Interview with Donald Rubel

6/25/79

Fortunately, I always had a penchant for going through open doors and when Harry Butcher and I had a talk one day about the Committee of 70 he said why don't you come on the Committee of 70 -- he said it would be your best introduction to politics because at least you know the bivs if not the highways and I found it to be exactly so. I found that getting into the Committee of 70 and the things they were doing and going to work against the traffic court at one time and deciding that we would go in there and take notes and having the traffic court suspend (?) because they wouldn't let us take notes and all that sort of thing showed how inappropriate it was for the public to mix into the public domain.

That led to the door opening to City Council when Joe Clark called me one day and said can you meet me in ten minutes on the corner of Broad and Sansom Sts. at the Union League and I said sure. And he said I'll tell you what I have in mind when I see you. He said we want you to run on the Democratic ticket as a Republican, even though you are Republican, because the Republicans have put up a stooge that they want in there along with the other minority councilmen who are all playing along hand in glove with the Democrats. He said you have 20 minutes to decide whether you will or not because the Democratic City Committee is meeting and you must appear before them. So I called Judy (my wife) and I said Judy, here is the case. She said whatever you want to do is all right with me and so I called Joe back and said yes, I'll run on your Democratic ticket as a councilman. When do I appear and where? So he told me to appear in the Bellevue where the Democratic City Committee was meeting at that moment and I was asked whether if I ran on the Democratic ticket would I caucus with the Democrats or the Republicans. I said with the Republicans, because I am a Republican and I will run as a Republican on your Democratic ticket. Well, they allowed at how there was no reason why that shouldn't be tried so they accepted me.

In Council, which is a great adventure really, and could mean that politics would be a very wholesome and interesting adventure for anybody who really wanted to do the job as it ought to be done -- my very dear friend, Lou Stevens, who is a Democrat, was a councilman and I went in as a
Republican and I think the majority of any words that were spoken on the floor of the Council between the councilmen in general was between Lou Stevens and myself. We debated each other almost every week in some way or the other in great good nature and understanding and friendship. But it made it a very interesting kind of an affair where we could bring into the public view the things that were really worth thinking about. Most of City Council was in business for business sake. As you know, the Rose brothers had the zoning business pretty well in hand. Any real estate changes that were to be brought about usually went through them. Raymond Pace Alexander, with his grandiloquent and excellent way, he would get up and pontificate once in a while, but he always had a good nature about him and everybody kind of enjoyed him. Most of the others sat on their hands pretty well, except for Uncle Louie Schwartz, who had the desk right in front of me -- he was a Republican, as you know. And he would advise me what I should do and what I shouldn't do and when it came time for reelection the Republicans wanted to slate me on the Republican ticket. I said sure, that's fine. Uncle Louie Schwartz told me he said you are costing me a lot of money. He said I paid out as much as $50,000 in order to assure my reelection to this Council because of you. I said I'm very sorry for that -- I'm not paying out anything. And I didn't. And I lost, naturally, because the Democrats won. For reelection I lost my place, and I expected to. But for that period of time that I was in there it was evident that while Council, if it were run on the basis that it should be and could be, it would be a great boon to the government of any city.

Things don't work like that, as you know. Joe Clark was excellent in his cooperation with me. I could do nothing as a minority councilman but yell when something seemed to be going wrong. And even the City Hall reporter staff seemed to be pretty much in the pockets of the Democrats and I couldn't always get into public purview the things that I felt were important, but I would try.

Another Republican councilman there was a fellow named Phillips, no relation, I can assure you. He was in the electrical equipment business somewhere. And he never said anything. He never did anything until he was told what to do. So that I learned one thing and that is that the
minority councilmanship in the City Council isn't worth what it is cracked up to be. And I have said so publicly and I have said so otherwise that they would do well to do away with the minority councilmanic positions and let the Democrats take the whole responsibility for what happens -- because they are going to do what they want anyhow.

(BF: Was Jim Tate the President of Council when you were on the Council? What sort of relationship did he have with Mayor Clark?)

Jim was sort of everybody's friend when it paid him to be and he was everybody's worst enemy -- he was vindictive as the devil. But he played for keeps and as far as Joe Clark was concerned, none of the Democrats liked him, of course, because he was opposing their little games here and there. In fact the councilman who had his seat in front of me would turn around and say I just hate that blank blank guy -- meaning Joe Clark, of course. And he made no beans about it.

Since City Council I vowed that I would keep my finger in as best I could, which wasn't very easy, but as time went on I went to the Presidential Republican National Conventions. Judy went with me to two of them. And that was great public experience. Through my action on that delegation Mr. Austin Meehan, Sheriff Meehan, asked me if I would go on the Board of Directors of City Trusts. And I vowed as how that was another door opening and I certainly ought to walk through. I've been there now for a good many years as President of the Board of Directors of City Trusts -- a very vigorous and exceedingly important position that has the control over about $92 million dollars in 85 or so trusts that run all the way from a few hundred dollars up to many thousands of dollars. Of course Girard College is the biggest -- Girard estate. Wills Eye Hospital is the next biggest. And these enterprises have been run, I must say, as far as I can see from our Board of Directors of City Trust, without any political implication and domination in any way. It really has been excellently managed as far as I've been there.

(WMP: I'm sure you've kept it on a straight course.)

Well, there's no tendency to do otherwise. It is a terrific responsibility and the record speaks for itself -- it has gone right ahead in spite of wheel and woe. So that the
Committee of 70 was a stepping stone, you might say, for all of the things that followed.

(WMP: Your son, Walter, has carried on, has he not?)

Yes he has. He was President of the Committee of 70 for his term and he is still vigorous and active in it. It has carried him into the politics of Bucks County, where he lives and where he has been on a number of boards and hospitals and pro bono publico for him too. He's lending whatever energies and opportunities he has.

(WMP: The Committee of 70 was a very important and I guess still is important isn't it?)

I think it is more important today than it has been in a long time. It seems to be getting more support from the business community and the people who really can give some money. It runs entirely on voluntary contributions. What little foundation support there had been I think has been withdrawn. It is almost entirely voluntary public support. And the man they have in there as Executive Director I think is doing a very good job.

Neither my son nor I have had much use for the ex-chairman-itis that attacks people after they get through being chairman. And they need the support and the experience of those who have gone ahead to help the new ones coming along.

(WMP: It's a good record you have! Thank you very much.)