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Joseph Fitzgerald

Oral History Interview
University of Illinois at Chicago
Richard J. Daley Library Special Collections
Interviewed by Marie Scatena

July 24, 2014

Q: My name is Marie Scatena, and it's July 24, 2014. We're at the University of Illinois at Chicago in the Special Collections of the Richard J. Daley Library. Today I'm speaking with Joseph Fitzgerald. Thank you for being here Mr. Fitzgerald, and for sharing your memories. We're going to be talking about your life and your work with the city of Chicago and Richard J. Daley. So Mr. Fitzgerald, if you could say your full name for us for the record and when and where you were born, and then as much as you'd like to share about your early life.

Fitzgerald: Okay, I'm Joseph Farley Fitzgerald. I was born in 1928 in Chicago, and I've lived in Chicago my entire life except for a short stint in Western Springs. I'm now in New Lenox, which is a south suburb. But for the most part of my life, I lived in Chicago in various locations, quite a few locations.

My mother came from Madison, Wisconsin. She was born and raised in Madison and met my father when she was visiting some relatives in Chicago, and they got married and they lived in Chicago…well, obviously they lived in Chicago all their lives, the rest of their lives. My earliest remembrance of my childhood was when we lived on Prairie Avenue. We lived across the street from Mrs. Capone, so it was a place that stuck in my mind, because Al would come by once in a while, and everybody would be running to the curtains to watch him.

My mother, unfortunately, caught TB, and they didn't have penicillin at the time, so she was sent off to a TB sanitarium. She was there, I'm guessing, about two years, and in those two years I was farmed out to different relatives. I lived at Aunt Kit's in Gauge Park for most of the time, but I also lived at my Aunt Thom's and my Uncle Elmer Fitzgerald's. And for some time my father and I were downtown.

I think I went to St. Pat's School when I was downtown. I went to Gauge Park Grammar School for kindergarten and half of first year, and then I went to grammar school first through fourth in Western Springs. Then I moved to Vernon Avenue and went to St. Joachim for fifth, sixth, and seventh grade. Then I moved again to South Shore and I went to Our Lady of Peace Grammar School for one year. After that I went to Mount Carmel for two years and South Shore for the last year and a half.

I went through high school in three and a half years because I doubled up on my classes. I wanted to have my high school diploma when I went into the Army. I was planning on trying to get into the Army Air Corps at the time, but while I was in summer school that last half year, they dropped the bomb on Japan, and that was the end of my flying career.

After I graduated, I went into the Army and joined the Paratroops, so I was an Army Paratrooper for a year. After a year, they were trying to downsize. The war was over and they were offering an early discharge if you were going on to college. I enjoyed the Army, but I felt I should get on with my life. I was planning on going to college, so I left the Army and went to Wilson Junior College. My father had signed me up at Wilson Junior College so I'd have a letter from that college to turn into the Army to get the early discharge.

I spent a year at Wilson, which was a great year, but I felt that I wasn't really getting the education I should, so I transferred to University of

Illinois at Navy Pier, and I spent a year at Navy Pier. I then spent the last two years at University of Illinois in Champaign. I was fortunate in that I qualified for the GI Bill for my time in the Army, so I was able to get through college without any financial problems.

After I graduated with a degree in architectural engineering from the university I secured a job at Swift & Co., a meatpacking company in the stockyards. They were designing buildings to replace the facility in the stockyards. These different meatpacking units were being built throughout the country. They were going to break up the headquarters—I shouldn't say headquarters—but they were too concentrated down in the stockyards. They were facing strikes every summer and they wanted to diversify, so we were designing plants that were going up all over the United States.

My father worked for the Building Department as long as I can remember. He was a mechanical engineer in the Ventilation Bureau, which was attached to the Health Department originally, but then it was transferred to the Building Department. I don't know what year it was they transferred, but I remember him working for the Building Department in the Ventilation Bureau for most of my life.

After I worked at Swift for about three years, he told me that there was an opening for a structural plan examiner in the Building Department. There were only two structural plan examiners, and they had an opening for one. So he asked if I would be interested, and I said yes. There was no civil service exam for that position because it was only two people. I guess they didn't feel that it was worthwhile writing a civil service exam for that spot, so it was going to be an appointed position.

He said you're going to have to get a letter from your committeeman. I didn't know the committeeman so he had one of his friends in the Ventilation Bureau get a letter from my committeeman. Then I was

interviewed by the commissioner, which was General Smichel at the time. And he took me on as a structural plan examiner.

I was lucky in that the other structural plan examiner, Alec Alexander, was very generous with his advice. He taught me more about structural engineering in the two years that I held that position than I learned in the four years at college. He was a great guy that really helped me out quite a bit.

After that I started taking the civil service exams. They had civil service exams going all the time in those years. I was pretty good at taking the civil service exams, because I was just out of college a short time, so I was usually near the top of the exams, and was accepted in a lot of different positions in the Building Department—building inspector, assistant chief of inspections and I don't know what else.

Backing up a little, when I first started with the city, I was interviewed by the mayor. He was the county clerk at the time, and head of the Cook County Democratic Party. I made the appointment, arrived at his office and was escorted in to meet Mr. Daley. I was 24 or 25 years old at the time and suddenly in a very impressive large office with a very imposing gentleman who got up and greeted me like I was really somebody. He was extremely gracious and warmly welcomed me to my upcoming service with the city and told me he knew I would be an asset to the citizens of our fair city. I was truly struck by the welcome I had received. It was an impressive pep talk that I'll always remember. That was it, I was in.

But getting back to the civil service exams, I finally took an exam for Architect 5, and there was an opening in the Bureau of Architecture in the Department of Public Works. Gerhardt was the city architect at the time. I went up and I was interviewed by him, and he said yes, I'll take you on as Architect 5. I told George Ramsey, who was the Building Commissioner

at the time, and who I was working with on fire protection for prestressed concrete.

There was a big problem with the fire ratings that the prestressed concrete structural units were getting. Without going into the details, I was helping him out in the fight that he was having with the prestressed concrete industry, so he was interested in my staying. He said if I can get you the assistant commissioner spot, which is not a civil service position, would you like to stay, and I said yes, I liked working for the Building Department.

And so he was able to get me the position of assistant commissioner, which I held for probably seven years or so. Commissioner Ramsey left and Sid Smith became the building commissioner. I passed the state exam for architect, so I had an architect's license. The deputy commissioner spot opened up when Colonel Eubank left, and Sid asked for me to fill that position, so then I was promoted to deputy commissioner, and I held that position for a year or two.

My first encounter with the mayor was…when Sid was gone on vacation or someplace, I had to sit in at the cabinet meetings for him. And they were very interesting meetings. I would be sitting there with all these department heads. At the time I was very impressed with all the big names that I'm sitting with in these meetings.

The mayor ran these meetings with an iron fist. If somebody was out of line or if he wasn't producing, or if he had done something wrong, we all heard about it. I think everybody was concerned, when they went into those meetings, that they weren't the ones that had done something wrong or hadn't accomplished what they were supposed to accomplish. I didn't have to worry at the time because I'm sure he wasn't going to take off on me because I was just sitting in for Sid. But some of the other guys, he

was really…he was a hardnosed boss, let me put it that way. Can we cut it for a minute?

Q: Sure.

[*Pause*.]

Fitzgerald: Later on, when I was the Building Commissioner, he didn't have those cabinet meetings. But at the time that Sid was the building commissioner, he did. If a guy had done something wrong or hadn't come through, he was berated right there in front of everybody. There were probably 20 of us, or I don't know how many, 15 or 20, all the department heads. So he was…it was a tense time.

In fact, Sid said—he had the cabinet meetings on Monday morning—Sid said that it ruined his weekends that he had to show up at the cabinet meetings on Monday when he might be one of the targets. And his secretary said—we were at 320 North Clark at the time, right on the river, on the north side—I can tell if he was the target for that day by the way he walked back across the bridge. [*Laughs*]

So he was a hard taskmaster. If somebody did something wrong, they were in big trouble. There was one guy…I can't go into that one because I don't remember the name. Where was I?

Q: We were talking about these cabinet meetings, which is fascinating because a number of people have brought up the cabinet meetings, so those were events. Two questions. Did you know ahead of time that maybe you would be on the hot seat, and were you ever on the hot seat?

Fitzgerald: No. When I was going for Sid, the mayor, when he had these cabinet meetings—it changed after I became building commissioner. We didn't have these intense cabinet meetings. I think he switched over to where

we'd have to go in and see him every week. If things weren't going right, he'd take your head off in private.

But before, everybody was sitting there hanging onto their chair. He'd really go after some of these big shots. He never went after the fire commissioner or the police commissioner, but the rest of us were all targets. Target is probably the wrong name, but he was very hard. Because if something went wrong, big trouble.

Q: There was a lot going on in the city at that time, though, wasn't there? What were some of the big projects that were going on in the city at the time of these very tense meetings?

Fitzgerald: Well, with the Building Department it was—and I didn't sit in when Sid was there, but I imagine it was…the Building Department was supposed to make sure that all the buildings in the city were in good shape, and obviously that's an impossible job. And housing was the big concern, the housing in the city—the slumlords, the slums, to get rid of the slums.

Half of the Building Department's operation was housing, trying to keep the housing in shape. It was the new construction, remodeling and everything else, which was the other half of the department, which is the interesting half. And the other half was housing. If they had a building in the city, what are you doing about it, and how come there's a bad building. They were tearing the buildings apart faster than we could get them repaired, so it was kind of a losing battle.

Let me think where I am here with this. We're talking about the cabinet meetings. Well, they were, interesting for me because, as I said, I knew I wasn't going to be the target. It would be Sid that we'd wait for to come back and then he'd take Sid apart. But watching these guys get taken apart

was quite a spectacle. Want to cut it off for a minute while I gather my thoughts?

Q: Sure.

[*Pause*]

Fitzgerald: It was new construction that was interesting. We had the Ventilation Bureau, Elevators, Iron, Plumbing, Electrical, and Architectural. The other half was existing buildings that were primarily housing. We had a lot of annual buildings you had to examine. You had to inspect the manufacturing buildings once a year and others, but they really weren't a problem, for the most part. It was the housing.

The housing was going downhill, and we were supposed to make sure that it didn't, so we'd go out and make inspections, write up all the notices on the building, and then send it to the owner and expect him to comply. If they were minor, you'd send it and forget about it. If they were of substance you'd send them the notice and then you'd make a reinspection after a certain period of time.

If they didn't do the work, you'd send it to the compliance board, so he'd be required to come into the Building Department and explain what he's going to do about the violations. Then we'd make another inspection, and if he didn't do the work, you'd send him to court. So we had, at that time, about 5,000 active court cases going at any given time. There were still slums in the city, and our department, the Building Department was supposed to see that there aren't any slums, so we're under the gun all the time.

The difficult part for the mayor, for the Building Department, was that he wanted the slums eliminated. We were supposed to send the notice and get compliance, which we were doing. But all these people that we're sending

the notices to and sending them to court are the people that are going to be voting, so it's a paradox. He wants us to do our job, but when we do our job, we're stirring up trouble. So I can see where he wouldn't be too fond of the Building Department.

Q: And yet he was known as the builder mayor.

Fitzgerald: All the new buildings, it was great, that part of it. When I'd go in to see him about some new building going up, he was tickled to death—which reminds me of the Sears building. Skidmore, Owings & Merrill were the architects, and they had three different preliminary designs for the Sears Tower at the time. They presented three solutions to the design of the building to the owners. Of the three different concepts, one was the tallest building in the world at the time.

They had asked me to come over and take a look, and I did, and I saw all three. I figured the tallest building in the world, how is Sears going to turn that down, if it's one of three design propositions. So I told the mayor that. I said that I can't imagine them not picking the tallest building. And he was all tickled about the fact that they were going to build possibly the tallest building in the world in Chicago.

So that's the happy part of the Building Department. All the new buildings were going up. We had the Hancock Building, the Sears Building and all the prominent buildings at the time. There's a lot more now, but at the time they were significant buildings. He had something of a love-hate relationship with the Building Department.

Q: Were you part of the process when some of the larger housing projects were going up, like the—

Fitzgerald: Cabrini-Green and those?

Q: Yes, Cabrini and the Robert Taylor Homes. Were you part of those conversations?

Fitzgerald: The architects came up with the designs for those buildings, and they were supposed to be the solution to the slums. They were showing the kids in the architectural drawings, the renderings on their little tricycles going down the balconies and it was all very pleasant.

Well, that didn't work out. They were throwing things over the balcony railing, so they had to put up screens and they couldn't keep the place maintained. So everybody thought, you know, now we've created a high-rise slum. A brand new building, they're calling this brand new building a slum.

And you should have seen what they tore down to build those buildings—dirt floors, buildings that were down below the sidewalk level, and really deplorable conditions. If they just saw what these buildings replaced, they'd be singing a different tune.

We had one fellow in the Building Department that was good at describing things Jim Brick. I'm not, but he was very good. He said something to the effect if they just saw what was replaced, they'd shut up. It was such a tragedy to see that happen. But, you know, that's what we were faced with. And now you made a slum high-rise. They were blaming us for all that.

Well, as I said, I was sitting in on the cabinet meetings for Sid, and so the mayor knew me, but he didn't know me very well. He just knew who I was. So one morning I'm driving to work. I didn't have the radio on. So I got to work and Sid Smith said there's been a fire over at McCormick Place, you better go over and see what happened.

I hopped in the car and went over to McCormick Place, and I was…it was one of the moments you remember all your life. I was stunned that the building was gone. This great big monstrous building was just laying there in a heap. The steel trusses were laying around like spaghetti. And I'm standing there in shock.

Then Fire Commissioner, Quinn, who knew me, but he didn't know me very well, pulls up with the mayor in a big Cadillac. And so I'm the deputy at the time. I went over and reminded him who I was and that I'm representing the Building Department here. I figured I better stick around to see whatever had to be done.

Quinn had been there all night, so he knew his way around. He pulls these hip boots out of the back of his car and he gives a pair of the boots to the mayor and he puts on a pair of the boots, and I've just got galoshes on. It was the beginning of winter. And so he starts giving the mayor a tour of the building, and I'm tagging along.

And we go through the first floor, and then we get down to the basements, and the basements are flooded, so the water's up to my knees, and they're walking in their boots, and I'm freezing to death. I had a wool suit on, and water started—osmosis was taking place.

So we get to the end, and the south end of the building which was still intact, the theater part. Remember how McCormick was? There was a big driveway between the auditorium and the theater, but there was a roof over it. And the mayor said are we going to be able to have the De La Salle graduation in the theater, and Quinn said yes. And I said, you know, we better not make that commitment because the fire went through the roof, and it may have affected the trusses over the theater.

Well, that's not what he wanted to hear, so that was…I probably should have kept my mouth shut, but I didn't, so I don't know that I made a very good impression. I went up later and I found that the fire had gone through the roof and the roof was in bad shape over the theater also.

Q: Did they have the graduation there then?

Fitzgerald: No. No, they tore most of it down and started over. But sometimes I didn't think far enough ahead when I was talking.

Q: That sounds like that was traumatic, the McCormick. It sounds horrible, actually. Was anyone injured in that fire?

Fitzgerald: Yeah. I think there was one person killed, if I remember right. But it was at night, so it wasn't occupied. The mayor put together a committee to investigate the fire and come up with recommendations, and the department heads, Sid Smith and Quinn were part of the committee that investigated the fire.

But Sid Smith wasn't interested and Quinn wasn't either. He had the head of the Fire Prevention Bureau, Chief Murphy fill in for him, and Sid had me fill in for him, so we went through the cause of the fire and the recommendations for the changes to the code. They thought it had been an arson fire because the first floor had burned, and the subbasement, but the basement between hadn't been affected. They thought how could the lower level burn and the upper level burn and nothing in between. The obvious conclusion was that it was an arson fire.

But we found that the aluminum doors that separated—you could separate various parts of the first floor. They were big accordion doors. They were made of aluminum. And they melted, and we saw that the molten aluminum flowed down through the expansion joint. We followed it down and it went all the way down to the lower level. So we thought that that

would probably answer the question of fire on the first floor and the lower basement. And then we did some tests out at the Underwriters Lab to establish the fact that that was probably the cause of the fire in the subbasement.

So that kind of killed the theory of arson. It was an electrical fire, presumably. And nobody thought that that big building, those big steel trusses 20 feet in the air, with the amount of combustible in the show could have taken down that building, but it did. It was kind of surprising. I have a picture of myself standing on the rubble. I can't find it.

Q: We'll have to check that out and see if it's in the files here.

Fitzgerald: You get to meet a lot of interesting, important people in the fire industry. Rolf Jensen, the head of the Fire Prevention School at IIT, was chosen as the chairman, and he was about my age. And then there were some other people that were experts in pumps and other aspects of the building.

We interviewed the first fire lieutenant that had arrived at the fire. The fire pumps had failed, and we asked if the fire pumps hadn't failed, would you have been able to handle the fire, and he said no. He said when he got in there and started fighting the fire it was so intense that he had to drop the hose and leave, whether there was water or not. But the fire pumps didn't work. They had to take the water out of the lake with the trucks to put out what was left of the building. So that was an interesting experience.

Q: Were there other experiences like that with fires that you had to be on the scene, any other big calamities?

Fitzgerald: The Wincrest Nursing Home. I was up in Wisconsin, and I heard it on the radio, that the Wincrest Nursing Home had burned and 23 people had died, so I hopped on a plane and came back.

I got there just in time. Bill Kurtis arrived on the scene. I didn't want him writing up a story about how we had neglected these poor people. Nursing homes were usually pretty crummy, but this one was nice, so we lucked out on that. We had a recent inspection and it had passed. I took him around and I showed him that the place was in nice shape and it was a pretty good nursing home, and that the fire had asphyxiated the people. They hadn't really burned to death. Smoke and fumes had killed them all.

And then we took steps to correct the situation by introducing an ordinance requiring sprinklers in all the nursing homes that we had in Chicago on a retroactive basis, which was…you usually didn't come up with ordinances, changes to the building code that would be retroactive. It's rather uncommon to pass an ordinance that would be retroactive because it's very expensive. But we concluded that the expense wasn't that much considering the circumstances, and there weren't that many nursing homes that would be affected, so the mayor went along with it. We got them installed eventually.

There was one other. When I first became building commissioner, there was a wedding party that was driving through Greektown and a building collapsed on the wedding party and killed I don't know how many. That was a real tragic thing because it's a wedding party and then all of a sudden a building collapses. So I ran out there and Quinn was there, and they had pulled all the people out. Then it was the Building Department's operation.

Then the media was going to drop on us. How could you have a building that you're supposed to be watching over collapse on a wedding party? So I spent the whole night out there trying to figure out what went wrong, and I did. The building had—it was on a corner. It was a 1 story with a bowstring truss, a wooden truss system, and they had had a fire there previously, a long time ago and they hadn't repaired it properly.

The connection between the lower cord of the truss and the part that curves was inadequate. At the street side they had piers, brick piers that would resist that thrust. The other side they had just a wall and then a building next door that supported that wall so the building was in a dangerous condition, but nobody could see it. But then they wrecked the building next door and then you didn't have that support on the one wall resisting that thrust, so it just was a coincidence that it collapsed when the wedding party was going by.

The news media was out there all night with me and I explained what I'd found, so that satisfied them. In the morning I went to the mayor and explained what had happened. It turned out that Earl Bush…it turned out that he and Earl Bush were planning on putting together a committee to investigate the collapse. Well, with something major like that, you put a committee to investigate the cause and take steps to make sure it doesn't happen again.

Then Earl Bush found out that I had satisfied the news media and that they weren't going to blame us, so the two of them decided that they weren't going to need a committee. I found all this out later. I went in the next morning and explained what had happened, and he said oh yeah, you did a good job. He didn't tell me that he had been considering putting a committee together.

Later that day I was walking over to Johnson, the publisher. He had a new office opening on Michigan Avenue. We were all invited over to the opening, so I'm walking along and this Cadillac pulls up next to me. It's the mayor, and he says, 'Would you like a ride, Joe?'

He always called me Joe when he was happy with me. He normally called me Commissioner, and if he was really mad at me he'd call me Mr. Fitzgerald. When he'd say that I'm thinking, I guess I'm a civilian again. I

guess I'm not working for the city. But he said you want a ride Joe? And I said yeah. So he was very cordial.

I'm presuming that was his way of saying I'm happy with you today. It didn't last long. There was always some inspector getting in trouble, or something going wrong. All these little plus operations didn't last very long.

Q: [*Laughs*] Well, dealing with the media sounds like it was part of your job, and that's almost a little surprising.

Fitzgerald: The news media were—and I had quite a few of these situations—the news media felt it was their job to criticize the city, even when it wasn't justified. They'd come up with these exaggerations and distortions.

And I even said one time to some reporter, after you write your story, why don't you let me look at it and I'll point out the different parts that are wrong or right, and then you can do with it what you want. He was insulted, that it would be trying to muffle the news media. I thought, sometimes I wonder if there's really this cold war going on with the distortions I see in your articles.

They felt obliged to criticize the mayor. And he was really devoted to the city. And they were constantly on his back, and indirectly on our back, to indirectly criticize him. So every time something happened, you had to be out there to try to defend the city.

There was one instance where there was a building in the Pilsen area. It was an area where they had raised the streets and the sidewalks, but they didn't raise the lots, so the first floor of the building was down below the sidewalk level. And they were old buildings. This one that collapsed was three stories tall and it was on wood piles, wood piles that were sunk into

the ground so you had lateral support. The building wouldn't go sideways because the columns were sunk deep into the ground.

Well, they were starting to rot out, so the owner got this contractor that didn't know what he was doing and they started cutting out the wooden columns and putting in a steel column as a substitute, so there was no lateral support, there was no way to keep the building from going sideways. After they got through X number of columns, the building just fell sideways. It went from here to—*fshew*—down. The owner and the contractor and the owner's son were in the basement at the time. The son got killed.

Chief Murphy, the head of the Fire Prevention Bureau was always out to these fires, collapses and explosions. He was always there, and he was good. He'd call me if there was something that he knew we were going to possibly get in trouble for.

So I got out there fast and there's already a reporter there. He comes running up to me as I'm getting out of the car, and he says, 'What happened here?' I said, 'How the hell do I know? I just got here. You can see I just got out of the car.' He says, 'Well, I've got a deadline.' I said, 'I can't help that. I don't know what happened because I just got out of the car.' And I said, 'Don't start writing up something that you don't know anything about.'

He did it anyway. He blamed the Building Department and the city for allowing this to happen, in so many words.

I found out that we didn't have a permit for the work. If they had a permit, we would have asked for architectural drawings, and the architect, and the plan examiners, which what I was at one time a structural plan examiner, would have seen that what he was doing had to have lateral bracing. The

architect would have put that in the plans. Then the contractor would have followed the plans, and the building inspector would go out and make sure they followed the plans, and this wouldn't have happened.

So that's how I played it. I said this is exactly why you should get a permit. If they'd gotten a permit, this wouldn't have happened. We would have asked for the plans and the inspector would have followed up. He called me the next day and apologized. That was the only time that some reporter ever did that, even after they knew they had the story incorrect.

But they were on our backs all the time. That was one thing you had to watch out for, the news media. In fact the mayor told me that after a Lois Lerner article. Lois Lerner. Lead poisoning. There was a big problem. The kids were eating the paint off the walls in these slum buildings, so we were supposed to do something about it. So we had this big lead program going, and we were sending out hundreds of notices.

She called me up one day, and I was in the middle of a meeting, so I shouldn't have talked to her, but I said okay, I'll talk to her. And she's going on about, you know, why aren't you doing more about this lead poisoning problem, and why aren't you out there taking this paint off the walls and repainting it? I said that's up to the owner to do. You start having the government go into these buildings and start taking out the paint and replacing the paint and everything, that's a step towards communism.

Well, she picked up on that. Next day the headline, 'Fitzgerald says protecting the children against this lead paint problem is a step towards communism.' So I went and saw the mayor, expecting to get my head taken off, and he said you have to be careful about what you say to the news media. I said "noted.". But that happened constantly. They were always trying to nail you on something. It was their duty to criticize the

government. That's how they felt. Later I was out--Harry Weese had a yacht. I knew Harry Weese quite well. He invited me out on his yacht for a little cruise up and down the lake, and Lois Lerner was there. I thought, you know, when these guys go downstairs I'm going to give her a little shove, but I didn't.

Q: Did you have dealings with Mike Royko?

Fitzgerald: Yeah. He was funny. He wrote an article about one of our building inspectors getting in trouble, asking for money or something like that, and he put it in a real funny way. I called him up and I said you're going to have to give me the name of this guy so we can get rid of him. He says, well, we don't divulge our sources.

I said, what do you mean you don't divulge your sources? You know somebody that's out stealing money, that's working for the government that's stealing money, and you're not going to tell us who he is so we can get rid of him? That's unpatriotic. It's part of your duty as a citizen. I gave him a big lecture. [*Laughs*] The next day 'Fitzgerald is— I've forgotten exactly what he said. I have it someplace—'Fitzgerald is giving me a lecture about his inspector stealing money.' But he did give me enough information to figure out who it was and we were able to fire him.

Q: How many inspectors did you have at any given time?

Fitzgerald: There were about 600 in the department. They weren't all inspectors. I don't know how many. We had the New Construction Bureau, the Plumbing Bureau, the Electrical Bureau, the Ventilation Bureau, the Demolition Bureau, the Elevator Bureau, the Refrigeration Bureau, the Conservation Division and Fire Lieutenants from the Fire Prevention Bureau of the Fire Department.

Oh, one other thing, the elevators. Shortly after I was appointed by the mayor, there was a child who was killed in an elevator. In some of these buildings they weren't keeping track of the kids. The little kids were playing with the elevators.

This building was one of the older buildings. It had a gate on the car. You've probably seen the old elevators that you pull the gate open, and it's a flexible gate, and then there's a door on the floor, a swinging door. You have to have both the swinging door closed and the gate closed before the elevator will move.

Well, the little kid got in and he's trying to get the gate open, and the door shuts behind him. There was enough room for the little kid because the gate was flexible. Then somebody pushed the button on another floor and—*fssht*—that was the end of the child. I'm telling the mayor what I found. I could see him blanch when I described what happened to the child.

And there was another elevator incident. He got a hold of me because a placard in an elevator, either he saw it or somebody else saw it, it wasn't up-to-date. You have to inspect it every year. It wasn't up-to-date. It was way out of date. So he started giving me hell.

I said we make the inspections on time, but we can't send out the certificate until they pay their inspection fee. That's been the rule. I said why don't we change the rule? He thought about it and said no. And then later on he said it again. He said, 'I was in an elevator that doesn't have an up-to-date inspection certificate, and I said if we just change the rule that we can send them out and then some other department can try to collect the money, that would make everybody much happier, including me, because I'm getting blamed for it.

I said I'm very fussy about what the Elevator Bureau does because my grandfather was killed in an elevator accident in the stockyards before I was born. I don't know if it registered or not, but he didn't change the rule. We still had to wait for them to pay their inspection fee. So if you see a certificate out of date, it's because they didn't pay their fee.

Q: I don't know the answer to that.

Fitzgerald: Well, that was always a sore spot.

Q: Yeah. Boy, you had a lot of public safety issues. I mean, just one after the other. The elevator issue is critical to the high-rise projects, too. I mean, oh, my goodness.

Fitzgerald: Nobody, including the mayor, appreciated my sense of humor. I said once when they were complaining about the elevators not working. I said something to the effect that they're in their safest mode when they're not working. I thought it would be funny, and it wasn't.

Q: [*Laughs*]

Fitzgerald: The next day in the paper—oh, yeah, VIP remarks in the newspaper. Fitzgerald says the elevators are safer when they're not working. [*Laughs*] So it took me a long time to learn.

Q: [*Laughs*] Well, getting back to Mike Royko a little bit, just because you mentioned him earlier, did you know him personally?

Fitzgerald: No.

Q: Just professionally?

Fitzgerald: Yeah. I never met the guy. I just talked to him that one time on the phone. We were closing down theaters at one point. The fire department closed down some theater downtown and it made a big stir.

[Pause]

Fitzgerald: We let them reopen while they were working on it, and I don't think the mayor was too happy with that. But anyway, the mayor comes back from vacation and he says, you know, this theater was bad enough that the Fire Department decided to close it; what kind of shape are the other one's in? The Building Department had notices, but we didn't shut the place down, but the Fire Department actually shut the theater down. So he said, well, we better take a look at the rest of them.

And so we put a task force together. The task force has all the inspectors go out together, the ventilation, the electrical, the plumbing, building and the fire department. They stick together and they all write up what they see wrong in their own specialties, and then you have a large package of violations.

We don't normally do that because it's a waste of manpower and time. The ventilation inspector might only take ten minutes, whereas the electrical might take half an hour or an hour, so the rest of the inspectors are just standing around waiting for whoever takes the longest to write up his violations. And it's not a matter that one inspector would be slow, it would be that the building would be in bad shape plumbing-wise, or electrical-wise, so he'd take a lot more time than the others.

We did that with many of the slum buildings that we had in court. You'd throw the whole package down in front of a judge along with pictures, and he'd get a better idea what we were talking about, what kind of condition the building was in. We did that with the theaters.

Fitzgerald: Gene Siskel called me up. He's copping a plea for the theaters. He wants me to back off. I forgot what I said, but he said, at the end, touché, so I must have said something that amused him. I said I'm not about to tell you I'm going to open the theaters. So I got to talk to Gene Siskel for a few minutes before he left us.

Getting back to the closing of the theaters. The news media had all kinds of theories as to why we were closing the theaters. They thought the reason was that the mayor didn't like black exploitation movies or he thought the movies were too raunchy, and they were, or that the Building Department, and the Fire Department weren't getting free tickets. They were coming up with all sorts of reason other than the actual reason.

Quinn was the prominent party. The Fire Department had shut the first theater and I was just the Building Commissioner. He was old enough to have been my father. He was the guy that they all looked to for answers. The mayor said you two, Quinn and I, you two go out with the inspectors to show that we're serious about this. So we went out and made a showing.

But Quinn had a tendency to say things that he shouldn't say. If you read articles on him, they say he was a great Fire Commissioner. He came up with the snorkel and all that, and was great for one-liners. This is the news media. They'd always try to get him to say something.

So he wasn't too good at handling the press. Not that I was, but I wasn't as big a target. The mayor's press secretary at the time wanted me to answer the different questions, so I did. And then as a finale, John Madigan—you know John Madigan?

Q: Mm-hmm.

Fitzgerald: John Madigan was a reporter and was on the radio. He was kind of on the city's side. He'd interview you and he'd give you a fair shake. So Madigan wanted me on his program to explain the theater closings. So I got on, and by this time I had told the story so often I was starting to get good at it. I got on and I answered all the questions.

I said there are a lot of theories as to why we're closing the theaters—the mayor doesn't like black exploitation movies, no free tickets, etc., and I said there's even a theory out there that says perhaps these buildings were dangerous and unsanitary and should have been closed, and I said that's the one I like best. And that kind of ended the program. That night I went up to Michigan. Apparently the mayor was trying to get a hold of me that night.

So Monday morning I arrived in the office and Shirley Galligher my very talented secretary says the mayor's on the phone. I said oh boy, here it comes, I said the wrong thing again. Instead he said, 'You did a great job, Joe.' He said Joe, so I knew I was on his good side. That was the only time he ever did that. [*Laughs*] I was in some kind of trouble shortly after for something else. I was Mr. Fitzgerald again.

Quinn was the fire commissioner. He was quite a character. The first time I saw him was…there was a tornado out on the South Side, so I was out there representing the Building Department, and he shows up in his big Cadillac. And he comes out with some cute young girl. I was talking to a fireman and said that was nice of him to bring his daughter out to see the action, and he says that's not his daughter, that's his girlfriend. And then you'd see him going through City Hall with some cute dish on his arm.

I had to go out to all these collapses, explosions or fires of significance, and he'd always be there, so I got to know him. He found out I had an airplane. And he found out that I had been in the Paratroops. He thought

that was great and he liked the idea of my having an airplane and everything, so he told his guys out at Meigs to keep track of my plane.

So I said okay, that's nice of him to do. To reciprocate, I'll put all the firemen at Meig's on the insurance policy so all his pilots could fly the plane, they could use my plane to get parts or whatever with it, rather than use the helicopters, which are pretty expensive to run. He had three helicopters and one Beaver, which is a big single engine plane. So this would fit in to run to O'Hare or wherever.

I gave them the use of the plane and they kept track of it and made sure it was all tied down and everything, properly looked over. He insisted I learn how to fly the helicopter. I wasn't really interested because if you're going to rent a helicopter you go broke in a couple hours, they're so expensive. But I went out and they gave me a couple lessons flying the helicopter. I'd take the lesson over the garbage dump on the South Side, which I think was some kind of a message they were sending me.

Q: [*Laughs*]

Fitzgerald: Now, one other thing. This is bouncing all over the place. When I first got the job of commissioner—oh, I got the job as commissioner—you're probably wondering how I got that.

Q: Yeah, that would be great.

Fitzgerald: Well, I worked for the Building Department for about 15 years in a lot of different positions. I started off as a structural plan examiner and then I passed a lot of civil service exams and qualified for those different spots. And then I was made assistant commissioner, I was probably there six or seven years as assistant and one or two as deputy. I was the only person in the department who had an architect's license, so I had a big advantage. And then Neil Hartigan—you didn't interview him, did you?

Q: Yes, we did.

Fitzgerald: Neil Hartigan put together the Chicago 67. Did he mention that?

Q: Yes.

Fitzgerald: That was a very interesting group. I met a lot of people that you'd never meet except for an organization like that. He got all these people together and would have different gatherings for the reelection of the mayor. He asked me and some girl to put one together for the architects and artists.

So Harry Weese—you know Harry Weese—he's a well-known architect. Jack Hartray was one of his guys. Harry Weese was remodeling the Auditorium Theater at the time. He was putting it back to its original condition, and it was a very interesting building, a very famous building. And so I asked Jack Hartray how about letting us use the lobby for a party for the mayor, and he threw himself into it.

We sent out invitations to all the architects. The artists set up all kinds of artwork. Bill Hogan, who was the head of the electrical bureau and the electrical commission and the electrical union volunteered to supply the wiring and lights for the artwork. And then Hartigan got the hotel next door to supply champagne.

We had a big gathering that night, and the mayor came, and Hartigan introduced me as the guy that put this architect thing together, and he introduced the girl. I in turn introduced the mayor to Jack Hartray, and Jack gave him a tour through the theater, showing him of all the different things that they were doing to the theater, putting back the original cloth on the seats, for example.

The air conditioning at the time it was built used big blocks of ice in a room with a fan that blew the cool air over the ice, and through the ducts.

They had a balcony that was cranked up and down. They had that going again. He gave him a nice tour and then we had—I should remember his name. He's one of the prominent politicians. He made a nice little speech. I think Hartigan was impressed. I hope the mayor was.

And then later on Sid Smith got in trouble. I've forgotten what it was, but he ended up in trouble on something. He was going to retire, but he said I'll stick around another year. So he stuck around another year and then he retired, and he still caught hell for whatever it was. So when he left, who was going to be the building commissioner?

I think Neil Hartigan—I'm presuming it was Neil Hartigan—told the mayor that he would recommend me. I'm presuming that's the way it went. Neil Hartigan never told me that, but I'm presuming it. Daley and I didn't really know each other too well, so I think he was a little apprehensive about me. My sense of humor didn't go over too well. He invited a few of us down to the Hamburg Club, and that was the first time I was in the Hamburg Club. I was trying to be funny and I said, boy, this place is sure full of violations.

Q: [*Laughs*]

Fitzgerald: I realized I probably shouldn't have said that because I didn't see any smiles. So it was a tense relationship, I think. When I got the job, there was a new department, the data center. The data center had all the new computers and we were eager to use them.

We had some things on the computers in the Building Department, but I always thought that the Building Department would be an ideal candidate to be put completely on the computers because it was all paperwork. It was the inspectors responding to complaints and annual inspections and just plain old up and down the streets surveys. They'd write up the

violations and then the typists would have to type out the notices, and then you'd have to try to keep track of it. And it was all paper files, so they had a big room full of paper files.

Sid Smith wasn't really interested in doing that because his mantra—mantra, is that the right word—was that it's not the files you lose that you get nailed on, it's the files you keep. If something happens you run for the files and then you find out if you followed up properly or not, and if you didn't, you were in big trouble. So if there was some kind of a significant occurrence, there would be a race to the files to see who could grab the files first to make sure that we were covered, and if we weren't covered properly, they weren't there.

With the new data center, they were anxious for some department to latch onto them, and I thought this is an opportunity to turn our operation into something that's a little more orderly. At the time we had consultants because of the problems that Sid had. Daniel Howard & Associates were the consultants, and they had some guy, Schwartzky, who was nothing but trouble. He was assigned to the Building Department.

He thought he was suddenly the deputy commissioner, or sometimes I think he thought he was the commissioner. He'd be telling the guys what to do instead of Sid telling them what to do, and so the guys didn't know who to pay attention to, so they just didn't do anything. We finally got rid of Schwartzky, but I still had Daniel Howard & Associates.

I should have put it a different way. Daniel Howard & Associates had one guy who was really good, and he was assigned to us. Schwartzky was gone, but we had Jim Orr. Daniel Howard & Associates came in and interviewed all the higher ups in the Building Department, gave them all kinds of tests, me included. Then they came up with a brochure on each individual.

When I got the job, I was asking for certain people to have certain positions, like deputy commissioner, assistant commissioner, and then it had to go over to the mayor's office. Daniel Howard would have his little brochure on him and he'd declare this person's a little weak or a little nutty or something like that on everybody I'd pick. I had taken the test, and part of it was ink blots. You get the ink blot and what do you think of this ink blot. Well, I came up with the nuttiest things I could think of.

Q: [*Laughs*]

Fitzgerald: None of us took the test seriously. So then I'm recommending these individuals, and they're showing me the brochure. They said don't ever show this brochure to the person because it'll destroy their psyche. So I'm, you know, not taking all this seriously, but I'm not getting anywhere with the recommendations.

I finally went into the mayor and said Daniel Howard & Associates is saying no to everybody I recommended; they think we're all nuts. I said those psychological tests that they gave us, they're using that to knock the guys down. He says, 'Okay, pick whoever you want.' Then when I'm walking out of the room he says, 'You should have seen your report.'

Q: [*Laughs*]

Fitzgerald: And then he laughed. I think that was the only time he laughed when I was leaving. So I was able to pick the people I wanted. And then we put the thing together. It worked really well. Jim Orr was a big help. He knew the computer operations. And the guys in the data center, too. They were anxious to make this all work. And then our people jumped on it, also.

Q: And about what year was this?

Fitzgerald: Early ‘70s. We put everything on the computers. I even ended up with a monitor on my desk that you could just type in the address and you’d get all the building descriptions, the owners, all the violations, the status of the violations, if it’s in court, the court dates and everything. I’d have an alderman call me, and he’d be complaining about some building.

I’d say what’s the address, and I’d type it in while he’s complaining, and I’d say, oh, I know that building. We have that in court and it’s coming up in two weeks in the Daley Center, and it would helpful if you would show up, Alderman, so that we had some backing for our inspectors, ‘click.’ They didn’t want to be bothered with going to court.

Q: But that was very efficient, though.

Fitzgerald: Oh, it was, yes. We had it down pat. You really had to be careful with the addresses, and we were. Everyone was very careful with the addresses.

Q: The people who called in were careful with them?

Fitzgerald: No, the inspectors. You’d have to act on complaints, annuals, and then the inspectors would go up and down the streets spotting bad buildings. You had to make sure to have the right building sometimes checking with the Sanborn maps. They were often used. You’d get the exact address, type it in and it would be on the screen. Because we had notices on every bad building, you’d rarely come across a building that was in bad shape that wasn’t on the machine.

Q: Did you have a lot of dealings with aldermen?

Fitzgerald: Not a lot. But they’d come in complaining about some building, the neighborhood organizations and the aldermen. And we would try to keep them happy. We had it under control, so they didn’t have any beefs with us. Some of them were real characters. They’d come in complaining, and

I'd type it in and tell them the status of the building and that would calm them.

We had it down where the inspector and supervisor would make a judgment as to the seriousness of the violation. If it would be a 1) you'd just send a notice and forget about it, 2) you'd send the notice and then have a re-inspection, and then you make another decision, is it worth pursuing or not, so you'd either send it on through the procedures or else you'd just forget about it. And 3) you'd send it and then you'd make a re-inspection. If it wasn't done you'd send it to Compliance Board hearing in the Building Department, and then another re-inspection. If they didn't correct it, then you'd send it on to court. Then you kept track of it in court.

Then we had aging reports that were printed out every month that showed what happened to every building in the system. Then it was up to the bureau chief to find out what was going on if it wasn't where it belonged. So it turned out to be a very highly efficient operation.

In fact, we even had—this is when I started bragging. If I went in to talk to the mayor and started saying how great we were doing, he'd say it wasn't your doing. Don't start telling me this. I know it was the data center or the consultants or something else, so I never mentioned it to him. But we received an analysis by some efficiency company, and they said it was a model operation. We had people coming in from other cities to look at our new organization.

Of course they didn't have the money for the computers that we had. We had unlimited resources. The Building Department didn't have to pay for any of the computers, it was the data center. If some other building department did that, they'd have to pay for all those computers. So we had a big advantage.

But then—not to brag again—but I was a member of the AIA, American Institute of Architects. They gave me a fellowship because of my work with the building codes and the Building Department.

Q: I think that's pretty swell. And well worth documenting. Did you have a lot of interaction with the Landmark Commission or historic preservation folks?

Fitzgerald: Our only interaction was through the Zoning Bureau. The Zoning Bureau technically wasn't part of the Building Department. Maloney was the zoning administrator when I took over, but then he left, and Manley took over. Manley had inspectors, zoning inspectors, but the zoning inspectors worked for the Building Department, but he didn't.

The mayor would come up with some zoning problem, but he didn't want to deal with Manley. He'd call me and I'd remind him, and say, I'll see what I can do, but I'm not the zoning administrator. Zoning had stops on the landmark buildings. If somebody came in for a permit that dealt with a landmark building, there would be a stop on it—it wouldn't go through zoning. It would be referred over to the Landmark Commission or whoever. So that's the only dealing we had with the Landmark Commission.

Speaking of that, the Stock Exchange Building. The Stock Exchange Building was another famous building. It was kitty-corner from the City Hall. Sullivan designed it, Louis Sullivan. It was an old building, but a very famous building, and it wasn't making the grade financially, so the owner decided to tear it down. Well, the landmark people and the preservationists and that bunch started raising hell.

I might mention the fact that when I went to school, architectural history was one of the classes I flunked. I don't know why, because I liked

history, but I just couldn't get my head around architectural history. I had joined the American Institute of Architects, and they invited me to one of the board meetings because I was a new member. The controversy was going on about the Stock Exchange Building. I wasn't really paying attention.

The board decided that the AIA, American Institute of Architects, had to take a position on this; what's our position going to be? And Mr. Fitzgerald, what do you think? Because I was sitting to his right I was asked. So I said, "That old dump should have been torn down a long time ago." I could see the looks on the faces. They went around the table and each member was getting up and praising Louis Sullivan. For goodness sakes, how can you tear down a famous building like that. By the end of the meeting I was hiding under the table. I wasn't invited back.

Q: [*Laughs*]

Fitzgerald: But anyway, there was a big controversy. The mayor got involved as well as the owner, the City Architect Jerry Butler, the wrecker and me. They had Riccio as the wrecker. Riccio was probably the worst wrecker in the city of Chicago.

So they were trying to figure out what to do about it, and finally the mayor concluded there was nothing that could be done. There wasn't anybody coming up with money to save this building, and the owner has the right to rip it down. If all of these people who are complaining would come up with the cash, we'll try to save the building. But nobody did, so I had to issue the wrecking permit.

Now I have all my architect friends calling me. One of them, Will Hasbrouck—I don't know if you ever heard of Hasbrouck. He was into preservation and old buildings and that sort of thing, and he's in the

hospital for something. He's calling my wife and actually crying over the telephone telling her that her husband is issuing a permit to wreck this wonderful building.

And then they started wrecking the building. Oh, and the wrecker and the owner promised to preserve the arches that are now out by the Art Institute as well as the stringers for the stairs. I don't know where they—Jerry Butler stashed them someplace, along with some other things.

A short time later Riccio comes running up to my office complaining about the fact that we're being too hard on him. As I said, he was really bad…one of the worst wreckers in the city, but he has the job and he's taking the building down. He just left my office when all of a sudden there's a big crash, and the dust comes flying up past my 9th floor office window. I thought, good Lord, something collapsed—there must be hundreds of people killed.

Luckily only a couple of people were hurt. Riccio's scaffolding went down onto LaSalle Street. It was probably up ten stories or so at the time. I ran over there to do my thing, to find out what had happened and to make sure it's not our fault.

It turned out that he had cut the tops of the columns off, two feet above the floor as he's coming down, floor by floor. Then he put a wire around the top of the stub and tied it to his scaffolding. Then he had to have tarps on the side of the scaffolding to keep debris from falling on to the street. The wind had come up that day and jiggled the cable up over the top of the stub so the scaffolding lost its support and fell into the street. I can't imagine why no one was killed, but they weren't. And then, shortly after that, the photographer disappeared. I'm trying to think of his name.

Q: Richard Nickel?

Fitzgerald: Nickel, yeah. Nickel disappeared. The last time they saw him he was in the building taking pictures. They said he's missing. And so we started a big search of the building, and we couldn't find him. And it was starting to get dangerous. It was tile arch construction and the bays that were open to the weather, water was coming in and was dissolving the mortar and the bays were getting dangerous. We almost got hit by a collapse while we were looking for Richard.

They even sent police out to California because they thought he ran off with his girlfriend. We were there with the police, and one of the police officers said why don't we get the dogs over here, maybe they could sniff him out. So we called for the dogs. The car with the dogs goes by the door, the officer runs out to stop him, and gets hit by a car following the police car. They get the dogs in and within an hour the dogs are bleeding all over the place. They were cut up by all the rubble.

We gave up on Richard. They finally found him when they got down to the basement. He was down in the basement all that time. Let's see, what else happened to that building? Then Riccio, to make things worse, while they're taking down the building, he has a little shop set up on the street selling the doorknobs and things. [*Laughs*] Really pouring gasoline on the fire.

Oh, then later on—I didn't realize they had saved the Stock Exchange room. Somebody I knew was doing some work over in the Art Institute, and I went over to take a look. We went into this room—I'm not sure if he was the one who was working on it—but we went into this room and there was the Stock Exchange room. I thought this is like a nightmare after all we went through with that building. I knew they had the arch, but I didn't know they had rebuilt the whole Stock Exchange Room in the Art Institute.

Q: That was a wonderful story. I don't think I've heard that one before.

Fitzgerald: The Stock Exchange Building was a real nightmare. Now the Commission on Building Code Amendments. Right after I got the job, I asked the Mayor if I could use his name and form a committee to keep the code up-to-date, and he said sure. So, you know, you mention his name and everybody wants to join up, so I got the pick of the crop for all the high-end architects, structural engineers, mechanical engineers, contractors, the union people, and the Fire Department as well as other specialists.

We kept the code up-to-date, even though the newspapers didn't think so. They'd say the out-of-date building code. I knew what they meant. They meant we weren't allowing Romex for electrical and we weren't allowing plastic pipe, because the unions didn't want to go along with that, so there wasn't much we could do about those two issues.

But the code was kept up-to-date. If some architect came up with some kind of a design that didn't comply with the code, but it was safe, and we all thought so, there was no problem. We'd tell him to go ahead and design it that way and we'll change the code. We knew that if we made the recommendations and gave it to the corporation counsel, he'd write it up, and it would be submitted to the city council.

It would go to the Building & Zoning Subcommittee, and they'd have a hearing and we'd appear and explain the amendment and they'd say fine, and it would go to the full city council and they'd pass it. That went on for years and years. We'd meet once a month, and whatever code amendments that were deemed worthy were sent right to the city council and passed. We never had a problem keeping the building code up-to-date.

The high-rise code. Again, when I first got the job, I and some of the others realized that in these new high-rise buildings, you'd have a

population the size of a lot of small towns in Illinois. There are a lot of people in these buildings, and you're going up higher and higher, and there's only one way out, and that's the bottom. Something had to be done to make these high-rise buildings safer.

We put together a special subcommittee of the Mayor's Commission on Building Code Amendments. Fazlur Khan. He was the chief structural engineer at Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, a world famous structural engineer who designed the Sears Tower structurally, and the Hancock, among others, formed an international high-rise committee separate from our commission which broadened the scope of what we were intending to do.

It was primarily the structural engineers to start with. They were going to talk to each other about the latest developments in structural engineering. But then they realized that that kind of impacted the others, architects and contractors, so he expanded, and I was invited in because I was involved in the code work.

So we came up with the high-rise code. It was a major change to the building code and we anticipated some pushback. We had a little help at the time—remember the movie "The Towering Inferno?" That came out about the same time, so it gave us a little boost. And then I also had some movies of a high-rise building in Sao Paulo, Brazil.

It was a high-rise building that was being built, but wasn't actually finished. It went up in flames, and it was spectacular burning right from the first floor up probably ten stories. They were showing firemen trying to get from the buildings next door over their ladders that they had dropped flat and they were crawling across trying to get the people out of the building on fire.

So that helped. If anybody objected to the committee, you'd click on the movie and they'd have to back off. We even had a big meeting out at the Sheraton near the airport where we invited not just the people from Chicago, but from throughout the country, the different people that were interested in the subject. There were even people from Canada that participated. So it was a big deal at the time, but we finally got it into law.

Looking back, we didn't consider the fact that 9/11 could happen. You'd have to design a building to resist an airliner going into it. That would be kind of impossible to do. The engineer that designed the building in New York had unfortunately answered some question about a plane running into it, and said that wouldn't be a problem. But when you say a plane may run into it, you're not talking about an airliner, you're thinking of some small plane. It would have withstood a crash like that, but not some plane coming in at 500 miles an hour full of fuel.

So what am I missing here? The high-rise code, Mayor's Commission on Building Code Amendments, theater closing, Wincrest, collapse in Pilsen, Fire Commissioner Quinn, Stock Exchange, McCormick, elevators, wedding party in Pilsen, Mayor Daley years and my start.

Q: We covered a lot. I was wondering about 1968, when the city was burning.

Fitzgerald: Oh, I forgot that—the riots.

Q: As the Building Commissioner, that must have been horrible.

Fitzgerald: I wasn't the Building Commissioner at the time. I was the Deputy Commissioner. Sid was out of town again, so when it happened I was filling in for him. The Mayor calls us in and we're all in his office, and he turns to me and he says, you're going to go out and you're going to wreck all these burned out buildings.

And I was about to raise my hand and say, you know, there's an awful lot of safes and things like that, valuables in these buildings that the owner might want to get out, or try to get out before we wreck the place. I didn't say it because by that time I had a little more experience and was thinking a little more clearly.

So he dismissed me. We had a demolition section in the Building Department. But we had about $5 million for demolition. And this doesn't have anything to do with the riots. But we'd get court orders on buildings that were in real bad shape to wreck, and then we'd have to pay the wrecker to wreck them, and then the city would put a lien on the property for the amount of the wrecking fee. And it worked very well.

Bob Malloy was in charge of that bureau, and Jim Brick was his right hand man. Jim Brick was probably the most capable guy in the Building Department. He was really good. I told him he should have been the building commissioner instead of me, and unfortunately everybody agreed with me. Malloy was good, too. They knew what it should cost to wreck these buildings, so the contractors weren't going to take advantage of us. Pat Noonan, the New Construction Bureau Chief was another outstanding member of the Building Department. A guy you could really count on in an emergency.

I told them what the mayor's orders were, and they got a hold of all the wreckers that we had. We had a lot of different wreckers. We put them all out on the street starting to wreck the burned out buildings. Just tell them this block is gone, knock everything down and cover it with dirt as fast as you can, and then when you're finished with that, let us know and we'll give you another block or another building or whatever. We were out there when everything was still burning, wrecking the buildings.

My impression was that the mayor didn't want an image of the city in ruins. He was very protective of the city. He wanted the right image. Part of that image was not to be burned out buildings. He didn't want pictures of burned out buildings, pictures in the newspapers. So we were out there day and night wrecking these buildings.

We didn't have radios in the cars at that time. I was out in my car while they're running through the streets throwing gasoline or whatever, breaking windows, rioting and I'm trying to keep track of things with the telephone. I had to run into buildings in the area to make telephone calls. And if you did it fast, you got in there, made the call and got out, you were all right.

But there was one place I almost got caught in. They took exception to my being there. After I got out of the place in one piece I thought I'd better get a little protection. The electrical inspectors, I knew usually carried a little heat, so I got one to go with me, and it worked out okay. The National Guard showed up after a while and things calmed down a little. But it was pretty wild for at least a day or so.

There was one building that stuck in my mind. It was a three story building and it was completely gone except for one wall. We had a three story free-standing brick wall. And next to it was a little one story frame building, a house. The wind was coming up and we could see the wall was starting to sway. We ran up to the door of the house and banged on the door trying to get the people out of the building. They just pushed the curtain aside, shook their heads and closed it again. We couldn't get them out of the building.

I sent some guys around the back to see if they could get in the back door, and all of a sudden the wall came down on the building. Went right through the roof of the building. I thought, my God, everybody's dead. A

couple of minutes later bricks come flying out, one after another. They were all okay. Apparently nobody got hurt or killed.

There was another building. We had the wrecker out there and he had the ball on the crane, and he's swinging the ball at the building, and there's hundreds of people there watching. It was like a party, a neighborhood block party or something. He'd hit the wall and they'd all clap and scream, and then he'd swing it again and miss and they'd boo.

Other areas they're stealing everything. It was a chaotic experience. But we got a lot of buildings down. It looked pretty good after we finished. It was an interesting experience. I never thought my life would turn out the way it did, to end up in such an interesting position for so long.

Q: How long were you the building commissioner?

Fitzgerald: Eleven years—longer than anybody else. I've been meaning to go back over to the Building Department. They had a plaque on the wall when I was there that had all the building commissioners since the beginning of the city. But the last time I was over there it was gone, and I asked about it, and they said it's in the back someplace. That was some time ago. I'd like to get a copy of it so I can put it in my memoirs, all the different people that were building commissioner before me.

Q: I'll just make a little note about those images that maybe we have here. Maybe there's an image that we have.

Fitzgerald: The Historical Society might have it. But it should be someplace over in the Building Department, I would think. I was eight years with Mayor Daley, two years with Mayor Bilandic, and one year with Mayor Jane Byrne. She kept me on because we were both department heads for a long time. She had the Department of Consumer Protection. Oh, and she was in the Chicago 67, too.

She was a big friend of Mayor Richard J. Daley. He thought highly of her. When she became mayor she said do you want to stay on, and I said yeah, I like the position. I was born for the position, Jane. So she kept me on. She kept me on until she came up with this new housing department, and she wanted me to run it, but I had better offer at the time, so I left.

But it was a very interesting experience, working with the most prominent mayor in the history of the United States. It was harrowing at times, but very interesting.

Q: What do you think was Richard J. Daley's greatest legacy to the city?

Fitzgerald: Well, he established the university here. He had the tallest building in the United States. He ran a city that is renowned for its architecture. It's supposedly the architectural capital of the United States. He had all the prominent architects, present and past that did work in his city. And he kept the city going and established a reputation for getting things done. I don't know who could have done a better job.

You have Harold Washington—for instance, the code committee, which I was still chairman of when he was elected. I wrote a letter to him saying I'm chairman of your Mayor's Commission on Building Code Amendments. I didn't get any answer. So I sent him another one. I didn't get any answer.

And then somebody called me and said something about the Mayor's Commission on Building Code Amendments. I said, oh, are you calling in response to my letter, and he said he didn't know anything about a letter, he just wanted to know if there was an opening. He had some people that he wanted to put on. I said that's not the way it works, click.

Montgomery was the corporation counsel. We were sending the amendments like we did in the past. We sent them to him and they'd just

pile up. He didn't do anything with them. There was no response at all. Later on, I'm getting calls from contractors and builders and architects saying we have to do something about the problems with permits. We're not getting any response from the Building Department or the mayor's office. I said, well, there's nothing I can do about it. I'm on the outs for some reason.

They tried to get something done about the problems they were having by forming a committee to make recommendations. The recommendations they made went back to the Building Department. They turned them all down, every one of them. Someone said I think they're afraid to pass anything because they might be held liable for whatever might happen down the road. You ran across people like that. They would just say no to everything because they didn't want to be responsible.

Q: We've covered an awful lot. I'm kind of curious about maybe your favorite building in the city, or if you have a couple favorite buildings, and what you think maybe was Richard J. Daley's favorite building in the city.

Fitzgerald: I don't know what his favorite building was, but I would think that being the mayor of the city with the tallest building, that the Sears Tower would have been his favorite building. I was a little more connected with the Hancock. When it was going up, and they had gotten up to about the second floor, one of the columns started settling. The caisson was failing.

The caissons went down to rock, so they were having a hard time understanding what went wrong. They finally drilled it and found that when they had pulled the steel sleeve, the concrete was stiff enough that it pulled up the concrete and left a void in the caisson. They eventually had to drill all the caissons to see if there were any more voids. I don't remember if they found any others, but they had to dig this one out and re-pour.

They got the building up but then they had a fire. Some of the insulation burned in the outer wall. It wasn't supposed to burn. It was rated non-burning and self-extinguishing, but for some reason it burned even though it wasn't supposed to burn. It was tested, and labeled non-burning and self-extinguishing by U.L. We had to come up with a solution fast because the building was half up. A suggestion was made to spray the insulation with fireproofing that they sprayed on the steel. Spray it all over the outer wall over the insulation, which they did. Another incident with the Hancock. I was the Deputy Commissioner about to be the Building Commissioner. They got up to about 80 stories and they were having some trouble with the ironworkers. There was an argument over where the safety nets were to be hung. And Sid Smith said to me they're having trouble over at the Hancock Building with the location of the safety nets, why don't you go over there and straighten it out?

Fitzgerald: Well, I got to the bottom of the building and I could see that the top half of the building is just a steel skeleton, and that's where these iron workers are. I thought I can't chicken out up there. I'm going to have to make up my mind if I'm going up while I'm standing here on the ground. I said to myself, well I can't not go up, an ex-paratrooper and you're afraid to go up in the Hancock Building?

So I got into the man hoist and I went up. The door opens at the 78th floor and there's just planking across to the stair. I walked across the planking looking straight ahead, and got to the stair, and the stair's wide open. It was just the steel risers and treads. I walked up the two floors to the floor that was planked over and grabbed hold of one of the columns. Someone's explaining what the problem is, and it's not registering. I'm looking out at the lake trying to forget where I am.

Then he says, oh, come on over here, I want to show you something. So I had to walk across the planking and across the steel grating over the

openings that were just grating. I'm not sure exactly what happened, but I guess they were all satisfied, so I left. But then I had to look where I was stepping when I was going down the stairs. If you work your way up with the building it's one thing, but I was going from a four story office to bare steel out in the open. I got to the stair and down okay, but that was a real scare.

There were a few other places I had to go out to because of structural problems, but this was early in my career. I had to go out, because I was a structural plan examiner. If there was a structural problem I was supposed to go out and see what the problem was. They had this building in court. It was an armory. They had large wood roof trusses. The lower cord of the trusses was floored over so you had an attic space in the building.

This attic space was probably two stories over the floor. We had it in court because the inspector said the trusses were rotted and in dangerous condition. They had hired this William Schmidt, a prominent structural engineer, to counter the inspector. William Schmidt was a good engineer, but he was reckless.

I went to the building, and went up into the attic space. It was dark up there, but I saw there was a hole in the roof that gave me some light. The roof was rotted out. And then when I'm walking over to look at the roof, I look down and the floor is all rotted. If I'd gone a few more steps I would have gone through the floor and ended up on the pavement on the main floor.

When I got to court Schmidt sees me and asks me what I found. And I told him that I almost went through the rotted floor. He was going to testify the thing was okay. They condemned the place.

He showed up in a number of places. He was the structural engineer for the Federal Building. They were right next to Berghoff's Restaurant. Berghoff's Restaurant is on clay, soft clay, and they were digging a great big hold next to Berghoff's for this new building. Schmidt was the structural engineer and he had them pounding in the steel sheeting. Berghoff's was up in arms objecting because cracks are appearing in their building. He didn't seem to give a damn. William Schmidt. I wonder what happened to him.

But there were a lot of interesting foundation problems, not just the Hancock. That happened in a couple of other buildings. There was the gas company building. The gas company building was built in the '20s, I think, and one of the columns started settling. They dug a shaft next to the caisson. When they got to the bottom they dug horizontally over underneath the caisson. They were going to put in pre-test piles, where they put in a piece of steel column, and jack it down, then weld other pieces and jack them down until they reach rock or hardpan.

So I went over there to see what was going on and they said do you want to take a close look at it. I said yes. This big guy lowers me on a rope down through this hole in a bucket of some kind. I get to the bottom, and then I'm crawling through the tunnel over to the bottom of the caisson. They had guys are working there cranking down the new steel pre-test piles, and I'm thinking I'm looking up at 15 or 20 stories of office building sitting on this caisson and here I am looking up at the bottom of it. It was kind of an interesting experience, one of the many interesting experiences.

There was another one across the street from the Tribune, whatever building that was. They had that same void problem. They had created a void in the concrete, but the void was up near the top, where they had

these big reinforcing bars. They must have been three inches in diameter. They were all just bent right over.

There was another similar caisson problem. They had records that the concrete was poured in, but they couldn't find the caisson. That one was along Michigan Avenue someplace. So there was a lot of interesting experiences with the Building Department.

Q: Yeah. Well, we've covered a lot of history. Was there a building or situation in the city when you were very involved with the Building Department as the commissioner working that didn't get built, or didn't get destroyed, or didn't get changed in some way that you thought, oh yeah, that had to happen and it didn't?

Fitzgerald: That it should have changed and it didn't?

Q: Mm-hmm.

Fitzgerald: My regard to Richard M., but I wish they hadn't gotten rid of Meigs. That's where I kept my airplane. When the war was on, I wanted it to last long enough that I could fly one of those fighters. I missed out on that. But then later on I took flying lessons, and then I bought this airplane. The airplane only cost 5,000 bucks. At the time, 5,000 would be probably 20,000 right now, so it wasn't a very expensive airplane.

Before I bought the plane I was up in Michigan. I had my pilot's license and I was renting planes, and then something happened in Chicago that I had to get back, so I thought I'll go over to the airport, rent a plane and fly to Meigs. That was the first time I went into Meigs with a plane. It is the most spectacular site you'll ever see. I asked at the airport if I work for the city, do I get a discount or something.

They said if you work for the city and you're over the rank of lieutenant or equivalent, it's free, there's no parking fee or landing fee. So then I thought, well, if there's no parking or landing fee at either end, I'll buy a plane and then commute up to the cottage, which I did in the summers for quite a few years.

At the end of the day I could drive over, park the car right next to where the plane was parked, fly it to the cottage, and the next morning fly back, which I did quite a few times. And at the time I appreciated the fact that this is kind of a unique experience that I never thought I'd have. But then there was a windstorm that went through Meigs and wrecked my plane, and I just rented from then on.

But speaking of the view, you fly into Meigs, which I did constantly, and you see the whole city spread out in front of you. It's really spectacular. And then when you come in at night it's even more spectacular. There are an awful lot of people that are missing a beautiful view now that you can't land there anymore. Yeah, coming in at night was really something. The whole city is laid out in front of you. And you get a real view from the plane. An airliner, you'd just see a little piece of it.

I'd go up in the Hancock once in a while to the bar there up in the top and sit by a window and look out at all those buildings and think, you know, I'm responsible for all those buildings, theoretically. Yeah, I never thought I'd end up in a position like that.

But I still have a plane. It's a little one. It's an ultra light, so you don't need a license. You don't need a pilot's license, though I have one, and you don't need a federal license, you don't need a state license, you don't need anything. The plane has to be under 254 pounds, single seat, no more

than five gallons. So I have that up in Michigan now. You sit out in the open.

And I think of my Hancock experience once in a while when I'm up in the thing because you sit out in front of this plane and you don't see the plane. You're out in front of the engine and the wings and tail are all behind you, so you're just sitting out on this little chair, and the only thing you see is your feet. So it's a real thrill to fly.

Q: That vantage point of being above the city is so emotional, almost, and as I'm looking at this picture of Richard J. Daley, this famous picture of him(refers to image on display in library conference room of Richard J. Daley looking over the city from a rooftop)—

Fitzgerald: Yeah, looking out. Where is he in that picture? What building?

Q: Civic Center roof.

Fitzgerald: Oh, Civic Center?

Q: Yeah. And that looks like it was in 1966.

Fitzgerald: The Daley Center.

Q: Yeah.

Fitzgerald: That building had a structural failure when they were building it. They were using steel trusses, and one let go. They were putting it in place. It turned out that the welds weren't adequate, so they had to go back and redo all the welds.

Q: The job sounds like it was a lot of stress.

Fitzgerald: Yes, it was. It was stressful. You never knew what was going to happen next, which made it more interesting. It was like the Army, the Paratroops.

It was stressful and it was a harrowing experience at times, but it was something that I wouldn't trade for anything. The Building Department was an interesting, yet stressful operation. You never knew when you were going to get a call.

Q: The 11th Ward, that whole Bridgeport area, is very different than it was, in some ways, I think, from back when Mayor Daley was living there.

Fitzgerald: I went through it a short time ago and it's really coming up. A lot of work, a lot of money was poured in there. I was asked early in my career to take a look at a rather sad situation out in that area.

The poor lady had dirt floors, and the building was in really bad shape. I felt we probably should do something for this lady if we could.

I don't remember all the details, but pretty soon the contractors, the guys I knew heard what we were trying to do to help and pretty soon everybody's out there doing one thing or another, plastering or painting or whatever.

In fact with the painting; I grew up with Wayne Hart in South Shore. Wayne Hart had inherited his father's painting company. It was one of the big painting companies. I've forgotten the name. National Painting, I think it was. He inherited National Painting. So after the guys did all the work, they fixed the stairs and put in a floor and whatever, I said, Wayne, would you like to volunteer to paint the place? He said great. He was looking for some volunteer work so he came out with his crew and painted the building in a couple of days. We had a party at the place after they finished, all the guys that had worked on it. We had a little cocktail party. So we did a few good things.

We sent out an awful lot of bad news over the years. I told somebody I hope somebody shows up at my funeral after all the notices I've sent out to people. I keep thinking how would you like to get a big fat envelope

from the building department with all the violations you have in your building?

Q: And yet that's public safety.

Fitzgerald: Mm-hmm. Yes, and I think of the people that were stuck in some of those neighborhoods. There had been a Jewish neighborhood just west of downtown—Lawndale. Mrs. Drubin. I remember her name was Mrs. Drubin. She and her husband who had recently died had bought a two flat and lived in the basement their whole lives. It had been a really nice neighborhood; three story brick apartment buildings, parkways, parks, elevated trains, good transportation. And then the neighborhood turned into a slum. So she's stuck there.

We were sending her notices, and she comes in, and for some reason or another, I let her in my office, and she's copping a big plea. Mr. Fitzgerald, you know, I'm doing my best. I'm trying to keep the place together, but the tenants are wrecking it faster than I can put it back together. And, you know, I'd pat her on the shoulder and tell her we'll get her another continuance. Just do a little work and try to keep the place together. And she'd be back the next month. Mrs. Drubin.

And you feel sorry. You know, they bought the building figuring this is their retirement, they're going to live there the rest of their lives and rent out the other two units, and then this happens to them. It's a tough life for some people.

Q: Are there any other organizations or social gatherings that you were involved with Mayor Daley in besides the professional life?

Fitzgerald: No. One thing he told me, when I got the job, he said you run the Building Department and leave the politics to me. So if there was something that came up that might have political connections, you'd hand it off to the

mayor. One of those things was Alderman Keane. Do you have anything on Alderman Keane in these?

Q: A lot of people bring his name up.

Fitzgerald: Alderman Keane was the head of the Finance Committee, and he ran it—I'm trying to think of the proper word—like his own little kingdom. We had a budget, and you'd have a little flexibility. You'd be able to transfer funds from one part of the budget to another part, but you had to get his permission to make that change. Some of the things were kind of routine. But you had to call him.

But when I first started I said I'm not going to call him on this minor transfer and . And they said, well, good luck. So, you know it would go on and on. Well, did the transfer come through? No. You know what you have to do. I said I'm not going to call. After a while I was calling up Alderman Keane. He says, 'Joe, I'm glad you called. What can I do for you-oh you want to transfer funds. I'd be happy to do that.' Then he's writing this down someplace. I owe him one.

I can't remember the name of the building, but it's that orange building over near Michigan Avenue, that orange one.

Q: I'm trying to think. I just can think of the CNA Building. That's the only one that's coming to mind.

Fitzgerald: That might be it. It was orange, and somebody came in and was complaining about the color. I said don't worry, that's just the primer on the steel. It turned out that was the finish coat.

Anyway, we were asking him to put more fireproofing on than the code required because of the previous fight we had with the pre-stressed concrete industry. Without going into all the details, we were asking for

something that we didn't have the right to do. But it was the proper thing to do because the fire test was faulty in our opinion.

So he was the lawyer for the company. He comes up to my office. And I explained the situation to him, and admitted that we didn't have the legal right, but this is the reason we were doing it. The next thing I know I get a call from the mayor, and he says he'd like to see me. I went through the reasoning and he says, you mean you're asking for something that's not legal? And I'm explaining as fast as I can why we are. He stops me and says if it's legal, pass it. Keane went to him. Before I left I said, did I handle this properly? He said yeah.

Q: There were lots of rules. It must have been hard to navigate through all those situations.

Fitzgerald: Mm-hmm. Well, I'd just hand it to him if there was something like that coming up. I don't think I could say we had a cozy—

Q: Relationship or rapport?

Fitzgerald: Cozy relationship. But he kept me on all those years. A few times I thought I was a goner, but I wasn't. It made life interesting. It was the most interesting part of my life other than the family. He was hard, but he was always fair about everything. He kept everything running.

Q: Well, that's kind of a great way to end this. It's kind of a perfect ending. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

Fitzgerald: He was dedicated to the city. Everything revolved around making things work.

Q: I think we could probably go on and on, but it might be a good point to take a little break or for today. How does that sound?

Fitzgerald: Good.

Q: Okay. Well, thank you very much, Mr. Fitzgerald.

Fitzgerald: My pleasure.

[*End of recording*]