there anything else you'd like to say right now about Richard J. Daley? We haven't even touched on the city council.

Burke: Well, he made it possible for me to become the Democratic leader in our neighborhood and become the alderman. But for him I wouldn't have had the opportunity. So I, in a certain sense, owe him a great debt of gratitude.

Q: And in terms of his, I don't know, I don't want to say his most important contribution to the city, but maybe one of his most important contributions to the city, what's the first thing that pops into your head?

Burke: But for him there wouldn't be a University of Illinois at Circle campus. And I'd also say it took a great deal of political courage for him to make that decision because he uprooted one of his most loyal areas of political support in that neighborhood to make way for the university. But he believed that it was vital to the growth and success of the city. If I ever write my book on profiles in Chicago courage, that will be one chapter.

Q: Well, I hope you do. And I hope we get a chance to chat again.

Burke: We will.

Q: So we can talk about the city council, because that's really an egregious error here, and I know you have to get going. So why don't we say we'll pick it up.

Burke: Do it again, yes.

Q: We'll do this again. And thank you very much.

Burke: Pick up where we left off.

Q: Okay, great. Thank you.