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Jim Riley Oral History Interview Part II

Richard J. Daley Library Special Collections and University Archives

University of Illinois at Chicago

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MS: Here we are with at Harry Caray's¹ with Jim Riley. Thank you so much for doing this interview.

JR: My pleasure. I just thought this was a part I forgot. Actually, we ran out of time—it's not that either one of us forgot. This is a very important part, I think, of my history with the Mayor. It started in Aspen, Colorado when I had a home there. It was my father-in-law's home, actually. I bought a home a little later when I could afford one, but at this time it was my father-in-law's home. On the ridge of Red Mountain where he lives there was a guy who lived down the way from us, Leon Uris-- one of the greatest writers of our time. Leon Uris wrote Topaz—they made a movie of Topaz, he wrote Exodus—they made a movie of Exodus, he wrote Battle Cry—they made a movie of Battle Cry. And QB7, Mila 18, plus he wrote many other books, but they made movies of all of these. Then came along a book called Trinity.² He went to Ireland and wrote this book on the Irish, and it was a great Irish story.

I had met him at some kind of cocktail party or other in Aspen on the mountain, and we talked at length—we had a good talk that night. What occurred was that he invited my wife and me out to dinner at his house. So we went over to his house for dinner another time when we were there. He had a very interesting house, and in it he had a large picture—it was a painting that was 8 feet by 10 feet on his dining room wall. And I walked in and I said, 'Kilty's Wake!' And he said, 'You're the only one who picked that out!' Kilty's Wake was part of the story in Trinity, and I picked it out right away. The painting was of a big wake in Ireland—the body was laying there in white. It was interesting. So we became very friendly. His wife was a professional photographer when they met. He had lost his wife, and they finally

¹ Jim Riley is the original owner of Harry Caray's Italian Steakhouse, the flagship restaurant of Harry Caray's Restaurant Group named after the legendary American sportscaster.

² Published in 1976, Trinity: A Novel of Ireland was followed by a sequel, Redemption which was published in 1995. Uris's papers can be found at the University of Texas in Austin's Ransom Center.

got married. They met in Aspen—they both were Aspen people. He lived there full time. So we started talking and we got to be good friends. His book had come out recently, just before I went to Aspen and went to his house. So when I came back (to Chicago) I said to the Mayor, 'I've got an idea. I think I can get a guy I know—and I'd seen him a couple times after that—I think I can get the guy who wrote *Trinity*.' And he said, 'That was a wonderful book.' And I said, 'Oh you know about it?' And he said, 'Yes.' I said, 'I think it's still on the best seller list.' I think it was number one for thirty-eight weeks. It set some kind of a record for the *New York Times* best seller list. So I said, 'I think I can get him to come to town to talk about his book, and we could have an Irish Fellowship luncheon for that.' The Mayor said, 'That's a great idea. Go ahead and do it.' I said, 'Great!' I always liked to bounce things off him, and I knew he'd love that.

So I built the thing up and put it out and of course, I made one big mistake. I took the Ritz Carleton Ballroom for the luncheon. And that only holds about 500 people, and we had about twelve hundred who wanted to go to the luncheon. So we squeezed and squeezed, and I went over and pushed tables around with the people at the Ritz Carleton, and I was able to keep selling more tickets—I sold about eight hundred tickets. (Laughter) Maybe it was seven-hundred and fifty, but we had almost eight hundred people at this luncheon.

So Uris came in free—on his own nickel— brought his wife with him. She did a book called, *A Terrible Beauty*—about Ireland. While he was there doing his research, she went all around Ireland and took pictures. And he did the writing in the book, and she took the pictures for the book, *Ireland: A Terrible Beauty*. That's when the IRA was active—that was all part of her story. So she did that, and he wrote *Trinity*. So he came to town, and we filled the place up, and at the front table we had, Mr. and Mrs. Daley, Leon Uris and his wife, and my wife Darryl and myself. We were the six people at the front table. Then he got up and gave his talk. It was wonderful. And she got up and gave her talk. The Mayor loved it. I could just tell. He just thrived on it. He liked meeting them. We had a great table conversation.

So I got up to thank everyone for coming. And when I got up to thank everyone for coming, Jim McDonough got on the stage with me and I didn't know why he did. And he grabbed me and said, 'Don't leave yet, Jim. The Mayor wants to say a few words.' I said, 'Oh, he didn't tell me.' He said yes. And the Mayor got up and said, 'I want to say a few words about Jim Riley.' He gave a wonderful talk. I wish I had

it on tape. Everyone who was there heard it. And he went on to say, 'And I just want to thank Jim Riley for being so special in my life, a great Chicagoan, and all the things he's done for Chicago.

And he went on and on and on and I couldn't believe it. And then he reached down below the podium. There was something down there. And he pulls something out and he hands me a Kennedy bowl. The same bowl I gave him when I had that dinner for seventy-fifth anniversary of the Irish Fellowship Club³ and the two hundredth anniversary of America. He went and got the same bowl and gave it to me. It was a big day for me. He actually walked up to the stage and jumped up. It was about two and half feet in the air. Instead of going up the stairs, Daley he got up off his chair and jumped up on the stage! Gave a speech, and walked down the stairs and everyone left. That was Monday after lunch. Exactly one week to the hour of that lunch was when he died.

And the last good-bye was at 'Hope for Ignatius,'—when we had that thing called 'Hope for Ignatius.' We ran a fundraiser for St. Ignatius⁴ and Bob Hope came in gratis. He entertained everyone and we raised a quarter of a million dollars and we saved St. Ignatius—I was on the committee. The Mayor was there on Saturday night. I was sitting in the audience down below his box. His was right up high, and I was sitting in the audience down in front and I looked up and saw him, and he waved at me and I waved at him, and that was goodbye. Monday he died. I thought that was an interesting part that I'd like to put into my story.

MS: Thank you. That's a beautiful story.

JR: You can imagine how sad and sickened I was when it happened.

MS: But what a great legacy.

JR: Yes.

MS: Are there any other thoughts you'd like to share?

JR: No, I think that's it.

³ Jim Riley is a former president of the Irish Fellowship Club of Chicago, board and long-time active member.

⁴ St. Ignatius College Prep is a coeducational Jesuit high school on Chicago's west side founded in 1869.

