

Second Interview with Judge Charles DeFazio, Jr.

Interview with Judge Charles DeFazio, Jr. at his office, 929 Washington Street, Hoboken, New Jersey, on May 27, 1992. Nora Jacobson conducted the interview, which was originally gathered for background for her documentary film on the gentrification of Hoboken, *Delivered Vacant*. At least a portion of this tape was made using a sound person, Doug Lindsay. The tape starts and stops to coincide with taping and to ensure that the sound is synced up. It begins mid-conversation.

Nora Jacobson: (laughing) Not a very lucrative field.

Judge DeFazio: Well, it's what you like. What you get a kick out of. You got to love what you're doing. If you're doing ...

Jacobson: (looking at picture in office) Is that the port?

DeFazio: Yeah, it's the port. It's the harbor in New York. New York Harbor. Sure, it's the Port of New York. New York and New Jersey. That's what the PATH is all about.

Jacobson: Now, did troops leave from, the army...

DeFazio: From our pier site, our River Street, yes. The whole waterfront, up to say, up to Fifth Street. Up to the Holland America Line. That was a space of about four or five blocks.

Jacobson: Yeah.

DeFazio: See, they came all the way from mid-state New York, down with the railroads, on the West Shore Line, and the West Shore runs on the end of those two trains, then they'd like, march up First Street.

Jacobson: Say that again?

DeFazio: They'd come in on troop trains.

Jacobson: Who would?

DeFazio: Our troops, our soldiers. These were all solider boys, no Navy, just soldiers. And they were going to.. this was known as one of the Port of Embarkation. And Debarkation. They embarked from here and debarked from here. See? And Hoboken played a big, big part in the First World War. First World War. They commissioned St. Mary's Hospital, that's where all of the wounded, the sick, were nursed. Lots of them died there, of course. We went through this whole period of Spanish Influenza epidemic, First World War, we had before you were born.

(looking at pictures) Who's this? This is Marlene Deidrich. She was a good girl. She was a good actress.

Jacobson: They would walk up First Street and then what? Walk up River Street?

DeFazio: No, First Street west. See, they'd get off of the train, there's railroad tracks that run on the west boundary, that divides us and the heights of Jersey City. See, the hills, that's all hills back there. And they get off the trains there, that's where the West Shore ran. They had a station over on Erie, in Jersey City. But this is where they made their stop. And they'd all line up, the soldiers would parade up First Street and get their greetings and everything. The people were so kind to them and they were so nice to people. And they'd walk up, that's a stretch, that's about 14 blocks, 12 or 14 blocks. All the way up to the river. Front. Get on to the pier site. And that's where they'd enter the ships eventually and that gave... that gave

we youngsters in Hoboken, specially the boys, an opportunity to voluntarily serve these troops. We kids that were in high school age. Troops loved us.

Jacobson: Say that again?

DeFazio: We loved the troops and the troops loved us. Yeah. And on the counterpart, of course, the Navy, we had a big piece of the Navy that used to come in here, because our ships, our transports, which were all converted from the Holland... not the Holland, the North German Lloyd and Hamburg American Line, they had their headquarters and their piers.. Those were their piers. They were known as German piers, years ago. And all converted into American boats, then. There was confiscation, because war is war. Everything goes in war. And we used to serve the sailors, too. They'd have knapsacks. Old-fashioned knapsacks. They went around like.. We were an ambitious lot. There were a number that saw the wisdom of putting your time to use.

Jacobson: And what was that saying they used to say? About the troops leaving and coming back?

DeFazio: To hell, where you're going? What's your objective? Whether it's hell, heaven, or Hoboken.

Jacobson: Heaven, hell or Hoboken?

DeFazio: That's it. Heaven first, then hell –well, nobody wanted to go there, but sometimes you were missions – and then, eventually, if you lived, to come back to Hoboken.

Jacobson: Did people know that expression, was it a well-known expression?

DeFazio: Well, it was. It think there was songs after it. At least one song. Heaven, Hell or Hoboken. Come out the time they had that beautiful set of melodies, like (sings) "Over here, over there, we are the Yanks, tell them we're coming over.. And it won't be over till it's over over there." Those kinds of songs. Kitty Kit Kelley. Kit-kit-kit-Katy. Did you ever hear that one?

Jacobson: Yes, I did, my father...

DeFazio: (sings) Kit-kit-kit-Katy.. I mean that was pure recorded in records. I know it must have been very prominent on the Vito graph.

Jacobson: Why did they say.. where did that expression come from? Heaven, hell or Hoboken.

DeFazio: Well, I don't know the exact derivation, but it was a saying that they come from a big tradition, and they pinned it down to mean that was the ultimate goal: Heaven, hell, or Hoboken. What options did you have as a soldier? You're under command, you're under restraint. And you were bound.. those who were unfortunate to lose their lives. Either they went to heaven... I don't know where the hell come in, because I don't know of any bad soldiers. But that was the expression.

Jacobson: You mean because they would leave from Hoboken? And so, they would either die or come back to Hoboken.

DeFazio: That's right. (tape is interrupted when DeFazio recognizes someone)

Jacobson: What did that feel like? The power? (talking about Vezzetti's election)

DeFazio: Well, it felt beautiful for .. See we were all.. I never knew Tommy had ambitions to be in politics, you know what I mean? I thought that was part of his career, part of his training. He was organization... he come up, he come up, let's see, who did he follow?

Jacobson: DePasquale.

DeFazio: He followed..

Jacobson: Why did you chose to support Tom Vezzetti rather than Steve Capiello?

DeFazio: Well, I was part of the organization. I, like Tom. I used to go up to spend a little time with him, when I was active. I always used to make a stop at Tom's to see how he was getting along in the latter part of the evening. Before, I knew his mother and father, I knew the whole family. And there were, from my study of humankind, that he was an honest guy and I had been in the field many, many years. I was a product of the system. Every lawyer worthy of his salt had to be affiliated with some organization, if it was only one we had. It was McFeeley's organization. Bernard McFeeley Association, overwhelmingly machine democrat. That was Hagueism. He was first lieutenant to Hague, by the way.

Jacobson: Well it must have been a real shock when Capiello lost, because he was the machine. It must have been a shock!

DeFazio: I know, but it was time for a change, apparently. That's what it was. People were fed up with one-man rule by this time. It went on too long. See, and then, it wasn't public progressive. It was more or less a sort of dynasty, the leader and leadership did very much what they wanted to do. Making placements.

Not all was for merit. Many times, kinship or friendship, or for money, even, I don't know.

Jacobson: So when he lost, it must have seemed like the King is down.

DeFazio: It was a big defeat, but he was at it, as I was saying, I didn't think Tom was going to go all out. I didn't realize it. He, I, and a couple of others, and a lady I remember particularly from West Hudson, came from Kearny. Why don't you resign, why don't you get out of that bench, you don't fit there. You're not deserving to continue that. Just move on, move on, the people don't want you anymore. You've served your purpose, now let the younger people come in. And have a say in their governments.

Jacobson: Who was saying that? Who said that?

DeFazio: Tommy.

Jacobson: To who?

DeFazio: Cappiello. While he was president, he was chairman of the board. Cappiello was chairman of the board. He was top man in the board of freeholders.

Jacobson: Top man of the city, I guess.

DeFazio: And the city, at the same time. He had both jobs at the one time. That's the way it was, you know. The double dip. And the triple dip. Some of them went up to triple. They didn't care how they were plundering and putting their hands in. Of course, I have no direct proof of any pay-offs. I never saw a pay-off in my life, but I'm just going by reputation, from what you hear. And that's all hearsay, too, you know.

Jacobson: Do you think Cappiello was shocked and surprised that he lost?

DeFazio: Oh, I imagine he was. Knowing Steve, you know, because he was sort of a, I think his egotism got the best of him. He thought he was "it" you know. And what was he, a little Crum bum. He wasn't an educated man. And when you're educated, you see things a lot different. You know what I mean, if you've had anything beyond high school. People in Hoboken, many of them didn't have high school even, see? The type of people you had. Today it's much different. Well, that was the system. It was a system. It followed New York, it followed New York, the greats over there, you know, not an easy way of life.

Jacobson: Say that again?

DeFazio: Politics in the state of New Jersey is not an easy way of life. You've got to work very hard, you've got to be able to give and take. If you're a little sissy boy, you're out. You're get thrown in the pond in no time. You've got to be able to have a thick skin. And you've got to be able to give as well as take. And if you can't do those things, and do them with perfection, you're lost, you're scratched, as we say in the vernacular, you're scratched. You don't even get a chance to start participating.

(tape cuts off)

No, he was in. He didn't cater to the people that I thought were worthwhile following. He wanted to be a rough tough guy, was brought up that way. And now I'm talking about, real paizan. His people and my people came from the same village.

Jacobson: Now who, Steve?

DeFazio: Steve. No, the other fellow, he comes from the other...

(tape cuts off)

Jacobson: Suddenly he was back on the council, because he was gone, and suddenly he was back again, Capiello. How did that happen?

DeFazio: Yeah. Well, that's. That's the result of what we call the Faulkner Act, that we operate... (tape cuts off)

Jacobson: You thought it was time for a change, too. He had too much power for too long, right?

DeFazio: Too, too long. It was. An awful long time. Bernie McFeeley. They became mayor and stayed for life! And why do they stay for life if they're supposed to be so brilliant? From the monies that they get from the docks? You can make much more than that from private enterprise, if you devote your time, you know.

Jacobson: So that was time. When Tommy won, it was time for that dynasty.

DeFazio: He was a rough and tough guy, this Capiello. He was rough and tough. Yeah, he was rough and tough. He come up the hard way, under the longshore, Florio influence. You know, Florio influence. Learned all the gimmicks. Long shoring. That encompasses an awful lot, takes in the whole orbit of things, that sometimes it's best to stay away from. Because it opens up some terrible enterprises. (laughs)

Jacobson: Did the city see him like a king?

DeFazio: You would say so, but he wasn't as strong and powerful as Barney N. McFeeley. You know the fellow that really followed that New York system. Yeah, yeah. He was the King. Next to Frank Hague, our mayor Bernard McFeeley was a super duper. But Hague was tops. He was a perfect boss. And they respected them

as such. And his word was order, law and order. I am the law. You remember the story of the expression "I am the law"?

Jacobson: No.

DeFazio: One time he was having a little debate with one of his police inspectors and the inspector says: Mayor, we have no law for that. I don't know what we can do. He says: Never mind. I'm the law. You've just got my order. And that's where he received that name. "I am the Law" Hague. And this fellow Barney McFeeley was just like Hague. In fact he out-Hagued Hague. At that time, he had a gang. Look at the power it gives you.

Jacobson: Say that again, say that whole thing again?

DeFazio: I say that McFeeley was everything that his boss was. He was a good student. He followed Hague literally. But then he out Hagued Hague, because he was over, over zealous in his love for his kinship and his family. He put them all on the payroll. Anytime he had to pay off an obligation, it had to come out of the public funds. He gave these jobs out like it was running out of style. In a small community, we had some payroll.

(tape cuts off)

No doubt about it, no doubt about it.

Jacobson: Why?

DeFazio: Because they had enough of it, I guess they had enough of dictatorship. They wanted to be a little more free, I guess. They wanted free government.

Jacobson: So I asked you if the people were relieved when Tommy won.

DeFazio: Relief is a very broad word. Were they relieved? Yes, I would say they got some relief. A good bit of relief. They felt taken out of their bondage a bit. Because they felt they didn't have a real good democratic, uh, republican form of government. And they wanted more. They wanted calm and he demonstrated, through his life and his way of life, that. Relief. It was a matter of credibility and belief, I guess. They didn't know if he was going to make good or not. How would you know? Because... (tape cuts off)

Jacobson: Down the street, down Washington Street.

DeFazio: Well, they always did that in Hoboken. Hoboken was a circus maximus at all times. We always had a circus going in Hoboken. Don't forget, we're a waterfront down. We're only a mile long and square. And it's very controllable. And there was always something going on here. And there was always a feast. The Italian people had so many feasts every year. Religious feasts for instance. It wasn't all piety and praying. Was having fun, too. Eating, drinking, and being merry, for tomorrow who knows where you're going to be. They weren't stupid. The Roman people had some background, too, you know. And they weren't all illiterate. We had a lot of literate people from the ranks. And in spite of sometimes very harsh government. If we can get along to a certain extent, to the fullest extent, under restraint.. how much nicer it would be if we had more favor and less restraint. That's what they were looking for. They weren't dumb. The people just reacted naturally. Sure, they were happy. Sure, they were proud. There was a lot taken off their shoulders. They felt a new deal, the New Dealers had won. And a common man. It wasn't a man that bought the job. Man started from scratch. No interloper! He

wasn't put in here by command, by command performance. He was put in here because he had ambition and he was willing to work hard for it.

Jacobson: He campaigned hard.

DeFazio: Did he campaign hard? He certainly did! And went to the fundamentals. We hadn't seen anything like that... I think I might have been the last before Tom to go to the people like that, you know. To talk with them on the public street, create a little crowd and start telling them off and telling them what it was all about. That's teaching.

Jacobson: He did that?

DeFazio: Oh, he did. He did. He did that.

Jacobson: That must have been neat.

DeFazio: (laughs) I used to talk to, what did he have, a horn or something? That was..

Jacobson: A bullhorn?

DeFazio: What?

Jacobson: A bullhorn?

DeFazio: A bullhorn. That was part of his make-up. He wanted to come over loud and clear. And he looked like an honest man. Once you heard him, you know. And I guess people were looking for a little taste of decency. People who might compare themselves to that way of life. Here's a man, bartender...

Tape cuts off and resumes with sound person Doug Lindsay announcing that it is May 27, 1992, and they are filming and interviewing Judge DeFazio by the World War I boulder in Hoboken.

Jacobson: So, Judge DeFazio, tell me what you were telling me in your office, about the troops. What I want you to say, basically, I'll be very straight with you..

DeFazio: Yes.

Jacobson: What I want you to tell me is that Hoboken was embarkation and..

DeFazio: Port of embarkation/debarkation, right?

Jacobson: That the troops would march down the street, and then get on to the ships that would take them to World War I.

DeFazio: Yes.

Jacobson: And there was that saying "Heaven, Hell, or Hoboken."

DeFazio: That's right.

Jacobson: So I want you to say that, as if you were telling me the whole, including the part with Heaven, Hell or Hoboken, if you can.

DeFazio: Well, I don't profess to be an authority on the derivation of that famous slogan of hell, heaven.. Heaven, Hell or Hoboken.

Jacobson: Where does that come from?

DeFazio: It originated, it's probably a spontaneous expression that came about with so many, from the troops. We had over a million and a half men, young boys, from all over the nation, that paid the honor to land in our city, via the West Shore banks of the West Shore Railroad. And they came, the railroad came down our west bank, and by that I mean - boundary - that's the division line between Jersey City Heights and Hoboken. That was a main line that connected to Jersey City depot which would ship all the way to Chicago, you could come all the way from Chicago and back.

Jacobson: Look towards me.

DeFazio: These troops were, you would say, were the cream of the youth of America. Probably boys from seventeen on upwards. And they would get off at temporary stoppages down at the West Shore and assemble, then march up what, our second main street, that was known as First Street, and they would walk from West to the East, because the destination was to get to the waterfront piers. They were formerly North German Lloyd and Hamburg American Line piers that were confiscated by our nation. At or a little before the world war.

Jacobson: Why did they call them the "doughboys"?

DeFazio: Because they were the best-paid troops in the world, I guess. At \$30 a month. (Tape cuts off)

Jacobson: So what were you saying, that I would have loved to see?

DeFazio: The doughboys, marching.

Jacobson: Tell me about it. What was it like?

DeFazio: They were youngsters, many of them just out of school, going to fight a cause, to save the world, the democracy of the world, make the world safer for democracy, and I say, we of Hoboken were greatly honored to have all these nice kids from all over the states come to our little town.

Jacobson: What would they do? They would march up the street?

DeFazio: What? Yes. They'd come in on the railroad at the west end of our city, that's the boundary. And the west boundary divided Hoboken and Jersey City Heights. And they made special stops of the trains for the troops to come down First Street, which was a pretty narrow street, and they'd all march from the west bank there up First Street, about ½ mile or so. Directly bringing them to these piers, the

old German piers we called them, because they were owned for years and years by the Republic of Germany. And they, the piers, and all the ships, there might have been twenty at the time, were confiscated by the United States of America. And converted into Army transports, and that's where the Army transports came into these piers to take those boys across the ocean to the war front in France. And I well remember, it was 1917 or thereabouts.

Jacobson: And what was the expression?

DeFazio: The expression that was coined by the doughboys.. (Tape ends).