

E. NELSON COHEN
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COHEN: Yes, yes!

RLC: I used to live in Decatur.

COHEN: And nobody seems to be able to turn the key to create this impetus. And I think this is part of Terre Haute's problem.

RLC: Um hm. And we've seen downtown Terre Haute decline. I haven't been in Decatur . . .

COHEN: Part of downtown Terre Haute's decline was also, as I alluded to, absentee ownership, you know. There was a lot, a lot. There were some . . . I won't call them mistakes. There were some mis-judgments at the time.

But, you know, you've got prime prairie ground out there surrounding Terre Haute; and why not go out and build the Honey Creeks and the Towne Souths and this and that in prime prairie ground? You have good transportation. You start from scratch. You don't have to worry about hundred-year-old buildings, you know -- to air-condition and to bring up to modern standards, fire protection standards, sprinkler standards. And you do this all from scratch and it does lend itself. Yes, I would like very much to see downtown revitalized. But most down . . . how do you define a downtown? A shopping area? Well, some people say yes. Most people now define downtowns as the financial . . .

RLC: Business, commercial.

COHEN: . . . and office area of the downtown business.

RLC: Not retail.

COHEN: Not retail so much. Yes. Because the retailer really has to be spread out throughout the community in order to . . . because of the easy access to transportation. I don't know what's going to happen now that fuel is becoming higher.

RLC: It should make a difference.

COHEN: It should help mass transportation again, but I don't know. Mass transportation seems to be pricing itself out of existence.

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RLC: Right! Terre Haute's amazing though to provide the bus service that it does for the ridership it gets.

COHEN: We were just discussing that last night, as a matter of fact. And some friend of mine says that the buses really are over-sized. And I said . . . you know, I never paid attention to it. I said . . .

RLC: Evansville has buses half the size.

COHEN: Has mini-buses, yes. So, I presume that . . . maybe this is what I said that there's been a misjudgment here.

RLC: Um hm.

Well, do you envision downtown Terre Haute ever becoming more viable that it is now?

COHEN: Well, unless the town grows, unless you start adding population back into it, why would anybody move back in? You know.

RLC: Um hm. Well, we have the . . . what's now called the Deming Center for the elderly, which seems to be functioning well.

COHEN: Well, that's true. But you can't rely on a person who . . . well, most elderly people, you know, don't go out and what I call impulse buy. You know they buy out of need. And to support a downtown retail business, you have to have people . . . you have to have a large influx of people. What is there? Only what . . . less than a hundred apartments in the Deming Center? You know. And that's not many people to turn out on the streets. Even if they'd put up one at the Terre Haute House, it still wouldn't be many people to turn out on the streets. You need hundreds of people passing through there every day or thousands of people, I guess, as evidenced by Honey Creek. So . . .

RLC: And with the highway now being I-70 instead of U.S. 40.

COHEN: Yes, there's been a lot of factors that . . . I'm very . . . although I'm on the planning commission, I'm very interested to see what the Hocker report is going to say. I think a lot of us are because,

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COHEN: you know, as practical business people everybody's analyzed it. And what's it going to take to turn it /downtown/ around, and the answer is I don't know. And that's a lot of answers.

RLC: Terre Haute has long been somewhat of a transportation center, and I still think it is -- although we don't have passenger rail service any more. What is your opinion of the transportation picture here compared with other comparable towns in the midwest?

COHEN: Well, Terre Haute's no better or no worse than anything . . . sure, it has an east-west railroad and a north-south railroad. It has the spur lines into the farm land, so that there is some grain harvest moving through. Terre Haute ten years ago, five years ago had national headquarters for at least two truck lines, maybe three or four, I don't remember which . . . or regional truck lines. Today it has none.

RLC: Why is that?

COHEN: Well, Eastern /Motor Express/ sold out and they moved . . . Well, eventually, they collapsed and moved everything. But Commercial-Lovelace sold out to Banner Industries in Cleveland, Ohio. They moved the national headquarters to Columbus, I think, or maybe even to Cleveland. The McLaren truck line, which was a regional truck line, sold out to another corporation who has its regional offices or home offices elsewhere. You had . . . going back 20 years ago, you had Green Line. They merged with Bestway and somebody else. And then they have subsequently sold out. So, where you had eight, nine, ten truck lines with their major offices in Terre Haute, you now have none.

RLC: Um hm.

COHEN: So, you know, they talk about a transportation center, but I think that's a figment of their imagination today. I don't think it's there! It's not . . . it's a focal point, sure. You know I-70 and U.S. 41 cross each other. But "big deal." In the United States there are plenty of I-70s and 41s.

RLC: Well, yes, but we . . . for example, there are two four-lane highways between here and Indianapolis /and/ a good four-lane road to Chicago. Highway transportation here is good; and we're near the center of population of the U.S., I think, which is a factor. It keeps moving westward, I guess, but . . .

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COHEN: But I don't see where this really does any good for the city of Terre Haute.

RLC: Um hm. You don't?

COHEN: It's a place . . . you know, I kiddingly say that when you cross the Wabash River, you jump off until you get to St. Louis. Well, there's nothing left. And I don't mean to demean Effingham and Vandalia, but really, you know, they're just small towns out in the prairie -- in the Illinois prairie. And it's the same way. You know, people from Indianapolis say I'm going West. There's nothing 'til I get to St. Louis.

And they . . . you know after all, they misplaced the Interstate to a degree. It's 30, 35 blocks south of downtown Terre Haute (or uptown Terre Haute, whichever person you want to talk to). And they only gave us one, really one cutoff that leads into the mainstream of the city. Most . . . you go into most towns . . . you go to a little town like Danville, Illinois, they got five cutoffs leading into Danville -- into downtown. I've never been able to get an answer as to the reasons why. I couldn't conceive of why they had a cutoff going to . . . the Darwin Road cutoff. Why they spent that money there instead of somewhere else. It goes nowhere. Darwin, Illinois, is a town of a thousand people, you know. Why do you need a cutoff to go to a town of a thousand people? The east part of it is only a mile away from U.S. 40. And it goes into Toadhop, actually, or West Terre Haute. So, I never could understand that.

RLC: Right. And it takes . . . of course, so many towns experience this now. The traffic goes around instead of through. It's inevitable.

COHEN: Yes. We travel a lot by car, and you can leave Terre Haute and travel to Denver, Colorado -- a thousand miles -- and make one traffic light.

RLC: Right.

COHEN: In Lyman, Colorado. And why do you need to stay anywhere? Why do you need . . . your town that relies on transportation or travel is . . . it's really a . . . it's not basic, you know. It helps the hotel industry and the restaurant industry near the interstate but that's about all. They don't shop in the town in other words. Although it does

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COHEN: Terre Haute is a central location of 250,000 population. There are a lot of people that come to Honey Creek [Square shopping mall] from eastern Illinois.

RLC: Yes. Yes.

COHEN: And it is good access.

RLC: Right off the highway.

COHEN: But getting back to your question, no, I don't consider Terre Haute as a major transportation center. It has good transportation, but it's not a major transportation center.

RLC: You would consider Indianapolis a major transportation center, I guess?

COHEN: I would think . . . yes. Indianapolis, Louisville, for sure, because it has three or four modes of transportation.

RLC: The river . . .

COHEN: The river, yes, and good interstate system, good railroad hub system. Yes, I would think that Indianapolis, St. Louis, would be much better.

RLC: Um hm.

Are civic activities in Terre Haute pretty centered in the downtown area? Or are they, as you see them, are they dispersed around the community?

COHEN: I don't quite understand what you mean by civic activities.

RLC: Well, the Rotary, the different service clubs . . .

COHEN: Oh, service clubs?

RLC: . . . I think . . .

COHEN: Well, I presume they meet . . . you know, I'm not a member of any of those particular organizations, but I think that there are downtown clubs. But there are also morning and evening service clubs that meet in the regional areas, I guess. Some of the suburban areas.

RLC: Probably less activity downtown now than there was in the past?

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COHEN: Oh, yes. I mean . . .

RLC: Of that nature.

COHEN: Yes, I mean . . . well, there are less places to go downtown. You know, for years you used to meet . . . one used to meet at the Terre Haute House and one used to meet at the Deming Hotel for lunch. And neither one of them are there. Neither one of them serve, you know. So, it's . . . you can't fault the service clubs for that. That's just the nature of the downtown.

RLC: Right. And there were more restaurants and meeting rooms in general.

COHEN: Yes. Downtown Terre Haute was a focal point. You know, everything converged on it. It was . . . 7th Street and Wabash Avenue was truly the crossroads of Terre Haute, for sure -- probably the crossroads of the nation. But there's nothing there, now.

RLC: Um hm.

You mentioned earlier before we began the recording that there were tearooms and . . .

COHEN: I said, I heard that documentary last Tuesday night on Channel 2 /107/. I guess it was. And they were talking about downtown Terre Haute. Sure. Herz had a tearoom. Root's had a tearoom. There were a jillion restaurants up and down Wabash Avenue. I think even, you know, it used to be . . . as we were growing up, I think we counted there were 27 saloons between the Wabash River bridge and Fruitridge Avenue. And today there are very, very few neighborhood bars along there, especially in downtown Terre Haute. I think only the Saratoga and T's Lounge /remain/. And I don't use . . . mean to . . . you know, the bars; but this is just the nature of the change of the community.

RLC: Um hm. And people would drop in various places just to . . .

COHEN: They were social places. That's right.

RLC: . . . socialize.

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COHEN: Especially in the west end of town. I can't remember the names of them right now, but I do know that from Water Street, which is right there parallel with the Wabash River, to 1st Street there were two taverns that I was very, very familiar /with/ because the family worked in the area there. And then the Indois Hotel was at 2nd and Wabash, and it was a focal point of activity. There were a lot . . . and then as you start up Wabash Avenue -- especially below 5th Street -- there were a lot of workingmen's activities. They'd come into town on Saturday night and shop and . . .

RLC: Saturday night! The stores were . . .

COHEN: Yes, all the stores were open on Saturday night until I think 1939, '40, '41, something like that.

RLC: Really? Uh-huh. So, it must have been a lively

COHEN: It was very live downtown. Yes, Saturday night.

RLC: Saturday night it's totally dead now. (laughs)

COHEN: Now, any night! (laughs)

RLC: Any night.

Have you seen any changes in the Terre Haute Jewish community in your lifetime? Has that . . .

COHEN: Yes. As a matter of fact, I happen to be affiliated with the national organization of the Reformed Jewish movement. And Terre Haute is not alone in these problems. When you reach a town of 100,000 or less, most Jewish communities have the same problem in that the children move away and Matter of fact, we just took into the movement a little congregation of 25 families. And . . .

RLC: Located?

COHEN: Well, located in Ohio -- in northeastern Ohio. And 50 years ago they were something like 125 families. So, in 50 years they dropped almost 100 family units. And this is what's happening in Terre Haute. As we discussed earlier, there were two congregations, two buildings; we're now into one building. The two buildings . . . I think at the height of the Jewish community in Terre Haute, there probably was somewhere in the neighborhood of 450 to 500 families.

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RLC: And when was the height?

COHEN: Well, I would presume it was somewhere in the '20s or early '30s. Probably late '20s, '25 to '30 -- something like that. Because as the Depression came in 1930, I'm sure (if my memory serves me) some of my friends, you know, their families moved to Indianapolis and Danville and Louisville and whatever because there just wasn't enough to support their families at the time. Now we're down to, oh, I think the membership is listed at 150 families, but there's something like 30 widows on the membership roster. So really, there's roughly 120 family units, husband and wife, you know, of sorts.

RLC: Well, where are young Jewish people moving today? All over or . . .

COHEN: Well, you have to understand . . . All over. But you have to understand that most of the people 50, 60 years ago were family-owned businesses. A father had a business, and he expected his son to come in. Of all of my friends in my age group, I'm the only one who went into the family business and stayed. There were 14 boys and girls in my age group and 13 . . . well, 12 of them have left Terre Haute. And so, you know, with the demise of the family business, the children are going either into the big cities and opening up their own business or they're going into corporate life, and they move wherever they have to move.

RLC: Wherever the corporate headquarters are. Yes.

COHEN: Yes.

RLC: Well, would you like to comment further on anything before we close?

COHEN: No. Just I want to thank the library and whoever is funding the project for allowing me to appear and discuss my thoughts about Terre Haute.

It's been a great city. It's . . . really, I have nothing . . . I would like to see it better. But I feel that Terre Haute's done well by our family, and I'm sure . . . I hope that our family has done well by the city.

RLC: Well, thank you very much, Mr. Nelson Cohen of Terre Haute, and we'll end the interview here.

END OF TAPE