

TRANSCRIPT OF WISCONSIN-MILWAUKEE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT INTERVIEW

Interview with Mr. Frank Zeidler
Former Mayor of Milwaukee

December 9, 1993

Interviewer: Dr. John R. Johannes

Tape Counter Number

- 000 - 072 High points of being in office were in the defense of civil rights. Expressed in 2 ways: open housing and duty to not use status against someone else. Community accepted his ideas until he was associated with the black community. Lost nomination the first time he ran for mayor in 1944 because of a block of votes from the 18th ward (east side). Area later became quite liberal; Catholic and Episcopal Churches favored civil rights. Problems were with working class who were afraid of being pulled back down. Low point of administration would also be civil rights because of difficulty in securing them. Other things in between: doubling the size of the city, bringing in northwest and southwest sides for development. Influenced in policies by Democratic Socialists regarding equality. Met with Municipal Enterprise Committee and Socialist Party for ideas also. Advisory Council to the Mayor: largely conservative businessmen who did not participate much. Worked with secretaries, Stanley Budney, Peterson.
- 073 - 153 Most powerful group was Northwestern Mutual Life; Fitzgerald was okay, but some other heads quite hostile. Company worked to break up city policy of serving water only within its own boundaries which was a major economic blow in 1959. Industries fled to suburbs as a result. Used city attorney's office and hoped for help from the legislature to fight on the water issue. City Club was a positive force while Leo Tifentaler was in charge. Citizens Governmental Research Bureau used to be hostile but Zeidler did not find them that way. Good rapport with labor unions (possible exception of teamsters). Fossum strike over unloading of ship; the City of Milwaukee was fined and Zeidler at time thought he might have gone to jail, but the issue died down. Union membership was strong due to leadership (Jake Friedrich, Charley Hymens). Strain between Milwaukee labor movement and state labor movement: Friedrich was "connived against" by state movement and he should have been chair of the state movement.
- 154 - 185 Being mayor was always a great strain because of lack of press support. In 1956 the Sentinel had headline articles for 3 weeks accusing Zeidler of being a communist. Responded to attacks of newspapers constantly but had good relationship with some of the reporters; But reporter Lloyd Gladfelder was always trying to get him, and Bill Norris of the Sentinel attacked Zeidler whenever he wanted to. Ed Bailey wrote stories that the Journal refused to publish on the issue of Zeidler being responsible for bringing blacks into the city. Other local papers might have given him some help but indirectly.
- 186 - 273 Issue of governing philosophy: strong legislature, checks and balances, and his scholarly approach may have prevented from being more successful. Believes that long term his policies were better. Hard to get things through the Council. President Milt McGuire was ultra-conservative. Council represented utility interests. Maier picked up the conservative machine that was a tool of the power company. Conservative Polish element on the South Side, German Catholics on the West Side, Protestant Socialist element in the central city (except Lutherans). Protestant Republicans were those who sustained his vetoes (Irv Rahn, Walter Koepke, Jimmy Mortier). Dealt with Council in straightforward manner. Race

issue was critical because a group of real estate people would create panic among whites so they could profit from quick sales and resell homes for large profits. No give and take or political deals during his administration; issue by issue only. British type city government with ceremonial mayor and city administrator not best for running large cities. Much talk during his administration about the Galveston Plan and city manager govt. but still favored the mayor-council form.

274 - 407 Relationship with county government had no real conflicts. County grew in size and influence because of migration of people outside the city of Milwaukee. County supervisors from Milwaukee more interested in administering the suburbs than helping the city. Not pleased about county getting control of the freeway system through the legislature (Sen. Alan Busby and brother Burt). Hospital went over to county. Rarely went to Madison to argue with legislature because he left it to the city attorney's office. Got along fairly well with Walter Kohler Jr. and Vernon Thompson. Suburban legislators in Milwaukee area got rural legislators to identify with them (big city v. rural). Milwaukee area legislators generally supportive but not great leaders. Maier was a Republican at first (until 1948); elected to legislature. Maier was a "bad political genius" with lots of tricks - e.g. raising money from contractors and public officials so that there wouldn't be enough money to run against him. Also got in by posing as opponent of blacks to the white community while promising the blacks he would advocate help for them, and corrupted civil service by getting undated letters of resignation in advance. Got reporters removed (Bill Spring, Jack Kohl). Stopped urban renewal to keep from being identified with blacks while posing nationally as a great liberal. Always got somebody to do his dirty work. Didn't accomplish anything. Created racial tensions as a byproduct of his actions.

408 - 545 Community groups helped in open housing fight. Joint Action Committee for Better Housing was helpful. Bishop Halleck supported him. Strong opposition from Property Owners' League which succeeded in stopping things after 1952. Utilities very powerful; lesser group was construction industry (labor strength headed by Peter Schumann; within that group most powerful was the Operating Engineers run by Marsh Weyland). Some neighborhood commercial associations were strong. Property owners had power, Catholic Church strong on some issues. Nature of power of these groups was electoral. Financial power came from industries. Some Protestant ministers were helpful; leaders generally not political. "Irish Mafia" opposed Zeidler; Irish conservatives were active even though numerically small. Rev. Ensworth Riesner was active in civil rights and supported labor; names of others who defended civil rights have their names in the Milwaukee Commission on Human Rights.

546 - 693 Martin Schreiber, Sr. was a progressive alderman. No real strong supporters; strongest probably James Mortier. Many socialist proposals not just socialist but more widely popular, e.g., decent housing, clean streets. Not hard to build support for socialist issues. Public television a very contentious issue - took 5 years to get the station on the air.

Side Two

1-85 Maier always complained about the Journal, , but no mayor was tearted better by the Journal than Maier. Contention that Maier lowered the Journal's assessment when he came into office. Relationship with Richard Perrin "at arm's length". Got along with Reuss and Zablocki; they were helpful to the city. Good friend of Alex Wiley who was also a supporter of the city. Ryan Duffy also a good friend. Not much contact with anyone at other levels except governors. Harry Brockel was a powerful figure; anti-socialist who ran the port in its own interest. Personality gave him influence. George Saffron influential; made a budget examiner by the Council after driven out of the controller's office. Jim Barr

before Saffran; also very capable.

- 87-193 Civil defense was a big issue; danger of cities being bombed after the war. Not a popular issue and Maier killed it. Maitland Field. Annexation was a top priority; suburbs were "parasitic" because, lacking water supply and dump sites, they relied on Milwaukee to provide such services. Big contributors to Norquist's campaign from outside the city, which Zeidler avoided. City provided only fire and some library services to the suburbs during his administration. Good rapport with Walter Matteson (conservative), Leo Hanley, John Coffey, Dick Marzewski, Harry Slater, John Dolan in city attorney's office. Existence of the "Iron Ring" around the city. Biggest priority was urban renewal. Strong opposition on Common Council because of real estate and property owner interests, ideological objections. Many referenda during housing debate; some of them considered "tricky." Matt Shimenz went from being for housing to against it. Race a big factor but not the major one. Maier turned housing projects into "patronage centers."
- 194-276 Library-museum battle; UWM Idea sponsored by the business community ("glamour projects"). Richard Krug headed the library and was influential with the Council. Decided that the library would go first; Council then wanted to back off on the museum, and Zeidler had to push it through. Taxpayers opposed the project. Substantial branch libraries proposed by Zeidler also. No suburban cooperation at the time but suburban residents used Milwaukee Public Libraries. Evolution of UWM. George Parkinson worked with Zeidler in early 50s to come up with a full university in Milwaukee instead of just a teachers' college. Went to head of university, who said they could have three years but Zeidler insisted on four, like Wayne State. Called in Mark Ingram, dean, who said money had to be spent in Madison. Two Republicans on the Board of Regents, Oscar Renebaum and Ellis Jensen, who said they would help get the university; and then it went through. Struggle over chancellorship; J. Martin Klotsche got it because Parkinson did not have the connections. No resistance to the university in the city.
- 277- 367 Transportation. Mass transit a necessary thing for those who could not afford cars. Streetcar dangerous because of auto traffic. Fought for public ownership; came about during Bill O'Donnell's time. Maier would have let public transit die. Last streetcar done in 1957. Transport company was very influential with the Common Council. Fred Johnson, owner, decided to sell the company to Milwaukee County. Zeidler supported city ownership. Maier would have let public transit die. Last streetcar in 1957. Transport company was very influential with the Common Council. Fred Johnson, owner, decided to sell the company to Milwaukee County. Zeidler supported city ownership. County moved in on many things such as the airport without any political opposition. Influence of companies and the campaign money they spent. Big disaster was the closing down of the North Shore; should have been subsidized. Opposition was ideological. Public officials often not well educated. Council not anxious to make its own proposals; depended on department heads for initiatives (e.g., freeway initiative). Fight over waterworks expansion.
- 368-588 Miscellaneous. Least rewarding aspect of being mayor was that his administration did not result in an organization of liberal and progressive people that could have prevented the disaster that took place under Maier. A liberal/progressive political coalition might have formed from the liberal Democrats if Henry Reuss hadn't made the mistake of not really living in the city. Group could have been a counterbalance to Maier. Maier intensely concentrated on his own interest. Zeidler's advice would be to hold to one's ideals. Felt that his ideas such the housing authority and expansion of the city were manipulated and did not come out right. Would have concentrated more on the arts than he did but didn't have time to advance all the causes he wanted to. Also the story of the evolution of employee unions has not been told. The triumph of the "underworld" such as gang

murders. Race and feminist issues are what people are interested in now. Police and minority issues surfaced at the time. John Pozlzin was a good police chief. Incident over police dragnet regarding rapes by several blacks. Typical bureaucrats were good employees: Lloyd Knapp, Walter Swetlik, Edward Crumby, George Saffran, Walter Matteson. Virgil Hurliss was "crooked;" Joe Krueger was influential with the Council. Zeidler held monthly meetings with department heads so that everyone knew what was going on elsewhere. Had a very honest purchasing system but gone now. Maier elected by the work of Manny Gottlieb, Art Else, and others. They had misjudged his character. Zeidler's employees were on the whole pretty good. Wants to be remembered as a nice guy but ineffective; doesn't think he was ineffective but doesn't want to have the newspaper image of a tough, nasty politician.