**Michael Rotman** [00:00:00] It is June 18, 2011. My name is Michael Rotman. We are at Coventry Library. And could you please state your name and perhaps where and when you were born?

**Larry Beam** [00:00:11] I'm Larry Beam. I was born on the 11th of September 1945 at St. Luke's Hospital down, I guess it's parts of it are still there, on Shaker Boulevard, not far from here. And I've lived in the Coventry neighborhood since the fall of 1975. Returned here, going to graduate school at Case briefly. And I suppose I'm best known around here... I was president of an organization called Coventry Neighbors Inc. for what I think was eight years at the very last throes of a street fair that went on here for 20-odd years. I was president that organization for the last couple of years of that street fair and then for another five or so years, largely without street fairs, though, there was a sort of abbreviated street fair that was held, well, during those years after the old street fair ended.

**Michael Rotman** [00:01:19] So let me ask you, what were your first memories of Coventry?

**Larry Beam** [00:01:24] My first memories of Coventry. I don't know, I'd come here from Oxford, Ohio, and needed a place to live in Cleveland someplace near Case, and I knew some people lived in this neighborhood. And so I went looking for an apartment and found a suitable place here. First memories of Tommy's first location in the neighborhood was just a few doors east where I lived. And aside from that, it was kind of a matter of... There were all kinds of places to eat, not just Tommy's but Irv's and several other restaurants, a kind of urban excitement about the neighborhood that certainly wasn't there in Oxford, Ohio. It's kind of a... holds a medium-sized university, a school with 12 or 15,000 students but it's really in many ways a pretty rural town. And this was genuinely urban in a way I'd never lived before. Maybe in childhood, but not as an adult. My parents lived in Garfield Heights, which once again was, you know, pretty rigorously suburban, lacked the urbanity or urbanness of this neighborhood.

**Michael Rotman** [00:02:49] And did you have a favorite place to eat or a favorite place to shop?

**Larry Beam** [00:02:55] Well, Tommy's was a very regular place to eat. Shopping, I didn't do much shopping here. One thing I didn't have any money. The shopping I did was for things like clothing that... Largely, the shops here were very fashionable. And I wasn't, you know, I was trying to get by. And even even now, you can buy a lot of fifty-dollar T-shirts here, but it's pretty hard to find an inexpensive pair of socks and underwear and ordinary clothing. You gotta go someplace else. Gotta go outside the neighborhood to find ordinary clothing. I'm not, I'm not disparaging in any sense the hip boutiques, but in those days they were far beyond my reach and now they're just not my style.

**Michael Rotman** [00:03:44] Sure. So how did you get involved with neighborhood association?

**Larry Beam** [00:03:49] I started going to its meetings. I've always been active in that kind of thing, student associations and college and then from there to, goodness, I'd go to churches just to ... not out of any religious instinct ... but just to see what this organization was, what this thing was. And I started going to Coventry Neighbors meetings then and then left school and went to work for a Cuyahoa Community College. And in those years, continued going to Coventry Neighbors meetings at night. I left community college and went to work for the City of Cleveland Heights as a planner and really got to know the community in that role. My portfolio was economic development stuff. And so I got to know the merchants, not just in this community, not just on this street, but all over Cleveland Heights and, oh a year or two after that job ended I became president of Coventry Neighbors and held that office for, I don't know whether it was six years or eight years or something, roughly 1982 to 1990-something. Lost all track of it. And I did a little monthly newsletter called the Coventry Village News almost every month for those seven or eight or whatever it was years. That thing might be of interest to anybody who wants to do history in the neighborhood. It's been digitized and is available at Cleveland Heights Historical Society's website. Almost a complete collection of that thing, and not just in the five or seven years that I did it but through many more years when a guy named Alan Rapoport ran it for a long time. He subsequently served on Council for six or eight years and then served as Mayor for some of those years. And other people had run that monthly newsletter in those years and as I said, it's digitized and available out there on the Internet these days.

**Michael Rotman** [00:06:15] So during your time. What kind of issues, when you were president, what kind of issues was the neighborhood dealing with, I guess?

**Larry Beam** [00:06:21] The first of the first and biggest of them was the street fair, which had which had grown so large and complicated that it became nearly impossible to manage it, manage it well, and it also had become so very expensive that in order to finance it, we had to invite into the participants, into the paying participants, a lot of people who sold stuff like fried dough, the classic midway carney food that a lot of people felt just was not appropriate in a sophisticated neighborhood and all of that conveyed a bad image. There was a guy that sold shoes, you know, out of the back of a truck kind of thing for a while. He paid hundreds of dollars for the right to set up business at that street fair, and apparently he was happy with it. But it was not... It didn't project the kind of image that a lot of people wanted to project, and the merchants tired of it. There were some merchants who never liked that big street fair. If you run a dry cleaning shop, for instance, it's unlikely to bring you any continue... to bring you any new customers and it flat out shut you down for a couple of days. Customers can't get to your shop and drop stuff or up or drop stuff off or pick it up. And there were problems with the bars who did benefit immensely from it. Their people loved it and were sometimes drunk and got in trouble. A man who was mayor of the city at that time, a man named Richard Waggan lived on Euclid Heights Boulevard down here not but eight or ten houses down from Coventry. And one of the years I was president of the organization, he called me, quite angry, saying that somebody had left to the street fair and had pissed on the tree in front of his house. He was just absolutely furious. What was I going to do about somebody who had pissed on the tree in front of his house? And I didn't have a clue what I was going to do about anybody that pissed on the tree in front of his house. [Laughs] I said, okay, Mr. Waggan, I'm sorry this happened, but, you know, when you get thousands and thousands people together something like that might happen. Having used the number thousands and thousands of people reminds me of another good story about that fair. There's a man named Bruce Hennes who used to do the... He initially, he's very good at promoting and getting stuff in the media, and he did a very good job with that street fair, getting attention brought to it the Plain Dealer, and Sun Press and radio and television in the region, and he was sort of the spokesman for it, and early on in this event that went on for, as I said, 20 years or so, somebody asked Hennes, well, how many people were there? Bruce said, don't quote me on the numbers, but this was trying to convey the sense of it, Bruce said, oh there were 10,000 people there. Well, the next year, I asked him the same question. And he remembered that he said 10,000 the year before and there had to be more people than there were a year or so ago. He said there were 15,000. I was running it for 20 years! And by the time the 20 years were out, Bruce had 150,000 people at that, which was preposterous. But the newspapers bought those numbers. The television stations broadcast them. And presumably a lot of people believed them. We know now, well, it wasn't true, but it had this wonderful history to it. How could we say that there were fewer people there than, you know. But the other thing that all ultimately killed that big old street fair was... There were some scary moments for the police department in this. Rival groups of kids. They weren't gangs in any ordinary sense of that word, but they were kids from Cleveland Heights High School and from, what you call it, the high school in East Cleveland sort of standing on opposite sides of the street, giving each other the finger and carrying on like that. Well, if you're a cop between two kind of hostile looking groups, even though they maybe meant it in humor and whatnot, eh, you're a cop in the middle of that, you're not a very happy cop. And so a man named Martin Lentz, who was Police Chief in those days until quite recently, really, he said no more. I can't I can't put my boys out there and subject them to that kind of scary stuff. And the rest... and of course event required of city permit. And that was the end of it. They asked me as leader of the sponsoring organization to take the onus of ending the event from the city and asked me to have... to get the organization to vote to shut the thing down of its own accord, which we did. I'm been talking about street fairs for a long time. Other things that I think are kind of important, far more important than the street fair in this neighborhood is its developmental and ethnic history. When I moved in this neighborhood in 1975, a Jewish coloration to the neighborhood was just ending. There were a lot of, I mean there were several rest[aurants], notably a place called Irv's that was not kosher in the formal dietary rules sense but certainly in a stylistic sense. And a lot of other businesses. There was a guy called Feathers whose business consisted of recycling down from pillows and... pillows, and I want to say bed furniture, you know, oddest kind of business. There was a business called Coventry Poultry that was very rigorously, in the formal sense, kosher. A man named Zalman Kezen, ultra-Orthodox, presided over the slaughter ritual. The old, real world, you know, super Orthodox, had to say certain prayers and carry out the slaughter in certain ways and drain the blood in certain ways. And hack the chickens up in just, you know, ways as prescribed by Torah or by whatever Jewish law, and well, the business wasn't real popular with the city because they brought live chickens and in wooden crates, and every once in a while they'd escape and there'd be chickens running around the neighborhood. Besides, they didn't handle their waste, entrails and feathers and whatnot, you know, very... They didn't handle it very well. It would stink in the summer. But old Kezen's still around, I think. I saw him recently as six or eight months ago, a very old man now, but people who know a lot more about these things than I do assert that Kezen was some kind of world-famous scholar of the ancient texts. Well, as I knew him, he was always looking for empty cardboard boxes he could pack his produce in because he didn't want to buy... didn't want to go out and spend money on 'em. But that institution was important to the diets of a lot of rigorously Orthodox people. What's now recognized and what now is the Unitarian Society building on Lancashire Road here was... I don't know what it was built... but for many, many years of its existence, ending before I got here, ending well before 1975, was an Orthodox shul, where among others Shondor Birns, Shondor Birns, I don't know if that name's familiar to you.

**Michael Rotman** [00:14:51] I just saw the movie about Danny Greene and he's in that.

**Larry Beam** [00:14:56] Yeah, that's the context in which his name always comes up. He, he, it's hard to think of organized crime as a Jewish thing, but it was, at least in this neighborhood. The drugs and gambling and loan sharking and prostitution and the whole role of traditional organized crime things where these guys got together what's now recognized as the Unitarian Society and did their morning worship and went about their business and... it's inconceivable but that's what happened. Birns lived in a house down here. It's the third or fourth house south up here on Coventry. I don't know where I'm oriented in this building. I'm pointing over here as if that was... It's the third or fourth house down there where Shondor lived for a long career. And his life, I never read much of it, but it's got to be pretty well documented in the historical and fictionalized history of Cleveland crime. As I said, he's tied to Danny Greene, and Greene wasn't part of this, but I think there was a great deal of rivalry between the Jewish-controlled organized crime and the [inaudible] Catholic or Italian-controlled or Irish, whatever, other ethnic religious groups who control other kinds of crime. And it was about 1975 that building, on the southwest corner of Mayfield and Coventry, was a gas station and part of this organized crime warfare business, big hole got blown in the wall of that building. I remember the hole... I don't know whether the explosion occurred while I lived here or whether... I think when I moved to the neighborhood, the hole in the wall just hadn't been fixed yet. But all that stuff was very much part of the neighborhood's history. This bar called Irv's was... I'd never... All the going crazy places I've been all these 65 years, I've never encountered organized crime and quite the out front, you know, people dealing dope. You'd probably encountered, you know, kids selling pot or whatever. That's all I ever encountered anyplace else, but at Irv's there was a guy named Charles, "Mr. Big," who rather openly ran a business that in which he would give you a doctor's name and he would go to this doctor, the one that I heard most stories about was down on Broadway some place on the southeast side of the city. That doctor would write you a prescription for a substance called the Daladdin [?] in the case that I knew some people who did this, and you'd go the drugstore and negotiate the prescription and bring the drug back to Mr. Big Charles at Irv's and get your money and, you know, it had this kind of ordinariness about it. It was just a way of life. I've never encountered that thing, that sort of thing, anyplace else. That it was Jewish is just, I don't know if people are gonna believe me when I tell the story, but that's true.

**Michael Rotman** [00:18:40] But it was still a nice... I mean, for the most part, it was a safe neighborhood, right?

**Larry Beam** [00:18:44] Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. There's something there's something about organized crime that, you know, if you're selling heroin and cocaine and stuff and you really want to make your business thrive, you damn well better make sure none of your customers get hurt and that they get good stuff when they buy and... So for reasons like that yet it... Yeah, I never experienced any... I've experienced violence around here, but it's come from, in every case, from white, white-ish folks who are mad at me over something like shutting down the street fair or over some matter of politics. Guy who tried to throw me through a picture window up here once across the street because I had organized an effort to get snow removed from the sidewalks. Why he wanted to kill me for that, I will never understand. But he did. And I've encountered violence a couple of times, but always with that kind of thing, because I was the guy who tried to shut down the street fairs though. People were going to beat me up. Well, people threw rocks through my windows on that account, but never... I've never encountered the kind of random street crime that, you know, so terrifies people. Never. And there were some nasty criminals in this bunch. There was a guy... I can't fetch his name. One of my predecessors at Coventry Neighbors represented him. Got him out of jail once. This kid who bragged about--a crazy kid, I tell you, he was really crazy. Didn't believe thing he talked about. But he bragged of, oh, gosh, killing this guy. And beating up this... He told all these stories; I never believed a bit of it. Then he finally got in jail, and Rapoport got him out of jail, and the next day he got dead. Somebody killed him for... Violence existed around here, but it wasn't random. It wasn't people getting mugged in the ordinary sense. It was that if you didn't pay Mr. Big, this guy Charles, if you didn't pay him on time, when he'd charged you some money, you were likely to get hurt. But any random. Time for you to ask some questions.

**Michael Rotman** [00:21:19] Well, you know, I apologize. [crosstalk] We're at 20 minutes, and we got a lot of people to talk to. So I just want to say thank you.

**Larry Beam** [00:21:25] I'm done. Okay. I told my stories. Those are some of my favorite stories about the 'hood.