

Pittsburgh Oral Histories
Pennsylvania Department
Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh



JD

Interviewed by Barry Chad

Interviewed at Beechview Branch, Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh

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Interviewer's Note

With a great, measured, crystal clear voice and the cool perspective of a sports writer who has known the great athletes of Pittsburgh's sports traditions; a "learned laborer," unashamedly a blue-collar writer with over 100 articles to his credit published in the Post-Gazette; with a boyish sense of humor that belies his 74 years; and brimming with Irish insightfulness, here is Pittsburgh.

Interview

bc: The Branch Manager here at Beechview said that you were, or are, a reporter.

JD: I'm a freelance writer.

bc: You write about something in particular or whatever comes your way?

JD: It's either/or. Either I'm given an assignment. Or, I come up with my own story idea.

bc: Where are you published?

JD: *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Pittsburgh Catholic, and the now-defunct, Pittsburgh Sports Magazine.*

bc: Are you a sports writer?

JD: I wouldn't classify myself as a "sports writer," but most of my articles revolve around sports.

bc: Are you still writing?

JD: Yes.

bc: Have you always lived in Pittsburgh?

JD: I've lived in this community, Beechview, for 74 years.

bc: Where did you go to school, to elementary school, high school, and then college?

JD: I went right across the street to Saint Catherine's grade school. [Located across the street from the Beechview Branch.] I went to high school at St. Mary of the Mount in Mount Washington. And I went to Saint Francis of Loretto up in Loretto, PA, for the first year. I never completed college.

bc: Was it the Depression?

JD: [He chuckles.] No, no. No. It wasn't. [It was] my failure to pay attention to the academics. I was more interested in sports than in academics.

bc: What did you play—were you a spectator or a participant?

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JD: No, I was a participant. The last year of high school at St. Mary of the Mount, 1949, I was the Captain of the football team.

bc: And you played football at Loretto and just ignored your studies.

JD: Yes. In a nutshell that was it.

bc: What were you studying there?

JD: General courses as I began. I wanted to be a teacher and, hopefully, get into coaching, but it never materialized. And then the Korean War started. So there was an “out.” There was something I wanted to get involved in; and so I volunteered and joined the United States Army.

bc: You served in Korea.

JD: Yes, with the 7th Infantry Division, 31st Infantry Regiment. 1st Battalion of the 31st Infantry Regiment.

bc: How long were you over there?

JD: 13 months.

bc: You saw action?

JD: Limited. Because, not long after I arrived there, they signed a truce at Panmunjeom.

bc: That was very fortunate then.

JD: Yes. I saw enough of it to not like the taste of it, believe me.

bc: And then, when your term of Service was up...

JD: I reenlisted after my first hitch. And, on my second hitch I went to Northern Italy as part of an armored infantry battalion and we were security for the Honest John rockets that were pointed towards Tito's Yugoslavia at that time. And that was the best 17 months I ever spent out of the six years because not only was it a beautiful locale, the *Alpini* [Alpine troops] taught us how to ski because, we were in the mountains and the commanders of the SETAF, the Southern European Task Force, decided, Well, if the men are up there, they must know how to ski in case they ever come under attack. So that was fun.

bc: How did you get involved in writing? Did you get a job when you got out of the Service?

JD: No. My writing ability, you might say, goes back to my Junior year in high school. Sister Antonina was the homeroom teacher; she also was the English teacher. And we had a school newspaper called *The Marian*—'cause we were St. Mary's of the Mount. And she asked me to write an article about the Junior/Senior football game, and I titled the article “The Fiasco.” Afterwards she said to me, “James, you have a nice way with words; you should pursue it.” But I never did—until many years later. [For me it's not been a career; I'd term it an avocation.] I worked in construction—with these things [he points at the brick wall behind the desk where he is sitting]. Bricklaying. (There are a lot of bricklayers in this city, a lot of men—especially over here in this neighborhood. When I grew up here, it was Irish, Italian and Jewish; and many men worked in the trades. When I came out of the Service, many men were still working in the trades—plumbers, electricians, carpenters, laborers, bricklayers—a course that you sort of fell into if you didn't work in a mill. I preferred the outdoors so I worked with bricklayers for close to 35 years.

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bc: Was there any kind of conflict between your skill with words and with doing manual labor?

JD: No, in fact, the older man I used to work with—God bless him; he’s 91-years-old—he used to call me his “learned laborer.” He was a tough old guy, paid you the Union scale, paid all your benefits, but he definitely wanted a day’s work out of you—which was the work ethic at that time.

bc: That’s one of the things that Pittsburgh’s famous for.

JD: That is true. I don’t know now exactly how the workforce displays itself, but I know, when I was working, it was work and get paid and that was it—no monkeyshines.

bc: Were you writing and doing construction at the same time?

JD: That’s correct. Yes I did. The writing was a release for me in a sense. It gave me a chance to express myself differently than on the job where you’re working in construction and you might hear a lot of profanity every other sentence, but you didn’t do that when you wrote. You tried to use the language properly.

bc: Were these just pieces “off the top of your head” or did you interview people?

JD: I interviewed people. You used the word “conversation” before. I look at an interview as a conversation. Yes I do. I think that puts the person more at ease. Certainly you have your list of questions before you interview a person [but] I still think of it as a conversation.

[bc explains his view of these interviews as conversations and how he has found that the apparently random assortment of interviewees have lives that interweave—from working at Gimbels to working at Union Switch & Signal.]

JD: My mother worked at Frank and Seder which was directly across the street from Kaufmann’s on Fifth and Smithfield. [She was a sales lady.]

They used to have minstrel shows [in the hall across the street] which would be politically incorrect today. (Minstrel shows took place in the late ‘20s—1928 through 1932. That was part of the culture at that time.) My father was an “end man” and my mother was in the chorus. That’s how they met. They ended up getting married and lived here in Beechview all their lives—although my father’s family was from in town, 1037 Forbes Street (which is now a parking lot). And my mother’s family’s from Mount Washington.

As I say, [it was a different time]. This was a synagogue, where we’re sitting right now. [The present site of the Beechview Branch of the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh.]

When I was a kid—ten-, eleven-years-old--Saturday I used to come up here: Old Zayde Zachowitz ... “zayde” ... “grandfather”....

[He’d say,] “Jimmy, come up, stoke the furnace, turn the lights on.”
“Sure.”

(He would give us matzoh.)

Sunday morning I’d go across the street and serve the seven o’clock Mass with Father John L. McCann.

So I was workin’ both sides of the street when I was a kid.

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I was going to get into Heaven one way or another.

bc: Does the Halloween Parade still exist in Beechview? And did you participate?

JD: To my knowledge, yes. When I was a kid, yes. Let me tell you a story: two brothers—Red, who was Joseph, and Blackie, who was George Gimigliano—two big guys. They would dress as a mother and a baby in a baby carriage...and they'd always win a prize. These guys were six-foot-four! 225 pounds! Blackie and Red Gimigliano. They're both gone now—God rest their souls. They were bricklayers. And they'd drive old man Maffei crazy down there—Maffei's saloon down there. Red, [the "baby"], had a big all-day sucker and he'd tap old man Maffei on his bald head. And old man Maffei said, "Give 'em all the beer they want to drink, but get 'em out of here!" Oh brother! I'll never forget those things! And pushin' him down in a baby buggy—oh brother! Blackie pushin' Red. With the baby bonnet and the bottle—and he had whisky in the bottle, naturally.

Some of the memories, fond memories I have when I start reminiscing. Same thing up on Mount Washington—Olympia Park—all the fun we had playing baseball and football. We didn't have time for some of the other nonsense. (Smoke a cigarette, yeah, but that was--oh boy--that was unheard of.) I'm talkin' about good, clean fun. [JD emphasizes each of the words with a beat of his palm on the desk.] And your body was tired when you came home and you went to bed. You did your homework and that was it.

bc: What have been your most memorable interviews?

JD: I did a piece on Franny Rogel [1928-2002]. Franny Rogel was an All-American at Penn State. He came and played with the Steelers for his entire Pro career. I think it was Joe Tucker who was the Steeler play-by-play announcer at that time, and his song was "Hey diddle diddle, Rogel up the middle." Because Walt Kiesling, the head coach, ran Rogel on a first series of downs. "Hey diddle diddle, Rogel up the middle." On another occasion I saw him play against Pitt the Saturday after Thanksgiving a number of years ago—Penn State was behind. He carried the ball 16 straight times and took it down to the one-yard line; and, on the next play, trying for the touchdown, he ran off right tackle—and who stopped him but Big Nick Bolkovac for the [Pitt] Panthers. But Franny Rogel was interesting.

The piece that I did that I'm proud of it's in Atria's down on Beverly Road, the original Atria's. [It's about] Andy "Kid" DePaul and Jim Kennedy who still lives over here in Beechview Manor. Andy was a boxer. Jimmy Kennedy was a basketball player under Chick Davies. And they both went their separate ways after, but they both grew up on Wabash Avenue down in the West End and it was humorous the stories they told me when they were kids going to St. James grade school and high school down there. But that article is—as you go in Atria's and go all the way in the back—the last room it's all boxing. (Atria's started out on Beverly Road as a beer distributor, beer distributor / grocery store. Old Joe Atria and then his son, Nick, he took it over and then they sold it; and now they have seven of them. But I frequent—in fact I was down there last night—had a

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wonderful bowl of tomato bisque soup. Oh they have good food down there. At the stadium [PNC Park].) But anyhow, getting back to where I was going—the last room is all boxing. As you come in through the archway on the left-hand side, there's the article I wrote: about the two classmates, the two kids from West End. They have it framed and hanging there, but the thing that makes me feel real good—there's a pencil sketch of Art Rooney, Sr. next to it. I make a personal connection with it—although there is none—but it makes me feel good that it's there.

John McCollister, whose book [The Bucs: The Story of the Pittsburgh Pirates] we were just looking at, I interviewed him for an article I wrote about him.

There were a couple of others:

There was a statue of a fireman, that was down in front of Matthews Bronze down on West Liberty Avenue. The firefighters had commissioned to have this statue built in Italy. And here it was shipped to the United States during the chaos that took place after 9-11. So, they thought it was lost because it was shipped by air instead of by boat 'cause they wanted it quickly. Where it ended up was in a warehouse, on the docks, in New York City. So, they turned around, thought it was lost—We'll make another one. So they did; and then they found the original. They had the second one down here on West Liberty Avenue for the longest time. In the winter. Hundreds of thousands of people passed it on the way going through the Liberty Tubes. It struck my eye and it caught my mind: boy, that'd be a nice article to write about, write about that fireman. So I wrote about that and that was well-received 'cause many people read it although it was published in the "South." (Here, in Pittsburgh, the *Post-Gazette* on Thursdays—it used to be Wednesdays—[covered] the zones: [highlighting the] North, South, East and West [of the Pittsburgh District].)

I remember doing a piece about Dick Frank. Great athlete. High school. When he coached over here at St. Catherine's. Grade school football team. And then later I went on to write about Jim Sweeney. (St. Catherine parishioner.) Eleven years with the New York Jets. Last three years with the Steelers. Greg Gattuso, an outstanding nose tackle at Penn State under Joe Paterno, was drafted by the Redskins but didn't follow that career. He came back [and] was very successful as the head football coach at Duquesne University. Now he's working for Dave Wannstedt, the coach at Pitt.

Athletics and music have been a part of my life since I was a kid. When I went to school here, Sister Henrietta taught me how to play the piano. And Sister Cephas (God rest both of their souls) taught me how to play the pipe organ in church—although I haven't touched a piano or organ in years. Yeah, it was fun. [It was] mostly church music: I was a member of St. Catherine's; I was an altar boy and I was a choir boy.

Last Saturday I sat down with the Reverend Hugh J. Lang, retired now as a priest after 52 years, once the Superintendent of the Diocesan schools. (We went to

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school together.) I said to him, toward the end of the conversation, I said, “Do you remember when we used to take two streetcars and go to Panther Hollow and go ice-skating?” “Either that,” he said, “or take two other streetcars to go down to skate at Rox Arena in McKees Rocks.” So many memories.

bc: [bc engages JD with questions about changes in the Roman Catholic Church since the implementation of the reforms of Vatican II. This leads on to discussion of the changes in the fabric of Pittsburgh and of the larger society.]

JD: ...the culture of our country now: there’s less discipline in everyday living, everyday dealing—I don’t care what it is—the discipline that was there when I was a young man is not there today and, I think, in a sense, it has diminished some of the lifestyle that I wish was still here.

Pittsburgh now, from the mills that used to light up the skies at night, has culture, medicine.... I mean, the culture has changed from that “mill mentality,” or that “mill ethic,” to research—which is great...the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center, which is outstanding. But these changes are definite, they are part of the fabric of the city now. And that’s what makes this city, in my mind, unique.

bc: Other folks I’ve spoken with don’t see the city taking advantage of these changes (in technology and medicine), exploiting these changes the way they could, the way they should....

JD: There’s a valid point there. But you notice: people from other countries that come here, they want to study, they want to go to Carnegie Mellon, they want to go the University of Pittsburgh.... Oh yes, by the droves.... Pittsburgh is Pittsburgh my hometown; I’m so very proud of it. [I was having dinner the other night with these two guys from Brazil] and I told them, If you have time, I’ll take you all over this city. And I would. Without a second thought. Because I want people to see what I see. I’m going to show them the best that I can: I’m going to show them the museums; I’m going to show them Mount Washington, the rivers.... But naturally there’s a downside; it isn’t all peaches and cream, so to speak. But the transition was interesting as far as I’m concerned--very interesting.

bc: You mean the transition from the ‘70s and the end of the steel mills to what we have now?

JD: Right. Exactly. I guess, as you get older, I don’t know if you get any wiser, but maybe you become a little more observant, a little more appreciative of what it was, what it is and how they combine to make the place the city that it is now.

bc: Is that going to be your next article?

JD: No, no, I don’t think so. Gaelic football seems to be on the menu here.

bc: [We turn to a brief discussion of the Irish in Pittsburgh and it emerges that my Supervisor’s family operated a funeral home near where JD’s father grew up. Furthermore, it turns out that my Supervisor’s grandfather, apprenticed under JD’s father’s cousin, who also ran a funeral home in the vicinity. We speak briefly about the ethnic mix that used to be the Lower Hill.]

JD: All the Italians and Irish that lived down there in the Hill, [there was] an ethnic mix like there was here [in Beechview]. Syrians, Lebanese, Jewish, Blacks.

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[bc: On the desk in the office where we are conducting the interview we find a photograph of Beechview in the “old days” and JD reminisces. He identifies, in a kind of inventory of memories, buildings and landmarks in the photo and in the surrounding vicinity: Bard’s; John’s Drug Store; Isaly’s; Donahoe’s; Smith’s Tavern, a basement saloon; Kroger’s; the show that was part of the Harris theater chain; the Boylan Building—Jock Boylan—and upstairs (it was a large area) they had basketball games up there, they had testimonials, and then the American Legion took it over and they used to have dances up there on Sunday night and draw kids from all over the city; John Strobatz, he was a barber; later Babe Folino had a restaurant; and we used to shoot marbles over here; Olsen’s Market.] The trolley tracks [today where the “T” light transit now runs] were elevated—about six feet high. Autos, the few that there were, ran on either side. At the trolley stops there were cinders and we used to shoot mannies (marbles) at the trolley stop. I don’t know if you could picture that. [We’d] draw a circle, thumb it, try to knock the other guy out, like bocce. But that’s what we did at trolley stops...Belasco, we’d shoot there...and Neeld Switch (where the streetcars turned around); and the Neeld home it’s where that apartment [building] is up there, the one with the yellow-glazed brick...big old home...Neeld. I just did an article on Ray Neeld’s daughter. She was an amateur mountain biker.

...we all have gifts that the Good Lord gave us. It’s our responsibility to use, develop those gifts and share them with others. That’s the way I always looked at it. I don’t consider myself to be any kind of a writer *per se*...like John McCollister (and I’ll see him next Monday, he lives down in Daytona, when I go down to watch my granddaughter play softball). I don’t put myself on a level with John McCollister. I don’t put myself on a level with the wordsmith, Gene Collier, down at the *Post-Gazette*, Bob Smizik, Phil Axelrod.... I don’t put myself on that level. I’ve had a modest amount of success—starting with letters to the editor to having 110 of my articles published in the *Post-Gazette*.

bc: I’ve got to remark on this: you’ve got a great radio voice.

JD: I’ve heard that from people.

But I say—music and athletics—in my life they’ve meant something. In this city, I’ll bet if you talked to a lot of other people, the sports side of Pittsburgh is very evident, very prominent; but, you have one of the finest symphonic orchestras in the country—they’re in the top ten, the Pittsburgh Symphony. They are one of the top ten. I don’t care where they’ve gone—whether they’ve gone to the Far East, whether they’ve gone to Europe...the reviews written on them...Andrew Druckenbrod, the *Post-Gazette* music critic...glowing reviews about the music they’ve produced. I don’t care if it’s Vienna or Tokyo....

bc: Do you travel a lot?

JD: Since my wife died, I’ve moved around a bit. We were married 43 years. She would not get on an airplane. She came from a family of nine in Johnstown. Her delight was going up there on the weekends, Saturday and Sunday, eating dinner, sitting around the kitchen table or the dining room table.

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bc: Where did you meet?

JD: Getting off a streetcar down in front of Rizzo's. I said to her, "Did you go to St. Mary's of the Mount?" She says, "No. I'm from Johnstown, pal." [JD and I both laugh rather raucously.] What a come on! What a line! [She was saying.] Get lost, pal; I don't know you! But then we began to date; and we'd go to the movies 'n' 'at. And we wound up getting married, I'd guess, about eight, nine months later. We had a good, solid marriage—43 years. I've had a lot of young kids say to me today, How did you and your wife stay together for 43 years? I said, It was a different time. But it was quite simple: we took the vows and we kept them.

bc: Did you ever regret not finishing up at Loretto?

JD: Oh certainly. I do regret [it]...but maybe that's the way it was meant to be. I think, had I a Bachelor of Arts behind my name, maybe different doors would have opened for me. But now I balance that by saying, well, you've seen a lot; you've enjoyed a lot; you've met a lot of interesting people. So that's the way it's gone. You play the hand you've been dealt.

bc: The bricklaying was a real counterpoint to your native intelligence....

JD: Wait: let me clarify that: I worked with bricklayers, but not as a bricklayer. I was a laborer. I was a laborer, mixing mortar, building scaffold; and I ended up driving a truck, hauling scaffolding from one project to the other--more or less in some cases being an expeditor, making sure that all the materials were there. So that bricklayers, a gang of, say, six bricklayers and three laborers could start the following day. But I don't lay claim to saying I was strictly a bricklayer. No, no. I was a union laborer. I don't want to make it sound like I was something more than I was. No, I wasn't. I got the harder end of that deal too, believe me, because laboring for a brick contractor is hard work. "Mason tender"—they fancy it up; they call it "mason tender." I'm still here. [JD knocks on wood.]

bc: Are you still a member of the union?

JD: Yes, I get my pension from the union. ...but the point that you raise, I often think about that because people have said to me, You have the ability to write and things like that, why don't you write a book and things of that nature? My brother-in-law, 89-years-old: When are you going to write that book? He says, You don't have to write anything long, just condense your experiences of a week. Or even (he uses the example of the movie "Picnic") condense it all into one day. I could probably do it, and I have a guy, Terry Shields, Notre Dame grad, that's the assistant Sports Editor down at the *Post-Gazette* who gives me my assignments. He'd be a tremendous editor. I might tackle that yet because I still have a lot of energy.

bc: The easy way out of that is what Phil Musick did and what, to some degree, Myron Cope did and that is, take your old articles, put them together in a book, clean them up, edit them...and that's the easy way to do that.

JD: Jim O'Brien—I haven't talked to him for a while but I have most of his works. [I have his] Steeler Stuff--that's the last one he wrote. Now Phil Musick I lost track of him. Phil and I used to talk back and forth quite honest.

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Oh here—Cope—I have to tell you this one: I can't let this one get away. Suzie McConnell, All-American basketball player at Penn State, Olympic Gold Medalist—I wrote lyrics to the tune of “She’s a Yankee Doodle Dandy, born on the Fourth of July.” [JD sings it.] I [changed] it to “Suzie/she” instead of “he.” [JD sings,] “She’s a Yankee Doodle Dandy.” I sent [the lyrics] in to Cope and he said to [his producer while he was on the air], “Strike up the band! We have lyrics here by this little Irish guy from over in Beechview.” And Cope’s voice! Cope’s distinctive voice sang [the lyrics]. And he says, “Give us a big overture!” And you could hear the piano playing. Then he sang. And [then] he said, “Now how about that?!” The first guy that called up was [Suzie McConnell’s] brother Tim: he says, “You ought to burn that song!” And Myron said, “What are you talking about?! There have been many great Irish lyricists down through the years!” I thought, Oh my goodness, Myron. (I saw him at Atria’s one time up in Mount Lebanon and I laughed; we talked about it.)

bc: Do you have copies of all your articles?

JD: Yes. I have them all.

bc: That’s half the problem right there.