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**Wilson Frost**  
**Oral History Interview**

**FINAL**

**Richard J. Daley Oral History Collection**  
**Special Collections and University Archives**  
**University of Illinois at Chicago Library**

**Interviewed by Marie Scatena**  
**Location of Interview: Special Collection and University Archives,**  
**University of Illinois at Chicago Library**

**November 13, 2014**

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*This interview was conducted over telephone with the technical assistance of UIC Specialist Robert Pearce.*

Q: I'm going to start off by slating the interview by saying the date and our names, and then I'm going to ask you if you wouldn't mind saying your name again and a little bit about yourself, like when and where you were born and just anything you'd like to share about your early life. So that's the way we'll start and then we'll just take it from there. How does that sound?

Frost: Okay.

Q: Lovely, okay. So Mr. Pierce, can we give it a...? Okay, all right. So we're going to start. Today is November 13, 2014. My name is Marie Scatena,

and I'm speaking with Mr. Wilson Frost, who is in Palm Springs, California.

Frost: No, I'm in Palm Desert.

Q: Palm Desert. Oh, okay, thank you. I'm sorry about that.

Frost: That's east of Palm Springs.

Q: Oh, okay. So a tiny bit closer to us in Chicago.

Frost: Yes. It's about 15 miles east of Palm Springs. We have Palm Springs, Rancho Mirage, then Palm Desert. And then you're going toward Arizona.

Q: Oh. Well, thank you. That gives us a lot of information about where you are so we can use that in our interview here. So I'd like to start with a question about yourself so we can, again, put this into more context. And Mr. Frost, could you say your name for us and when and where you were born, and a little bit about your early life?

Frost: Wilson Frost. I was born in Cairo, Illinois. Moved to Chicago—my family moved to Chicago when I was about three years old. Lived in Chicago ever since. I attended elementary, high school, junior college in Chicago. I went to Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. I attended John Marshall in Chicago, Kent Law School in Chicago, and was admitted to practice law in the state of Illinois, and am still licensed to practice in the state of Illinois since 1958.

Q: Thank you. That gives us a good understanding of where you came from. So I'm wondering, because our interview is about former Chicago Mayor Richard J. Daley, if you could just say when did you first become aware of the mayor, and what was your first encounter with him like?

Frost: Well, I lived in Chicago, was aware of the political climate in Chicago. I was involved in politics sort of on the edges, and later I became more interested in politics. At that time Richard J. Daley became the mayor of the city of Chicago. In 1967, I ran for alderman of the then 21<sup>st</sup> Ward, and was in a runoff, and was elected, and had an opportunity to meet him personally, being a member of the council, and from that established a relationship in the city council. And I stayed in the City Council until about 1983.

Q: That's a long tenure. Can you tell us maybe a story about maybe the early years when you were in the City Council? That was a very turbulent time in Chicago's history.

Frost: Well, I was in the City Council, and at that time the City Council was made up primarily of people who belonged to the Democratic Party. We had a lot of people that—we had a couple people in the city council like Leon Despres and others who were pretty vocal and what have you, and used to get involved the discussions and the debates involving just about any issue, whether it was schools or whether it was financing, or any of those things.

As a result of me coming from the 21<sup>st</sup> Ward at that time, I was a Democrat, and I had the label of being a Democrat, so I had an opportunity when first elected to meet with the mayor and to become familiar with the programs that he was trying to espouse for our community, and ask him whether or not I could be available to have some input and to participate. He suggested and recommended that I do participate in those debates and everything, and I did.

Q: Were there any of those debates that particularly stood out in your memory?

Frost: Well, there were lots of debates, and some of them, most of them involved either finances or education. At that time, we passed a budget for the Board of Education, but we didn't select (members)—and I think we voted on the members of the board at that time. But many of those rules and laws have been changed since, and the City Council no longer participates in that function.

Q: That's a really interesting change. It makes me think about how your relationship with your communities and how close that you must have been. Can you talk a little bit about your relationship with the people in your ward?

Frost: Well, in Chicago the wards are community organizations as well as political organizations, and they get involved in the needs, the wants and

hear the problems of the people in the community. They maintain office hours to hear complaints and to try to address those needs so that it is sort of like the place where people have an opportunity to voice their concerns about city government and about community activities.

Q: Was there a time when you were in your ward office speaking with the people that you represented where you had to sort of mediate between what was going on at City Hall and what your constituents wanted, or when their concerns were different than City Hall's?

Frost: Yes. And in certain communities you had people whose needs, wants and desires were a little different. They would exercise their thoughts, feelings and what have you, and you would have to, in many instances, hear what they were talking about and to take that information to City Hall and ask for some resolve.

Q: And at that time, it's been said that we had a strong mayor in Chicago and a weak City Council. Would you agree with that? And how did that work then if you were an alderman and you were trying to get across something to the city council and the mayor's office that maybe they didn't agree with about your ward?

Frost: Well, I thought it was the role of the alderman to explain and to let the mayor know what the problems in his or her community were, and to get them addressed. In many instances, if there was a feeling of anti-

administration, you wanted the people to know that whether or not the administration politically agreed with them, the services and their tax dollars would be equally shared and used for their benefit.

Q: I'm recalling seeing on television city council meetings being televised, and they seemed like they were kind of raucous affairs sometimes.

Frost: Well, they involved some theatre and, you know, you give people an audience, sometimes they're going to take advantage. And having television cameras there, well—[laughs]—aldermen sometimes become actors and they want to make sure that when the television camera is on that their community is able to witness or to see them doing or talking about the problems that they have in their community.

Q: And just for the record and for researchers who will read this in the future, your ward was the 21<sup>st</sup> Ward, is that correct? And where was that located in the city?

Frost: Well, my ward was the 21<sup>st</sup> Ward. It started around 83<sup>rd</sup> Street, went as far east as Cottage Grove, went as far west as about Vincennes or Halsted, and went south, oh, into Morgan Park. However, after my first term, they redistricted the city wards because the populations had shifted. And every ten years, according to the census, you have to redistrict the wards. After that time I became the alderman of the 34<sup>th</sup> Ward, which was the southern

part of the old 21<sup>st</sup> Ward. And that was the office or the location where I was until I retired from the city council.

Q: Thank you. I would love to go back to the city council meetings when you were part of the Coffee Rebellion with Ed Burke and Alderman Vrdolyak and Kelly and others. Could you talk a little bit about the Coffee Rebellion?

Frost: Well, the Coffee Rebellion, that was a group of us who felt that there were certain things in the council that we needed to have addressed, and issues that we wanted addressed, and so we would set up a caucus in order to prepare an agenda that we could submit to the city council for consideration. Aldermen can submit ordinances or resolutions to the city council for consideration, and we used that as a vehicle to do so.

Q: And what was Mayor Daley's relationship with this group of people that were trying to maybe not wrest some of the power, but certainly question some of the city structures?

Frost: Well, most of this occurred at the later part of his regime, and this, if my memory serves me correct, started and became more active after. He ran a pretty tight ship, and if there were problems or if there were complaints, he would attempt to address those complaints.



Q: Thank you. What was your relationship like with him? Were you able to get an audience with him when you needed to or did you have a more formal relationship with him?

Frost: Well, initially, being a rookie or new alderman, you know, until he found that I was one that participated in the discussions and the debates and everything, then I was called to his office for a discussion in terms of him wanting to know what services I need in my ward, and whether or not I was satisfied with those services, what kind of complaints I was receiving from my constituents. Later on I was given an opportunity to participate in some of the debates and everything, and as a young alderman. And since I was a Democrat, this gave me an edge over some of my colleagues who were independents, like Sammy Rayner and William Cousins.

Q: I'd love to hear more about some of the issues in your ward—could recall just a couple of them that were really, really important?

Frost: Well, the issues primarily that aldermen would receive complaints about would be on garbage pickup, street cleaning, sewer repairs, tree trimming, and housekeeping type of events. Those are the majority of the complaints that aldermen have.

Insofar as the crime and all of those things, those came about a little later on, and we did not have the same type of issues that you have there today to deal with. But we did have a relationship with police districts and we

would have community meetings where we would have the youth officers and the heads of the police districts to come in and address the public to try to establish a relationship.

Q: It's interesting to hear how public safety was quite different than it is today. Are there some other issues that are quite different than they are now that you dealt with?

Frost: Well, most of them, you know—my mindset is not in that era. I've been away from there now some 25 or 30 years, so it makes it a little different for me to, you know, specifically recall.

Q: Yes. Well, I appreciate your taking the time to think about this. It is quite a distance in time. Well, there's one story that I heard that I wonder if you could talk a little bit about and tell us. When you were offered the City Council president pro tem position, in an interview for the Chicago History Museum that mentioned that you were at a shoe shine parlor at Clark and Washington, and I was wondering if you could tell that story for us.

Frost: Well, the mayor was getting his shoes shined, and I was passing there, going on the way to my law office, and the mayor called me in and told me that he was going to recommend and appoint me as president pro tem, but for me not to say anything about it until it happened, He wanted to

alert me and to make sure that it was acceptable to me. This was after Claude Holman, who was then president pro tem, had passed away.

Q: So you were just on the street walking by and it was kind of a casual conversation that took place?

Frost: Yes. This was in the morning, oh, I'd say around 9:00, about 9:00. And he used to stop and get his shoes shined, and my law office was right around the corner on Madison Street, so I was walking there and I saw him and his bodyguards, and that's when he gave me this information.

Q: Well, thank you. That's an interesting way to be offered a pretty important position. When you served as president pro tem, what was that like? How did that change your relationship with maybe the mayor or the council, or did it?

Frost: Well, the fortunate part for me was that I was able to do it at a time when I had the mayor to fall back on, because when he became ill, and was away from the city council, so that I had to go it sort of alone. I didn't have a backup of knowing that he's going to be walking in the door any moment, or he just went out for a few minutes or something, so that I had to deal with a lot of the experienced aldermen who had been in the council for many years before me, like Leon Despres and others who, at one time or another would challenge some of the decisions or rulings that I made.

After a while I was able to make sure that the council ran smoothly. If someone took issue with a ruling that I made, I put it to the body for them to make a decision as to whether or not my ruling should be sustained or not, and that was the way it went. He got the message of how things had occurred during his absence, and when he returned, he was really pleased and everything with my performance and the way that the council ran during his absence.

Q: And when Mayor Daley passed in 1976, do you have any memories about that particular day and what that time was like right afterwards?

Frost: Well, I was at my law office, and I had gotten a call that he had been out on the Southeast Side or something, and evidently he had become ill and they had taken him to the hospital. Then later on I got a call that he had passed. And at that time I went over to the city council to verify and to, you know, find out what was going on and go from there.

Q: There was a lot of turmoil and confusion at that time. What were your feelings about all that that happened afterwards?

Frost: Well, my feelings were under the law as it existed then—and since then, you know, we changed the law and made it clear or what have you—under the existing law, until the city council elected someone, I was the mayor. And that was what I said. I had called Bill Scott, who was then the

Attorney General of the state of Illinois, and he supported my thoughts and my position in the matter.

Q: Yeah, there were a lot of big debates going on at that time about what to do in the media. Did that affect you or did you just, you know, wait to see what would happen?

Frost: No. You know, I was discharging any responsibilities and duties that I felt that I had. And I was not permitted to go into the mayor's office, so I couldn't do it from there. But subsequently we had a meeting, and we sort of worked it out. Whether or not I was satisfied or not, I didn't have enough votes from the city council to become elected mayor, so that was when I became the chairman of the Finance Committee.

Q: Well, that's a big responsibility, too.

Frost: Yes.

Q: Yeah. And so I'd like to just go back just a little bit about the idea about how government was run. Mayor Daley used to like saying that good government is good politics and good politics is good government. Do you have any comments about that and how that actually worked in your career?

Frost: Well, I might differ in terms of it. As a slogan it sounds good, but it depends upon who becomes, you know, the beneficiary or the one that's

subjected to it. Good and bad are relative terms, and it depends on who's making the judgment call. *[Laughs.]*

Q: *[Laughs.]* That's wonderful. Speaking of judgment calls, Mayor Daley made a lot of big changes in the city and big decisions. Of all the things that he did, all of his accomplishments, which ones stand out in your mind as being ones that were really good, or they benefited the most number of people of the city?

Frost: Well, it's pretty hard to point out or to be specific because as a council member, not only did I get a chance to see what was going on in Chicago, but I had an opportunity to travel and to see what went on in other cities, and on a comparative basis the city of Chicago, in my opinion, we were head and shoulders over most cities, so that overall our tourists, our parks, and all of those amenities and facilities that we had, in my opinion, were pluses for Chicago.

And this enhanced our tourism and all those things, our downtown area and those sort of things, so that this was a combination of all. And in my opinion, these are many reasons why people enjoy Chicago, like to visit Chicago, and like to live in Chicago.

Q: Well, maybe with the exception of the weather. I have to throw that in.

Frost: Well, but, you know, with the lake there we have some good weather, and we've had some real cold days. I remember when I first ran for public

office we had some snows during that period that were pretty severe. But, you know, that goes with the territory.

Q: Yeah, '67 was a banner year for snowstorms.

Frost: That was the year I ran. [*Laughs.*]

Q: [*Laughs.*] So you have a lot of experience with Chicago weather and getting the job done.

Frost: That's right. I had to deal and get the snow plows in and out of my community.

Q: Yeah, that didn't work so well for Mayor Bilandic.

Frost: No. Well, what happened with him is that he promised people or told people that they were going to get certain services, and they were looking for them, and they didn't arrive, so he had to wear the jacket for them.

Q: Yeah. Yeah, there's a lot of give and take and a lot of responsibilities in the particular wards, and I appreciate all the nuts and bolts information that you've given us. I just wondered if you could speak a little bit—and I only have a few more questions—where did Mayor Daley, in your estimation, sort of miss the mark? What were some of his weaknesses, or a weakness, or a particular instance when things did not go well?

Frost: Well, being a chief executive or what have you, it's impossible for you to be able to individually know everything and do everything. And you have to depend upon people around you to give you information, your workers to do a good job, and to have credibility and all. The most important thing is they have to fairly distribute those services and things so that they're not given to just one community, but they're given to all communities on an equal and fair basis. And if your staff and some of your employees don't do that, then you wear the jacket for them.

Q: Yeah. So I have just one more question, and that is how do you think Richard J. Daley would like to be remembered?

Frost: Well, I think he would like to be remembered as a man who ran a tight ship and a good city. He was proud of his Chicago. I know on trips we would take to the Democratic conventions and various other places that he was very proud of his city. And it was the same when he was meeting with political candidates and everything.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add, maybe a story we missed or a thought that you have about the former mayor?

Frost: No, not that I can think of.

Q: Okay, well, I'd like to thank you very much for your time. This was great. And I'll be sending you a transcript, to your home in Palm Desert so you can take a look at it.



Frost: Okay. Now you have my address here?

Q: You know what? I don't know if I do. I'd love to get that.

Frost: Okay.

Q: Okay, I'm ready.

Frost: 39363 Tandika Trail, Palm Desert, California 92211.

Q: All right. Well, thank you. That's wonderful. You will be getting this transcript quite soon, so please look for that. And I'm looking forward to working with you on this and hoping we can get this all tied up by the end of the year, alrighty?

Frost: All right. While I still remember a few things.

Q: Oh, this was wonderful. Thank you. This was just great. And I'm glad we finally got to speak.

Frost: Same here.

Q: All right. Thank you, Mr. Frost.

*[End of recording.]*