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Richard J. Daley Library Special Collections  
Oral History  
Edward Burke – Part 3  
City Hall  
October 20, 2014

Interviewer: Marie Scatena

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Q: This is Marie Scatena interviewing Ed Burke in his office in City Hall. It's October 20, 2014 and we're talking about, Mr. Burke, your memories of City Council, and particularly starting with those early experiences, if you have a story, something maybe surprising or unusual that happened when you were a freshly minted City Council member.

Burke: Well, I think that Mayor Richard J. Daley had a deep respect for the role of the City Council in the governance of the municipality, and perhaps because he actually worked in the City Council when he was a young and up and coming staffer. He took his role as the presiding officer of the City Council very seriously, and would never leave the presiding officer's chair, not even for a break. So when he gaveled the meeting to order, he was there for the entire meeting, and he presided over the council with a strong presence, which would be challenged by some of the members.

At that time there were members who were not only committed opponents of Richard J. Daley politically and philosophically, but who were also skilled orators and experienced members of the body—people like Leon Despres, Jack Sperling, and Seymour Simon. They were accomplished political foes, and he was always on his toes and had to be prepared to counteract whatever legislative mischief they might prepare at each meeting.

We also met on a much more frequent basis than we do today. In the municipal code the city law provides that we should meet every second and fourth Wednesday. In recent years mayors have attempted to limit the number of council meetings, so more often than not today we meet only once a month.

Q: That's a big difference.

Burke: It is. And I think the political theory around here now is that the less often the 50 members can get together, the less mischief they can propose.

Q: So when you say mischief, I'm guessing that has to do with the issues that they were dealing with at that time. Can you recall any particular mischief between those years when you were there and Richard J. Daley was the mayor, so '69 through '76?

Burke: I'd have to go back and look at the clippings and think about it a little bit. But there was always something that would have to do with public housing, or fire department hiring, or police department hiring.

You might recall that one of the very contentious issues at the time was that a federal judge had held up federal revenue sharing because of Daley's policy of hiring. That was really a big financial roadblock at the time. In fact Daley had to go to the First National Bank of Chicago and borrow money to make up for the shortfall in the federal revenue sharing.

In fact when he suddenly died, Bob Abboud, who was the chairman and CEO of First National Bank of Chicago, showed up here at City Hall and was in a state of great trepidation because he had taken Daley's signature as security for the loan, which was tens and tens of millions of dollars. And this being a strong council, weak mayor form of government, Mayor Daley did not have the authority to enter into that loan agreement without the approval of the City Council, so in effect the First National Bank was standing there with a guarantee that was not worth the paper it was written on.

Ultimately, Mike Bilandic became the mayor and honored every obligation that Daley had entered into. But I'm sure there were a lot of

other examples of actions that Mayor Daley took that were assumed by the other party to the transaction to be valid exercises of his mayoral power, but really was not because they had not been approved by the City Council.

Q: Thank you. What was it like to be on the council then, the actual experience of being in the room and debating these issues and trying to get things passed?

Burke: Early on Tom Keane, who was the mayor's council leader, pretty much ran a one man show. But as the years unfolded, he understood the need to bring in the younger people and give them a part of the responsibility for the functioning of the legislative branch of municipal government. So originally it was expected you would fill a chair, vote the way you were told, and keep your mouth shut. Later on he realized the importance of assigning certain areas of responsibility to the younger members.

And I became a chairman of an important committee. In my second year on the City Council I became chairman of the Police & Fire Committee, which was quite an assignment for a young guy like me.

Q: It sounds like it might have been a little intimidating to be in that arena with all of those experienced people.

Burke: Well, there's an old observation, isn't there, that in the kingdom of the blind the one-eyed man is king. On our side of the aisle, on the administration supporters side of the aisle, after you passed Tom Keane, and Paul Wigoda, and Tom Fitzpatrick, there wasn't a lot of competition for leadership roles.

Q: So in the early '70s, '71, there's been things written about the Coffee Rebellion, speaking of having younger people and more participation.

Burke: Yes. Eddie Vrdolyak came in in '71, and that changed the dynamic. He was smart and brash and ambitious, and had the ability to inspire followers. And that's where the alleged Coffee Rebellion came from.

Q: And that had to do with your drinking coffee before the meetings?

Burke: Correct.

Q: That was at the Sherman House?

Burke: The Sherman Hotel, which—or no, I think it was the Bismarck.

Q: The Bismarck?

Burke: Yeah.

Q: Okay. So you all met before the council meeting, or those of you who were part of that, it was yourself and... *(Laughs)*

Burke: Yeah, those of us who were willing to be identified with a mini revolt. But of course Tom Keane and Richard J. Daley knew long before the meeting ever started what was transpiring at the Coffee Rebellion meeting because there were quislings among us.

Q: [Laughs.] And you knew it as well?

Burke: Oh, of course.

Q: It was actually, it sounded like, an extension of this meeting, or a pre meeting that was also pretty public.

Burke: In fact this cup that I'm drinking from right now was made by, or commissioned by Eddie Vrdolyak for the members of the Coffee Rebellion.

Q: Oh, wonderful.

Burke: You can see it's weathered the test of time, has it not? That dates to 1971.

Q: Oh, my gosh. Can I get a picture of that?

Burke: Sure.

Q: Okay. Well, I will take a picture when we're finished here of that with my camera. So those meetings sound like they were kind of, as you said, they energized the council.

Burke: It did. And remember that when I was elected our salary was \$8,000 a year, and there were really no significant appropriations for staff. We, I think, had a secretary and that was it. So Eddie Vrdolyak really energized the members to lobby for a more effective City Council operation.

The salary went from \$8,000 to, I believe, it might have been as high as \$17,500 in those days, and then there was an appropriate for car allowance and office allowance and additional staff, so it really started to take on the trappings of what a legislative body should require to be effective.

Q: What were some of the accomplishments of the City Council during Richard J. Daley's time? Was there some major issue that you felt like really made some kind of substantive contribution at that time?

Burke: The council functioned as a place where initiatives from the mayor's office would come and be debated and generally approved, so there were not a lot of initiatives that actually came from the City Council.



Q: I'm recalling television coverage of the City Council meetings, and some of them at that time seemed kind of rambunctious.

Burke: Yes. The one episode that sticks in my mind that has been preserved for posterity is the time that Dick Simpson wouldn't sit down. And there's a picture of him with the sergeant at arms, Sam [Coumo] trying to put him in his seat. And Daley's banging the gavel, and he wouldn't sit down. That was rather dramatic.

There was another occasion when—I think it was Despres had aggravated Mayor Daley by criticizing the appointment of Tom Keane's son to a minor city board or commission. I think it was the Board of Zoning Appeals or some obscure commission. And Daley really blew his cork. He was so aggravated that he was running back and forth on the dais waving his hands and shouting at the top of his lungs. But the TV cameras had been broken down already and they were never there to record that moment in history.

Q: Thank you for sharing that. That's the other counterpart to the photograph I saw in one of your books. It's a great photo. Well, I have basically two more questions to bring this full circle. So the city is different than it was in the time of Richard J. Daley's tenure in office, and it looks different.

Burke: Hopefully it looks better.

Q: Yeah. In some ways it feels the same. Is there some way you might want to just say something about how some of the changes that Mayor Daley made to the city—Mayor Richard J. Daley made to the city—made it better?

Burke: Well, I think probably one of his proudest accomplishments would have been the creation of the branch of the University of Illinois at what became known as Circle campus. In fact the Channel 11 series just yesterday had a small vignette about the creation of the Circle campus and what it meant to the long-term growth and improvement of the city. For 30 years it had been on the drawing boards, and nothing ever happened. And it was Richard J. that got it done at very significant political expense to his own base. Those were all people that were Daley supporters that were displaced by the construction.

There hadn't been a high-rise building built downtown in Chicago since the Great Depression until Richard J. Daley was elected in 1955, and then his vision to create tax increment financing for the North Loop led to the construction of so many of these buildings which are now dominating the skyline of Chicago.

Remember he at one time talked about cleaning up the Chicago River and the possibility of fishing in the Chicago River and cooking the fish along the banks? People scoffed at that, but now it's becoming a reality. The river is clean and you can walk down to the lakefront right now and find people fishing in Monroe Harbor.

Q: That's a lovely image. Thank you.

Burke: I don't know that I'd be taking those fish home to cook them up for dinner, but it's getting there.

Q: Well, one final question. How do you think Richard J. Daley would like to be remembered?

Burke: I think he'd like to be remembered as a person who left the city that he loved in a much better position than where he found it. I think he'd like to be remembered as a faithful husband, a dutiful father, a devout Catholic and a role model for other people who aspire to leadership in government and politics.

Q: Thank you. That's lovely. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Burke: No. I think that is, I hope, something that he would be proud to hear me say.

Q: Well, thank you. That's a beautiful way to end.