

INTERVIEW WITH ROBERT H. JEFFREY

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AK: Am I correct that your father was Robert Jeffrey?

TJ: My father was Robert, and my grandfather was Robert. Joseph Andrew was my great-grandfather, that's the guy who's portrait's on the wall. And his oldest son, Robert H. Jeffrey, for whom I'm named, was a mayor of Columbus from 1903 to 1905, and succeeded his father as president of the company in the 1920's. My father, Robert Kilbourne Jeffrey, his mother was a Kilbourne of Kilbourne & Jacobs, he became vice-president of engineering. He died in 1942. I worked there starting in summers of 1949, 51 and 52, and continuously from 1956 to today. This is the original company; the Jeffrey Company is the old Jeffrey Manufacturing Company; our charter is the 1877 charter.

AK: One of my themes in looking at the history in Italian Village is the role that families have played. It seems there was a very close-knit industrial community there.

TJ: I think that's true, but that was true if you looked at the south end, the west side or whatever, you'd find the same thing. The businesses were all family owned.

AK: But I think the Jeffrey Company was kind of unique in that it seemed to extend that whole family relationship though its philosophy of doing business. There seemed to be tremendous loyalty for employees, an extensive network of relationships were developed beyond just the workplace.

TJ: That's true. Jeffrey was always, even up to my day, known as a good place to work. It was paternalistic. Even when I was a lot younger and first heard the word "paternalistic" I never could see why it was bad.

AK: Was your great-grandfather still alive when you were born?

TJ: I was born in 1929. Joseph Andrew Jeffrey died in 1927, and his wife, my great-grandmother, died a few months before I was born. My grandfather lived until 1961, and he and I were very close. I was an only child, and most of the time I was the only one of his grandchildren that lived here in Columbus, so we were quite close.

AK: Was he still living in the mansion in Bexley at the time?

TJ: He gave that to the city in 1940 at which point I was eleven, and lived close by there.

AK: When you were a child, did you used to go the factory?

TJ: Oh yes. My father worked there, and there was the Jeffrey store, on the northside of First Avenue. It was a company store. Company stores were quite common, particularly in the coal fields. They got a bad name, probably deservedly in most cases, because the employees were paid in script and could only spend the script in company stores, so the company set whatever prices it chose. I think the Jeffrey store was there to benefit the employees, not to soak them. I went up every Saturday morning with my mother and she would do her week of shopping there. I can remember, this would have been in spring, great big metal containers of grass seed, each a

different kind, and they had a big metal scoop. And of course, at age three or four, I scooped from one into another. They probably had to sell the whole thing as mixed fescue and clover. The store ceased probably in 1959.

AK: What was the reason the store was closed down?

TJ: I'm going to defer your question. Particularly the first fifty years, the company was very successful. As far as I know, it was probably #1 in the coal mining machinery industry. We got into the chain business, and all kinds of material handling business, because coal, of course, is a material that needs to be handled, at the front end, by conveyors and machinery like that. Well, the company almost failed about 1920. The business had boomed during the war, of course, but the country suffered a rather large depression in 1920, and Jeffrey almost ran out of cash. That's how you belly up is you run out of cash. The inventory control in those days was in the hands of the factory. The factory didn't want to lay off this group of good skilled people they had, so they just kept issuing stock orders, for more motors, more gears, so all the cash ended up in the inventory. That was the last time the inventory was in the hands of the factory. Then things got better until the 1929 depression came along and quite a number of times, they were only working one day a week. This was all a part of the paternalism thing. When the unions came, you had to lay off according to seniority. Don't share the poverty, that was the union thing. Which was understandable, but before the unions, rather than lay people off, they'd just say, "none of us will work Tuesday" and then as things got worse, Tuesday and Thursday. For a while there, they were working only one day a week so they wouldn't have to lay anyone off. Then World War II comes along, and the company booms again, but by this time, the management was getting old and complacent, and the engineering and development didn't turn out to be as successful as it should be, and this part of Jeffrey really slipped badly. They probably went from first place to fourth place in a league of five players between 1949 and '55. Which brings us to the closing of the company store. About the same time, we closed the restaurant part of the cafeteria, and put in vending machines. We were Sanese's first customer. That part of the business really struggled the rest of the 50's and early 60's. I took over the manufacturing in '68, and by that time with a new coal mining machine which was a great success, very fortuitous, and the company started to make money again, good money, and we sold out in 1974.

AK: At the crest of the new wave of prosperity.

TJ: Right. The family by this time, three generations worth, had gotten very large, geographically spread out. Myself and three other cousins worked there, but most people didn't. Some of the people were very dependent on their dividends. This was a cyclical business catering to a cyclical, extractive industry. It's trouble squared. It was fortuitous for my shareholders that we did it. Actually, we thought this was going to be great not just for our people, but for the company. We didn't want to necessarily sell to the highest bidder, but to someone who could do something for our businesses. I really thought Dresser would be the ideal foster parent.

AK: At the time you sold it, there was still substantial employment at the First Avenue plant.

TJ: Oh, big time. The height of employment was perhaps World War I, but certainly during World War II, there were four thousand, maybe five thousand people at that plant. By the early sixties, we moved about a third of our operations to three plants in the south, 2 in South

Carolina, one in Tennessee. We moved all our chain operations to Tennessee, the other operations to South Carolina. We were just doing too many different things, and the union rules made it very hard. I'm not beating up on the union here. If we had you cutting gears to very high tolerance for mining machines today, and then tomorrow hand filing some spurs off of sprockets for chain, we had to pay you the same for that work as we did for the other. That's understandable from your standpoint, but you can't sell sprockets for that kind of money. So that's what led to the three southern plants. Basically all we had left here was the mining machinery.

AK: What were the circumstances of the company becoming unionized?

TJ: Jeffrey was one of the last companies around of that type to be unionized. That happened around 1953-4, when I was in service. The International Association of Machinists (IAM) won an election. You ask why? It's all part and parcel of what I've already alluded to; it's a lot easier to run a good ship where everybody's happy when you're making money. When you aren't making money, then you have to look around for ways to stay in business. That means we can't pay you your high machinists wages to clean up this sprocket, and we can't have the company store, cafeteria, and so on. Worst of all, we don't use many employees because we weren't selling as many mining machines.

AK: When you first visited the plant, was it completely built out?

TJ: By the time I came along, and my memory starts about 1940, I recall coming up Fourth Street to First Avenue, we'd go the store, pick up my father, or whatever, we'd pass the Kilbourne and Jacobs shops, right next to that was Jeffrey. I suppose Lincoln, Warren Streets at one time extended to the railroad track, but that was all before.

AK: Was Kilbourne and Jacobs still in existence when you remember?

TJ: By that time it was Case, Crane, Kilbourne & Jacobs. The Kilbournes had actually lost their business, I think in the 20's. Inevitably, it will happen to Bill Gates and Microsoft. Family companies only last so long. The family either runs out of talent, or gets lazy. It's really hard for Bill Gates to motivate his kids. So the Kilbournes were out of Kilbourne & Jacobs, and in fact the Kilbournes were on kind of hard times. Jeffrey bought K&J in 1946 or 1947 for expansion. We built our chain shop, that's where we made all our chains. I can remember, this would have been one of the summers I was working, probably 1949. Kilbourne & Jacobs had made wheelbarrows, and four wheeled trucks that were around railroad station and warehouses. The wheelbarrows were stamped and formed on a huge press, two story high press. This was an 1867 dated press, they didn't have hydraulics, they just had mechanics, a great big gear wheel, probably a 10-12 foot diameter, but instead of having teeth, it was cast iron, there were slots, female teeth, into which you put slats of oak and made a gear wheel. The reasons for this was that when you ordered sheet metal from a steel mill, the quality wasn't very good, maybe the metallurgy wasn't quite right, so if you got a piece that was too thick and/or too hard, you'd tear up your press, so by having these wooden teeth, when it came down and hit this thing that didn't work, instead of stripping the teeth off of the 10 foot gear wheel, you just made a hell of a lot of oaken splinters. I remember they were still manufacturing wheelbarrows at that point. Certainly by the early fifties, the old K&J had wound down completely. Some of those old spaces were rented out as warehouse space.

AK: What recollection do you have of the neighborhood at that time?

TJ: Not as much as you'd like. I remember the saloons best of all, not because I spent time in there. Hewitt's was a saloon at the southwest corner of First Avenue and Fourth Street.

Finnegans was the saloon that was just north of the office building, a long narrow building. I can remember, it was the summer of 1950, we were working twelve hour days in the shop, and the regular working guys would go into Finnegans and have our supper. I used to get my hair cut up on Second Avenue west of Fourth Street. I know my grandfather took some interest in the Catholic school there at First Avenue and Summit.

AK: Sacred Heart.

TJ: Yes. At the turn of the century, both of my great grandfathers were trustees of Godman Guild. Both Kilbourne and Jeffrey. In fact, the fellow that succeeded me as president at Jeffrey Mining Machinery Company had been on the Godman Guild board, and was about to be president. By this time we sold out to Dresser and his Dresser boss said, "If you have time for that kind of stuff, we don't need you."

AK: Did the employees live in the neighborhood?

TJ: I think that by my time, not so many did. It's interesting, we had a lot of German people, German are very good mechanics, and I mean that in the good sense. A lot of our departments, the foreman really had their fiefdoms. The drill press department was mostly Italian, because the foreman was Italian. Probably the foreman before him was Italian. That's how you got a job. You'd recommend to me your brother, or your wife's brother. I liked you, if you think he's a good guy, alright. There were African Americans in the foundry. Sadly, no blacks in management, except Harry Alexander who was my grandfather's secretary, a relationship that started when he was mayor, he just brought Harry with him. And another guy named Charlie Jones, he ran the stationery department, a one man department. But no blacks in the machine shop, no blacks in the routing shop. We made some changes in my time, but too little, too late. I'm just trying to think of some more ethnic combinations. The same thing was true in the so called white collar departments. The cost department, that was largely Roman Catholic because a guy back in the cost department in 1908 was Catholic. The routing department, I'm just making this up, was all Masons. Masonry was an important thing there, though.

AK: Was there an Irish contingent?

TJ: Probably but I can't really recall. All I can remember was the drill press department was Italian.

AK: Now Fourth Street was not a one way street then.

TJ: Oh no, in fact they had a trolley running up and down it, two train tracks down the middle. I recall that I would come from Bexley west on Fifth Avenue south on St. Clair, and then west on Second Avenue. That's how I'd come to work. I remember quite distinctly thinking that the neighborhood I was going through there around Second Avenue and St. Clair was distinctly Italian.

AK: I want to ask you about your grandfather. When he was mayor he was a young man. Did he remain a public figure throughout his life?

TJ: I'm speculating about this. Teddy Roosevelt was in the White House, and he was progressive. Reform movement was afoot, and I think the Republicans were in search of finding someone who was clean, politically clean. I don't know who the players were at the time, but they had to find a viable candidate and they ended up with this kid, almost, still in his late 20's, and I'm guessing they, whoever "they" may have been, went to the old man, and said, "How about your son, Robert? Do you suppose he'd run for mayor?" It was a very bitter campaign, and the Democrats understandably made Little Lord Fauntleroy charges. My grandfather always said that the reason he won the election was the night before the election he gave a speech in Schiller Park in German. He'd spent a lot of time in Germany. His mother, for a reason nobody seems to know or at least nobody talks about or put down on paper, whether she got mad at the old man, or whatever, but anyway, she took all the children and went to Germany. And stayed there for nine months or a year. All six children. Here's the old man back here trying to make his business run, and the old lady's skipped to Germany. Anyway, my grandfather learned to speak very good German. But they were two year terms in those days, and I think when that time was up... in fact, he had already started construction on the house in Bexley, and he would have had to live in Columbus to be mayor. Knowing my grandfather, he was not a political person. I didn't know him when he was young, but I don't think his stripes would change in all those years.

AK: Was he still a public figure in those days? Making the donation of the house was certainly a public gesture.

TJ: Yes, but making a donation and running a United Way campaign, which my wife did in 1972, are entirely different things. He wasn't a type to run the United Way campaign.

AK: Did your father have that public aspect?

TJ: No, my father was an engineer.

AK: But there seems to be a tradition, the Jeffrey name surfaces throughout the city, besides the mansion, the Graceland area, Jeffrey is linked with that.

TJ: That because my great-grandfather's regular residence was on Town Street, but they had a summer place up on what's now called Jeffrey Place, in Beechwold. I think the house is still standing. I've never seen it.

AK: What about the property near the zoo?

TJ: My grandfather owned that. It seems to have been a country summer property, a fashionable thing for people of that class, although I don't like that term. My grandfather owned property on the Scioto. I surmise he owned it before the O'Shaughnessy dam idea. I know he was mayor when the Griggs dam was built. And his younger brother Walter owned property on Big Walnut near Central College, and his sister, Florence the second oldest daughter, owned property on Big Walnut much further downstream near Reynoldsburg. And my grandfather gave that property on the Scioto, I suppose after the O'Shaughnessy reservoir was in, about 30 acres, to the Jeffrey Foreman's Club. You had to be a foreman, a management person, which isn't to say the department so and so wouldn't have its picnic, and everyone's invited. But there was something called the Jeffrey Foreman's Club up until fairly recent times. It was subsidized by the company. In my day, the coke machines and stuff around the plant

were run by Sanese and the kickback went to the Company and was passed on to the Foreman's Club, for getting the grass cut, and so on. There was a clubhouse.

AK: Nothing that your grandfather had lived in as a summer home?

TJ: I'm 95% certain the answer is no.

AK: And is it still in use?

TJ: A qualified yes. They have an annual gathering of Jeffrey retirees, 300 people out there. I go every year, and see all my friends getting older. But it's pretty run down, very run down, because the company doesn't have any money to jump start it. I'm not quite sure how the grass gets cut now.

AK: Do current Jeffrey employees use it?

TJ: I have to believe they do. But there are so few current Jeffrey employees ...

AK: At a recent IVS meeting, the president reported he had been contacted by Casto Communities to find out if the area east of Fourth Street was included in the Italian Village Commission boundaries, and his suspicion was there was interest in the Abbott Lab land. I also heard that someone had spoken with the current management at Jeffery and they had indicated they have leased other space from the First Avenue site. Their current lease goes through October of 1998, and there's every likelihood they'll be vacating that space in the next year or so. Do you have any thoughts on what the future holds for that property?

TJ: I've got my own problems. It would seem to me that's a wonderful piece of property. Back when there was all this discussion about an arena, I thought Ohio State and the downtown people ought to get together and put one big facility right there, but Gordon Gee says its too far from the university. I hope something nice happens. It's gotta be the biggest piece of land, almost downtown. Now we used to own the big empty lot across Second Avenue, next to Clark Grave Vault. I don't know who owns that now.

AK: I know that the former Indresco still owns a commercial building at Second and Fourth Street, it's been used as a carryout for many years.

TJ: The former Indresco also owns the office building. One of my concerns is that building. Have you ever been in that building? You go up the steps and there are some bronze and glass doors, and inside on the north wall there are three huge bronze bas reliefs. The middle one is industry, a woman in a flowing gown and smokestacks and other stuff depicted. To the left of that is another bas relief of the same size showing coal as it was mined before machinery, a bloke pushing a cart relying on his human power and another bloke lying on his shoulder with a pick undercutting the coal, and the one on the right side is coal, modern circa 1924 and it shows the back end of a Jeffrey cutting machine. I've talked with various people, and if anything happens to that building, I want to get a shot at saving those bas reliefs. I don't know what I'd do with them. They have the artist's name. They're quite good. Casting that sort of stuff is a special thing. I don't know whether COSI will move the Jeffrey coal mine to the Scioto peninsula, that would be a logical place for these. It would be a shame to have them lost.

AK: Are there any other unusual aspects to the building? That seems to be the one architecturally significant building on the site.

TJ: The board room on the third floor facing Fourth Street has stained glass windows, and they show different products, coal mining machines, chain, loading machines.

AK: The next newsletter comes out in December. It'll probably be in there. I'll let you go. Thank you very much for your time.

Post script:

From Tad Jeffrey's obituary:

What a shock . . . Tad had just recently walked thru the old Jeffrey foundry that is now the home of the State Library and Ohioana Library. He said it was wonderful to know that the historic building was thriving and still serving the city and state. The saying, "He was a pillar of his community" may be a cliché - but in Tad Jeffrey's case, it was absolutely true. Condolences to Mrs. Jeffrey and the entire family.

David Weaver, Ohioana Library