

Joel Tweedle 1993 Interview

Tape marked "Joel Tweedle-Side B" March 25, 1993

"I" stands for person doing the interview

"JT" stands for Joel Tweedle

I The time is 10:00 a.m. We're in the Fordyce Visitor's Center Conference Room. My interview is with Mrs. Joel Tweedle and my name is Ranger Toni Cooper along with Bill Black. First of all I want to know which bath house or houses did you work in?

JT First I worked at the Rockefeller Bathhouse for about nine or ten years. And then I went to the Superior Bathhouse, and I worked there for over 25. Then I worked at the Majestic...it's where I retired in '91.

I Great. And what occupation?

JT I first started out as a bath attendant, but I eventually went into massage therapies. And I've been doing massages for over 35 years.

I That's wonderful. Can you tell me how you got started in the bathhouses?

JT Well, let's see, I started as a teenager, in fact I started at the Pythian, do you remember the Pythian? And I started working there as a teenager, in the bathhouse, and then [Web], my father, Matthew William Purdy, he worked at the Superior for over 50 years. And so naturally the bathhouse industry was just in the family, you know. And I eventually went to the Superior where he had worked. And we stayed there, at least I stayed there for over twenty-some years.

I Long time.

JT Uh huh. And then when it closed, I went right on up the next day to the Majestic. I never did lose any time.

I That's good. Could you tell us what an average day was like? What was the procedures; what did you do? The routine.

JT My routine as a massage therapist was to receive the guests after they had had their bath, and which included steam, hot packs and a needle shower. And then they came into the cooling room and then the hostess

would outline each of us with a lady. And I've had some very interesting people to come in to give massages to.

I Tell us about a few of them.

JT Well, what's the rock singer's name [?] Oh, I tell you somebody else, too, Imitation of--not imitation of life--uh, no use of me thinking, my lord, my mind is so oh-oh-oh-oh. She came in...she was in this movie. It was a tear-jerker. I think it was--it wasn't Imitation of Life, it was something else. But, I had her. And I had a lot of singers and back-up singers of some of the world's most popular singers and things like that.

I Any presidents?

JT No, when I was at the Rockefeller, not Mondale--what's the other vice president? He came in and his wife. They were staying at the Majestic, but they come across the street over there to the Rockefeller.

I Right.

JT No presidents.

I Are physicals required for your job? Did you have to take a physical every year?

JT Yes. I had to take a physical every year. And another thing--massage therapist, you have to go to school for it.

I I was going to ask you about that.

JT Yes, and I had to renew my license every year.

I What school did you attend?

JT The Hot Springs School of Massage Therapists.

I The license was issued by who? By the park?

JT Yes.

I You took a test?

JT Oh yes.

I Both written and...

JT That's right. That's right.

I Did many bathers return year after year and maybe ask for you?

JT Yes, they did. They most certainly did. I had a lot of returnees.

I That's good.

JT And they still asking about me because I talked to the girl...

I Really?

JT Um huh. (laughter)

I You must have been good at your job.

JT Well, I loved it, I loved it, I really did.

I Well could you tell us where did most of the bathers travel from?

JT All over the country. All over. I mean there's no one certain spot; I mean they were from everywhere. Yep. Everywhere.

I Did the heat in the bathhouses ever bother you?

JT It did when I first started, but I usually got, I got used to it.

I How did duties working at the Rockefeller differ from working at the Superior or the Majestic, was there any difference?

JT Not too much difference. It was just the people, and I got along with everybody. I What year was it when you switched from the Superior to the Rockefeller?

JT When the Rockefeller closed--I can't remember what year it was--I went to the Superior. And at that time, my father had already retired, and so he wasn't there, but.

I So we're probably talking back in the '50's.

JT Oh yeah, way further back than that.

I Did you depend on tips?

JT Yes, I did receive tips. And tips were, back there, better then than they are now. I don't know whether the economy got the people to...

I What was the largest tip you ever received?

JT Oh, my goodness. I have received a hundred dollar tip.

I Oh, that's good.

JT I most certainly did, and that was at the Superior. I remember that. I never will forget that. And, yeah, about a hundred dollars about the biggest I've ever gotten.

I So as an individual, as I would progress through the bathhouse, I'd tip each person that served me.

JT That's right. Some did, and some didn't.

I When did I get this tip because I'm not able to carry it with me?

JT Usually when they finished and dressed and gone out and checked out and they'd come back in and give it to me in my hand. Now, there are some of them that did leave it at the office.

I You could leave it at the office?

JT You could leave it at the office. But usually they wanted you to have it, and they'd bring it back to you.

I Mrs. Tweedle, when did you start receiving pay by the hour? Do you remember what year?

JT Oh dear. I didn't get paid by the hour.

I You didn't?

JT No.

I Okay. How did the system work? How did you get paid?

JT I got paid on commission, like, as far as how many people I had.

I Okay. So you got paid for each individual?

JT That's right.

I No workee no payee?

JT Uh huh. (laughter)

I Which bathhouse did most of the blacks bathe at? Do you remember?

JT Well, we got a lot of them at the Majestic. And there was quite a few of them at the Superior, but there wasn't too many at the Rockefeller. Now, come to think of it. But the Majestic is the most...where the black folks were. Because I imagine they had tours, and they had...

I Even as a teenager, you saw the black people in the bathhouses.

JT Oh yes.

I Where you were working?

JT Yeah, now, when I started out, just like I said, I didn't remember the Pythian. I started out at the Pythian, and then, you know, that was a black bathhouse.

I Was there another black bathhouse besides the Pythian?

JT Was it the Baptist? The National Baptist. Uh huh. And there were a lot of...Ms. Logan, I remember her so well, at the Pythian. That's Alfonso Logan's mother.

I Did she used to work there?

JT Oh, she had the Pythian sewed up. (laughter)

I I didn't know that. Is she still living?

JT No, she's deceased.

I Did you give mercury rubs, or did you ever see the mercury rub treatment?

JT No, I didn't.

I Okay.

JT No. I heard about the sulphur baths.

I Would you like to explain the sulphur baths?

JT I don't know. I never did give any, but I just heard about it.

I So what do you think of the government's involvement with the bathhouses? I mean, don't they come in and check you...

JT Oh yes, but there for the last few years, we never seen 'em, but they used to come in every month to check. But, when I was at the Majestic, I never did see them.

I What did they check for?

JT Well, they checked the temperature, checked to see how the people were treated, or see what you did, or, and everything, but.

I Not the same any more?

JT No. I never did see them at the Majestic.

I Another question I wanted to ask you--have you seen any dramatic cases of healings all those years you worked?

JT Yes I have. We've had patients to come in in wheelchairs and leave walking. And what amazed me was most of them were teenagers with arthritis. That was just so pitiful, you know? And, yes, I've seen them come in in wheelchairs, walking and everything.

I Did you take the thermal baths yourself?

JT Yes, I did.

I When did you take them: before work, after work?

JT After.

I After work?

JT. Um huh. After work.

I Did you bathe free?

JT Oh yes.

I Okay. (laughter) Did the other employees to assist you with the bath, or..?

JT No, I just did it on my own.

I Were the bathhouses open seven days week back when you first started?

JT No, no, no, no. We didn't work on Sundays, no, no Sundays. And I don't know what year they bought in on the Sundays, but they eventually began to work on Sundays. I think that was after the...they tried to get that union round here one time. And they started working on Sundays. I remember that.

I What, do you remember the year? Was that in the '50's or '40's?

JT Oh dear, let's see, when was that? That was probably in the '50's. They tried to get that union started, but they didn't never work out. Didn't work.

I Have you noticed changes from the time you started until now in the bathing industry? Are they doing anything different now than they did back then?

JT Yes I do notice a difference. It used to be that the blacks couldn't work out front in the office.

I I didn't know that.

JT And, but now they are. And, I don't know any other difference, because I think the procedure is the same in the bathing industry. Now, I remember Mr. Bolton, cause I was under him way back there. I don't know what year it was, but I just don't know. It's a difference now. It's better.

I There's not as many people taking the baths, now.

JT. It isn't? Well, I don't know why. Maybe it's not advertised. Well, they advertised enough cause I hear it. I read it in magazines, about Hot Springs. But..

I What kind of magazines are you reading that in?

JT Well, I had the Travel's Post, and what is this other magazine I get, they got it in there. My subscription ran out, and they sent me this magazine. I didn't order it. But it's interesting to read, cause Hot Springs in there.

I When you worked in the bathhouse, what time did you generally start in the morning?

JT Well, I used to start at seven o'clock in the morning, but now it's 6:30.

I What time would you get off in the evening?

JT We used to get off at three, but now it's 4:30.

I Okay. You worked up until what date, what year?

JT '91.

I '91.

JT Um huh. September. '91.

I How many years do you have in all together? About? Over 50?

JT Oh well, yeah, I started as a teenager, I'm 65 years old now.

I Do you have any stories that you'd like to share with us about the bathing industry?

JT I can't remember nothin'. I haven't put too much really thought to it, but, naturally, things do happen that's funny, and some's sad.

I We are looking for pictures of the bowling alley in this building. If you know of anybody that has some would you tell Toni at some future date.

JT All right. In this building here.

I Or even if you have pictures of any of the bathhouses that you used to work at such as the Rockefeller, or anything. Just let us know so we'll take a picture of it and use it in slide programs.

JT Oh. Okay. All right, I will. I'll just look out for that.

I We'd like for you to comment a little bit about your father and where he worked. He was a bath attendant?

JT Yes, he was a bath attendant.

I Did he tell stories about some outstanding individuals?

JT Now, I know he could if he's [], but my goodness, oh dear. At that time the people had to furnish their towels and things, but they don't do it now.

I Oh, really?

JT. Um huh, because usually when most of the people that left and gave him their towels and things, he'd have them laundered and bring them home.

I He laundered the towels hisself?

JT Oh yeah. And he brought them home. But see, they don't furnish the towels..

I They didn't furnish towels...bring your own towels.

JT That's right. They had to bring their own towels. And which I say they brought about five or six of them. So when they left and they didn't want them, they gave 'em to him.

I Right. You made reference to the fact that your father bathed some of the gangsters. Any particular ones?

JT One of them had a house here, up on Prospect. What gangster was that?

I I don't know. The only two I've heard of been here were Al Capone...

JT [He's one I was tellin ya] Al Capone and somebody else.

I Bugsy Moran.

JT No, not that name.

I Onie Madden.

JT That's who it is, Madden.

I Onie.

JT Onie.

I Okay.

JT I can't think of anybody else. But he did, he was back there then.

I Back in the earlier days was there a lot of people coming in with prescriptions from their doctors to take the baths?

JT Um huh. You don't see too much of that now, no. Don't see too much of it. Once in a while, a patient will come in with bath instructions, and everything, but you don't see too much of that now.

I Now, am I correct, the Superior was on government land then?

JT That's right. We were government, considered government employees.

I So the gangsters were coming to government...

JT Bathhouses.

I The bathhouses were on government land. Okay.

I Thank you for your interview.

JT Well, I hope I have helped, because my memory isn't too good. Now, when I get home, I'll probably think of something else.

I If you think of anything else, just call us back.

JT You know how that goes. My memory just not too good. Can't think right now.

I Mrs. Tweedle, if the government came in and found something wrong in the bathhouse, what would happen?

JT Most of the...when the inspector came around, we would know it. Because when she walked in the front door, word got around that the inspector's here. And we tried to straighten up or do something, but a lot of times she was quick. She came in. If she found something wrong, she would

reprimand you. A lot of times she came in and checked the water, the thermometer in the tub...you know you supposed to put the thermometer in the tub to get the right temperature. Lot of times it was too hot. Boy, she'd get on you.

I Another question I wanted to ask you was: at the bathhouses that you worked at, were they all white attendants, or were they all black attendants, or were they, was it a mixture?

JT No. Most of the bathhouses I worked in it was all black attendants, but here in later years, at the Majestic, we have some white masseusses.

I Okay. Now, I heard...Do they put as much interest in the work, in their work, as you people?

JT No, I'm gonna have to say that, and it's going on record, but still, but they don't.

I Why do you feel that way?

JT Well, I just don't know what to say. But, I prided mine, I loved my work, and I did the best I could. And that's the reason why I had so many people come in and asking for me. And you could ask Mr. Blackwell right now, go up there and ask him.

I Now who is Mr. Blackwell?

JT He's the manager of the Majestic Hotel. Now.

I How long has he been the manager?

JT Just a few years, or something like...

I He's fairly new.

JT Yes, he is.

I Mrs. Tweedle, I heard at one time that there used to be all black attendants at the Maurice. Is that true?

JT At the Maurice?

I Next door.

JT Yes, that's all black attendants.

I At one time didn't they hire one white attendant there?

JT Now that I don't know, but they could have. They could have, but I don't know. But I know they were black over there at the Superior.

I What about the Buckstaff? Did they have all black or where there whites?

JT Oh now, the Buckstaff. That was all white.

I All white. Now most of the black people that worked, were you all related?

JT No. No.

I You didn't get your job through the relation of somebody that was working there?

JT No. I didn't. But sometimes you were referred to somebody, and they called and asked, but I didn't. But...

I Do you remember when the blacks were allowed to start bathing on Bathhouse Row?

JT Well, I just don't know cause they had two bathhouses and the Pythian and the Baptist Building, and they just wasn't allowed to come up on the Row. But I don't know what year. That was back there in the '40's, I believe. Somewhere along like that.

I Okay, thank you very much for your time today.

JT All right.

END OF TAPE

JT