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"Public Housing for the Elderly in Portland (Interview One)"

Julia G. Johnson

Gene Rossman

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Julia G. Johnson (JJ), Gene Rossman (GR)
“Public housing for the Elderly in Portland (Interview One)”
Portland State University
March 27, 1963

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JULIA JOHNSON: Thank you. Our guest today is Mr. Gene Rossman, executive director of the Housing Authority of Portland. We're very pleased to have you with us today, Mr. Rossman.

GENE ROSSMAN: Thank you very much, Julia.

JJ: I know that you've been doing a lot of work in all kinds of housing, but you are particularly interested in housing for the elderly, and elderly of low income.

GR: That is the type of housing that we regard... that there's the greatest amount of need for.

JJ: And I think you proved this need without a doubt in the survey that your office made in 1959 and 1960. Could we start out talking about that, and some of the findings of that survey?

GR: Yes, we conducted a survey at that time of 10% of the some 5,000 recipients of old-age assistance, and this survey was conducted, incidentally... the field work was done by Portland State graduate students, but it was done under the supervision of the Portland Development Commission and the Housing Authority of Portland, and from this survey, which was made, incidentally, *also* at the request of Mayor Schunk, we learned that more than 75% of all of these people that were surveyed... or approximately 3750, in actual numbers, were presently housed in dwellings that were in non-compliance of from one to 15 city codes, relating to decency, safety, and sanitation.

JJ: Now, can we go back a little, because I'm not very good on figures. How many people did you survey? Was it 5,000?

GR: We surveyed... there are a total of 5,000 recipients of old-age assistance, and we made a 10% sampling survey, which... was regarded as authentic in...

JJ: Yes.

GR: indicating the needs of the total 5,000.

JJ: And this indicated that 3,750 are living in substandard housing.

GR: That's right. That's right.

JJ: Was this within the city limits of Portland only?

GR: All within the city limits of Portland.

JJ: And these are only recipients of old-age assistance?

GR: Yes, that's... 5,000 of approximately 65,000 people in the city of Portland over age 65.

JJ: Now, what do you... can you tell us a little about the substandard housing? What codes were among the 15?

GR: Well, they were electrical, plumbing, and the various basic codes that are involved in what we refer to as decency, sanitation, and safety.

JJ: Now, when you say electrical, does this mean that the wiring of...

GR: Faulty wiring...

JJ: There might be a fire caused by it.

GR: That's right. That's right.

JJ: Now, excuse me for interrupting, but I wanted to [*laughing while speaking*] get some of this straightened out in my own mind. Now, what other findings did you have?

GR: Well, then this last year, we were able to—through the Public Housing Administration—to get a set of statistics from the Bureau of Census that were taken from the regular Bureau of Census in 1960, regarding Portland’s senior citizens. Now, this, of course, covered all of ‘em, not just those under old-age assistance as our previous survey had covered, and this was a special service provided to us for a fee by the Bureau of the Census of Washington. They had some staff people dig this information out, and at the risk of possibly boring you with a few statistics, I would like to give you some of the basic results of this survey, because they’re very significant, at they tell us a little bit better what the situation is here.

JJ: Well, this is the sort of thing that we have been realizing we need very much, because we have not had accurate figures. Much of what we’ve been having to do in Oregon is guess!

GR: Mm-hmm. Well, we couldn’t get *exactly* the information that we wanted, but we got so much that it’s close to what we wanted that we feel it is significant. For instance, there are 14,170 households of persons age 60 or older in Portland who are living in rented quarters that were built prior to 1939. 27,893 households of persons age 60 or over were found to be living in their own dwellings built earlier than 1939. Now, the age of the dwelling does in many cases indicate the degree of deterioration, and this is the only clue we had on that particular point. Now, as to income, this was a thing that really startled us: that of the 45,271 household heads in Portland in 1959 at the census who were age 60 or over, 1,699 had no income at all. 2,461 had an annual income of only from one dollar to 499 dollars. 7,269 had an annual income of from 500 to 999 dollars. Another 7,496 had an annual income of from \$1,000 to \$1,499, and then the top level, 4,376 had an income annually of from 1,500 to 1,999 dollars.

JJ: Now, when you say a head of household, does this mean that this is the only income for, perhaps, a couple, or... ?

GR: This... yes. This is the... a household, this actually refers to gross household income that we would use. Which is the gross income of an applicant for public housing as figured as... the income from everybody in that family, in this case, this would apply.

JJ: Do you have any figures on the rent that they’re paying?

GR: Yes, we had a little breakdown on that, which I think is interesting. There were 3,778 households of persons age 60 or over here whose income was less than \$1,000 a year and who paid less than 20 dollars per month rent, and you know what you can get for less than 20 dollars a month rent. [*chuckles*]

JJ: Well, no, I really don't. Can you describe it? I can't... *[breaks into a chuckle]*

GR:... Well, I could show you some pictures, and they're taken right out of the newspaper morgues in Portland, and they're... they're literally horrible. Most people don't realize; they just don't have a chance to get around and see the type of dwellings that so many of these elderly people who are subsisting only on Social Security and possibly a small private [...] pension, the type of housing that they can afford. And incidentally, there were an additional 5,357 households of persons age 60 or over whose income was between \$1,000 and 2,000, and who paid less than 30 dollars a month rent! So you see, there you have pretty close to 10,000 households of elderly people in Portland whose incomes were somewhere between 20 and 30 dollars a month. I mean, whose rentals were probably...

JJ: Yes.

GR: ...in between 20 and 30 a month. And all you have to do is look around town for the type of apartments and living quarters that you can get for that kind of money, and you can appreciate that a very great percentage of this total must be dilapidated and considerably substandard.

JJ: Oh, yes. Now, do you have any figures telling whether these are mostly one-room apartments or are they little sh... houses?

GR: Yes, there were figures, I don't have the breakdowns here. The statistical sheets that were given to us by the Bureau of Census were very complicated, and we're making additional breakdowns now, but I don't have that information right at my fingertips today, I'm sorry.

JJ: And do you happen to know where most of these are located? Are they in the downtown area? Or are they out some distance? I'm sure these people have not their own transportation and probably not much funds for public transportation.

GR: *[hums in agreement]* Well, this was covered everybody in the city of Portland, however, I think it's pretty generally known, I know at least it is with persons who are concerned with the problems of the aging in our area that Portland has the highest percentage of persons age 65 and older living in its downtown district, I think, of any metropolitan city in the United States. I believe that this was brought out by some surveys that were made two, three years ago. So you know that a good share of these people are living in the downtown area.

JJ: This is from choice, too. Isn't it?

GR: Yes.

JJ: I think they prefer to be near as many things as possible.

GR: All the cultural attractions...

JJ: Yes.

GR: and things that they have... in the core of the city—near the core of the city—it does attract them to that area. I think one thing that adds to the determination of just what the need is, is the fact that our Northwest Tower project that we are now building at 19th and Everett in Portland, which will house 150 low-income elderly. It won't be completed until September of this year and we already have over 600 applications from elderly people who are eligible from a standpoint of income and assets for tenancy in this project.

JJ: Now going back to the... well, first to your survey in 1959 and 1960. Did you have any... did you get any figures then on the rent paid and what this paid for as far as the facility was concerned, the living arrangement?

GR: Yes, we have those figures. I didn't bring them with me today, Julia, but the rentals were generally 50 dollars a month and lower. Now, when your total income is in the neighborhood of 100 dollars a month and you take a 50 dollar cut out of there for rent, it doesn't leave much for food and... let alone, of course, the need for medicines and other things that elderly people...

JJ: That's right.

GR: ...have a special need for.

JJ: And there's probably... they still have to add the cost of utilities...

GR: That's right. That's right.

JJ: ...to the price of rent. And I... go ahead.

GR: Well, in public housing... in all of our projects, utilities are included in the gross rent. A minimum rental for the elderly is 25 dollars a month, and that covers a great many of them whose incomes are a lot less than 1,000 [dollars] a year, and that includes all utilities.

JJ: And I want to get into the housing that you are now providing and you plan to provide, but before we get into this now, I've gone back and forth, I realize, too much, but are there any other figures that you received from the census that we should bring out at this time in regard to living arrangements of the elderly people in Portland? For one thing, I believe you said this is the age group 60 and over.

GR: The census figures are 60 and over, yes. No, but I think there's one thing that I should bring out that is just now being given the attention it should have been given, we think, many months ago, and that is what is going to be the effect of the Foothills Stadium Freeway displacement of elderly people of low income in that right-of-way area. Now, this Foothills Stadium Freeway is now an actuality. The route is definitely determined. It's gonna cut a very wide swath right down between 13th and 14th clear across the west side, and that happens to be one of the areas in which there is the highest concentration of elderly people, and the highest concentration also of low-income elderly people because in this area are many old flats and older homes that have been used for rooming houses and flats for low rent purposes for low income older people. This could be a tremendous thing, and the needs that I have illustrated through these other surveys, the Bureau of Census and also the survey that we conducted, this highway displacement is in addition to that! We are now urging the Highway Department to conduct—in that right-of-way area—the type of a survey that will give us the facts as to the number of people that are living in that area. Their ages, their gross family income, and the type of figures that we will need before we go back to our city council and say, "Now, there is an additional need for so much housing for so many elderly people whose incomes are within such and such a range," and know what we're talking about. We know that this is going to happen, because we've gone through the area, and we know that there are many elderly people, that we must have the facts.

JJ: Yes. You can see it, but you don't have any facts to...

GR: That's right.

JJ: ...back up this right now. Now, has... to date, has anything been done for planning for where these people will live later? When they're dis...

GR: Displaced.

JJ: ...displaced, they've got to have a place to live.

GR: Well, that's true, and, no, nothing, to our knowledge. Now, the Highway Department has, thankfully, set up a "relocation assistance department," they call it, and we're very pleased about that, and I guess they're going to have the use of some tax funds to—gas tax funds—to assist in handling the moving charges of household goods, but as to how limited those funds are or how much of a job they can do, we don't know. Now, insofar as actually relocating these people, finding a place within their ability to pay in a nearby neighborhood, to our knowledge, the Highway Department is not set up to handle that, nor... I don't think it intends to.

JJ: And I'm wondering if there even are available living facilities within or near the same neighborhood in these price ranges.

GR: Well...

JJ: Just from my observations, I can't think that there are that many vacancies.

GR: That's right. There are vacancies. There are lots of apartment house vacancies in Portland and—which is not a good thing—and we are unhappy about it too, but most of these apartments are in the range—rental range—that are far above the reach of the elderly people that I'm referring to.

JJ: Are these elderly people in private apartments, private homes, generally able to care for their own needs? Are they relatively healthy? As far as you know?

GR: Well, so far as our knowledge is concerned, they are. If they aren't, they're living in nursing homes or they're being taken care of one way or another. In public housing, we must insist that the tenant be physically in pretty good shape, because they have to maintain their premises and their housekeeping standard has to be kept at a certain level and so on. So far as we know, the ones that we're concerned about...

JJ: Yes.

GR: ...are those that are able-bodied people. Even though they're getting on in years.

JJ: I think I brought this question up because last week in reading of a fire in Portland in a hotel, I noticed that one of the vic... one of the people who had to be carried out was a man with a broken back, and I would not have assumed that a man with a broken back would be living in a hotel. I would've expected him to be in a nursing home or some type of care institution, and I wondered if some of these in their own apartments are disabled, to that extent.

GR: I suppose there are some, but I wouldn't have any way of knowing the extent, and I wouldn't anticipate it would be very many.

JJ: Now, Gene, another... this reminds me that probably this new freeway is going to eliminate the Carlton Hotel. Is this right?

GR: That's right.

JJ: They're in... right there.

GR: Goes right through it.

JJ: What is their capacity? How many people do they have living there?

GR: Well, Paula Whitney, the manager of that operation has contacted me on a number of occasions lately. They have presently, I think 140 elderly people living there, and they are all of low income. There... I think she said the average monthly income was around 100 dollars or maybe slightly less. Many of those tenants are not physically able to look after themselves and the very unique operation at the Carlton Hotel, probably and solely because of the unusual capabilities of Paula Whitney, has made it possible for these disabled people to live there because Paula and her staff do look after their needs. This is a very unusual situation. I think it's a tremendously important thing and very sad state of affairs that an operation like hers is going to be... have to be abandoned because of the highway development.

JJ: It certainly is. Now, I think any listener in the Portland area is familiar, probably, with the Carlton Hotel and it's been very enthusiastically received and accepted in Portland. For listeners outside of the Portland area, I should say that this is a older hotel that is now in use. The rooms are rented to older people exclusively, aren't they, Gene?

GR: Yes.

JJ: And room and board is provided for at a minimum rate much less than one would expect. It's really licensed as a home for the aging. The location is near the downtown area. It's provides very comfortable and satisfactory living conditions at a minimum price, and it would be too bad to have 140 of those people... certainly they're not going to find the same kind of arrangement some place else unless her arrangement can be...

GR: That's right.

JJ: ...replaced. And I suppose at his time there's no knowledge whether this will be a possibility or not.

GR: No, I know that the Highway Department is concerned about it. Their representatives have told me that they are concerned about it, but what they can do or what they would do if they could, we don't have any idea. Julia, I think another thing that should be brought out is the fact that when you dislocate an elderly person, if you are unable to relocate them fairly close to where they were dislocated, in other words, if they don't... if you're not able to provide substitute housing for them within just a few blocks of where they had been, this is something that is just... that means a great deal to them, and it affects their health and everything else.

Now, a classic example, right here in Portland of—it doesn't just have to do with the elderly but it has to do with low income renters—is the situation involved in the ER center when the Memorial Coliseum was first built. Now, they displaced over there approximately 150 households many of which were households of elderly people. At that time, we were aware of this and we contacted each of these 150 tenants, told them about public housing, determined that virtually all of them were eligible for public housing if they wanted it, and encouraged them to apply to us so that we could provide them with a standard, decent, safe, and sanitary housing at a rental they could afford to pay. This was our statutory obligation under the State Enabling Act, and amazingly enough, only four of the 150 finally wound up in public housing. Most of 146 remaining households, moved across the street, three blocks away, or very close by, and suddenly a three-family dwelling became a four-family dwelling, or a four-family dwelling became a five-family dwelling, and that's what happened. In other words, they went from slum-type housing into slum-type housing. They would rather pay more money, sometimes, to live in unsafe quarters and to be in the location that they want to be in, then to take advantage of low-rent public housing that is remotely located to where their interests are: their churches, their friends, their families and so on.

JJ: This doesn't surprise me because I know the way we all feel, but I never heard this and I think it certainly indicates then that there is a need in this west side area where this number of people—the number of which you still do not know—will be displaced for additional housing right there. Now, could you have accommodated those 150 households that were displaced around the Memorial Coliseum in public housing some distance away from that location?

GR: No. Had we had at that time, any public housing in the Albina area, we could have accommodated these people and I would venture to say that *all* of them, not just virtually all, but all of them would have taken advantage.

JJ: Yes. Now, the four who did take advantage, were they moved rather far away?

GR: Yes, they were moved clear across town. At that time, the only public housing we had in Portland—permanent public housing—was way out in the St. Johns area, and they were housed in either our Columbia Villa project, which is way out in the Portsmouth area, or in Dekum Court which is adjacent to Columbia Boulevard on about 25th Street. So, it was just like moving to a different city for them, you see?

JJ: Yes, and mighty uncomfortable for them.

GR: That's right.

JJ: I should like to invite you to come back in two weeks, Gene, to talk about... talk *specifically* about public housing in Portland for the elderly. In the meantime, today, perhaps we can discuss what public housing you do have—the locations—not just for elderly, but what... exactly what is this business [*small chuckle*] that's conducted by the Housing Authority of Portland?

GR: Well, we have 664 units of public housing in operation at this moment. Now, our biggest project is Columbia Villa. It's nearly 20 years old now and it's 440 units; it's the largest low rent housing project in the state of Oregon and the second largest in the Northwest. It's located out in the Portsmouth area, and it's been a very successful operation through the years. There's quite a bit of adjacent meadowland grounds and it's a very low-density project, so that the people enjoy it out there; it still is a long ways from shopping centers. It isn't where we would locate a new project if we were building one today, but it has been quite successful. Then we have 86-unit Dekum Court and that initially was a housing project during the war for Air Force personnel, and it was deeded over to us by the government at the conclusion of the war and we adapted it to public housing; that's our second largest project. Then a couple of years ago, we purchased two existing court apartments from the Federal Housing Administration. They were what they refer to as Title 608 FHA properties, and they'd gone bankrupt, so we were able to acquire them at a very low figure and we adapted those to public housing.

JJ: Now, they were privately operated apartments...

GR: Privately operated apartments, and we now operate them and they're both very successful. Then last September, we purchased Royal Rose, another existing court apartment out on Vancouver Avenue. 36 one-bedroom units, and we immediately adapted it as a stopgap to meet the needs of emergency cases of elderly people who couldn't wait until the time they would be able to move into Northwest Tower when it's completed.

JJ: Did the Housing Authority build... actually build Columbia Villa, and Dekum Court? No, not...

GR: Columbia Villa they actually built, that's right.

JJ: And the others, they've taken over...

GR: That's right.

JJ: ...already... ready made, so to speak. How many people all together then... or no. I'm sure that would be an impossible question. How many units do you have as a total?

GR: 664 in operation now, but we have another, almost 500 under development.

JJ: Oh, you have! Does this mean you're building them... or buying?

GR: That's right. That's right.

JJ: Now building, or... in planning?

GR: We are now building Northwest Tower and we are in the process of purchasing another 66 unit already-built court apartment, and the balance of some 180 units we are nailing down sites right today onto build new projects. And these newer ones mainly will be for large families: four or five bedrooms for families with seven, eight, nine, ten children, because there are quite a few in Portland with low income.

JJ: I realize this. Thank you very much, Gene, and I should like to invite you right now to come back on April 10th to discuss specifically some of your plans for housing for the elderly in Portland. Our guest today has been Mr. Gene Rossman, executive director of the Housing Authority of Portland.

[program ends]