LEXINGTON ORAL HISTORY PROJECTS, INC.

Interview
Robert Cataldo
August 24, 1993

Interview conducted by Richard Robbat
Videotape length 77 minutes

RC: My name is Robert Cataldo. I live at 121 Marrett Road in Lexington. I was born in Lexington, that's September 24th, 1924. I was born at home on Rindge Avenue up in Lexington, lived on Rindge Avenue until 1936. Started at school in the original Adams School which is now the parking lot of the Follen Church. At that time I was against tearing the school down, even as a child, and went to the newer Adams School. Mrs. Hall was our principal.

You know, before I was born my mother and father were immigrants from Italy. My mother came here at the age of three, and my father came here at the age of seventeen. And they were living in the North End. Came out to Lexington about 1909. As they did in those days, had a summer shack with a garden on Rindge Avenue. As they grew older, finally got married, they moved to Lexington, built a two-family house at the corner of Rindge Avenue and Winn Avenue.

My father when he first came here went to work for the Lexington Water Department. Didn't like it, so he went to work for Hood Rubber with a lot of the other Italians in the neighborhood. Didn't like working for anybody, so he started his own peddling route, selling fruits and vegetables and food, house to house. At the inception of the supermarket in 1927 or so that business was for naught. So he started farming. He started farming on Rindge Avenue.

And we, as children, grew up being farmers, and kept buying land on Rindge Avenue. Finally, he rented the Wilson farm, the original Wilson farm, and I think they were uncles of the Wilsons that are in Lexington now. As a matter of fact, Bow Street at that time was Wilson Avenue. My

father rented the land from a Mr. Shaw in Arlington. Mr. Shaw was in the contracting business which we all understood. He got in trouble. My father lent him some money, and, finally, had to take the farm for the mortgage.

So we moved to Bow Street in 1936, and started farming the bigger farm. We were a family of five boys and a girl. And from there we bought the farm on East Street, which is the Bailey farm. As we got older we started to leave the farm. But being five boys, there wasn't enough income there to support five families. So three of us left the farm and two stayed. My brother, my second oldest brother Anthony, the one who started the Depositor's Trust Company, and we all went out on our own. I went into the service in 1944, went overseas, and come back in 1945. Came back to the farm, contracted arthritis of the spine in the service, so I left the farm and took a job selling industrial supplies for Genalco, Incorporated in Needham. Stayed there until 1972 [and] then I started the nursing home, East Village Nursing Home. Sold that in 1983. And from there, went on the board of Meditrust and Mediplex, which is a health real estate investment trust. That's what I'm doing now. I've done some bankruptcy work. I've done other consulting work, but basically, that's what I'm doing now. Doing some developing. Have the subdivision at Pheasant Brook. Have a shopping center developing in Milford. But beyond that, basically, I'm at the Trust and Mediplex doing work-outs for the Trust.

INT: A couple of questions about your background, with regard to the Lexington: Were there many immigrant families at that time?

RC: Basically, Lexington was divided into primarily three districts. Meriam Hill and the Center were the original Lexingtonians, and the so-called Yankees. The Bow Street area was where the Italian settlement was, along with some on Reed Street. And Woburn Street was the Irish settlement. There were some Jewish people on Sylvia Street. As a matter of fact, they had their own synagogue up there on Sylvia Street. But by

and large, Lexington, for the most part, was a farming community with a lot of immigrants here, mostly Italian and Irish.

INT: So you're saying, at that time–during the 1920's and 30's–Lexington was primarily an immigrant town?

RC: Yes. And even into the forties, it was a farming town.

INT: Who held the political power back then?

RC: Meriam Hill.

INT: Meriam Hill. Were there attempts by the different immigrant groups to get involved? Were they…?

RC: Yes, once or twice there would be a candidate, but they never went anyplace. I think I was the first candidate outside of…in that whole succession that got elected. And that was in 1963.

INT: And you were elected as what?

RC: Selectman.

INT: Selectman. And you were a Selectman until when?

RC: 1972.

INT: 1972.

RC: I was defeated for re-election in 1972.

INT: Did you feel that there were definite…were there definite ethnic [issues] or politics in the town at that time?

RC: When we were growing up, there was no question in my mind that was the case. Because I think of the—I won't mention names—but a couple of times, a couple of Italian families that bought a house downtown—or a lot of land downtown—had to buy it through a straw.[1] It was definitely that sort of situation, in my opinion.

INT: One of the things I remember as a young person in the town when the playgrounds were still active, and there were three playgrounds, Center, North, and East, at the time. There was always a great rivalry between the

[1] Buying through a "straw" refers to a transaction whereby someone serves as the "front man" for the transaction while the actual buyer's name is hidden.

playgrounds. Of course East was the tough guys and this and that, and the North this, and the Center, you know.

INT: Was there a feeling for the town as Lexington, do you think?

RC: Oh, everybody was very loyal to the town. Every election—even though there was that separation—you could call it a class separation—every election the candidates would come down to the farm. And my father would gather all of the neighbors, just like they do today. That was in the thirties. I remember in school, they would come down. And every Christmas, one of them would bring my mother a box of candies, you know, all through the process. It really wasn't until the fifties that it really changed.

INT: Changed in what way?

RC: That, you know, that there was more of a cross-section of people, and the town opened up.

INT: Who was coming into the town, as you saw it then?

RC: Well, it was a great mix, which was healthy, primarily, I think, because of the lack of numbers over the years, because there was only the one street with Jewish people. A lot of Jewish people came into the town because of the school system. And you take the Green & White developments—which would be Peacock Farm and up on Emerson Road and what have you—not that you want to put a name on anyone, but I think that sort of construction attracted more of a liberal person than the conventional colonial house would attract a more conservative person. And that's how we got the mix. In my opinion, it's healthy to have a difference of opinion and a cross-section of people. I think that's the strength of a board, of a company, or anything else.

INT: What did you mean by Green & White?

RC: Green & White developed Peacock Farm. And you know, that type of construction, like the "Deck House" of today, would attract a more

liberal type person than the old dyed-in-the-wool conservative. And that's where the cross-section came, in my opinion.

INT: That's very interesting. So you're saying that the architectural styling of the housing developments began to attract different types of people?

RC: In my opinion, yes.

INT: That's very interesting. During the sixties now, did the town change at all during the sixties, as you recall?

RC: Change in what way?

INT: Well, were the types of people coming into town during the sixties different than the types of people coming in during the fifties?

RC: Well, they just…no, not really, in my opinion. I think in the sixties there was just more of them, because there was more developing and more construction. A lot of the farms were going out of…like the Burnham farm was a big…you know, Duffy opened up down in Pleasant Street, behind Wilson's. What's the name of that development? You go up Fern Street to go into it.

INT: Moon Hill.

RC: Moon Hill, that opened up. And the land up on Burlington Street opened up. There were a lot of big subdivisions in that year, that were farms or privately held land that was sold. And that's how we got… I don't think the type of person changed; I just think the numbers were greater.

INT: The land that was privately held, what was that used for?

RC: It was either farming or personally. It's like this farm. Somebody liked land and they held it. Or it was handed down generation to generation. You take the land up near Willard's Woods: All of that land, you know, that was privately held. And then during my tenure on the Board we bought a lot of land. We bought tremendous amounts of land, because (1), I loved land, and I don't think…and (2), I think it's the best investment anybody could make, personal or otherwise. And I think it's a

great legacy to hand down, because people—especially as it's growing—people, you know, don't see nature. It's like, you know, a couple of the times schools kids would come down here and come down and pick the apples and look at the farm and pick a pumpkin or something. Kids don't see that anymore. So I think it's a great legacy to leave the town. And I worked hard to…you know, the Conservation Commission was established when I was on the Board. We bought up most of the land. We bought—not that I was responsible—but I supported, I think, every land purchase but one, and I didn't support that one because I think we were paying too much money for it. Not that I didn't want to buy it, but I think we're paying much too much money for it. So I think we, in that period of time, kept or tried to keep a lot of the character of the town that would have gone if we didn't buy this land, like Swanson farm.

INT: Right.

RC: You know, over there, a big farm, all that land, you know, the Utica Street sandpit, the Catalano farm next door here, all of those pieces of land. We spent a lot of money in those days, as far as the dollar was concerned, but I think it was well worth it.

INT: What was the nature of your community involvement at the time? Can you give us some…?

RC: I was involved primarily as an individual in not so many organizations, because I'm not a joiner. My first position in the town was when I ran for Selectman in 1963.

INT: So it was the first time you ran, and you were elected?

RC: Yes, I was.

INT: What would lead, all of a sudden, to an Italian immigrant, the son of an Italian immigrant, finally breaking that barrier? How do you…?

RC: Do you mean to get elected or to run?

INT: To get elected, Bob, why all of a sudden?

RC: Well, I think primarily it was because of the new mix in town. I think as the people came in, they were fed up with a name succession, and they were looking for some new blood. They didn't know I was as crazy as I was.

INT: Was there a sense that when you were running…was East Lexington, let's say, 95% behind you, would you say?

RC: East Lexington was, but I had some general support because of a business background.

INT: Could you describe that please?

RC: Yes. I was always, always affiliated with business, you know, whether it be family or otherwise. Even when I left the farm, I started the industrial division of Genalco. So I was always business oriented, business minded. And my position was to bring that to the Board.

INT: Were there—prior to this, the event of the veterans on the Green issue—were there any other controversial issues that you faced as a member of the Board of Selectmen?

RC: They weren't controversial as such, but they were very emotional issues, like the kindergarten issue, the school issue. I was the one that recommended building the two schools at once, to save some money and get the enrollment and the classroom space behind us. I recommended Bridge [School], and what's the one down here?

INT: Bowman [School].

RC: Bowman. I said, design the two of them, and build them, and let's get it over with. And I was the one that pushed for the five year bonding, because what we saved in interest, we paid for things. And we didn't put our debt on the next generation, as they always did. But the money we saved in interest on the five-year bonding was incredible. And those are the things that I brought to the Board.

INT: Any other major issues?

RC: No, but nobody wanted to go to a five year bonding, because the payments were much higher than a twenty year bonding. But on the other hand, the payment being higher, 80% of it was principal and not interest. And it was because of that we got a better Moody's rating, so we borrowed money cheaper.

INT: We get finally to the era of Vietnam, and you had indicated that you were a veteran. What branch of the service were you in?

RC: I was in the infantry.

INT: And you contracted arthritis in this? Had you been sent overseas or were you still in training?

RC: No, no. I was in Germany. I was wounded, sent back. In the springtime over there, it's very wet and very cold. And laying in the mud doesn't help.

INT: So, from your recollection, when was the first time that you heard about the veterans wanting to make this march, and when did the Selectmen begin discussing it?

RC: It was probably a month before the march was planned. We got a request to use the Green.

INT: And what was the nature of that request?

RC: They wanted to camp on the Green overnight.

INT: So, for a month previous, they had…part of their request was to camp?

RC: Yes.

INT: And what was the Selectmen's initial reaction to it?

RC: Basically, we wanted some more information. We wanted information as to who was involved in this. We wanted somebody to take responsibility of coming to town, taking responsibility of the whole march. And being a very emotional thing, we wanted somebody to be able to answer to us, in case somebody is going to get hurt. Because we knew from the other marches there were a lot of drugs and liquor involved. So we

were looking for somebody to step up to the plate to take responsibility here. Most of the people involved were not veterans. So it was those issues that came. They never answered to us, that we finally said, sure, you can use the Green. But like anybody else, you have to be off by ten o'clock. That's our by-law. Our people that pay the bill live by that rule. If you want another location to go overnight, we'll consider it. But the Green is sacred to us, sacred to the country, and the rules are the rules, you've got to live by them. That's what we all fought for. And you can use the Green, but you've got to be out by ten o'clock. If you want another location, Tower Park, Lincoln Street, or what have you, we will consider it. But the Green, sure, you know, with all of the issues and what have you, that's really what it's for. But then, you've got to live by the rules that the world lives by. And especially [the rules that] Lexington lives by, because we pay the bill.

INT: So you made that request, and ultimately, later on, a fellow by the name of Gross, came to speak to you at a meeting.

RC: I forget the names. It could be.

INT: And you asked those same questions, you know, "Who is responsible," "Who is going to pay?" The Town Manager was involved in that.

RC: Walter O'Connell.

INT: He was the first Town Manager?

RC: Yes.

INT: Just as an aside, what led the town to go to a Town Manager?

RC: Because basically we felt that the town was getting so big, it should be run like a business, and there should be somebody here on a day to day basis to start making the decisions and have the overall responsibility to run the town. I supported the Town Manager Act, but I did not support every facet of it, because I thought the pendulum went too far. I don't think any one person should appoint every board, because then you don't

get a cross-section, either way. And the strength of a board is for cross-section of people, cross-section of thinking, and cross-section of experiences. And that got lost in the Town Manager Act, number one. And number two, there was just too much authority [placed on] this one individual with no real overview by the Board of Selectmen. And that's where we parted company. I thought there should be one person to have the everyday responsibility of running the town, because as time went on… In the old days it was different. You know, people ran for the Board of Selectmen. They lived in town, their business in town. They could be in town all or some part of everyday. That's no longer the case. So somebody should be there to deal with the people and answer the people's questions, deal with their problems. They should be able to go see somebody to deal with their problems. But now, as it's come down, we've lost all of that. We lost the whole intimacy of the town election, in my opinion. And although I agreed with the concept, I disagree with the details of it.

INT: Do you think the appointment power of the Town Manager led to any kind of polarization in the town?

RC: No, because I think basically, it's not so much the Town Manager. It's basically, there's no one to deal with—there's no one to sit down and discuss your problems with.

INT: We lost that.

RC: See, when I was there—and it's not that it was me and everybody before me—some part of every day, somebody was in that Town Hall. And if you had a problem, somebody could deal with it. Now everybody is too busy, and it's no good. We're still a small town. We're big. You know, we have a 50 million dollar budget. But then again, we still want Lexington to be Lexington. And we've lost all of that.

INT: So, was Walt O'Connell [the Town Manager] in any way—he had some say, at least according to this—was he influential at all? Who had the

ultimate decision as a body? Was it the Town Manager or the Board of Selectmen with regard to whether the Green could be used that day?

RC: The Board of Selectmen.

INT: The Board of Selectmen.

RC: It was the Board of Selectmen's decision, and it was a unanimous vote, not too long.

INT: It was a unanimous vote?

RC: Unanimous vote.

INT: And there was no question about that?

RC: That's right. The record is very clear.

INT: And also, in terms of the "guerilla theater" thing that they wanted to do, too, that was unanimous. They wanted to come in and do something in the Center, and there were some remarks about being concerned about…

RC: Yeah, the Board was completely unanimous in its decision.

INT: Now, what happened on May 24th, from what I can see, that was when a unanimous decision was reached, that yes, they could use the Green and leaflet, but there was no bivouacking and no guerrilla theater, and they could march.

RC: Yeah, they had every right…they were afforded every right they were entitled to, and then some.

INT: May 27th, there was a special meeting [of the Board of Selectmen]. Evidently, there were reporters calling from *The Boston Globe* and raising the issue that maybe they were going to camp on the Green, anyway. What was going on in your mind, in terms of…?

RC: May 27th was what day?

INT: May 27th would have been a Thursday. And so, you called a special meeting. And evidently, you had been called, and some other Selectmen had been called—and these guys plan on staying.

RC: Well, we knew that.

INT: You knew that?

RC: Yeah, we knew that.

INT: And how far in advance did you know that?

RC: We probably knew it a couple of days.

INT: A couple of days. So, between the May 24th meeting and the May 27th meeting, the word had gotten out that they [the veterans] were going to stay anyway.

RC: Only because we knew what they were doing along the way, and we knew what, you know…not because other people had given them permission to…like up in Concord, the National Park gave them permission to stay, which is fine; that's their prerogative.

INT: Did the vets ever tell you directly that they planned on staying on the Green?

RC: Not that I remember, not that I remember.

INT: So it was reports filtering to you from different people in town or whatever?

RC: Mm hmm.

INT: You made a remark…I'm going to quote from the...

RC: The minutes?

INT: The minutes, okay?

RC: Okay.

INT: But that was interesting. You talked about the transition, the change from May 24th to May 27th. Then, to quote you, "The clergy put the town in this position."

RC: Yes, I did. And I feel very strongly they did that.

INT: Okay, can you explain that?

RC: The clergy supported [the veterans] every inch of the way, to do what they did. This is one of the reasons we had the meeting. And the clergy got involved in it. In my opinion, it's not their role. The clergy has a responsibility to the townspeople. I think that, basically, they should not have been involved in this issue.

INT: What clergy were they?

RC: Every one of them.

INT: Every one of them.

RC: Missing none.

INT: What church did you belong to at the time?

RC: Sacred Heart.

INT: Who was the pastor there at the time?

RC: Father McKay. And Father Kelty had been in Saint Brigid's. And I was livid with them.

INT: And did they use the pulpit at times—at all—in terms of sermons to talk about the war?

RC: I was so mad at them I wouldn't go to church.

INT: So they were very, very active.

RC: Very active, very active, every one of them. And the thing that upset me, there were many people in town that needed help, and they wouldn't take five minutes to help them. We had to help them as individuals, and the church just took a walk. And they know it.

INT: So what you're saying is that, in terms of Sacred Heart specifically, there might have been people within the parish that needed whatever type of help, and you're saying that it was…

RC: I will give you a very specific item. There was this woman…when we went to school, we'd walk through the back way to Adams School. From when we were—from first grade—this woman would always be out in her garden, and she would always say, "Good morning," and we'd talk to her—for the whole six years, even when I went to church. So, finally, I get a call from her daughter. At this point I was Chairman. And I got a call from the Superintendent of Public Works. There's a woman on Fowler Avenue. The mother was in her eighties. The daughter was in her sixties. And their sewer was plugged and they were going to the bathroom in plastic bags and put it on the back porch. So he said, "What

do you want to do?" I said, "John, go down, put a new sewer line in, and either we'll get the money, or I'll pay for it." So I called the church, because they were very good Catholics. "We don't have any money for that sort of thing." "What do you mean? These people have gone to your church since I could walk." I couldn't get five cents. So finally, we went to the Bridge, I think it was the Bridge Trust Fund for the indigent and the needy, and got the money to pay for that sewer. I couldn't, you know…who needs all of this publicity, when your own flock is in trouble? And I could go on and on and on, but there is no sense. So that's why I was upset. The church has a place, and they have a very important job to do. And I think they've fallen down in it.

INT: Do you think that's still the case today?

RC: I can't answer you. I don't know.

INT: Let's talk a little bit. The theme of the role of the clergy has come up with other people. Were there things going on at Saint Brigid's or Sacred Heart that you knew of in terms of group? Were the churches themselves—the parishes—split along political lines?

RC: Very much so, but I'd rather not get into them. We supported Sacred Heart Church when we were kids. I will never forget, in 1932, the pastor of the church—we had no house for the priest. I don't know if you were in town, where Arlex Oil is now was the Rest Inn, was a rooming house. And that's where the priest lived before they bought the house at 627 Mass. Ave. with the big pillars. The priest had no car. So the people down in East Lexington, and especially in Bow Street, got together and wanted to buy him a car. Every one of us kids went out and went to work, whether it was one dollar or five dollars, put the money in there to buy that priest the car. You know, there was no question back then that the community was very loyal and very much involved. But you would never get that today. And the priest, the priest would come. If you needed a

priest, he'd be there. My mother was a very religious person. I don't know if you remember Father Rocco?

INT: Yes.

RC: When my mother died he said the Mass. And he, you know, he was funny. He said, "I've got to tell you, when I was going through the priesthood, it was tough. But no matter when I came home, Mrs. Cataldo always slipped me a few bucks [laughter], knowing I needed it." But when my mother died we couldn't get a priest. The answering service was on. So…

INT: So the clergy, your attitude toward the clergy, had been changing anyway, by this time?

RC: No one was more dedicated to the church than we were. We did more…we've donated more things and more money to the Sacred Heart Church and that community center, I think, than any other family in the town of Lexington, as a group.

INT: Did the Selectmen as a whole share your sentiments about the clergy, would you say?

RC: No.

INT: No?

RC: No, no, they weren't involved as I was. Because I had the nursing home, so I could see it all. In 1972 I opened East Village Nursing Home, so I could see more than they did. You know, I had the nuns come to me, one of the oldest nuns in Marycliffe, [who] was teaching in her eighties. Had to go to a nursing home. And the only home she could get into was the Baptist Home on the third floor, and she couldn't wear a habit. So *I* took her in and gave her a private room. No one, none of the Catholic organizations, would do anything for her. So this is why I was more bitter. I had more experiences than they did. And nine times out of ten, they just couldn't believe the things that I'd…

INT 2: Did you know if the other churches, besides the Catholic churches, in 1971, were also involved in some way in supporting the Vietnam veterans?

RC: Oh, every church in town was.

INT2: Every church in town. So you were…?

RC: The Baptist, you take them all, every church in town was. As a matter of fact, they were feeding them. Which is fine, that's their prerogative. But stay out of the political fight.

INT: Let me ask you this, getting back to your experience as a serviceman: What was your attitude as this was developing toward veterans, the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, and what they were doing?

RC: My attitude was, we shouldn't have been over there, but we were. And what they were doing was showing the other side that we were divided, is what it did. It's like this Gulf War. Until the final vote came down in Congress, Saddam [Hussein] thought he had us, like Vietnam again. That's what it did. And although I personally was against the war—I even wrote President Johnson, as an individual. But on the other hand, we were there, and some of our guys were there on the front line. And nobody really knows what the front line is unless you're there. And for our people to be going that way, with the guys up there getting killed, it wasn't fair.

INT: Even the veterans themselves?

RC: I beg your pardon?

INT: Even the veterans themselves? You thought it wasn't fair for the veterans themselves?

RC: I didn't think it was fair for anybody.

INT: For anybody.

RC: Veteran or not. Because if we didn't go to the last war, they wouldn't have been here; they wouldn't of had what they had to live by or with, if we didn't go do it. Sure, it was a lousy…we shouldn't have been there. There's absolutely no question in my mind. But on the other hand,

we were there. And the guy in Washington was comfortable. The guy in the front line certainly wasn't. And that guy was entitled to our support.

INT: So now we have a situation where, because of the pressure in the town, and what you've heard, and you called a special meeting on May 27th, which would have been a Thursday, and that's when the issue of the clergy…and that's when the issue of an alternative site came up. And that was voted down. What was the reasoning behind being against an alternative site?

RC: Because it was too late to set it up right.

INT: Explain that to me.

RC: Because they were coming on a Saturday, that was a Thursday night. And we felt that…they were going to go to Bunker Hill. The MDC would not…were going to let them stay, because I talked to the Captain down there. Although they weren't, you know, on the grounds—they were not supposed to [be]. But they were going to let them stay; they weren't going to bother them.

INT: So, you felt, however—or the majority anyway—felt that it was too late. What had to be set up?

RC: Well, you needed security. You needed restrooms. You needed whatever protection you were going to afford these people. The neighbors should be, you know, entitled to some security and some protection.

INT: Are you—let me ask you—are you saying that…well, I'm not going to put words in your mouth. Explain the nature of your vote. What was motivating you to vote the way you were voting?

RC: Just like I said, you know, they were entitled to use the Green like any other person in the country or the world. But they weren't, in my opinion, they weren't entitled to any more rights than the people of Lexington were entitled to. We had rules; we had regulations[2]; we had

[2]By "regulations" Mr. Cataldo refers to the Lexington Bylaw regarding the Green. Section 25 reads as follows: "No person shall engage or take part in any game, sport, picnic or performance on the Battle

laws. We all lived by them since the beginning of time and through the Revolution. And especially where most of the people involved were not veterans—were not veterans.

INT: How did you know that?

RC: We asked them.

INT: Some of the leaders, I know…

RC: Probably the people that came were, you know, a lot of them were veterans. But even then, a lot of people on the Green… I bet you if a count was made, that half the people on the Green were not veterans. Because as you know, we got a restraining order. And it was interesting to see, at ten o'clock, how many people left the Green, and what type of person. Every lawyer in town left the Green. They were there, you know, marching with them until ten o'clock. Ten o'clock, they went home. John Kerry showed up at, I don't know, midnight or something, to get arrested. That's what he showed up for. And you know that we did offer them an alternative place that night, at the church. We met at the church.

INT: What went on at that meeting? Who was present, and what went on?

RC: The people that originally came to us with the request. And we said…we met with the four members of the Board that were here, and I forget how many of them, but at Saint Brigid's. And we said, "Lookit, this is crazy. The emotions are high. And why don't you take either Tower Park or Lincoln Street [park]?"

INT: And so even after you as a Board had voted down offering an alternative site…

RC: We offered it to them that night.

Green, without the written permission of the Selectmen or other board having charge and control thereof, and no person shall climb upon, deface, mutilate or otherwise injure any tree, shrubbery, monument, boulder, fence, seat or structure thereon, or behave or conduct himself on the Battle Green otherwise than in a quiet and orderly manner in keeping with a respectful regard and reverence for the memory of the patriotic service and sacrifice there so nobly rendered." This town bylaw was in effect in 1971, and dates back to 1923 or earlier; it was not amended until the 1980's.

INT: Okay, so after the vote had been taken, in this private meeting…

RC: Yes.

INT: …at St Brigid's, as things were escalating…

RC: Yes.

INT: …you were willing to give them an alternative site?

RC: Because we felt…and we did it for the purposes of the public safety of the town. If you were up there—I don't know if you were there.

INT: I was there.

RC: You could cut the drug smoke with a knife, so anything could have happened. It was a time bomb. About nine o'clock, the Blue Angels[3] came into the police station. They said, "Do you want us to go down and clear them out?" You know, with their chains and the whole bit. We said, "Please go home. Please go home." Anything could have happened that night. People don't know how lucky the town was, to end up the way it did. And it was because of the public safety of the town, that we…you know, we could have said, "Go ahead," and walked away. In my opinion, that would have been very unfair to the town.

INT2: Can I interject one question about this security part? Earlier, you had mentioned other events that had drugs or drinking involved, and that would be a security problem. Were you thinking in terms of in Lexington, or other places?

RC: Other places.

INT2: Other places, okay.

RC: That's the reports that we had gotten, other places that they had marched.

INT: So, at this meeting at Saint Brigid's you were willing, because of the reports that…now, were you on the Green?

RC: I was on the Green. I was on the Green.

---

[3] A mistaken reference; the speaker most likely intended to refer to the "Hell's Angels," a then-notorious motorcycle gang.

INT: How often were you on the Green?

RC: Probably three or four times.

INT: Three or four times. And also, you were getting reports from the police, I assume.

RC: I was there the night. And I talked to the police. I said, "Anybody that doesn't want…" I said, "You know, having been in the service, going into something, you never know what's going to happen." I said, "If any one of you—I know you all got families—if any one of you want to go home, please do, because I know what can happen up there."

INT: This meeting goes on from ten thirty to about two o'clock in the morning. What wasn't resolved? What happened?

RC: Well, we didn't go that late at all.

INT: It wasn't that late?

RC: Oh no, oh no. We were only a half an hour.

INT: A half hour.

RC: Oh sure, we weren't there that long.

INT: And nothing could be resolved?

RC: They were adamant to stay there.

INT: They were going to stay. So, by this time, no alternative site, no Green.

RC: They wouldn't accept it. Because this all happened before ten o'clock, because at ten o'clock, the Chief [of Police] read the restraining order.

INT: What was the process for the restraining order? How did that work?

RC: Norman Cohen, who is now Town Counsel, was a private attorney. We went to Judge McLaughlin's house who was Chief Judge in Belmont. He issued the restraining order.

INT: When did you go?

RC: Saturday.

INT: Saturday, at what time?

RC: I don't know, probably one o'clock.

INT: And who went? Who is "we"?

RC: Norm Cohen, myself, and I think [Selectman] Al Busa was with me, I'm not sure. A long time ago, you know?

INT: I know. Well, you're doing a great job here, I'll tell you.

RC: You know I've been off the Board twenty-one years.

INT2: Your memory is great.

INT: Now, had the Board…the Board had voted. When did the Board vote…?

RC: To get the restraining order?

INT: To get the restraining order.

RC: Saturday morning.

INT: Saturday morning. Was that an open meeting, or a closed meeting?

RC: You could call it open, because anybody could have come, but nobody wanted to talk to us.

INT: All right, so Saturday morning, you voted for…and what was the vote on that?

RC: It was only four of us here, and it was unanimous together.

INT: Unanimous, okay. All right. So Saturday, you went to Belmont. Now, was the judge at home?

RC: Yes, he was.

INT: He issued the restraining order?

RC: Yes, he did.

INT: When was that made public, the restraining order? When did people know about it?

RC: I think the…when it was really…everybody knew we had it, but I think the Chief read it at ten o'clock, when it was to take effect, over the loudspeaker, on the Green.

INT: Early that Saturday, or late afternoon, early evening, there was a big meeting at the Town Hall.

RC: Yes.

INT: And you people were there and you listened. What was the intention of that meeting, in your opinion, and what was…how did that meeting…?

RC: The intention was to give the townspeople an opportunity to speak as to what was going on. The original intent was to talk to the clergy and ask them why they were doing what they were doing. The thing got completely out of hand. I never saw so many people congregate in the town of Lexington so fast. I don't care what issue ever came up in the town. We could spend a hundred million dollars at Town Meeting and it wouldn't have been half the people that showed up. The place was just loaded.

INT: Describe the atmosphere at that meeting, if you can.

RC: I think the atmosphere was…actually, depending on what side you were on—not that there should have been sides—what your opinion was. There were people there that felt they shouldn't be allowed to stay on the Green at all. And there were other people that felt we should mind our own business, let them do what they want. That was the spectrum. Basically, my attitude was to get these people to hear the townspeople's attitudes, and maybe they would come to their senses and see we had a town that respected our Green. That was the purpose of the meeting. And it didn't work out that way. Because every clergyman, to a person, got up and spoke and just buried us. You know, you're there to do a job. We were elected by the people of Lexington. Although we do feel the Green is a national shrine, and everybody in the country is welcome and entitled to come there, it's still our Green.

INT: That's interesting.

RC: And we pay the bill.

INT: At the time, it was Lexington's Green. Here, the federal government had allowed the veterans to stay in Concord at the National Park. Here the state government, in essence, was saying at Bunker Hill that they were going to let the veterans stay and...

RC: No, at Bunker Hill, the rule was they couldn't stay. But they weren't going to move them off.

INT: So they didn't give permission, but they weren't going to take action.

RC: They weren't going to, because the Captain said to me, "What are you—crazy?" [Laughter]

INT: Sure. So, rather than one giving in and the other saying "okay," and then the local jurisdiction saying "no." Did you think about that at all?

RC: Absolutely. And my feeling was…and naturally, you think of those things. You are there to do a job. And if I was going to make a political decision, I would have voted to let them stay. If I were going to make a decision for what I was elected for—to protect the town of Lexington—my vote was right. And I would do it again. It's a question of, what type of decision are you going to make? And I've never made a *political* decision for the town of Lexington.

INT: Would you say that the other Selectmen had the same perspective as you?

RC: The other Selectmen felt exactly as I did: It's Lexington's Green. We are proud of it and we respect it. And we've got our rules that we live by. I think, probably, there would have been a little different opinion if all of the people that came to us were veterans, had been wounded, or something, and said, "Lookit, we just want to express ourselves in this way. And we just can't go on to Bunker Hill." I mean it might have been a different story. But here they are, half of them were not veterans. It was strictly a political venture, in my opinion. And they wanted the use of the

Minuteman [Park] and the Green to expand their venture. And they were hoping we didn't let them stay. They wanted the publicity.

INT: What makes you feel that way?

RC: I beg your pardon?

INT: What made you feel that way that you think…

RC: I have a very strong feeling for Lexington. I have a very strong feeling for the country. You know, I was in the service. And I paid my dues. I paid my dues both as a serviceman and as a person in Lexington. And I was elected by the people of Lexington, for Lexington. What would they have said if somebody got killed that night? Who would they have blamed? They wouldn't have blamed those kids? They would have said, you know, what did you let them stay there for?

The people that were most vocal about letting them stay, that's where they come back and say, "You know, it's you guys, what did you do it for? You guys should have known they were going to have drugs and liquor and this sort of thing, if you did your homework." That's where we were coming from. There was no one person or group to say, okay, I will make sure that everything is done the way it should be done, or no group, or no organization—no one.

INT: That is very consistent from the line of questions that appear in the minutes.

RC: That's right. We never changed our position. We never…

INT: So you're feeling that the whole venture was strictly to get publicity and…

RC: No question in my mind. Why did John Kerry come to get arrested? We were up there and they were arresting the people, and there was this poor guy in the wheelchair. And he wanted to be arrested in the worst way. He was not a veteran. He was not hurt in the war. He was just an individual that got hurt somehow. And they just wouldn't arrest him. And he's screaming at them, I want to be arrested. And we're saying, "No,

you're going to get hurt. Why don't you please go home?" And he stayed there until the end and wouldn't go home. We didn't arrest him. But you know, it was just an attitude of...it was more politics than saving the country.

INT: Who gave the order to go ahead with the arrests? Who gave that?

RC: Well, the Board voted that they couldn't stay there.

INT: Who finally said, we've waited long enough? How was that decision…

RC: The Chief decided, once he read the restraining order, they decided when they were going in.

INT: Did you observe the arrests itself? Were you around for that?

RC: Yes, I did.

INT: So, what was your reaction?

RC: They were polite. Everybody just went willfully. Everybody wanted to be arrested, whoever was there. Whoever didn't want to be, went home. Once the restraining order was read, they went home, and rightly so. So then, you know, the fallacy comes, they all were arrested, they were all found guilty. Then they all wanted a pardon. And I screamed at the Governor. I said, "Well, they put us through this, now you want to pardon them?" And he finally did, I think. I'm pretty sure he did.[4]

INT: There were some who were [pardoned]?

RC: Yeah, that's not right, that was their choice, to be involved and be arrested. It's no different than any other guy that commits a crime.

INT: The arrests took place, and you observed that. And certain things happened afterwards. There were some issues about a lawsuit. Can you explain that?

RC: I'm not that familiar. A lawsuit against the town?

[4] No official action on pardons was ever taken, although a pardon petition was circulated. Attorney Julian Soshnik organized the petition drive. See the Julian Soshnik interview.

INT: You, the Selectmen, there was a motion to withdraw a lawsuit. Who were you suing? Was the town going to sue someone? My notes aren't clear on it, actually. There was a meeting on June 2nd. There was an issue of a lawsuit.

RC: That I don't remember. Maybe if you refresh my memory, maybe it will come to me.

INT: I'll have to check that probably. Because I don't have my…

RC: See, Natalie Riffin[5] was not here that weekend. And she came back. And I think what she was saying is, she wanted the charges withdrawn against the people. I think that's what that was.

INT: That's what it was. And they did vote three to two, to withdraw the charges.

RC: It had to be Busa and I that voted against.

INT: Why? Do you recall?

RC: Yeah, because it's like I said, they went there by choice. They were arrested by choice. They had every opportunity to leave. They were given ample notice that the restraining order was in effect. It cost the town and it cost the state a lot of money to process those arrests. As a matter of fact, the judge had a special session all day to process those arrests. They did it knowingly and willingly, so they should carry it with them.

INT2: I'm going to ask a question related to the logistics on that Saturday night. When the Chief of Police knew what he was going to have to do—to apprehend so many people—you're one of the first people we can talk to about it—what logistics did he have to deal with? There was a lot of stuff that…

RC: It was all set. I don't know how many buses they had. And I forget how many state police were here.

INT2: Did that cost the town to get the state police?

---

[5] Natalie Riffin was a member of the Board of Selectmen who was spending the holiday weekend with her family on Nantucket.

RC: No, no, it did not. The buses were donated. And the state police came at our request, for protection. State police protection was afforded everybody, you know, even in Concord. I went up to Concord the night before, on the lookout on Fiske Hill.

INT: What did you see there? And what did…?

RC: Well, it was early. It was probably six o'clock. And you know, they're all having a good time. And that was fine. And they were all absolute gentleman. You know, as a matter of fact, every one of the committee come over to talk to me. I talked to them, and I said, "You know, I'm glad you're having a good time." And I said, "How's it going?" "It's going fine," he says, we'll see you tomorrow. I said, "Fine." You know [laughter]…

INT: And they were aware, at the time, that Lexington had already said no.

RC: That's right, that's right.

INT: And was there, in your verbal exchanges with them, any indication at that time that they were going to stay, no matter what you…

RC: No, but you knew what they were going to do. You knew what they were going to do.

INT2 The atmosphere on Fiske Hill on Friday night was kind of pleasant, it sounds like on Saturday night on the Green…

RC: Same thing at the early part of the evening, same thing. But they probably—you know, they had cases of—they had a truckload of beer and liquor and all kinds of drugs all piled up.

INT: Who is "they"?

RC: The veterans. They brought it with them.

INT2: Is it acceptable, or was it then acceptable?

RC: No, it wasn't acceptable. We told them to move, but—you know.

INT2: So, there was also a general town rule about consuming alcohol on the Green?

RC: Oh, naturally, you can't.

INT2: Naturally, you can't, okay.

RC: No, naturally, you can't.

INT: There were meetings afterwards. A lot of things went on in the *Minuteman* [Lexington newspaper], letters and repercussions.

RC: Oh yes. It hasn't died yet.

INT: Talk about that. Talk about a little bit about what happened immediately after, its effect on your political career, and how you see it continuing into…

RC: You know, not all of the people, but a great number of people that really don't know me just formed their opinion based on that one decision, and they're still holding it. There is a…I don't know what you want to call (me), that was just terrible to be… That's why I say, if I were to make a political decision, looking back, even that night, even then, you knew, that you know that you were biting your hand. But I just couldn't…you had to weigh that against what you were elected for. And I worked hard as a Selectman. And I brought a lot of things to that Board, financially. I got a lot of financial stability to the town, fortunately. But it's that one decision, and that's life. So. There are to this day people that still hold that feeling. But as far as I am concerned, it's gone by, and it's over.

INT: Do you think it had any long-range impact on politics at the time?

RC: Oh, sure.

INT: In what ways?

RC: Because when I got defeated, it was a change of the weight of the Board to a different philosophy completely. It was a philosophy of—let the Town Manager run the town; whatever he does, he does. There was no financial, real financial.... Because I served on the Appropriation Committee for nine years after that. And the only way you could do anything for the town is to—not to cut a budget—but to make sure you get every dollar's worth of the budget you spent. Because every dime was

going to be spent. And that's the only attitude you could have to get the thing done. And every dime was spent, and that's why we're in the mess we are today. We projected this mess five years ago, that we're going to hit the wall today. But nobody… Oh, something will happen. Santa Claus will come; but he hasn't.

INT: What about the ethnic politics in town, Bob? Did that change, or was your defeat…did that…you certainly represented a lot to East Lexington and to the mixture of the ethnic makeup.

RC: No, I don't think that's changed. I think that what's changed is the—and I don't like to say it this way—is that the Yankees controlled the town from the beginning of time, until probably the sixties. I think that's changed dramatically, because the families are gone. See, the families, the real families, the offspring couldn't afford…we had big estates in this town. They're gone. All of the mansions are torn down because the families couldn't support them.

INT: So, development in the town was not only the…the farm land was developed, but also the estates.

RC: All of the mansions are gone. Yes, all of the mansions are gone. You know, this town was like Concord. You see how many mansions are in Concord and Lincoln. We had our share of them here, and they're gone.

INT: In retrospect—you touched on this a little bit—would you do anything differently?

RC: Would I do anything differently? If I was going to be a politician for a career, I certainly would have. But if I were going to serve on the Board of Selectmen, for the same reasons I served, I would have done exactly the same thing. I think I owed it to the people of Lexington. Unfortunately, the majority of people didn't feel that way. But I think the real Lexington people felt that way.

INT: Who are the "real" Lexington people?

RC: People that were here to stay. We have a very transient population in this town. And I never realized it myself. I'm serving on the Board, when you look at the change in the numbers of water bills in a year, that's how you could tell. I think we had had a 25% turnover. That type of person could care less what happened to our Green. That type of person could care less that we developed Lexington Center the way we did. But when you travel the state or [elsewhere], and you hear the comments about our Lexington Center, it was well worth what we did. And I spearheaded that. But people could care less.

INT: Did it enter into your mind at all, that it was a "we" versus "they" type of situation?

RC: No, because you could always interpret that, even today. You know, because of the difference in philosophy. You know, now you see the write-ups of the change of the balance in the Board of Selectmen now. That's their attitude now. Although there is no question with the membership of the Board now, the philosophy of the Board has changed. But it's not "we" versus "they"; it's the Board has got a different makeup, and the majority of the people of the town made that decision. They were not satisfied, evidently, with the philosophy of the town, of the Board.

INT: I'm going to raise the question again. And my feeling sometimes is that there have always been some ethnic things in sections of town versus [other] sections of town. The current Board of Selectmen, you have Eddison. You have…

RC: [Jack] Eddison is not there.

INT: No, Betty [Eddison].

INT2: Running [for office].

RC: Oh, running. Oh, okay.

INT: And you have…

RC: Nancy.

INT: Nancy Cannalonga.

RC: Yes.

INT: Do you think there is ethnicity, or is it…What do you think is going to be the dominant issue? Is it going to be ethnicity, or is it going to be politics that's going to…?

RC: It's going to be politics. A conservative person or liberal, if you want to use those terms. No, the ethnic part is…we've gone by that. We've gone by that. There was a day in this town [when] that certainly [existed]. Today, I don't see that at all. Because I will bet you that there will be a lot of Italians that will vote for Betty Eddison. I'm not one of them, but… [Laughter]. And I don't know her.

INT: You don't know her.

RC: But I know Nancy.

INT2: One of the things that got kind of tripped up in my mind here—in the issue of the 1971 Battle Green arrests, the demonstration and then the arrests—there were different people who reacted in support of the Selectmen's' decision, and others that were very supportive of the veterans. Did you see a pattern as to who in the town supported what you did, and who in the town didn't? Was there some pattern, or was it just a mixture that wasn't so clear.

RC: I think it was a mixture. It was not a pattern. Because I had some good friends of mine, not understanding the issues, [who] supported the veterans very strongly, and were very upset with me. But when you explain to them the real issue, [that] it wasn't a veteran's issue—because it was not a veteran's issue at all. It was a very simple issue: who stays on the Green overnight? That was the bottom line.

INT: And no one does. No one stays on the Green.

RC: That's right.

INT2: So there wasn't a clear-cut line in that sense, it sounds like?

RC: No, not at all. I had some women that I knew probably thirty years, that went up one side of me and down the other. And I sat there and

listened. And I said, the way you feel, or the reasons that you feel the way you do, were true; you're absolutely right. But the reasons you feel the way you do are not true.

INT: How did your family react, Bob? What was their…?

RC: They were very upset with me. Yes, they were.

INT: Your family, who specifically was upset?

RC: Take your pick. [Laughter]

INT: Your wife?

RC: They wanted me to make the political decision and take the easy way out.

INT: How old were your children?

RC: Let's see, 1971. My oldest girl was twenty-two, she was in college. My youngest, my next son would be twenty years old. My daughter Jackie would be seventeen. And Todd, I think he was six. Very upset.

INT: Five to one? I mean, not Todd, but would you say it was four to one against Dad?

RC: Oh, without question.

INT: Oh, really?

RC: Without question.

INT: Were any of them on the Green?

RC: No.

INT: No?

RC: I wouldn't let them go, no.

INT: So, there were debates around here?

RC: They would just tell me, "Dad, you're wrong. You're wrong, and listen to me." I said, "I'm listening, okay?" And my wife, to this day…and she'll say to me…they are all giving me a speech today: "Be careful what you tell him. And don't get mad."

INT: You've done a great job. What were the grounds for their…

RC: It wasn't worth the fight. And they were in school with the kids. The kids saw it a different way.

INT: Did the kids have a different perspective than your wife? Your wife was what? More concerned about the political aspect of it?

RC: Right. And they were afraid something was going to happen. When I walked on that Green, she swore—if she knew I had gone up there, she would have died. I walked on that Green and you know, anything could have happened. But I walked. Because you know, if I could be overseas and walk over there, I could walk here. But my wife…I went on the Green three times. And they were…my whole family, my sisters, my brothers, my family, my immediate family, you know, my mother—my mother's, you know, beside herself.

INT: What was her perspective on it?

RC: That I should have let them. Not had the fight.

INT: Just keep peace, right?

RC: Keep peace. That was my mother, anyway. And you know, she was very proud that I was a Selectmen, but you know, what do you need that for?

INT2: Has that mellowed over the years? The opinion that…

RC: No, they still tell me this, I made a mistake. Because the biggest thing to them was my defeat in the re-election.

INT: How did that affect you?

RC: You know, you're disappointed, naturally. Because I think it's one of the greatest experiences I ever had. That type of experience, you can't get in school or in business. And it's done a lot for me as an individual, the experience of it, and what have you. But the defeat, sure, you're disappointed, but you go on with your life. As a matter of fact, it saved me a lot of money.

INT: What?

RC: Well, at the time, I could put my time into something productive.

INT: Is that how you felt at the time? How long was it before you got over the defeat?

RC: Oh, it didn't take me long. It didn't take me long. Didn't take me long.

INT2: If you don't mind, a sort of technical question: Your first year that you were elected was what year?

RC: Sixty-three.

INT2: Sixty-three. And you said, through to seventy-two.

INT: And how many years were you Chair?

RC: Three.

INT: The last?

RC: The last three. And see, the other thing, I was on the Board of Massachusetts Regional Community Colleges. And I was very active building the colleges. I negotiated the first collective bargaining agreement for the state, for the community college system. And built the fifteen colleges—not, you know, brick and mortar, but picked the sites and picked the architects. I was on the design selection board, representing the board and design selection board. So I was busy.

INT2: What time period was that?

RC: Sixty-six to seventy-eight.

INT2: So that was the same time period.

INT: That was a very interesting time period, because really, there was no community college system in Massachusetts.

RC: Oh no, we built the system. We built the system. And it's the best system, educational system, we've got. Because it's helping the kid that needs the help.

INT: So that was you and other…

RC: We were nine. But I was chairman of the two committees. I was chairman of the Personnel Committee and the chairman of the Facilities and Site Committee. So I had the money. [Laughter]

INT: Anything else you would like to say?

RC: No, I just…it's interesting that…at some point I would like to see the finished product. And at some point, if I can be of any help to get the thing done, feel free to call me. You know, maybe we can help you raise some money, if that's what it's going to take. But in the meantime, you know, it's… I didn't look at it as everybody else did. I looked at it as another phase of my life. I did what I thought I had to do. And I'm not ashamed of it; I wouldn't do it different. And I don't mind talking about it. I very seldom do talk about it, because nobody would understand. Nobody would take this kind of time to even want to understand it. They've got their opinion, and nothing is going to change it.

INT2: This is a great help.

RC: But if I can help in anyway, call me.

END OF INTERVIEW