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## James J. Feeley Memoir

**F321. Feeley, James J.** b. c. 1939

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 30 mins., 10 pp.

Feeley, executive director of the Logan Square Neighborhood Association in Chicago, discusses the history and development of Logan Square, movement of ethnic groups into the area, changes in the community, and organizations that were formed to promote the growth of Logan Square.

Interview by Brent Deland, 1974

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See collateral file: photographs of Feeley

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## Preface

This manuscript is the product of a tape recorded interview conducted by Brent Deland for the Oral History Office on March 15, 1974. Linda Jett transcribed the tape and Susan Jones edited the transcript.

James J. Feeley, born ca 1939, has lived all his life in Logan Square. He was executive director of the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, associated with the Northwest Pioneer Businessmen's Association and executive director of the United Residents and Businessmen's Association.

He describes the history and development of Logan Square and the problems of immigration of ethnic groups into Logan Square, the organizations that were formed to help the growth of Logan Square, and the future potential for Logan Square.

Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

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James J. Feeley, March 15, 1974, Chicago, Illinois.

Brent DeLand, Interviewer.

Q: Mr. Feeley I'd like to know how long have you lived in Logan Square.

A: All my life, thirty-five years.

Q: Where were you born, please?

A: Born at Whipland Courtland.

Q: How long have your parents lived at that address?

A: Sixty-eight years.

Q: I see. Could you tell me something about the evolution of Logan Square, at least over the past twenty or twenty-five years that you have been somewhat active in the community?

A: Well, Logan Square was originally farmland founded by a man named Kimball and then it went into being developed as a community, became part of the city, was inundated by Scandinavians, Norwegians, Swedes, a scoop of people. Probably reached its peak around the early twenties and after that as people moved out of the city after the Depression. After the war, people started moving out of Logan Square. And the transition has been from Scandinavians and Slavic to Spanish. We are now having a new group of people moving into Logan Square. The Spanish speaking people. I can remember back to when my part of the community was considered a Jewish community. There's only one synagogue run by a part-time rabbi and virtually all the Jewish people have moved out to the suburbs.

Q: You cited that there has been somewhat of an immigration from the city to the suburbs by the Jewish population and I assume by the Scandinavians as well and an influx of Spanish speaking people. How long has this taken place and where did it begin and at what progress or at what point is it presently?

A: Well, it probably started fifteen years ago. The Jewish people started moving out of Logan Square maybe twenty years ago. And there were some movement of Spanish speaking people into parts of Logan Square but after the riots, I think they were in 1968, many people who were identified with Division Street didn't want to be identified as Puerto Ricans or Cubans with that area, so they moved up to what they considered a nicer, cleaner area, cheaper rents, better recreational facilities for their children. And now we have, I'd say, twenty to twenty-five percent of our area is Spanish speaking and our biggest problem is learning how to communicate with new people. They maintain the buildings as well as

the Scandinavians ever maintained. By and large they're good people to live with. The problem is just a language problem.

Q: What is the neighborhood as a whole doing to bridge the language gap?

A: Well, we have Casa Central which is a Spanish organization to work with the Spanish speaking people. We have some classes at some of the churches and libraries to teach English to Spanish speaking people. We have some companies where they are teaching their foremen how to speak Spanish to work with the Spanish speaking people. The community organizations either don't know what to do, or if they know what to do they aren't doing it. They are the last bastion of the white middle class Americans.

Q: Mr. Feeley, you were once the executive director of the Logan Square Neighborhood Association, then moved on to the Northwest Pioneer Businessmen's Association and are presently the executive director of the United Residents and Businessmen's Association. Would you tell me a little bit about each of the organizations you've worked for and what they've done?

A: The Logan Square Neighborhood Association was formed after a very critical article in the newspaper saying that Logan Square was dying. The businessmen, the residents got together and said, "We've got to do something to save the community." They formed the Logan Square Neighborhood Association. For a year or two it was an organization run totally by volunteers. Then they hired a director. And then about a year later, 1965 I believe, I came on as a staff worker. And I worked with the neighborhood association on housing problems, organizing block clubs and neighborhood groups. And I went on to finally be the executive director to work on many community problems. We tried to fight to get a library, we worked on thousands of housing. Due to the fact that the "L" ended in Logan Square, many people had converted their apartments from six room apartments to six sleeping rooms to where they could rent them out at a large profit. And we had to spend a lot of time having these buildings reconverted back for use for families. We worked with the Spanish leadership and we were one of the moving forces to move Casa Central up to our area to work with the Spanish speaking people. I had several Spanish board members on the Logan Square Neighborhood Association.

I left, after I felt that it had reached the point that it was organized and that they needed an executive director, plus the area just west of Logan Square was looking for a director to work with businessmen and the community people and to do some community organization work. So I worked there for a year. The problem there was that the people went one direction and the businessmen wanted to go in another direction and I felt I couldn't go in both directions at the same time so I stayed with the people. I formed this group called United Residents and Businessmen's Association to work in a particular area to work on the community problems. Our job is to work on the nuts and bolts things, how to get the streets paved, how to get the alleys fixed up, better garbage collection, better street lighting. One of the problems we have is crime on the streets. With the effort of all the neighbors getting together we found that if we press the police department, if we go to court, some of the young people who have been arrested ten, fifteen, twenty times for armed robbery, attempted murder, rape, are now starting to go to jail instead of getting suspended

sentences or court supervision or probation. In some cases they are on court supervision and probation at the same time which defeat each other. We're working on housing problems. We're working with the senior citizens. We were instrumental in getting a hot lunch program at a local school, having some buildings demolished, establishing a nursing home.

Q: All of these projects are very worthwhile. At least, as a community organizer myself I think that they are. I was wondering if we could, for just a moment, go back and kind of bring us forward to the point that Logan Square as a total community is now. For example, I understand that some years back the statue that's now very prominent standing in the center of Logan Square was built--if you could start by telling me when that was built, why it came about and kind of progress very slowly and at your own pace and tell me some of the major developments of the community. For example, the establishment of the Jewish community and then the Scandinavian community and then into the Spanish neighborhood and then perhaps we can get back to exactly what it is you've done and the neighborhood associations in this area have done to help promote good citizenship and a stable community.

A: Well, to start with the centennial monument was put up on the hundredth anniversary of the state of Illinois. It was placed at the center of the Logan Square community, Kedzie and Logan Boulevard. During that time, Kedzie Boulevard and Logan Boulevard were the homes of many millionaires--Oscar Mayer lived up here, several other people. This was the elite of the community lived on these boulevards. The area was prominently, I guess you would call blue collar workers, Scandinavian people, some Irish, the Polish were moving in at this time. After the First World War and during the Depression, a lot of the people moved into Logan Square because it was a good basis for living. The housing was reasonable and there was much recreational facilities. During the war or prior to the war the Jewish people moved into Logan Square. Now for a number of years the Jewish people as a group were not owners of property. They would rent apartments due to the long history they had with their property seized and being run out of countries. They were not too sure they wanted to establish roots and wanted to buy housing. They lived in most of the apartment buildings. The owners of the apartment buildings were getting a premium because the Jewish people insisted on the buildings being kept up and they paid top notch rents for it. And the area was kept very beautiful. Now for some reason which I don't know the Jewish people decided that Skokie and Lincolnwood was the place to live and they became, instead of tenants they became owners of buildings. They still own many businesses in Logan Square. Now they're commuting.

I know one gentleman who owned a hardware store and lived across the street and if the store was suppose to be opened at nine o'clock, he got there at nine-thirty. But now that he lives in Skokie, it's supposed to be opened at nine o'clock he comes at eight-thirty. When the Jewish people moved out, the rents could no longer be sustained by the average person because they were paying ten, fifteen, twenty percent more because they were getting all these special services. The landlords, not being able to get their rents, started subdividing some of the apartments, renting them out to two families instead of one. Then all of a sudden, the boom to the suburbs came and all the young people instead of renting

the apartment down the street from Mom went out to the suburbs, went out to Wheaton, went out to Wheeling, went out to other places. And the new people, the Spanish speaking people began to move into Logan Square. I'll say for lack of a better term, the lower class white who had lived southeast of us began to move into Logan Square. Armitage Avenue has changed. I can remember when it was a flourishing business street. Now it's a street of small manufacturers and people who are running printing shops and things like this. It's no longer a business street. This article that I mentioned earlier that said Logan Square was falling apart was the thing that prompted the people to take some action. If that article hadn't been written, maybe the people would have waited for two or three more years.

Q: What would have happened had the people waited two or three or four more years to have begun to do something?

A: That's a hard question to answer. My personal feeling is the white middle class, if they had waited and some more had moved out, the tough people who don't have anything to lose, the people that are in the lower class that have the cheapest jobs and the fewest amount of dollars might have organized a tougher community organization. But when the white middle class got angry they were organized. And they have an organization that is effective but not as effective as TWO or NCO or these organizations that organized not white middle class people, but people who had less to lose and were willing to fight harder. I feel that sometimes white middle class community organizations lack sufficient punch because they're afraid of their jobs, they're afraid of losing their houses or other things and sometimes they don't press the issue as hard as they should.

Q: Mr. Feeley, is the Logan Square Neighborhood Association or any of the organizations that we've mentioned previously Alinsky organizations? By that I mean were they formed by Saul Alinsky?

A: No. The Logan Square Neighborhood Association was not formed by Saul Alinsky. They took some money from the Catholic churches. I had taken some training from Mr. Alinsky and some of his instructors. But they were not Alinsky organizations. I think this is another problem. If they had been Alinsky organizations, they might have been more willing to lay it on the line. The businessmen obviously weren't and this organization I'm organizing is getting the benefit of the Northwest Community Organization's training and Mr. Alinsky's training with the Northwest Community Organization. But, no, none of the organizations were Alinsky organized.

Q: What exactly do you see the role of the community organizations in Logan Square today in view of the fact that, I believe you mentioned twenty-five percent or more of the community is Spanish speaking? From census information it would imply that perhaps within the next ten years over fifty percent of the neighborhood will be of Latino origin. What's the role of the community organization in such a community as this and what will the role be in the near future?

A: Oh, I think the role of the community organization is to work with the Spanish speaking people, help them to enjoy the things they want to enjoy: the good housing, the good recreational facilities, things like

this. One of the problems we have is the Spanish are moving in, the political organization, the city of Chicago is not giving the city services they used to give. When the Jewish people were here, the Scandinavian people were here, the streets were repaired, the garbage was picked up, they were taking care of all the essential services. We are not getting these kinds of support from the city. The Spanish speaking people have to know where they can go. They need to have representatives who can represent them. At this point there isn't a Spanish state representative, there isn't a Spanish alderman, there isn't a Spanish congressman. The people are represented by Polish congressmen, they're represented by a Norwegian alderman though there aren't any Norwegians around to amount to much. They were represented by a Norwegian committeeman until just recently. Some of the Polish areas represented by Polish leadership in the Democratic party but the problem is the Spanish virtually have no representation. Community organizations should work with the Spanish speaking people, help them to organize. There's a very strong feeling that the Anglo was out to screw the Spanish speaking person, that he's out to hurt them. He's not. He's afraid of the Spanish because he feels that some of the problems and some of the lack of services are their fault, some of the gang problems are their fault. The gang problems have been here for fifteen years. They're just highlighted now because the names are changed. Some of the gang members, when they were Polish it was just the neighborhood kids causing trouble, but now because they're Rodriguezs or Gonzolas they're real terrors and troublemakers.

One of the things, Logan Square needs revitalization. We need bigger parks. We need some newer buildings. There've been plans to replace the six flats and the eight flats on Logan Boulevard and on Kedzie with high rise buildings. I think this would help the community, would bring young people in. Young people aren't able to handle the rents and handle the six and eight room apartments. But they would if the area was rejuvenated, be able to move into smaller apartments. It would be more towards their liking. We need area for recreation for the young people. I think twenty or twenty-five percent of our community is senior citizens. We don't have any senior citizens housing for these people. They're living in one and two rooms some place, illegal basement apartments. They're not cold water flats anymore, but they're inadequately heated and people are getting sick and they're not being taken care of. We need programs for the senior citizens. We have senior citizens clubs, but no community organization is actively working to help the senior citizens in the community. We need to have something done with organizing the young people, the young marrieds. Getting them involved in community activity. At this point, if they've got a complaint, if they have a precinct captain to go to or some community organizer, they know they can get the problem solved. But many times out of frustration they throw up their hands, put up a for sale sign on their house and move.

Q: Mr. Feeley, what do you see the future of Logan Square as being? Is it a bright future, a dim future or where does Logan Square go from here? Recently in a Chicag Tribune article it was cited that Logan Square is in effect returning to a low class or middle middle class type neighborhood. Is that article correct and if so, does this mean that Logan Square still has some potential for young life?

A: I think it has a big potential for young life. Four years ago I had to make a decision myself as to whether I wanted to buy here and live in the community and stay living in the community or whether I wanted to buy out northwest. And I felt for my children's advancement, for their education, for general living, Logan Square was the place to be. I think the action now is in New Town. It's left Old Town. I think the action is headed west to Logan Square. Logan Square is, in ten or fifteen years, going to be the in place to live. It's going to be the place to be known that you're from Logan Square. I think the Spanish are going to add much flavor to our community. They're good, hard working people. We're building up a small but good Greek area. At Kimball and Fullerton we have Greek theaters and all kinds of stores. And we are getting a migration into the community of Greek people, which is a positive thing. People are starting to take an interest in Logan Square. They're starting to renovate the buildings. They're starting to, the young people are starting to move back in. This is the thing we need.

One of the things we need done is the renovation of our schools. We have a school that's over a hundred years old. And it's probably a fire trap but the building department doesn't want to say so for political reasons. This building needs to be torn down and a new one built. We need better police protection. We have fairly good service but the problem is we haven't made a loud enough scream so we're not getting as good services as they're getting in Woodlawn and other areas. It's starting to look up. Real estate values are going up. Young people are starting to move back in Logan Square. As I outlined earlier, some rebuilding could be done because we have very little vacant space. Some parks could be added. Maybe a theater or two. Things like this would cause people to be more interested in Logan Square. People in our community have money. We support three institutions that have over a hundred million dollars in the bank and it mostly came from Logan Square. And the only problem is, we can't get these kinds of institutions to help us support ourselves and help us build the kind of projects we need.

Q: I have one final question that's somewhat broad and perhaps an unfair question. But with the rise of apathy in the United States, not only the Watergate being a symptom perhaps of apathy, but certainly the fact that the college campuses have turned from campus protest to streaking almost back to the days of goldfish swallowing and certainly as, if I may, a professional radical much along the line of Saul Alinsky what is the future of the city, of the community and of community organizations in particular being this is 1974?

A: The community organizations are going to have to relate more closely to the people. They're going to have to work with the people. I don't think people are basically apathetic. I think they're tired and frustrated of trying something and trying it and getting no place. There's many commercials today that say, you know, that we've become accustomed to bad service, to cheap and broken material, and not getting good service. One of the steel companies is going on how they're doing a better job. I think community organization has to relate more closely to people. I think the government has to relate more closely to people. We've got to, you know, the people I talk to aren't apathetic. When they want something done--if somebody shows them a way of getting it done, shows them they're

even interested in helping them get it done, they'll go and they'll work hard and work many hours. I've known men who've lost their jobs with the city over an argument of a bad building of some corrupt practice who weren't afraid of losing their job, and they were making fifteen, twenty thousand dollars a year. I don't know why the college student has gone from protesting to streaking. I don't know if the college students are just worn out or if the new breed of college student is afraid to handle a problem. But people have to be given attention, they have to be cultivated, they have to be worked with. I don't know any people that are really apathetic. If you've talked to them about what they want to talk about and not what you want to talk about and if you don't try to come and give them the answer but help them to find the answer. This is what Saul Alinsky did, and this is what his people are doing. They might have done it in a very radical way but unless you stomp on the guy's head, he doesn't know you're there. The only time he knows you're there is when you're voting. And if you vote his way everything is fine. But if you give people alternatives and you help them find the answers instead of telling them what the answers are, they're willing to work. I don't really think they're apathetic.

Q: Do you have any advice to give to the young college students or to anybody as a closing to this interview?

A: Yes. I feel that the young college students coming out should try to find jobs that are going to relate to people. I remember when I was getting out of college we were all looking for good paying jobs that, you know, didn't relate to people and people services and weren't people oriented. I've been seeing in the last few years where college students have been coming out of college, you know, instead of taking the twenty-five thousand dollar a year job where they had an impersonal type of work, they started getting involved with things like Action and Vista. I think, you know, the young people, if you will make a few thousand dollars a year less but work with the people and do the job you enjoy doing rather than spending the time and the extra money on trying to--I know young college people who were in my age group, thirty-five, thirty-six, who don't like their work, are very unhappy. They're either drinking too much or they're going, things that are causing them to run away from their jobs and run away from their families. And I think if you're doing something that you really enjoy, that the money isn't secondary but you can work for a few thousand dollars less and still make it.

Q: Thank you for taking the time to be interviewed for the Oral History Office of Sangamon State University.

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