Interview with P. Blair Lee
October 31, 1978

(BF: Would you tell what you remember of the formation of the Greater Philadelphia Movement and what your role was?)

I think that came along about 1951. The date of the founding of GPM and the charter were pretty close together because I now remember that GPM was very much involved in the charter. As a matter of fact, I think that there were 14 or 15 members of the Charter Commission and I think about 11 of them were members of GPM. They were able to persuade the then President of Council -- Fred Garman -- to appoint a number of these people. I was not a member of that Commission. But when I heard about GPM being formed I was highly in favor of it and I think I just asked to be included in the membership. After all, you had to volunteer occasionally.

(BF: At that point were you with Western Savings Fund?)

Oh yes. I had been President since 1939. So those two things had no time connection. I didn't have much to do with the formation of it, I simply joined it.

(WMP: Who were the most active members?)

Bob McCracken. Bill Kurtz. Harry Batten. Jared Ingersoll. I wish I had that list.

(BF finds the membership list.)

Harry Batten of course was tremendously active and two or three years later he got the idea of the Food Distribution Center and as a matter of fact, I think it is dedicated to him because he was a prime mover in that. Now Joe Burke was on the Executive Committee -- I was on the executive committee -- Joe Burke was the head of one of the unions. Tanner Duckrey was I think the only Black man on the board -- wasn't he assistant head of the public school system? He was a great person, he really was, and his wife -- his sister, I think, was Sadie Alexander. I know they were all related. Jim Gowen was the President of Girard Trust. He was not terribly active. Jared Ingersoll was extremely active. Matt McCloskey, Jr. -- I don't remember him at all as being around. Bob McCracken, of course, was an outstanding lawyer and was really, I think, the Chairman of the charter group. He was terribly active in the formation of the charter. Bill Meinel, you may remember, with the Heinz company. He was a very outstanding manufacturer. Yourself. Freddy Potts, the President of Philadelphia National Bank.
Now Tom Ringe was very active. Charles Rohlfing -- who was Charles Rohlfing?

(WMP: He I think was at the University of Pennsylvania.)

Nick Roosevelt was in and out and reasonably active. Carter Schaub was the top man at Sears here and he was extremely active. He was very fruitful in his ideas. A man of considerable initiative. Bernie Segal -- one of the leading legal brains in the country, certainly in the area. Now Henry Shipherd?

(WMP: He was a CIO agent in Philadelphia.)

I don't remember just what he did. Lew Stevens of course was a very active lawyer -- a very public-spirited man. Leon Sunstein -- the broker -- he was very faithful. Robert C. White -- wasn't he the Controller?

(WMP: He may have been the Controller going back. I think he was elected about 1938. There was an effort to get a new city charter in 1938 and that failed and Bob White then ran for mayor after that and he didn't make it at that time and he got in as City Controller at some point.)

Al Williams was the President of the Federal Reserve Bank and he was a very outstanding member. Bob Wolf, Morris Wolf's son, -- well, that completes the GPM. It was very helpful to have the list of board members.

(WMP: What do you remember were the conditions that caused the business community of Center City to form the GPM?)

I just think it was awful dissatisfaction with the form of city government and people who are much more knowledgeable than I have the feeling that a strong mayor would be the thing to seek. And that's what the charter achieved. I think before, as I recall it, the people that everybody looked to were the Councilmen. And I remember the time when members of city council found that so much of the power had been in effect deflected from them and directed to the mayor -- the council members were greatly with the thing. Because people were accustomed up to this point that whenever they wanted to get something done to go to the councilmen. Maybe they still do that but that was a real gripe among members of council after the charter went through.

(WMP: They did take away power from the Council to the Executive --)

Exactly. And that was a hard thing for them all to swallow.
Now you ask which of GPM's accomplishments were the most significant. The list is an awfully long list and I can't remember much about it in the early days. I mention the Food Distribution Center, which was an idea of Harry Batten's, and that chap, Sam Cooke, a member of one of the markets. Harry would say that you would be asleep at 3 o'clock in the morning and the phone would ring and it would be Sam Cooke calling from California. He'd get an idea in his sleep and would immediately telephone. It was a great achievement, really, because it meant the condemnation of some of those awful markets down on Dock Street, where the conditions were deplorable. Dock Street as rebuilt is now an important part of the restored Independence Hall-Society Hill area and the wholesale food merchants are located in a large unsightly dump, northeast of Municipal Stadium. And it has become a very remarkable distribution center. In fact, people come from all over the world just to see it.

I'm sorry not to be more fruitful about what GPM did, but they were in all sorts of things. I was a very faithful, active member, but isn't it terrible not to remember more of what it did. We thought we were terribly important.

(WMP: You were.)

(WMP: How did you happen to get interested in the Housing Authority?)

Jared Ingersoll mentioned the housing situation to me one day and asked me whether I would be interested in going on the board of the Housing Authority and I meekly said I would. Then I found out I was in the middle of that thing for almost ten years. And the greatest thing that happened to me on the Housing Authority was when Jim Tate fired me. He fired me because he found out that I was a Republican. As you may remember, you and I have been active in trying to have a civil service type of handling employees instituted. Of course that meant a lot of people who were party faithful but didn't do anything would be gradually eased out. And I think that they were naturally anxious to recapture the jobs. We had really, I think, improved the morale of the employees and put in a pretty good civil service program under Walter Alessandroni, who was very much an excellent person. But when Jim Tate found that I was a Republican, I was dismissed. Just think of how much trouble I avoided! The Housing Authority just got into more and more trouble from that point on -- not having anything to do with me, but just the way the wheels were turning. I think I was a member from '52 to the early '60's.

(WMP: Do you know who put me off the Housing Authority?)

You said in your memorandum that Joe put you off.
I don't remember that. Why were you put off?

(WMP: He was under some political pressure to put somebody else on. He figured I was the guy he could most push around.)

I think Joe was in favor of a decent Housing Authority and an honest one.

(WMP: Oh he was. He just was in a jam and he figured he could put me down better than anybody else so I was dropped.)

I had forgotten that you were eliminated by him.

(WMP: I still speak to him. Play tennis with him almost every day.)

I remember that Raymond Rosen -- who was quite difficult -- you and he were always arguing and I was always inclined to your position although I didn't always support you, because I knew you were honest. Who were the other people? Was Abe Freedman?

(WMP: Abe Freedman was legal counsel.)

Who were the other members? Blumberg, do you remember him?

(WMP: And Jim McDevitt.)

McDevitt was before Blumberg, wasn't he, or were they both on the board?

(WMP: I don't remember Blumberg being on the board.)

Oh yes. Norman Blumberg.

(WMP: He may have taken Jim McDevitt's place.)

He was always for raising salaries and employing unionized people, but on the whole I thought he was a decent type.

Well, we are kind of wandering, I guess. What do you want now? I think the problems of the Housing Authority was really getting sites. It's always been the same thing. Everybody in principle is for public housing -- there was no great objection to it -- but don't do it here, go down the road a mile. We found some places where there was no objection because people lived in remote places. But when you go out to a place like Roxborough that was a very different thing and there were several areas there that we tried hard to get and we didn't have a prayer.
They would organize and come down to the hearings -- they all took place in the hearing room of the school administration building and Walter Alessandroni, who was the executive director and a lawyer, would handle them very very well, but people were just howling mobs when it came to their neighborhoods. And it is the same thing today.

I would say the main difficulty the Housing Authority ran into was getting sites. We never had any trouble with building the buildings -- they were always under contract and the contracts were carried out and we had a dedication.

Now you ask me about Raymond Rosen and the conflict that you had with him. I don't really remember, but I wouldn't have any doubt about it because you and he were always at loggerheads. Why don't you talk about it?

(WMP: Raymond Rosen was in favor of high-rise buildings and Dorothy Montgomery was very opposed to that for various sociological reasons and we fought over it with Rosen and somehow Abe Freedman, who was legal counsel then to the Authority, persuaded Raymond Rosen not to get down in the gutter fighting with me and just to walk away from it. So Raymond Rosen resigned.)

But this comes into the next question about high-rise apartments. I don't remember the Wallace study, which you mention here, but there was no question that a majority of the Authority was enthused with the idea of getting shelter created and it was impossible to get the number of units unless we went to high-rise. Looking back on it it was obviously a terrible mistake and Dorothy Montgomery was right in being against it but we didn't have enough sense or perception to realize what was going to happen. I think in those days, with all due respects to decisions taken, there was much more law and order. Children were better disciplined. There wasn't quite as many large families with no fathers and I think that condition, which I understand has pervaded these high-rise things -- kids running around without any parental control or discipline -- committing nuisance all over the place -- running the elevators and leaving the doors open and kids falling through the elevator shafts -- nobody conceived of those conditions and I think if you had asked the members of the Authority to visualize what was going to happen we thought that the people would be living there thankfully in surroundings which they couldn't possibly have had otherwise. But that did not become the case. The situation has gone from bad to worse and I think now they've had to abandon some of them and close them up. They have one of Oscar Stonorov's -- the one near City Line -- Schuylkill Falls -- the high-rise buildings have porches that run the length of the buildings. Those porches had no barricades and the kids would romp up and down on them and raise the dickens and it just became untenable. The theory was ok, but the practice was just terrible, and we just didn't foresee those conditions.
I think Dorothy Montgomery was pressing us to pay attention to them and we then hired, if you remember, a man named Tony Wallace to study the sociological conditions in high-rise buildings and he wrote a report which was presented to the Authority -- I have a copy of it -- and that was quite well received by the sociologists and so on -- saying that the reasons why there should be no more high-rise apartments.)

I don't remember the report but I'm sure that we all understood what was in the minds of the people who were opposed to high-rise -- the sociological conditions -- but I think that was a term which wasn't very popular with some of the conservative members like myself who wanted to get ahead and provide housing -- and we weren't going to be influenced by some theory or guess as to what was going to happen. Obviously it has been proved we were wrong. The only successful units as far as I know are the ones that were built on the ground.

Talking about the high-rise -- my impression of Dorothy Montgomery was that she was a pain in the neck, but she sure was right. I think she probably was great but we didn't appreciate her foresight and her ability. She was stopping us from doing what we wanted to do. We wanted to create units come hell or high water and nobody visualized what these sociologists foresaw.

Looking back over the years, I suppose it was a constructive program -- it certainly was necessary. I think that you have, for better or worse, you have 15,000 units throughout the city.

I think the last thing they started to do when I was active was fixing up individual homes -- and they weren't conspicuous in that they weren't in groups. There might be two or three in a block. But that was better I think from this standpoint -- it didn't identify the tenants as being "project" people. But everyone who lived in one of the large public housing units in the earlier days, lived in a "project." A project was a sort of a dirty word, wasn't it? I would think degrading in a sense. There was an aura about it which was not of the best. I remember the Housing Authority scattered individual houses in two or three blocks out in West Philadelphia and I think we did it in a few areas. I can't remember the street, but it was fairly successful. It had the advantage of being less conspicuous -- less obvious. And I think that was probably good and every now and then you pick up the paper and see about people taking over abandoned houses and fixing them up. That strikes me as very sound. I think the people could be gotten back into single family houses where they have been boarded up and blocked off -- it would be very very helpful.
After all, we used to always say that Philadelphia was the city of homes -- 500,000 individual homes. That was one of the cliches we used to bandy about. What we were trying to do was create new homes -- unfortunately we piled them one on top of the other and that was awful.

(WMP: But the problem was we couldn't get the land.)

You could never win that in a high school debate -- you could argue that both ways. Anyway, we did it for better or worse, and of course it did lead to some of these awful messes that they now have to undo. I think if they could turn those places over to housing for the elderly, who wouldn't be hard to police -- I don't believe the elderly are as mean and not as physically tough as the kids and therefore they can't run around and raise hell with the neighbors. That would be the solution. Maybe it will come to that. I heard that some of them were being used that way.

Well, I've told you more than I know!

(WMP: And I've asked you more than I know to ask!)