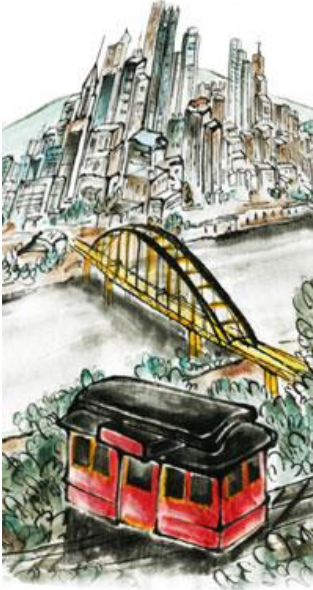


# Pittsburgh Oral Histories

Pennsylvania Department  
Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh



RS

Interviewed by Barry Chad

Interviewed at Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, Beechview

12-10-07

Transcribed 12-26-07 – 12-27-07

Reviewed by phone 01-03-08

Revised 01-03-08

## Interviewer's Note

*Memories of Beechview back when there were three or four doctors' offices and doctors still made housecalls. Back when John's drugstore was the hub of community life—"I worked at John's as a teenager. Practically everybody worked at John's drugstore!" On their way home from work, her mother and her mother's friends would stop at John's. They'd have a soda and sneak their cigarettes that they weren't supposed to be smoking—like something from a 1940s Andy Hardy movie. People*

*would sit out on their porches every night in the summer with the street lights on and the children playing shadow tag and all the parents would be out and everybody talking to each other.*

## Interview

bc: You've always lived in Pittsburgh.

RS: Yes.

bc: You were born in Pittsburgh. Beechview?

RS: Yes.

bc: In doing these interviews I've learned a lot about the Beechview community. Beechview just turned 100. What's it been like living in Beechview?

RS: I live in the house that I grew up in. My mother had lived in that house since she was eight. So I'm the third generation to live there. My grandparents bought the house probably in the '30s. We have a picture of my grandfather standing on the front porch (around 1930 maybe 1932...). Other than when I went away to college, I've never lived anywhere else. I went to Clarion [University].

bc: What did you study at Clarion?

RS: English. I was an English teacher for a while.

bc: I've actually been to Clarion.

RS: It's really pretty up there.

bc: I go there in winter.

RS: Winter's a different story in Clarion. [It's very pretty in Spring and in the Fall.]

bc: You majored in English up there and obviously you also got your teacher's degree up there too.

RS: And I taught right across the street [from the Beechview library] at St. Catherine's for three years. [St. Catherine's school now closed.] I also taught out

in Monroeville. [St. Catherine's] was not the school I went to. I went to Beechwood. At that time Beechwood went K-8. I went there from kindergarten through eighth grade and then I went from there to St. Justin High School in Mt. Washington. That closed when I was a Junior. The first half of my Senior year I went to St. Elizabeth in Pleasant Hills. I ended up graduating from Hilltop Catholic. (Hilltop is not there anymore. It was one of those "consolidation" schools: St. Canice and St. George: in the Knoxville area. St. Justin is closed. St. Elizabeth's is closed. All the high schools I went to are closed.)

bc: I actually met and interviewed the gentleman who was in charge of maintenance at St. Catherine's.

RS: I met him one day. I was driving by and, I think, it was when we were doing the Beechview centennial. I was on that committee and I was just feeling kind of sentimental, and I stopped one day, and he let me go in and see my classrooms. He was really nice.

bc: You were on the centennial committee.

RS: (In a very small way. I didn't do nearly as much work as these people up here did.)

bc: What did you do?

RS: I worked that day at the centennial. They had a big street fair down in the business district...and that's one of the things I should talk to you about, about growing up in Beechview because what Beechview is today is not at all like when I was little, when I was growing up here. At any rate, they had a street fair down there—some vendors, some food booths.... They had bands playing. They had a parade. They had a lot of activities down there. [The manager of the Beechview branch of the Carnegie Library] put a lot of work into it. (And she's not even from Beechview!) I also did some preliminary work—like making phone calls. I did contribute to the Beechview book. I contributed some pictures to that—not any of the text. (There were signs up in the library that they wanted pictures. That's how I got involved initially.) There's a picture of my parents on their wedding day standing in front of my house. There's actually my third-grade class picture because [the library manager] was asking if we knew of any celebrities from Beechview, and, I said, Even though Bill Cowher [former Pittsburgh Steelers coach] only wants to claim Crafton, he did go to Beechwood School. He was in my third-grade class picture. I donated that so that we would have proof there that Bill Cowher actually did go to Beechwood School. [bc finds this very funny.]

bc: The question that I usually ask at the end of an interview—but you've already broached it—is what's the difference between Beechview now and Beechview when you were growing up?

RS: When I was little, there was just...a lot more here: there were a lot more businesses. It was not as transient. Down in the business district, there was hardly an empty storefront. All that's really there now is Foodland and a Mexican store and I think there's still a bank and a store where you can buy newspapers.... But, when I was little there were probably three or four doctors' offices—of course that's when doctors still made housecalls—a grocery store, a five-and-ten, Bard's (which was kind of like an Isaly's on the corner), John's drugstore which was...

bc: ...there's a painting of John's in the stairwell here at the library...

RS: I worked at John's. (Practically everybody worked at John's drugstore.) I worked in John's drugstore as a teenager. It had two sides to it: there was the pharmacy side and there was the candy side and the pharmacy side was where all the "serious" stuff was and the other side was where they sold newspapers, that's where they sold greeting cards...alarm clocks, cigarettes, candy...and that was the side that I worked on—unless you were an aspiring pharmacist you didn't work on the other side. I just worked there when I was in high school.

It's funny: I had a class reunion this past summer. We did an eighth-grade class reunion. In our graduating class [there must have been] over 120 kids. We had four of each grade: big classes: 30 kids or more in a class. (As a former teacher I think of those as big classes.) I was on the committee for the class reunion. When one of the girls sent her response form back in, she said, Even though we were this really big school, it felt like we were a little one-room schoolhouse. That's exactly, I think, the feeling that we had. Even though it was a really big school: K-8: four of each grade. At one time—I don't remember what grade I was in—at one point that school [Beechwood] had two sets of "portables"—[portable classrooms]—because there were so many kids. But yet it still had this really small, hometown feel. (Beechwood is still a school, but it only goes up to fifth grade now.)

bc: I've heard enough about Beechview to know that, even though it's changed, there are people still living in the same houses that they were born in. There are old residents who won't leave—they're really happy here. Obviously, your eighth grade must have been very close. How many people came out for this?

RS: We ended up with—I think we had about 60 at the reunion—many people brought their spouses—more than half of those [60] were classmates. Some people just came by themselves. If you're counting just classmates, probably 35-40 of those were classmates. A lot of people we weren't able to locate. Some, of course, had died. I was amazed: we had one guy come from Texas; a girl came from Missouri. Somebody else came from West Virginia; one came from New York. I was really impressed with that because this was eighth grade—it wasn't even a high school reunion. (There were a lot of people there that I really wanted to see. It was nice; it was a real nice turnout.)

bc: Where'd you hold it?

RS: The principal [at Beechwood] was so nice: she let us have an open house there in the afternoon. (We wanted to actually have [the reunion at the school], but, the Pittsburgh Public School policy—and I understand that completely—is zero tolerance for alcohol: whether it's during school hours or not and whether you're adults or not. We decided—if we're going to have this big reunion—some people are going to want to have a drink so we didn't have it there, but she offered us the option of having an open house there.) We had it for two hours in the afternoon. She opened up the door to every single room in the entire school. You could go anywhere—you could go in the gyms, you could go in the janitor's closets.... It was wonderful. We just had cookies and punch in what [used to be] the auditorium when we were there. (It is now a lunchroom.) Then everybody just roamed around the school and got to see it. We had dinner later that evening at the Best Western over in Greentree. Some people came to that [the open

house] that did not come to the dinner. Some people came to the dinner but did not come to the open house. At the school—a lot of people brought their kids to show them where they had gone to school, brought their parents, which I thought was really nice.

bc: It must have been strange to have been an adult in this environment that you were in as a child.

RS: The school was very very much the same—except for the cafeteria. When we were in school, it was an auditorium and it had seats bolted to the floor. (It was beautiful when we were there because it had velvet drapes and a velvet curtain over the stage. There was a foyer in the back where, if you were doing anything big, that was where you processed in from. And that is now the kitchen where they cook. They've torn out all the chairs.)

That's another thing that's really different: when I was in school, the kids from Shadycrest ate lunch at school, but everybody [else] went home at lunchtime. The school day was probably longer. It seems to me that we didn't get out of school until about 3:30. We had an hour for lunch and you walked home and you walked back up. Everybody walked. Nobody's parents drove them to school. That was kind of "taboo" if your parents took you to school. Now it seems to be the norm, but back then...everybody walked with their friends. You could walk around the streets at night and feel very safe. (I don't know if that's still true or not—around my own street, yes, I feel safe.) John's drugstore used to be open till eleven o'clock at night and open seven-days-a-week. (Not on Sundays: I think Sundays they closed at five.) Even as I got to be a teenager and then when I went away to college and I came back, you were seeing that the stores were closing earlier. (I don't know if that was financial—if they couldn't afford to pay the people or [if] it was just that their employees didn't want to be leaving there at eleven o'clock at night.)

bc: I think that Beechview has one of the largest Hispanic communities in the city: who have they replaced? who left?

RS: That's kind of interesting because I don't really know. [Perhaps as you were saying] the population just got so old that a lot of people were dying out.... It seems like [the Hispanic residents are] the only people who are putting in businesses.

bc: I come from Philadelphia and the ethnic nature of Pittsburgh is still very obvious. One gentleman told me a great story. He would, on a Saturday, be the altar boy across the street [at St. Catherine's] and then there was a synagogue here, on the site of the current library, and then he would come over here and light the furnace on the Sabbath. That's one of the wonderful stories of Pittsburgh's ethnic diversity that I've encountered in doing these interviews.

RS: When I was growing up, this was primarily Italian. My family was one of the few families that was not Italian. It seemed most of my friends had at least one Italian parent. When my mother was younger, there were a lot of Jewish people. [When the synagogue that was on this site left, I'm guessing that a lot of people left too.] During the time when I was in college and maybe when I was a young adult, it seemed like things got pretty transient for a while. On my street I live in the house that I grew up in. The people next door to me—it's a brother and sister—both of their parents are deceased—they live in the house that they grew

up in. Across the street from me there's a man who lives in the house that he grew up in. (Both of his parents are deceased.) He lives there with his wife and his kids. Two-doors-up a man lives in his grandmother's house. So, on that part of our street, there's this whole little core of all these people that have lived there for a really long time. But now what's happening is that all of the ones that were older, as they have died off, their children are not doing that, [that is, moving into the family home.] Now we're getting a lot of younger couples and younger families, but they don't seem to have that sense of neighborhood. There's probably about ten houses of us in the middle who all have been there a really long time and have known each other for a really long time. Then, on either end of that, a lot of newer families.... When I was a kid, people would be sitting out on their porches every night in the summer...[with] the street lights on...and you'd play shadow tag...and all the parents would be out...and everybody talking to each other.... And [nowadays] you just don't see that. Nobody's out at night anymore.

We'd spend our days up at Beechwood pool: in the summertime you were always up there—all day long—until you had to go home for supper. And it was safe. You didn't have to have an adult with you. You could just go up there with a bunch of kids from your neighborhood.

When I was little, the people who lived on the corner and their next door neighbors kept a set of (construction) horses in the alley between their houses. When we would get a good snow, they would put the horses out on Methyl Street blocking cars from going through the intersection. We would drag our sleds to the top of Bayonne and sled-ride down past Methyl to Rutherford. The street flattened out down there, but if the snow was really slippery and you could get some speed built up, you could make it all the way to Belasco. This was especially fun to do at night. I guess they didn't plow the streets the way they do today, which was lucky for us.

bc: Everything you're saying is identical to what I've heard about other communities—Wilksburg, East Liberty, the Lower Hill....

Why did you decide to major in English and how did you decide to be an English teacher?

RS: I went to Clarion, as I told you. Now, looking back on it, I wish I had done something totally different. What I have always really wished I had done was majored in Library Science. I would like nothing more than to be a librarian. And, honestly, the reason I did not major in Library Science was...most of the Library Science majors were, like, really geeky.... I had been a geek all through high school and, I thought, Okay, this is my chance not to be a geek. So, I decided not to do that [and] I have regretted it for most of my adult life.

I started out as a Liberal Arts major and [since] I had to declare some kind of major and English happened to be what I was good at and what I liked and I [enjoyed] reading, [so I became an English major]. And, oddly enough, I really liked grammar.

bc: I understand. Prescriptive grammar.

RS: I really did. I think I took every English class they offered. I loved Linguistics and that kind of stuff.

bc: I actually like to diagram sentences.

RS: When I got into high school and I took French, one of the things I really liked was the declensions because it made things so clear to me.

I student taught my Senior year [at Clarion]. I actually came home to student teach. I student taught at Carlynton [School District—Carnegie, Roslyn, Crafton]. I did half a semester with seventh grade because I was a Secondary Ed major and then I did half a semester with Seniors. And, I thought, I really hate this—I don't know what I'm going to do....

bc: Why did you hate it?

RS: I hated classroom teaching. I think it was the age group.

So I finished my student teaching: I had no intention really of ever teaching.

[When I student taught] at the beginning I did a lot of observation. I had really great co-ops. They were both wonderful teachers and very very helpful to me. As the weeks moved on maybe I'd have one class a day that I taught. The co-op was always in the room with me; he never left. My advisor—the advisor to the student teachers—from Clarion would come down once-in-a-while and observe me.

bc: What was the difference between the seventh graders and the Seniors?

RS: The seventh grade I didn't mind, but the Seniors.... Part of it, I think, with the Seniors was I was only 21—they were 17 and 18. I didn't feel that I was enough of an authority figure. I never felt comfortable with kids that old. (They were very nice for me—especially if I was being observed—they were great. They would answer questions. And they would be so cooperative. [And then when my advisor would leave and after I had talked with him and had come back to the classroom], the students would all be like “Did you get an ‘A’?!” They were always really trying to help me. They were really nice kids.

bc: Were the seventh graders rowdier?

RS: No, I don't think so. No. They weren't bad.

And then, when I actually got a teaching job, I started out in Monroeville and got a job teaching fourth grade. The principal called me for the interview and I said, I don't have elementary certification; I have secondary certification. She said it didn't matter. (The diocese was, I guess, a little looser.) I would be teaching Language Arts, and so it was related to my certification.

bc: You taught in Catholic schools. Were there any nuns?

RS: Yes.

bc: Teaching?

RS: Yes.

When I was over here—St. Catherine's—I was only here three years—we had two different principals: [one for two years; another one came the third year I taught there.] Both were nuns. [Our first grade teacher, our kindergarten teacher were nuns.] Out at St. Bernadette in Monroeville, both of the principals [during my three-year tenure there] were nuns. So, yes, there were still nuns.

bc: On the phone you said that your mother had stories.

RS: She seemed to have a really interesting life.

bc: What did she do for a living?

RS: She was a telephone operator. She worked in the Dormont Bell Telephone office which is now just a business office. It was Depression era. She would take the streetcar over to work sometimes or sometimes, I think, walk in order to save the streetcar fare—although my grandfather was a streetcar driver. She said, one time—only once—she tried to get on the streetcar without paying and he—her father—mortified her in front of everybody and called her back up to the box to put her fare in and told her she was nobody special: she had to pay the fare just the same as everybody else. (I never knew any of my grandparents because they had all died by the time I was born—with the exception of my maternal grandmother. She died when I was nine-months-old. My sister and brother have really fond memories of her; but I don't remember her at all.)

On their way home from work, [my mother and her friends], would stop at John's—John's had a soda fountain at the time. [They'd] go in there and have a soda and sneak their cigarettes that they weren't supposed to be smoking. (It always reminded me of something you would see in the movies, the movies from the '40s.)

bc: Like Andy Hardy.

RS: At our house, the house that I live in now, it's two bedrooms, one bathroom. The attic is finished.

[Probably about the time my mother was still in high school,] in our house lived my grandparents,  
my mother and her sister,  
her two brothers,  
two female cousins  
and two male cousins  
and my mother's grandmother.

Eleven people lived in this little, tiny house.

[My mother said] in the one bedroom were my grandparents, in the other bedroom there were two sets of bunk beds (that's where the four boys slept). Up in the attic there were three double beds—my mother and her sister slept together—and the two girl cousins (who were sisters) slept together—and their grandmother slept upstairs.... They had all of these people....

I think my grandfather was the only one working—he worked for the streetcar company and would only work, because of the Depression, one day a month. That's all he could get. They were trying to keep everybody employed. And so, instead of laying people off, they would give them these really scant schedules. There was no welfare. There wasn't any kind of compensation. If you didn't work, you didn't get paid.

My mother said that the thing that always used to bother her [was that she had a cousin who] was very delicate. My grandfather would buy oranges for [this sickly cousin] and [as a result] she would kind of lord it over the rest of the kids that she had gotten these oranges [and they hadn't]. The rest of the kids would sit there

and watch her while she would suck on the oranges and they would all be so mad—I guess [the oranges] were too expensive for him to buy them for everyone—and so, because of her condition, my grandfather would buy them for her. My mother was always so jealous that this cousin got oranges and none of them could have oranges.

There were a lot of people living in that house—one bathroom, eleven people. My grandmother was a housewife and she just took care of everybody and cooked and baked.... I don't know that she ever worked outside of the home. I don't know that.

bc: You were talking about your mother being a switchboard operator.

RS: She started that right out of high school. She didn't go to college. She went to South Hills High School.

bc: How long did she work at that?

RS: She retired from there.

bc: She wasn't "phased out"?

RS: No. She retired in the late '70s.

She had worked all her years over in Dormont. Then, when they closed the Dormont office (for operators), she had to move Downtown to Seventh Avenue, which she hated. But she had only so much time to go before she could retire. She hated Downtown because she had spent her whole life [working] at Dormont. (It was so convenient.) Our family only had one car—my Dad would take her to work depending on when he worked. (My Dad was a State Store manager and he worked shifts. Because he was a manager, he had to be there either to open or to close. He worked at the Brookline store for a while. He worked at the Dormont store for a while. And he worked at South Hills Village for a while too.)

bc: You've done a great job of describing how Beechview has changed over the years. How have Pittsburgh and Western Pennsylvania changed in your lifetime? Pittsburgh the Smoky City—before smoke control—is not part of your experience?

RS: Not really. I don't remember it being that way.

I remember going Downtown a lot more.

There were a lot more stores Downtown then....

I can remember when South Hills Village was built. (That was built when I was in grade school.) For things like going-back-to-school shopping for clothes—you always went Downtown. I remember the days when going Downtown—if you were a girl—you wore a dress; and you wore gloves.

I can remember the very first time I ever went Downtown that I was not in a dress: I was so upset: my sister was working at the Allegheny County Bar Association: she was a secretary. She had to go down on a Saturday to pick something up. (She and I were doing something that day. She was taking me somewhere.) Actually I was wearing an outfit that she had made for me: she was a really good seamstress. It was like a little tunic top and bell-bottom pants. (By today's standards of what you see Downtown it was really dressy.) We parked the car and we were going to go into the Bar Association. I was so upset.

I said, I can't go in there!

And she said, We're only running in and coming right back out.

And I said, Mummy will kill me if she knows I went Downtown and I wasn't in a dress.

That's when things were starting to change. I would have been Junior-High age. What I used to love was when we would go Downtown to go school-shopping: we would take the streetcar down, but then—usually by the end of the day—by the time you got done getting all your school stuff—my mother would be pretty tired—(and this would be such a big treat)—we would take a taxi home. And that seemed like a really big thing—to take a taxi home. It seemed like a luxury.

We all belonged to Junior Achievement when we were in high school—which was down on the Boulevard of the Allies. You would take a streetcar Downtown at night; go to the Boulevard of the Allies; you would take a streetcar home. It never seemed unsafe. There were always people around.