

**SPECIAL
COLLECTIONS
AND
UNIVERSITY
ARCHIVES
UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY**



This oral history interview is part of the Richard J. Daley Oral History Collection at the Special Collections and University Archives Department at the University of Illinois at Chicago. It has been used to create content for the online exhibit, Remembering Richard J. Daley, <http://rjd.library.uic.edu> , published on July 20, 2015.

Special Collections & University Archives
Richard J. Daley Library
University of Illinois at Chicago
801 S. Morgan St.
Chicago, IL 60607
3rd Floor
(312) 996-2742

<http://library.uic.edu/special-collections>

Interview with Dr. Robert M. Vanecko

Date: 8 March 2010

Location: UIC Historian's Office, 815 W. Van Buren St., Chicago, IL.

Present: Dr. Robert M. Vanecko M.D., Dr. Timothy Lacy Ph. D., and Jason Marcus Waak

Jason Marcus Waak: We are sitting with Dr. Robert M. Vanecko. The date is 8 March 2010. It is roughly ten a.m. Dr. Vanecko, if you could just again, state your name for the record. Then give us a little background as far as where you were born, where you grew up, and maybe your educational background.

Dr. Robert M. Vanecko: Yes. I'm Robert M. Vanecko. I was born at Mercy Hospital in Chicago. I spent most of my life on the south side of Chicago in the Beverly area. My father was a physician. My mother was a nurse. I went to the parochial school in the neighborhood including Leo High School. I played football. I decided I didn't want to continue on with that endeavor because I felt that I wanted to be a physician. I didn't know how I could go to practice and take all of those courses. I went to Georgetown University for undergraduate and then to Northwestern Medical School.

Following that, I had training in general surgery at Cook County Hospital for five years. This was at the time of the Berry Plan, which I was in. At that time, they were still drafting physicians. My fellow residents had decided to take the chance, and they got drafted out of practice. Because of the Berry Plan, I was able to be assured that I would go into the service and practice in the field to which I was trained. So I was also able to take a year of training in cardiothoracic surgery at Cook County Hospital before fulfilling my obligation to the service.

I spent two years as the chief of surgery at Homestead Air Force Hospital. I came back to Chicago and obtained the other year of required training in cardiothoracic surgery at Hines VA Hospital. Following that, I went into the practice of medicine primarily at Northwestern Memorial Hospital. When I started there, it was still Wesley Hospital. So the great majority of my time has been spent in Chicago.

JMW: Can you talk just a little bit about your experience at Cook County Hospital?

RMV: Well, it was a very interesting place and a good experience. I was fortunate to be there at the time. It was one of the first trauma centers in the United States that was formed. I was also able to do some basic research in shock trauma. We had a wide and varied experience. At that time, general surgeons did a lot of orthopedic surgery, even basic neurosurgery. We did a lot of gynecological surgery, in addition to the trauma. It was a place that was always busy and always active.

It was interesting. When you were the chief surgeon and your call came up, you were the night surgeon. Because of the nature of the hospital with trauma and so forth, you'd just operate all night long. So, if somebody wanted to trade call with you, you would happily take their call. But you wouldn't let them take your call, so you'd get an extra night of experience, so to speak. You'd see a lot of unusual things that you might not ever see at other hospitals.

And there was a lot of camaraderie among the residents. It was very nice at that time because Northwestern University, the University of Illinois, Loyola, and Chicago Medical School all had their own wards there. The residents were county residents, though. So we would rotate through these various wards. We would have the experience of the sometimes different approach of attending physicians from the various universities.

JMW: What period were you at Cook County Hospital?

RMV: I was there from 1961 until 1967.

JMW: So then, you were inducted into the Air Force in....?

RMV: It was July of 1967.

Dr. Tim Lacy: But you were already under the Berry Plan at that point? You had stayed there.

RMV: I got the Berry Plan right from the beginning, upon graduation from medical school, or shortly thereafter. I don't know what the time frame was.

JMW: So how did you meet Mary Carol (Vanecko)?

RMV: You'd have to ask her (RMV laughs). She has a different story than mine.

JMW: Well, what's your version?

RMV: She was a friend of my brother in the whole group of boys and girls from the south side. And they thought we should get together. So I think I was first introduced to her at a party after a Notre Dame game. But she says no. It wasn't that at all. It was shortly after that. We then were invited to an engagement party of a common friend. And then, after that, we started dating. We went along. I can't give you the years. It wasn't very long, though. So she said she was going to Europe. I said, "That's fine. I'll see you when you get back," or something like that. Then we started dating more regularly after that. When I finally proposed to her, I said, "I have a two year obligation to the Air Force. Maybe we can get married after that." She said, "No (RMV laughs)." So we were married before I went into the Air Force. Actually, it was several years before. I was still in residency.

TL: So that was 1964 or 1965?

RMV: That was 1964. What are you, testing me or something (RMV, TL, and JMW laugh).

TL: No. I'm just curious.

RMV: She does, every once in a while.

TL: No. I don't remember her particular version. But I was wondering. You said a brother. Was this a younger brother or an older brother?

RMV: No. I'm the oldest of four boys. So when I got engaged, my mother was ecstatic. She was tired of being alone, with all boys.

TL: So, could you say that the Vanecko family knew the Daleys and not just you?

RMV: Yes. Well, my parents knew of them. They had common friends. But it mainly was my brother. My parents and her parents had a lot of mutual friends. So I guess I got the good housekeeping seal of approval.

JMW: What was it like dating the daughter of the mayor of Chicago? Or was it not relevant?

RMV: It was sort of irrelevant. I mean, you couldn't park in front of the house because the escort was there (RMV and JMW laugh). Then we'd go to movies and go to parties of common friends.

TL: It wasn't like you were escorted by someone from the mayor's security detail out on dates?

RMV: No. It wasn't necessary or anything like that.

JMW: Hitting back on the medical thing, when you were going in during 1967, obviously it was pre-Tet Offensive. What was the reaction within the medical community? I mean, was there a withdrawing from military service? I mean, in some cases it was inevitable. You could join on your own terms or get drafted. I'm just wondering what the climate was like within the medical profession, regarding military service at that point.

RMV: Well, this was the transition between the draft, the Berry Plan, and the National Guard. The physicians would go into the National Guard and fulfill their obligation that way. They could do it in some chunks of time. They wouldn't have to close down for two

years. They'd come back and so forth. My experience was that the service, as you may know, asks, "Where would you like to serve?" Florida would have been the last place I would have picked. That's because I thought, "Gee, there are a lot of opportunities to go to Florida." It was a nice place. I'd been there with my parents. So I put the northeastern United States. There was an Air Force hospital in Springfield, Massachusetts that I got assigned to. I thought that was great. You could get into Boston and Harvard, for conferences and things. So I got my orders. They came and packed us. I was going to leave for three weeks of basic training. And I got a call from the colonel in the Air Force. He said, "Your orders are cut. And there's really nothing that says I can change them. If I do, there might be a fight. But I'll probably win." So I have two assignments in tropical areas available. One is in Homestead, Florida. The other one is in southeast Asia." And with two small children at that time, including a six month old, I said, "Florida sounds fine to me." So that's how I wound up down there. I would not have chosen that. I think I was fortunate that they let me have a year of thoracic training because it made me more valuable to them. So that's where we went.

JMW: So your entire active duty was spent at Homestead?

RMV: Right. At that time, in the Air Force, it pretty much was where you went was where you were going to be. If you did go to Vietnam, the idea was that you'd come back after a year. But the way their pipeline was set up, at that time, it was that you would stay there for the two years. That was what most of the physicians did, except those that did go to Vietnam.

JMW: So you were down in Florida for two years?

RMV: It was two years.

JMW: We've heard about how much your father-in-law loved to fish.

RMV: Oh yes (JMW laughs).

JMW: Do you have any fishing stories from the Florida years or otherwise, like Michigan or here in Chicago, with fishing stories?

RMV: Well, it was very relaxing for him. I certainly enjoyed it. Our kids enjoyed it. Basically, that was why he came to Florida, to fish and relax. He wasn't going to play golf. But he'd go swimming and stuff. That was really what he liked to do. And he had been in the Florida Keys with his father. We were down there several times. There was a lawyer from Chicago who loved to fish also. He was also involved in real estate. He sort of retired from his practice and went down to Florida. And he liked to tarpon fish. Supposedly, the best place was around the Ft. Meyers area. He used to go there. He found out about Islamorada. There was tarpon fishing and everything else down there. So he went over there. And he couldn't find a place to stay. So he built a motel. He, at one time, saw the mayor and said, "Why don't you come down and fish with me?" And I think that was how he started going down there.

TL: Do you happen to remember the fellow's name?

RMV: Yes. It was Leo Samuels.

JMW: He was a local, Chicago area lawyer?

RMV: He was a lawyer that was into real estate. Yes. This has nothing to do with the mayor particularly. But his son was a judge. And his son was killed scuba diving in Lake Geneva. He came up and a boat happened to be going by at the same time. I don't know if there was a diving flag up or not. But anyway, it was a tragic event.

TL: How did your early experiences with the mayor, after marriage and marrying into the family somewhat, how did that correspond with your preconceptions of what the mayor and his family were like before you met Mary Carol?

RMV: I would say that they weren't much different. I had heard some about them from the children of parents from the south side who were friends of the mayor.

JMW: What was your in-laws' reaction when you announced your engagement? I mean, obviously, you sort of had the seal of approval. Do you remember when you told them?

RMV: Oh yes. I sat them down and asked them if they were comfortable with me asking (RMV and TL laugh). No. Mary Carol had said yes. She, of course, would talk to her mother. She said, "You'll have to ask your father." So it was the weekend after some event. I was going to ask him. Mrs. Daley and Mary Carol were there. They observed that he was trying his best to keep away from me (RMV laughs). I think it was an international stock show that used to be at the stockyards. It was a big stadium event. They had to go and see that.

They said, "Well, why don't we eat here rather than going back home?" He must have slipped up. He went downstairs. There was nobody down there. So I snuck down there. I told him that I'd like to marry Mary Carol. I felt that I was going to be successful as a physician and felt that I could take care of her. So he said, "Okay." There wasn't much discussion to it. There was not a list of qualifications or things like that. It was kind of matter-of-fact.

JMW: So it was somewhat anti-climactic after you finally cornered him (JMW laughs)?

RMV: Well, I could breathe a little easier. Yes.

JMW: Do you have any memories of being with the mayor at sporting events? We know that he took your son to quite a few of them.

RMV: He did.

JMW: I know you were probably busy with residency, etc.

RMV: No. But I did have the opportunity to go to a lot of Bears games with him. We took the kids sometimes, other times not. He had good seats. One time, when it was really cold, they came down and got him to go up to the press box. It was the only place that was enclosed at that time. It was with Mr. Halas. It was nice to see him. And it was a nice place to watch the games. Unfortunately, one of the experiences I did have was, I don't know where the tickets came from. But we went to the playoff games that the Bears were in. It was like ten below with the wind blowing off of the lake. Everybody had on three coats and stuff like that. I lost my interest in Bears playoff games at that time (TL and JMW laugh).

JMW: Stay home and watch it on t.v. Right?

RMV: Yes.

JMW: Stay warm. Would you say that baseball was his favorite sport?

RMV: Yes. I think so. He would always be over at the White Sox games. And again, I'd go when I could. Football was easier. It was on a Sunday all of the time. The White Sox played all of the time. And I did go to one Cubs' game with him.

JMW: Wow! I'm glad we got that on record. That could be shocking.

RMV: I don't know why he went.

JMW: That could be the most revealing thing we've ever heard (RMV laughs). Your grandson said that most of his favorite players would have been pre Bob G.'s days. Who would you say that some of his favorite White Sox players were?

RMV: It was whoever hit the last home run (TL laughs), or won the game. I don't remember. I didn't pay that much close attention to it because I used to go to the White Sox games, the night games, when I was in high school and college with a good friend of

my father. He had seats behind the opposing team's dugout. So I pretty well knew the White Sox and stuff. In high school, I knew all of the players. Once they were gone, I'd forget their names, like a lot of other names, including my own name sometimes (JMW and TL laugh). But it always comes back. It may not be until two o'clock in the morning.

JMW: When you would go to the games, who else would go with you guys, when you were with the mayor?

RMV: It would vary. Later on, it would be one of the older grandkids and his sons. Mainly it was his family. Judge Marovitz was a good friend of his. He used to go. I think that's about it. But I'm not sure. But it wasn't something that he, all of a sudden, just had a tremendous desire to go and see the Cubs play.

JMW: Were there any favorite restaurants and/or meals at the home, or places in the neighborhood that the family would frequent, because the mayor liked it in particular?

RMV: No. There was no place that I would recall. There were some fish places in Florida that he liked to go back to. Of course, he would be going out to dinner now and then. My feel was that he pretty much liked to eat at home. That's a little bit different than his son Richard, who loves all of the Chicago restaurants. And I think they're glad that he helps promote them. He truly enjoys them (RMV laughs). So it's a two way street there (JMW laughs).

JMW: Were there any particular meals that Sis might have cooked that he really might have looked forward to? For example, "Oh, it's Wednesday. So we're having...."

RMV: There wasn't, not that I can come up with offhand. It would be corned beef and cabbage around this time of year. That's one of those things that I'll call you on at two o'clock in the morning if it floats into my head.

JMW: Oh yes. When you're editing the transcript, you can certainly add things, if they come to mind. Did he ever give you any particular advice?

RMV: He didn't, not about the practice of medicine (TL laughs). He didn't like hospitals. He didn't like to see people in hospitals. And he'd come in take them out of the hospital sometimes. I remember when we first rented an apartment. He said, "Read the lease and know what's in there (TL laughs)," and things like that.

JMW: That's good advice, because a lot of people don't.

RMV: If I had a question on some legal thing or something, he would tell me. If he knew we were going to buy a car or something, he would say, "Why don't you go and see so and so." It would be somebody in the neighborhood down there. It was those kinds of things.

TL: Would he ever ask you about, if there were ever a building issue with a hospital? Would he talk to you about medical professional topics?

RMV: He would tell me what hospitals were going to do and stuff. And he'd ask what I thought of the hospital's medical standing and so forth. He did a lot of that that nobody knew about. He helped hospitals in their plans for expansion and ways to do things. I would only find out about it sometimes because some CEO of a hospital or someone like that would tell me. "Your father-in-law was very helpful to us, getting these people to come on our board and tell us to go ahead on this." And I think one of his happiest things was that he was not involved with Cook County Hospital, with the various administrative problems and things that they've had there that sort of run in a cycle and keep reoccurring. The first hospital commission took place when I was there. A separate commission took over running the hospital. Ten years later, they switched back. The Cook County Board felt that they should be more involved. Now we're back to a separate oversight board running the hospital, supposedly on a two year basis, for two years. But my guess is that it will last longer than that, until they get things settled over there.

TL: You mean with board members appointed by Cook County board members?

RMV: I forget the exact thing of it. The current one is independent. I think the county board may have named one or two people to it. But I know when I was there, one of the deans from Northwestern was on the board. Actually, in later years, I worked for him and eventually took his position as Associate Dean for Graduate Medical Education. The boards were very independent. But I think after they sort of resolved the immediate problems, their interest was not so much in running the hospital. And it sort of drifted into the hospital administration doing their own thing. Then it switched back.

TL: A persistent theme in a lot of our oral histories is that someone will come in and talk to us. And they'll say, "A lot of people didn't know about this that had to do with Daley," some quiet, sort of good things that he'd been involved with. Maneuvering makes it sound manipulated or something. But he was always doing things that were sort of under the radar. And a lot of them were very positive things. People would come in and report about those. Do you have other examples? I think you mentioned it in the course of talking about the fact that hospital executives might say, "Daley was good to us on this issue."

RMV: Well, that of course, would be the things that I would have, not access to, but would come up in the course of things. And I think that these were things that he wasn't looking for as aggrandizement for him. It was for the city, his city (RMV and JMW laugh). It was for the city. Again, through the county thing, the health care thing, there was frequently talk that he should take over the hospital, thinking that he had some magic. Well, it's an entirely different situation than government, law, and things like that. It's very complex. The solution is, "We just don't seem to be able to tell people to get sick on time and on schedule. Just go ahead and do it haphazardly." But that would mainly be my comment. Again, if I think of other things, I'll put them in there. But they would be in that kind of vein. I do know that he would ask friends to do things, to buy a building, to help in a redevelopment area and so forth, something like St. Xavier University. "Why

don't you give that property to them?" As far as I could tell, there was no delusion of honest service, a popular term now that comes up. The first time I'd heard it was from an opinion by Anthony Scalia, who was a classmate of mine at Georgetown. I think his concept of the intangible benefit, whatever that means, from honest service, whatever that means, is very hard to use as a law.

JMW: Did the mayor talk much about UIC? Did you ever hear him talk about it?

RMV: No. I would obviously hear about all of the problems of the land and stuff like that. It has his idea to have a commuter university for Chicago. It's obviously gone much beyond that. But no, I didn't hear much of the details. I mean, you knew what was going on.

JMW: In 1975, at the tenth anniversary, in his speech, he talked about looking forward to the medical center merging with Circle Campus, which of course ended up happening. Since that was medically related, I thought he might have mentioned that to you. I sort of wondered what your thoughts were, as far as the University of Illinois Medical Center and merging with the Circle Campus, and whether that was a good thing or bad thing.

RMV: I don't know the proximity of that to where he thought the university should be. That's because, obviously, the university medical school was already there. This would seem like, again, with other hospitals in the area with there already being a medical district, that they had a footprint of the university there. So why no expand on it? But I didn't get any direct connection between that. In fact, I don't know how he would have felt about Chicago Medical Center moving away, Loyola moving away, and so forth. I think that those were probably good ideas. But still, it leaves a lot of space over there to do something with. But this was all subsequent to his demise and so forth. But I think that he thought the medical center was a good thing.

TL: What were your perceptions of the Navy Pier campus, during that sort of era with the U. of I. in Chicago, as you were growing up. You were a teenager. You were here. You probably had some friends that were going to the U. of I.

RMV: Not really, not to Navy Pier. In younger years, I thought more of the university at Urbana. They really had a football team (JMW laughs).

JMW: It's amazing, the importance of a football team (JMW laughs).

RMV: And basketball.

JMW: Sure.

RMV: I knew it was there. I thought, "Well, that's a good idea to use the place." But I really wasn't that aware of the significance of it. Now, when they were going to expand, I thought that was a good idea.

TL: You mean to move over here?

RMV: Yes.

JMW: Can you talk about the highs and lows in your father-in-law's life? From your observation, how was he in 1968, with the convention? What were some highs, other than the White Sox winning the World Series in 1959? I assume that you didn't know him at that point. What were some highs and lows that you remember, and how he dealt with or celebrated them?

RMV: I knew him in the 1968 convention. I knew of the riots earlier, around Cook County Hospital. All of us sitting over there were glad that he was clamping down on things. We had to go back and forth from there. There were not any designated safety routes.

TL: You mean in the aftermath of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s death?

RMV: Yes.

TL: That would have been in early 1968.

RMV: With the convention, with our relationship, I wouldn't sit down and talk to him about it and so forth. We knew that it bothered him. What we did was try to get the grandkids around to distract him. It seemed to work well. He liked that. In fact, one of the grandsons, after one of his surgeries, used to spend a lot of time with him in Michigan, when he went up there. He recovered for a while. I think that was the big thing.

TL: Do you remember which toddler was going up there?

RMV: It was Richard J., R.J. Besides fishing, something that was relaxing to him was to be able to go up to Michigan and work, like raking leaves, fix something that was broken, or something like that. He enjoyed doing it. I learned a few things about how to do things. I learned more from him occasionally dropping a remark in a discussion. I don't know why the topic surfaced. I vividly remember him saying one time, "We shouldn't be in Vietnam." And of course, he was backing the president. People were pressuring him to do something like that. Essentially, it was what the president said. You might think that that would lead into a conversation saying, "Why not this, that, and the other?" No, it would be a remark. It was something that I would just put away. There were other things like that that I can't recall. It was some conflict, controversy, or something like that. It would maybe just be a sentence or two that he would say about something. It would make me think and it made me understand what he was feeling about it. It was not the solution to it. Or, "It has to be step, step, step, step." It was something that he didn't feel responsible to solve that he probably shouldn't have gotten in the middle of necessarily. I'm sure he was getting pressure because he was able to resolve things famously by getting people in the room and not letting them out until they'd come up with the answer. But they were

things that were not in his realm. Going back to Cook County Hospital, there was a lot of pressure there. I'd have fellow residents say, "Why can't your father-in-law straighten this whole thing out?" It was not his to do. He wanted it straightened out. I'm sure he let the people who were making decisions know how he felt. He wanted them to take that on.

JMW: So, other than Michigan, any other highs that you remember? Were there times that he was really pleased or excited?

RMV: There was the St. Patrick's Day Parade (RMV laughs).

JMW: Okay.

RMV: They had that. I think when good things happened in Chicago, he was proud. I'd have to sit down and go through a chronology or something. "Oh yes. Now I remember." I think when he could put the city on showcase for one reason or another, like a new convention or a large convention that hadn't been here before, some cultural thing, or something like that.

JMW: You mean a new building, or anything that was good for the city?

RMV: Yes.

JMW: So, when you'd come by the Lowe residence, what might you typically find your father-in-law or mother-in-law doing? What were their hobbies? What would they do?

RMV: Well, usually when we came, we were coming to visit. The kids were coming. There was some mayhem and stuff like that. He'd watch television. I can't remember what his favorite programs were. He liked to play with the kids. It was a distraction.

JMW: Your son is the first grandchild. Was there any special responsibility that went with that?

RMV: No. I don't think so. I think that he and Mrs. Daley loved all of the grandkids. There were no particular favorites. Obviously, with the first ones, they got to see them go to high school and go to college. That would have been a first for them. But I don't think that, in any way, diminished their joy and pleasantry of the subsequent grandkids coming through.

JMW: Yes. That's what your son had said. He had a special way of making everyone feel special. Were there any family traditions? Your son had mentioned the Fourth of July in Michigan, raising the flag, and signing the Declaration of Independence?

RMV: Yes.

JMW: Are there any others that come to mind?

RMV: No. Not off hand.

JMW: Then there was the stroke. That was in 1972, I think?

RMV: I think so.

JMW: What was the state of the family?

RMV: Well, they were obviously very concerned and so forth. They were interested in his health and wellbeing. I think that was the time he went up to Michigan. R.J. traveled behind him to keep him distracted.

TL: Just remind me. Whose son was R.J.'s?

RMV: That was our youngest.

JMW: That was R.J. Vanecko.

RMV: Yes. I think maybe there was some concern in the family. He had health problems. Should he slow down and so forth? And I think there was an underlying concern about that. But I think there was an equal concern. They were afraid that if he quit doing the things he liked, he would start to vegetate. He just kept going, paced himself, and knew what his limitations were. I think he pushed himself sometimes. I remember one St. Patrick's Day Parade when it went down State Street. It was cold and rainy. This was after he'd had the stroke. I'm sure he had some claudicating in his legs at that time. But he insisted in walking the whole way. I mean, he got past the bandstand. The detail was over there with coats, wanting to drag him off. He said, "These people came out to see the parade. I'm part of the parade. He just walked down to the end with no apparent ill effect. But I know that was not an easy walk for him.

JMW: Are there any memories or events, from the time of the mayor's passing, that stick out in your mind?

RMV: No. It all just happened so fast. I was at Northwestern at the hospital at that time. The doctors' offices were near there. I went over. And of course, there were some of the people that I worked closely with, the anesthesiologist and the intensive care people. One of my fellow thoracic surgeons put a chest tube in, as they tried the resuscitation. I myself had conflicting thoughts that you had at those times. Should you try to do more? Or not? They did all of the resuscitative things. So I think, aside from the sense of loss, there was the fact that he did not suffer, and he didn't linger. In a lot of ways, that helped me get through it.

JMW: In your opinion, what was his long lasting legacy?

RMV: It was the city of Chicago. I think there were a lot of things. But with a lot of the unique things, I probably wouldn't be able to name them.

JMW: How do you think your father-in-law has been portrayed in the media and in books? Is it fair or not?

RMV: Actually, I haven't read any of the books (JMW laughs), other than a chapter or two here and there. I think they're somewhat balanced. Again, I don't know. You see visitors from various foreign countries, saying what a great city it is. I think that really is a part of it. I think that his perseverance and dedication to the city, not as a stepping stone, or anything like that, was something the people realized.

JMW: My final question is this. If there were anything you'd want to leave us regarding your father-in-law, what would it be?

RMV: In my experience, he was an ideal and excellent father-in-law. I don't have any others to compare it with or intend to (JMW laughs).

JMW: Well, we're at the fifty eight minute mark.

RMV: Things may come back to mind. If they do, I'll jot something down.

*****END OF INTERVIEW*****