Tape 94.11

Interviewer tests for sound before beginning interview:

M: This is Mary Rose Lane interviewing Brendan Fleming on March 29th, 1994. I guess we’re going to be talking about your reminiscing about the different things related to the Merrimack Manufacturing Company, the buildings associated with it, and your efforts involved in saving the buildings, or tried to save the buildings. [Phone rings]

Well the first thing I wanted to ask about was generally your background. Are you from, from Lowell?

B: I’m from the City of Lowell. I’ve always lived in Lowell. I’m sixty-eight years old. I’ve spent the sixty-eight years, except for time when I was in the service during WW II, I spent my time here in Lowell.

M: I understand that you were involved in a lot of politics over the course of [unclear].

B: Well back, back in, back in 1963 I was appointed to the Lowell Redevelopment Authority at the time. That was the name of it. And that’s the time when Urban Renewal started to really get busy in Lowell. And I had the Northern Canal Project, which is the, the area that we’re talking about here. And when we talk about the Merrimack Mills, one of the buildings we tried hard to keep was the row house on Dutton Street. It was a beautiful building. It was a building that would be, you could be proud of to have in the City of Lowell, especially as, I won’t say a monument of what went on in the past, but at least it would give people at the present time, give them an idea of how the individuals lived who worked in the mills back in 18… in the 1840’s, 1850’s, 1860’s. Uh, we didn’t get anywhere. We tried. And if I remember correctly, at the time that we were trying to save the row houses, there was also a project going on up in Portsmouth, New
Hamphshire. And if I remember correctly, they called it Strawberry Bank. And uh, my understanding that they saved the so called mill buildings, the boarding, the boarding house, houses up there. And uh, I understand they used them now for historic purposes. And I understand people are living in them. But again, I haven’t been up there for quite awhile, so I don’t know what the current status is. But all I know is that the row houses here in Lowell are gone, and uh, that’s too bad, but the land was part of the Northern Canal Project, and the decision was made to take the buildings down. That’s the way it stands today. That’s where the new, new high school is. [Comment not quite clear].

M: How did you get to be involved with the, the Redevelopment Authority? What, how did you get to be appointed?

M: I was appointed by the City Manager. The City Manager at the time was Connie Desmond. And he wanted to fill a position that was vacant, and he, he knew of my activity in the city. And at that particular point in time, I was not actively involved in any politics, but uh, that was 1963. And when I saw the way things went with Urban Renewal, I began to really take a very close interest in what was going on. I have always been interested in the city of Lowell. I was telling you the other day how many times back then when I was in Boston, I’d go to some of the older bookstores. And I would find books on Lowell, and I would be able to buy the books for practically a pittance. Nobody wanted them. Now those same books, if you went to the same bookstores they’d cost a lot more, because of the change in the shall I say, the historical culture of the city and recognizing the value of the history of the city.

I went before the city council back in 1960, let me see, around 1966. And I wanted and requested the City Council, if they would consider establishing an Historic District, especially in and around the downtown area where we had the canals. And at that time I was told that the History of Lowell best be forgotten. I’ll never forget that statement being made. And I thought it was just so, lack of knowledge of the, of the History of Lowell that that particular statement would be made. But uh, I said at that particular point in time that what I was going to try to do, I was going to try to do something about it. If I couldn’t do it from outside the City Council, I’d try and see if I could do something within the City Council. So in 1967 I ran for the City Council, and I came in 10th if I remember correctly. But I ran again in 19, for the 1970 Council. I got on the Council in 1970. One of the first things I did was to propose that we have an Historic District, and it went through. And uh, since that particular point in time I, I have found that the history of the city of Lowell has been recognized much more so than it was long before that. There were individuals like Joe Kopycinsky, who’s over at the library here at Lowell Tech at the time, and Joe was very very much, very very much interested in the history of the city of Lowell. And there was Arthur Eno. And he still is. Arthur is still around. He’s very much interested in the history of the city of Lowell. And uh, it’s just that at that particular point in time, people were not that much interested in Lowell’s history. Now it’s a different story. History of Lowell is something that people like to study.

In fact, just by way of conversation, there’s one thing about the history of Lowell, is the labor movement, if you studied the history of the labor movement in the country, you really can’t study that history without including Lowell, because you not only had the
men who, who were involved, but you had the women who are involved in the labor movement. And of course you have the child labor laws, and so on. That’s, that part’s very interesting also. But that, that was, that shall I say, that’s indirectly related to the row houses.

M: What was the attitude of people who were on the, played a different, varying roles in the Lowell Redevelopment Authority overall? Or maybe you could point out a few individuals and what their attitude was towards preservation of historic buildings. [Comment unclear].

B: Well at that particular time, back in, back in ’63, ’64, ’65, uh, very little thought was given to the preservation of the buildings. In fact, what was, what was being discussed was practically taking all of the buildings in Little Canada down. Now Little Canada as you know, is the area right there where the Civic Center is, behind the Civic Center along, along Moody Street. The Northern Canal Project is about 96 acres, running from Dutton Street, where Dutton Street is, running all the way up to say, Saint Joseph’s Hospital, back down around by, by the canal, back down to the Merrimack Mills. About 96 acres of land, but there were some really, shall I say, important historic buildings in that area. But of course, for all intensive purposes, they’re gone. City Hall, and City Library, they’re, they’re very historic, but of course they’re not going to tear those, those buildings down now. But again, when you asked me in the beginning about the row houses, the row houses, they’re gone. And the interesting part about the row houses, that particular portion of land where row houses were, the school committee at the time, they couldn’t make up their minds one way or the other if they wanted the land. One time they voted they wanted the land, and then they decided no. Another they voted again that they didn’t want the land. Then they voted they wanted the land. It was back and forth, and back and forth. In the meantime the row houses were torn down, and they’re gone.

But to answer your question a little, a little more pointedly, uh, the, the people, the people on the Authority at that particular point in time, generally speaking, were not concerned about the historic value of the buildings. It’s just a matter of economics and developing the city. And seeing how, shall I say, the economic development of the city could be increased. And uh, the interesting things was uh, as you see the Northern Canal Project right now, that, that turned out to be a lot different than the original plan. The, the so called uh, what is referred to as “Cement Village” at that time, where the housing is on the Moody Street area, in the beginning that was never intended to be there. That whole area was intended to be industrial development and it didn’t, didn’t work out that way. But uh, again, I can remember one of the important parts of what I thought was the work of the Redevelopment Authority, when I was Chairman of the Redevelopment Authority we managed to get a vote of the Redevelopment Authority to have those residential buildings coops. And uh, I would, I would love to have seen it, because back then again, the only coops that I know of in the state of Massachusetts at that time, they were down in Brookline Village. And there was some people who looked upon cooperatives as being a socialistic idea. Well I, I did not, and still do not feel that that is true. The coops give people who did not have much money, it gave them an opportunity to have a sense of ownership, and also to be able to have some say in how the buildings were being kept up. And the coops that I was familiar with, they were kept up, because
of the people who lived there had some pride in the building. And uh, it, it would be something that would not be expensive. I’m not talking about expensive coops like they had in New York. I’m talking about coops, where a person could become a member of the cooperative by maybe a month’s rent and have a unit where they could live, and live reasonably. But of course when I was replaced on the authority, almost the next, or two meetings after that the motion to have those as coops was rescinded. And that was the end of that. But that’s the difference between having a vote and not having a vote.

M: And why, you were removed from, or not reappointed?

B: That’s right. That’s right. And uh, uh, the City Manager at the time was P. Harold Ready. And uh, there were, there were different things going on. And uh, as far as I was concerned, if you were going to have housing, the housing should be such that families could afford the housing. And one of the things that uh, I disagreed with was for instance, there was a parcel of land on Arcand Drive, right there near the, the current Civic Center. And that parcel of land in the original plan was set aside to be parking for some of the employees in that area. And at that time City Manager Ready, he decided he didn’t want that to be. He wanted it to be there for housing, or whatever, but not parking. I disagreed with that. We needed the parking then, and we need it now. But there were a few things that I didn’t see eye to eye with him. And I had no reason to hold my head low. I worked very hard on the Redevelopment Authority, and my turn was up. And I wasn’t reappointed, because I suppose my philosophy of government and urban projects didn’t agree with the Manager at the time.

M: Was it is personal decision, or was it a vote type thing, the appointment?

B: Uh, the uh, the Manager would recommend and the Council would vote at that time. But at that time if the Manager wanted something, he got it.

M: So you, you would say that because of your views that that lead to your not being reappointed? Was there a direct relationship?

B: Oh yes. Yes. Yeah, right, right. Right. My views haven’t changed and I’m still here!

M: You were not on the Redevelopment Authority when the row houses were being torn down?

B: That’s right.

M: Your period of that was already over?

B: I was off, that’s right. That’s right.

M: But you had just joined, no, a couple of years later you had joined the City Council?
B: That's right. Right.

M: So that you were just, sort of as a personal thing at that point?

B: Just a, shall I say, a regular citizen, tax payer of the city of Lowell. And there were a group of people who wanted to see those buildings kept. And many times, especially way back at that particular point in time, we’re talking back now again around 1960, ’68, ’67, ’68. At that particular point in time the people who were talking about the historic value of the city, uh, they were looked upon as though there was something the matter with them. You see. What a change. What a change. Here we are in 1994, and if we didn’t have, if we didn’t have the National Park and the State Park in downtown Lowell, downtown Lowell would be ghost town. As you can see, we just don’t have the, the uh, buildings filled, or partially filled downtown. I know there are stores downtown where individuals work very hard. Like I’m familiar with Margaret’s. Margaret has a good business, but she works hard, because she has to be able to attract business into downtown Lowell where there are no other attractions. And you know, it’s an interesting thing, uh, this involves the Bon Marche building and so on. You know, at one time, at one time there were plans for a downtown project. Downtown project, it never materialized. But one of the points that was being discussed at the time, was to take, take St. Joseph’s Shrine, take that building down, because one of the top Administrators in Bon Marche wanted to have that area as parking. The interesting thing is this, St. Joseph’s Shrine is there, it’s thriving, and in the meantime the Bon Marche building is not thriving by any means, and in serious condition. So rather ironic the way things go.

M: Um, you could describe some of your efforts then as a private citizen, to, to help save the row houses, since you were, were personally involved with that. Or was it (--) 

B: The only, the only things that you could do at the time was to try to convince those individuals who were in a position to vote to save the buildings. They, they would have to make the final decision. You would try to get those individuals to see that there was some value in keeping the buildings. And uh, if they didn't see the value, and they didn't want to vote to keep them, then no matter what you did, that was it, they had the vote. And as I said earlier, that’s one of the things about when I first tried to get the historic district downtown, if you didn’t have a vote, you could stand up at that microphone and you could talk as long as they’d let you, but you had to have the vote. You had to be in a position where you could do something about making motions, and so on and so forth. So. Now they, at that time they, I would say that many, many of the individual in position, governmental positions, that they were in positions to make the decisions to safe buildings like this, or safe historic buildings. Uh, they did not are to. I know that there are times, there are times when today some of the buildings that are being torn down, uh, some individuals will say, “well the building has historic value.” Well you can see what’s going on to day with the old Rialto Theater, which, which was the old train station years ago. Uh, I don’t know who are the developers in the area who have enough money to do something with that particular building. It’s going to be interesting to see what, what happens with that. That’s an historic building, but the only thing that’s left is the front of the building. The back part if all gone.
M: Did you (--) I was talking with Lydia Howard, and she mentioned something about going to meetings um, I guess City Council meetings like every, every week, or every month. Were you involved? Was that part of your plan of influencing people who vote? Or were you involved with that?

B: Well you, no matter how you meet them, you try to, even if you talk to them on the phone, or you talk to them individually on the street, the main thing is you try to convince the individuals who had the votes to vote to keep the building, speaking in terms of the row houses. But uh, there was not, there was not enough convincing shall I say. And of course, Lydia is very hard working. And uh, as you may know, Lowell as a city right now I would say you can classify it as a Democratic city. Well back, back when Plan E first came in during WWII, I don’t know what the percentage of Republicans was, but Lydia’s husband, Lydia, are very strong Republicans. And in some cases if you had um, members of Boards, or Commissions, or the Council who would be Democrats, they’re not going to do anything the Republicans want. So I mean those things came in to play, even if it was in the background. Um, there was, there was one person, Mrs. Sampson at the time, she was, she was Mayor. She was one person who was sympathetic to the cause, and she was very good at least trying to accommodate individuals who wanted to see the, the row houses kept.

M: And she was, who was she?

B: Mrs. Sampson was, was, she was a city Councilor, and Mayor. As you know, under Plan E, one of the, one of the Councilors is a Mayor. And at that time we had Plan E of course.

M: In talking to different people, I guess I’ve gotten the impression that some of the things that went on in terms of why the building were torn down weren’t exactly ethical, or legal, or I don’t know what the right word would be. But that people has vested interests in making sure those buildings were torn down. I don’t know if you know anything about that, or would you care to comment on that?

B: Well I, I really, I really don’t know what you’re referring to, but um (--) 

M: That there would be people who would benefit financially from the tearing down of buildings. And that they perhaps, perhaps, I don’t know, did things underhanded to make sure that they were torn down.

B: Well that, that could always be. See, no matter what city or town you go to, you always have your establishment in a city or town. And what I find is you have the public officials who are out in the open. You have like myself, and like Lydia who are out in the open trying to save the buildings. Now we were just citizens. And you have others who may have had ownership, that you may never see, but are very active in the background. I find that’s, that’s always the case. I mean while I was on the city Council I, I saw that so many times. People you would never see at meetings, but had a
tremendous influence. And uh, again for instance, the newspaper, what stand did the newspaper take on saving the buildings? If I remember correctly the newspaper did not take a strong stand at all to save the buildings. If the newspaper took a strong stand, and you had that particular shall I say, part of the community strong in wanting to save something like saving the row houses, that would always be a very positive things towards saving the mill. But um, I remember there were pictures in the paper of people standing there near the buildings, wanting to at least bring to the attention of the public that the buildings were worth saving. But beyond that I just don’t recall a newspaper ever taking a strong stand for saving the building.

And of course the argument was, well we need the land for the schools. But uh, even the school committee couldn't decide whether or not they wanted the land there. And there was always talk, there was always talk at the time before the high school, the new part of the high school was built on this land we’re talking about. Uh, there was always talk of whether or not the high school should be built on the outskirts of the city. Should the high school be built out by the stadium, out in that particular section of the city. Well now that the land was taken, and the land is used, and you got the building there, then the high school is downtown. Of course there’s always that argument, there were certain businessmen who wanted the high school downtown because they wanted the business. And uh, you always have the argument that we would like the business, but we don’t want the hassle of the students, you know? So we want their money, but we don’t want the hassle. And that, that was going on for quite a, quite a bit. But to answer your questions specifically, I don’t know about any specific legalities that went on. But not so much things that are illegal, but people work in the background all the time. And uh, I’ve seen it happen so often as I say, which I was on the Council. People would be, you’d get a telephone call, or you might get a telephone call from a person who’s like an intermediary for another person. Uh, the one who is a “member of the establishment” might not be calling you, but his or her friend may be calling you, you know? And uh, you get the message. Well I’ve always tried to follow the procedure whereby I could think for myself, I would try to get the information, both sides, and then make a decision. And in many cases that didn’t work with individuals who wanted you to vote the way they wanted. And if you didn’t agree with them, you were on the other side.

M: Um, how closely did you work with Lydia Howard on, on things?

B: Well I don’t know what you mean how closely, but I mean we worked together to see if we could get something done. I mean it wasn’t as though, I didn’t go to Lydia’s house and sit down and strategize, if that’s what you mean. No, I didn’t do that. But it was obvious, it was obvious what the group of people who were concerned about the row houses, what they wanted to do. And it was just a matter of whether or not the people who had the vote would, would vote to keep them, or vote to have them torn down. And they voted to tear them down. Again, keep in mind that the history of Lowell was not that, that uh, shall I say, much of a topic at the time. Different story now. Different story. But uh, but no. Lydia, Lydia was terrific, you know.
M: What were some of the ideas that you had about how the, the row houses could be used. Could you strategize what might be something that could be done with them to make them either productive, or money making, or justify their existence.

B: Well they could be used for people to live in. In other words, the buildings were so substantial. I mean, I mentioned to you the other day how if you stood along side the building, the face of the building, and looked up, you wouldn’t see a brick out of place. But first of all they, they could be used as shall I say, boarding houses, or whatever. Whatever name you want to use. People could have lived in them. Could be living in them today. Now granted the conditions in there at the time, let me give an example, such as closet space. You didn’t have the closet space, because people didn’t have the clothes like we have them today. But it was the idea that this is the way that the mill workers had to live. And if the buildings were just, shall I say, cleaned up, rather than try to renovate the inside of the building, and leave the outside alone. That particular point was never reached where for instance, the developer was interested in doing this and doing that. At least to my knowledge. But the question at the time was, you have, first of all you have to try and save the buildings. And uh, of course that never materialized. So beyond that point there were no, no substantial plans that I know of to renovate the buildings, or whatever. But I do know generally speaking that the buildings, we wanted to try to keep the buildings, and keep them in a conditions that they were in so they could be used as examples of the Mill Worker’s Housing. And it was one, one type, you know?

M: So you (--) How would you describe the condition overall the buildings?

B: Well in the beginning they were in good conditions, but it’s like everything else that happened in Urban Renewal. As people moved out, and an area was abandoned so to speak, what was happening is uh, I can remember a number of instances where I’d get a call on Sunday, or something like that from somebody in the neighborhood saying that there’s a truck backed up to the building, they’re taking pipes out of the building. What they’d do is they’d strip a building. They’d go in and they’d take copper, copper pipes, or whatever. If they could take the plumbing, they’d take that. One Sunday morning, I got a call, one of the buildings was being stripped. I got up there and they, at that particular point in time they were able to get the police. This particular man was caught, but there were, he might have been one of many stripping buildings. He happened to get caught. So what I’m getting at is, once the buildings were vacated, and you had an area that was pretty well vacated insofar as people are not living in the neighborhood, then what happen is at night, at night those buildings would be stripped. And the more the building was stripped, the worse it got, because then the building really began to go down. You know, you see it today. You see it today. For instance, if the police go in and raid a building because it’s a crack house, the building may be a substantial building, but they board the building up. There’s a building not too far from my own house, uh, they board the building up. Later on, a few weeks, a few weeks go by and you go in the back of the building and half of the plywood is bent over, or broken over. They’ve been going into the buildings. And what they do, is they go in and they strip the buildings and that affects the value of buildings in the neighborhood. I mean that’s a, I know that’s a different point, but it is, it is the same idea that a neighborhood can be affected
tremendously by leaving a building vacant, let it run down, and allow it to be stripped. And then it’s like a bad apple in a barrel. It just spreads, because sometimes people who can move, move away. It just multiplies. That was happening back in urban renewal days, it’s happening today in some areas. By the way, I think urban renewal was a failure. Absolute failure.  

M: You were talking about urban renewal being a failure.

B: I think, and it’s a personal opinion. That knowing many of the plans that were in the works for Lowell and Lawrence, I was familiar with Lawrence also, and uh, they never materialized. And when you see what, what has happened over the years, and knowing what was suppose to have been on the boards to be done, it just didn’t work out that way. It’s so very interesting that uh, urban renewal was discussed prior to WWII. And the plans that were in Washington at the time for this particular type of a program, apparently were, what shall I say, at least slowed down because of WWII. But uh, after WWII they had urban renewal, well I just look around our own city, and I look around Lawrence and see. Uh, very interesting that there was a book “The Urban Bulldozer” written by Martin Anderson a number of years ago. And he pointed out at that time many of the drawbacks of urban renewal. And if I remember, Martin Anderson is not out at Stanford. But Martin Anderson was born and brought up in Tewksbury, right next door to us here. But his book, his book it’s still a good history of urban renewal, but you look at, you read his book and you look and see what happened in Lowell. And you look and see the West End down in Boston. I mean that was just a small example. When you multiply that over and you see what has happened. There were people who made good money on urban renewal, but it wasn’t the average citizen by any means, because the money that was made was usually made by the blood, sweat and tears of the taxpayers. But anyway, that’s a personal opinion.

M: What was some of the, you mentioned that there was suppose to be more industrial development than there was. What was some of the things that was suppose to happen, but didn’t happen?

B: For instance, when the industrial development, you couldn’t get the industries to come into for instance, the Northern Canal. They didn’t want to go into that particular area. I’m assuming now, and just trying to think back that they felt as though they were locked into an area that was not good for transportation, things like that. But those are things that should have been thought of long before the plans were finalized. You know? And uh, of course one of the problems Lowell has always had in my opinion, Lowell has a very serious housing problem. We had it then, we still have it now. In fact it’s worse now. It’s worse now with the buildings that are being abandoned. This bit we had in the few years gone by where the banks were taking over properties, and they weren’t in the real estate business, but they couldn’t handle the properties. And the properties are run down. Now the Federal Government has taken over the properties and so on, and so forth. It’s just, it’s almost as though “des ja vous”. You know, it’s just uh, you have the buildings run down. And when the buildings are run down, he people move out and the city begins to go down again, you know? But at that particular point in time uh, you
could go in many homes, for instance, in Little Canada. The buildings may not have been the best in the world, but when you went into the families home, it was home and it was clean, you know. Uh, you may have, you may have seen pictures of the buildings along the canal. They used to have, the porches had the big, like screening up so the kids wouldn’t fall in, you know, the lattice work. The interesting part about some of those buildings, those buildings were on land that was owned by the Locks and Canals. The people who owned the buildings didn’t own the land. And the Locks and Canals was here before the City of Lowell. And if you look around and you see who gained by urban renewal, you’ll find it’s corporations like that, in my opinion, have gained by urban renewal. Not the city. But anyway, that’s some of the things that turned up.

M: What were the row houses used in the early 60’s, or late 50’s, or prior to their demolition, and prior to them being stripped and all that? Before Little Canada was demolished. What were the row houses being used as?

B: Well there were, there were people living there. Little Canada, there were families living there. In fact, you see Saint Jean de Baptist Church on Merrimack Street. Now that, that church is now going to become a Spanish Church. But the reason why that particular parish went down is because, because of urban renewal. The families were just relocated out of the project area. Some them moved to Dracut. Some of them moved to Centralville. Some of them moved to, to Pawtucketville, and different places. Some moved even further away. But what happened is, that parish, the families were just, they’re just gone. And that parish being run down in the sense of losing its numbers, that was a direct result of urban renewal. Uh, Saint Peter’s Church up on Gorham Street. The Lowell Connector was supposed to run right through the heart of Saint Peter’s Parish at one time, and go along the edge of the Concord River, and come around downtown and so on. And prior to the vote on that particular issue is, that is whether or not to extend the Connector through Saint Peters Parish, people were moving out. And when people moved out you had buildings that were abandoned again. I won’t say all of them, because there were other families that moved in, but it was that period of time you didn’t know what was going to happen. So again, Saint Peter’s Parish lost their parishioners. They went to the Highlands, and wherever else, but they, they moved out. So then you have Saint Peter’s Church now abandoned as a church so far, you know? But again that public, public type of projects has not helped. They really have caused, caused problems.

The interesting part that I can recall with the, The Northern Canal Project, getting developers to come in there to put up housing, when they couldn’t get people, they couldn’t get developers for industry and they turned to housing. Even then it was difficult to get anybody to do the housing. One of the developers who developed the apartments down there in the Northern Canal, they were developing apartments down in Boston. And those in Boston have since been, I don’t know if they’ve been abandoned, but the last time I was down there, boy I’ll tell you, it looked like it was war torn. You know? And they walked away with a pretty good bundle of cash. So those who made the money on urban renewal they made it at the expense of the taxpayer. And I still say urban renewal was no successful.
M: I was reading in the Sun, The Lowell Sun, some articles from (--) There was a certain controversy as I understand it, over the demolition. Some people like you supported their saving them, and others were like, you know, get rid of it. But there was a certain controversy that went on. And that there was a court case of a man by the name of William Riley, filed for an injunction to prevent the buildings from being demolished. Sort of last minute stop gap. Do you remember that? Or do you remember if that was something significant?

B: Oh, I’d have to review. I’d have to review it myself. I mean I’m doing this, I’m doing this cold. When I say cold, I haven’t, I haven’t looked at any of my, my files on these for literal, years! But uh, from what you say, it was my understanding that even that wasn’t successful.

M: No, it wasn’t successful. But I didn’t know if you were involved with that, or if you supported that, or if you remember it at all, or?

B: Well I’m just trying, the name doesn’t strike a bell right now, but if I went back and took a look at the records it might refresh my memory. But I will say this. Anything that would have saved the buildings, we were for. And uh, as I say, it was just a small group, small group and many times, many times they looked upon a small group like that as a, as an odd group to be charitable, you know? And the way history has worked out, I think they were right. They were right. Again, [unclear].

M: Um, you, do you remember if you had any sort of feelings about the actual mill buildings of the Merrimack, when they were being demolished, or when, even before they were demolished the plans were getting ready then. Do you remember having a reaction to that, or if you were around for that, or?

B: Well this really goes back long before urban renewal. Because if you, you may recall, or maybe what you might have seen in some of the pictures in the city of Lowell, you’d see that the mills all along the river, all along the river here. And if you can just picture almost, well they used to call it like the “Mile of Mills” and so on. But those, those buildings were gradually, shall I say vacated. And uh, people lost their jobs, because see, industry was moving south. And uh, as time went on they began to take down certain of the buildings. So now that in affect you see 95 Bridge Street, you see the Boott Mill, you see where the Wannalancit is, essentially that’s all you see. But at one time, at one time there was over two million square feet of vacant space between the city of Lowell and the city of Lawrence in mill buildings. Urban renewal didn’t help it one bit. Didn’t help it one bit. But the vacant space also meant the people losing their jobs, or moving out of the city. Now fortunately from 1990 our population has gone up again. But the population going up in 1990 has nothing to do with those mill buildings. Of course whenever you have jobs, people will come to your area, but that’s a different story.

M: Let me turn this over real quick.
M: I guess I’m trying to get at, do you remember the demolition of the Merrimack Manufacturing Company building. Does that make an impression on you at all when it was going on, or do you remember any feelings you had about that? In particular that, or is it just part of the whole “Mile of Mills” going down the whole turn.

B: Well first of all the Merrimack was a, shall I say, an historic type of building in the city. It was, it was a landmark. But even, even more so than the Merrimack Mills going down, because as you say, the “Mile of Mills” that were gradually going down, the Grist Mill that used to be in front of the Merrimack Mills there, that Grist Mill was one of the best in the eastern part of the United States. And that Grist Mill was taken down to put a bank up. Just because of the particular vista down the canal, you see the bank down there. And that was another reason why I may have been disliked by individuals, because I thought that Grist Mill should never, never have been taken down. And if we had the Grist Mill today, you folks in the Historic Park, you’d have another real good attraction, because as I say, they’re extinct if I may put it that way. And that was a nice, nice historic spot. And when you looked down, when you looked down the canal and that Grist mill was down there it was nice. And if you looked down the canal now, you see how the bank building was architecturally set, and uh, that, that was shall I say, in front of the Merrimack Mills. And uh, of course the Merrimack Mills again, they have historic significance in the city of Lowell, because that was the place where the mill girls worked, or the men, or the children worked. An the so called child labor laws. You know, that’s where the uh, shall I say, the hours were worked by the children that brought about the laws that were put on the books to do something about the children working from dawn to dusk, especially young kids, you know. But no, I hated to see it go, but again, it was one of those things where the decision had been made, and the mills were gradually going down along the river. That was it.

M: And you mentioned something about there was a lawsuit, the contractor had put in some back fill.

B: Well when the uh, when the building had been torn down, as you know, the cellar hole so to speak, were suppose to have been filled and filled properly. Well what happened is they were putting anything in here, wood, whatever. And uh, the contractor who did the filling was taken to court and uh, I don’t know the exact date, but if I remember correctly, he had to do the refilling, and do it properly. But you know, I mentioned to you about one of the beams that was in the Merrimack Mill is up there on Chelmsford Street in one of the buildings that was put up after, after the Merrimack Mills came down. And that, those, those people who own the building, they’re proud to be able to say, “this beam came from the Merrimack Mills”, you know.

M: What corner is that on, or what building?
B: It’s uh, let me see. It’s the building where the uh, the Fire Fighters, I think they still have their Credit Union up there if I remember correctly. But uh, the feeling was that it was great to be able to have a beam from the Merrimack Mills. But uh, in order for me, in order for me to really give you some facts, I, I would have to go back and I’d have to look in my file. And I have more and more files that you can shake a stick at, you know? That’s, that’s where when it comes time to decide when you’re going to clean out files what’s going to go, and what’s not going to go, you know?

M: The only other question I had written down here was your relationship with Mr. Kealy, Bill Kealy?

B: Bill Kealy was the Executive Director of the Lowell Redevelopment Authority. And he had been hired shortly before I got on the Authority in 1963. Bill now works for the City of Lowell. He went from the Lowell Redevelopment Authority to the City Development Authority, to the Planning Department. And it’s my understanding right now, he’s working upstairs in the Engineering Department at City Hall. But Bill, Bill has a wealth of knowledge of what went on during that period of urban renewal. In fact, I would say Bill has a wealth of knowledge of what went on in the background, because he was most likely bombarded, bombarded from one side to the other. So that he could, he could really talk to you about urban renewal, and he could specifically talk about the Merrimack Mills if that’s the specific topic you want to stay on, you know.

But as for myself, I’d have to go back and sort of get some of the cobwebs out so I could tell you more details, but that’s the way it is at the present time.

M: Well thanks for sharing.

B: Oh hey, you’re welcome. Glad to. Glad to.

END OF INTERVIEW