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Oral History Interview

Edward Burke
14th Ward Regular Democratic Organization
2650 W 51st St, Chicago, IL
August 5, 2014

Interviewer: Marie Scatena

Q: Its August 6, 2014...

Burke: Today is the 5th.

Q: Thank you. It's August 5, 2014, and we're in Edward Burke's office in the 14th Ward, talking about his memories of Richard J. Daley and his own life. I thought we might start with what's the most enjoyable aspect of this job that you've had for such a long time.

Burke: I think the most rewarding part of it, if not enjoyable, is the ability to help people who otherwise might not be able to cut through some of the red tape or the bureaucracy to achieve what they're entitled to.

Q: Do you have a story about that recently, or in the past, when Richard Daley was around, that you could tell about helping somebody?

Burke: Are you going to talk to Tom Donovan?

Q: He was interviewed.

Burke: He'd be a wealth of information. But I do remember specifically one case of a family over on 51st Street in the Back of the Yards, where the only breadwinner in the family was a worker in the stockyards, and he cut his hand off on a saw in a meatpacking plant. I called Tom Donovan and within a couple of days a brother in the family was working for the city and keeping that little family together.

But there are thousands of those stories. It was just a different time and a different city. I know there's a lot of criticism about the abuses of the political patronage system, but in truth there were a lot of families that benefited from the ability to access work of some kind.

I don't know if you've read what I thought to be a very well written biography of James Michael Curley. The title of the book is *Rascal King*.¹ Now, you're familiar with James Michael Curley, the legendary mayor of Boston, governor of Massachusetts, congressman, etc. It's a great story

¹ *The Rascal King: The Life and Times of James Michael Curley (1874-1958)* written by Jack Beatty and first published by Da Capo Press in 1992.

about Irish Americans in big city urban political movements. And in a certain way, the good deeds that James Michael Curley did for people, Richard J. Daley did for people—for instance, James Michael Curley, when he became mayor, got the scrub women up off their knees. Up until that point the women that scrubbed the floors in the city hall were on their knees with scrub brushes.

James Michael Curley got them long mops, and got them up off their knees. And not only that, but changed their titles in the budget from scrub women to matrons and attendants. Small things, but in the legend of James Michael Curley, generations of people remembered him for getting the scrub women up off their knees. And in a certain sense, he was doing it for his mother, because his mother was a scrub woman who scrubbed on her knees and developed calluses on her knees from being on her knees scrubbing floors. It really is an interesting read if you ever have a chance.

Q: Thank you. Speaking of reads, I want to ask you, since you're an author and historian, of all the books and films that have been made about Richard J. Daley, which ones do you think are maybe worthy of his legacy, or accurate and fair in their depictions?

Burke: I didn't think *American Pharaoh* was very fair or accurate. I think Royko's book took a lot of liberties with the truth. Maybe one that comes closest to depicting his early rise to power might be Len O'Connor's book *Clout*.

Q: I did read that. I'm trying to recall. The language was interesting. It was a newspaper reporter sort of language. My next question has to do with the media. There have been a lot of things written about Richard J. Daley and his contentious relationship with the media. Was that real, or how did you view his relationship with the media?

Burke: I think that he came from a different era, when there was a lot of cooperation between journalists and politicians. And wasn't one of his biggest supporters the publisher of the *Times*? I'm trying to remember the name now. Early on, in the '50s.

Q: I can't recall.

Burke: It'll come to me.

Q: In one of the interviews in this collection, Newt Minow was interviewed, and I'm going to paraphrase this, but he did say that Richard J. Daley was not good with TV. He was not good on television. It did not do him justice. And maybe that speaks to the era issue, of being from a different era.

Burke: Yes. He became mayor when TV was in its infancy. Not infancy, because it existed going back to the first part of the 20th century, but before it became part of our everyday lives in the '50s, as he was assuming the office of mayor.

Q: Do you remember the first time you saw him on television? Or a memorable time when you said that worked, that didn't work?

Burke: No, I don't.

Q: He gave so many press conferences. That's why I'm asking.

Burke: But Earl Bush was a Svengali for him. He was a bright man who, in a certain sense, helped Richard J. to cope with the media that were, I think, dead set against him. They were always trying to lay a trap for him. And of course he was prone to malapropisms like "the police aren't there to create the disorder, they're there to preserve the disorder." We can chuckle about that now, but at the time anarchy was raging in Chicago, with the whole West Side burning down.

Q: Do you have a memory, a story of that time? You were a policeman then.

Burke: I was a cop then, yes. Well, we were like all the other cops—all days off canceled, working 12 hour shifts, going into the attic and getting shotguns that had been stored away. The police department was sorely

underequipped, so we were getting 30 caliber carbines out of the basements, guns that had been brought home by soldiers from World War II and Korea. It was a frightening time.

Q: Yeah, it is depicted as that, sort of an out-and-out insurrection.

Burke: It was anarchy, yes.

Q: It seemed there was a disconnect between the media depiction of what was going on in Chicago and how the people of Chicago viewed Richard J. Daley's actions. Does that seem fair?

Burke: I think that was more finely tuned in the 1968 convention. The Eastern liberal media that came to Chicago to cover the convention didn't like Daley. They didn't like his reputation. But after the convention, Daley could never be defeated. The people of Chicago viewed him as standing up almost like a pater familias concept and protecting his city. And he truly did love Chicago, and he wanted nothing more than to be the mayor of Chicago. He could have been Secretary of HEW or whatever if he wanted to, but he never wanted to leave Chicago.

Q: That connection to place comes across in so much of the literature. What is it about Chicago? What are some of the things that you think made it so dear to him?

Burke: Well, he grew up here and he always was fond of saying that Chicago is a city of neighborhoods, and it really is. Even to this very day it's a city of neighborhoods. He had very strong connections to his neighborhood, Bridgeport, which really gave him his first chance to succeed. And he could have moved on, but he remained at 3536 Lowe for his entire public life. He lived for a very short period of time out in St. Leo Parish after he got married, but it was not long afterwards that he came back down to Bridgeport.

Q: You just mentioned parish, and I was wondering, the Catholic faith figures prominently in everything that's written about Richard J. Daley. In what ways do you think that shaped his—maybe not political actions, but his views of things?

Burke: He was a devout Catholic, mass and communion every day. He was down on his knees praying. But that was a devotion that he shared with Mrs. Daley. She was also a devout Catholic. Probably not something that was rare in that era in which he grew up.

Parish life was really the focus of what all of us grew up with. Talk to somebody whom you encountered in a different city and they say they're from Chicago, the first question is what parish did you come from. And that's how people in Chicago identify.

Our parish, Visitation, was the largest parish in America at the time. Seventy-eight nuns in the convent, eight priests in the rectory, 2,400 kids in the grammar school, 1,500 girls in the high school, 400 kids in the kindergarten.

Q: I'm envisioning 400 little toddlers running around. It's amazing.

Burke: The whole neighborhood life revolved around the parish—sports, the Holy Name Society, the Ladies' Sodality, bowling league, you name it.

Q: And as the mayor, was he present in many of those sort of organizations? Did he make himself physically present at these events?

Burke: Oh, absolutely. In our neighborhood political tradition, going to wakes was a part of what politicians did. My father was out every night going to wakes. And every day the local undertakers would call and give him the list of who died and what family, where they came from, and every night he and Judge McDermott and Committeeman Thomas O'Brien would make the rounds of the funeral parlors and attend wakes.

I can still run into people today who will say to me, 'Your father was at my grandfather's wake, or your father was at my father's wake.' I attempted to continue that, but it didn't last very long. It was just too demanding.

Q: That does sound grueling, in many ways.

Burke: It was something that families really appreciated, that sign of respect, that coming and paying respect to the family and expressing condolences.

Q: Your own father died when you were quite young.

Burke: I was 24.

Q: And you became a ward committeeman right afterwards.

Burke: Correct.

Q: I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about what it was like to step into those shoes and do that. You were very young to have that position.

Burke: Yes. Well, it was because of his political associates that I became the successor. And during his illness, I was kind of filling in for him. And so Tom Doyle and Joe Harnick and the other old time precinct captains really rallied around me and encouraged me to become his successor. And it was not a slam dunk. I won by three and a half votes in an election participated in by the precinct captains to be a temporary ward committeeman. And then I was elected the following year to the city council, and then elected ward committeeman.

Q: Just imagining you at 24 with all these folks that are a lot older. Was that intimidating or did you feel supported by the...?

Burke: Well, I felt supported by the key people in the organization who were committed to my father and then committed to me. And there's no one left. There's nobody that was in that meeting that night, July 1, 1968 who's still alive. And you may have noted, too, at the last council meeting, I remarked that I had gone back to look at the old journal of 1979 when Jane Byrne was inaugurated, and I was the only one that was there at this last meeting on Wednesday who was there in 1979.

Q: I feel like we're sitting here with history. *[Laughs]* Reading a kind of living book. I want to go back a little bit further, maybe a lot further. When Richard J. Daley was first installed as mayor, were you at that ceremony?

Burke: I was. My father had been elected in 1953, and he was reelected in 1955, the same year that Richard J. Daley was elected mayor, so my father had come into the council two years earlier.

Q: And you were actually at the swearing in?

Burke: There's a picture, yes, of me there with my father and my mother, and I think it was...I don't know who else was seated there, but the tradition was that each of the aldermen could bring three guests and sit at the

aldermanic desk. But I think that the photo is on display on the second floor of City Hall.

Q: I'm going to have to check that out.

Burke: The first inauguration of Richard J.

Q: When you were there, you were a young boy, 11, 10?

Burke: I would have been 12 then.

Q: Do you have memories of that, like how it felt to be in there? Was there a feeling that you can recall that, oh, this is something very, very important that's happening?

Burke: There was a lot of pomp and circumstance, so I'm sure that as 12-year-old I must have felt a sense of the fact this is an important ceremony.

Q: I'm just trying to get to the awareness of when, maybe, you felt that Richard J. Daley presence, this is a significant person in my life, the history of the city, this is an important...when did that kind of take hold?

Burke: It's hard to say. Certainly by the teenage years he was an institution. I don't know if I can pinpoint that, but let me think about it.

Q: Now, you were friends with Richard M. Daley, is that correct?

Burke: I used to drive him to school every day.

Q: Oh. High school?

Burke: College.

Q: Were you classmates in high school as well?

Burke: No, he went to De La Salle. I went to Quigley. And he was a year ahead of me. His first and second years of college were spent at Providence, in Providence, Rhode Island, a Dominican school. And his roommate in those days was the son of Fulgencio Batista, the dictator of Cuba. Then he transferred to DePaul and finished. In those days you could do three years of college and then transfer to the law school. So he finished in the undergraduate school after three or three and a half years and then went to the law school.

I would pick him up every morning at 3536 South Lowe. We carpooled—myself, Mike Casey, Jim Sheedy, and Pat Doyle. We would start at Garfield Boulevard and Peoria, where I would pick up Jim Sheedy and Mike Casey, and then we would go down Garfield Boulevard to Union, Union to 53rd, pick up Pat Doyle and then continue down Union Avenue to 3536, pick up Rich and then go over Oakwood Boulevard to Lakeshore Drive, and up Lakeshore Drive to Fullerton, and over Fullerton to DePaul.

And everyone knows where they were when they heard the news of John F. Kennedy's assassination, right? Or you're too young.

Q: Yes, I was quite young then.

Burke: I had just left DePaul, and we were going down...was it Armitage? Webster. We were heading west on Webster to go back to the South Side. It was a Friday about 12:25 or whatever. And in the backseat was Mike Casey, and sitting next to me was Rich Daley when the news came over the radio that shots had been fired at the presidential motorcade in Dallas. We turned around, went right back to school to the student union, which was in the basement of Alumni Hall. By that time they had the radio on the loudspeaker system and everybody was just in shock.

Q: Was it more scary than sad, or more sad than scary, or a combination?

Burke: I think we all felt that we were all going to be called up for the military and be off to war. I think that was the initial reaction.

Q: One of those times.

Burke: So yes, I knew the family. In fact when Rich went to Marine PLC, his sister Ellie and I took him to the airport, which would have been the summer between third and fourth year of college.

Q: It sounds like you were close to the whole family then.

Burke: Oh, I knew all of them. And there are a lot of people that will tell you they were in the basement of 3536. Not too many of them were. But I was. And I had the privilege of accompanying Richard J. when he would sing his favorite song, "A Dear Little Town in the Old County Down."

Q: Oh, that sounds wonderful. Can you sing that?

Burke: I'm not a very good singer, but I remember the words. I could play it.

Q: Yeah. That sounds like fun.

Burke: It was. I stayed in their house up in Grand Beach back before they moved to the old Hollingshead house on the beach. At that time they lived in a cottage on the golf course. I knew all of them. I knew Pat, who's the oldest, and then Rich is the second oldest, and then Mike. No. Pat's the oldest, then Ellie, then Rich, then Mike, then Billy—no. Pat's the oldest, then Mary Carol, then Ellie, then Rich, then Mike, then John, and then Billy. Billy's the youngest. I was at Mary Carol's wedding. The reception was at South Shore Country Club. I knew the whole family. And they're terrific people.

Q: I'm envisioning South Shore Country Club, and looking out over the lake. This sounds like a digression, a little bit, but the lake figures so prominently in Chicago. And in one of the interviews, it was with Vince

Gavin, he was recalling a story of driving former Mayor Daley back and forth from Grand Beach to Chicago, and he would stop and they would look at the lake, and he'd say that's Chicago's greatest asset. Do you have any memories of discussing this great natural wonder?

Burke: Have you read Lois Willie's book?

Q: It was a while ago, yes.

Burke: It's kind of interesting, now that there's the debate over the Lucas museum and how that forever open, free and clear will play into this. I think there's a big difference between Grant Park and the proposed site of the Lucas museum.

Q: This idea of recognizing the lake as an amazing asset of the city is something that you don't read about and hear about, think about a powerful politician continuously thinking about this and wondering about it.

Burke: And interesting, too, isn't it, that the journalists who gave us the biggest blots on the lakefront, McCormick Place and Meigs Field, would be the fore bearers of that reform tradition that is bandied about today?

Q: Yeah. There's a lot of irony there.

Burke: Isn't there?

Q: Yeah.

Burke: And you know Colonel McCormick was in elective office. He was the only person younger than I to be elected to the city council.

Q: Oh. What year was that?

Burke: McCormick served as alderman from 1904-1906. He was also elected to the Metropolitan Sanitary District.

Q: Well, I could go on about the lake, but I'd like to probe a bit about when you were a policeman and you were walking a beat. What a great way to get to know the city. But do you have a story about walking the beat that maybe is related somehow to knowing the mayor?

Burke: No. Of course I knew him. I slept in his house. I knew his whole family. I showed you a copy of my recruit class picture, right?

Q: No, I don't think so.

Burke: I thought I had it downtown. Recruit Class 65 1A1. It'll be 50 years this coming February.

Q: Wow. Congratulations. That's a long time to serve. Do you think that Richard Daley realized his vision for the city, and to what effect did he?

Burke: I don't know that he in his own mind would think of himself as a visionary. I think he was more concerned with the nuts and bolts of running a city and keeping it effective.

But his greatest legacy, of course, would be the revitalization of the downtown area and the University of Illinois, the Circle campus, which I said to you before I thought was a profile in courage, because he incurred the wrath of a loyal political supportive community that had given him support in his earlier political campaigns. And now he antagonized them by making a decision that he knew was best for the whole city, not just that neighborhood. I've got a 10:30 downtown.

Q: Okay.

Burke: But we can do this again.

Q: Yes, thank you.

Burke: I hate to keep dragging it out.

Q: That's fine. I'm interviewing for this collection until the end of this year.

Burke: Oh, okay.