

Interview with Charlie and Pooh Ritchie by Ann Greene, for the Episcopal Diocese of Pennsylvania Oral History Project.

ANN GREENE: Okay, we're live! [Laughs] We're live. But you know, you started, were telling me about Bishop DeWitt the other day, and about your relationship with him, and your high esteem that you had for him. And I'd just like you to keep talking about him, as you remember him. And of course, one thing that we're interested in as the History Committee is just this—this journey that he clearly made, as Bishop, from coming in, to—as one person put it, he went from being a pastor to the privileged to being a voice for social justice. And when I go back and think about the history of the time period, and the national upheaval over racial matters, and social change, and then what was playing out in Philadelphia. What have you been thinking since I was here last, and I gave you this helpful book? [Laughs]

CHARLIE RITCHIE: Probably, as Pooh pointed out to me, he had left a very privileged community, Cranford Parish, where he remained Suffragan Bishop of Michigan, and under a really neat guy who's name I can't remember, who was then Bishop of Michigan, and was a great supporter of Bob's. But Cranford was a very privileged—huge and privileged parish in Michigan, outskirts of Detroit. Ford, General Motors, all of them were—and huge companies that had a whole lot of privilege attached to them, in their families. And a lot of them went to Cranford School, which was the then best school around. That's where you sent your privileged kids. So out there he was—he

was, as you said, pastor to a lot of privileged families. And I think this was a difficult time for Bob and Bobbie, because they had—

POOH RITCHIE: They had—their older family were—

CR: They had two older children, Larry and Becky, and then they had, on the way, three more children, Kathy, and John, and Robbie. And they were to grow up heavily influenced by Philadelphia. And Larry and Becky were in this strange—

PR: Well, they were long gone. They didn't move to Philadelphia.

CR: No.

PR: They were married and gone.

CR: They were—yes, they were long gone, but they were going through their problems with their marriages.

PR: Mm-hm.

CR: Both of which ended in divorce, as did Kathy's first, and John's, ultimately. I don't think Robbie's—

PR: He never got married.

CR: He never got married. That was a simpler way around it. They lived as married, a married couple. But that situation has mellowed some. In any event, I think it's important to understand that Bob had been accustomed to being pastor to privileged, and think both he and Bobbie were not all that comfortable with that position.

PR: She definitely wasn't.

CR: And she definitely wasn't.

PR: But they moved into Chestnut Hill, on—what was it? Right down from Saint Martin's.

CR: You know the house?

AG: No. On Saint Martin's Lane?

CR: Yeah.

PR: Yeah, yeah.

AG: On Willard Road?

PR: The block beyond Willard Road. It was in on the left, and it was a big Chestnut Hill house.

CR: What was the name of that other road?

PR: That went under the station? Under Saint Martin's, where the Boyd's lived?

CR: That went right past the entry to Saint Martin's Church?

PR: Oh, well that was Willow Grove.

AG: Well, Saint Martin's was—

CR: Was that Willow Grove?

AG: Yeah. Saint Martin's was at the corner of Willow Grove, which goes on down to CHA.

PR: To CHA, yeah.

AG: And then Saint Martin's Lane, that goes up, and then eventually curves and meets Seminal?

PR: Seminal, yeah.

CR: Seminal. Seminal is the one I'm thinking.

PR: Yeah, so it was Saint Martin's Lane that they were on.

CR: They were on Saint Martin's Lane.

PR: Yeah, right in the middle, while Girard was—was—the college.

CR: Oh, yeah.

PR: That was the two extremes, at that point, when they arrived. Right?

CR: Well, Girard had not exploded.

PR: It hadn't happened, but it was about to.

CR: Yeah. So anyway, the day that he arrived was memorable to me, and here was this family coming in to an empty house, big, you know, typical of that area, and nobody to officially greet them. And I don't know whether I just hung around because I knew they were coming in. I know I was treasurer of the diocese, which meant very, very little at the time, but at least it was a title.

AG: Mm-hm.

CR: And I guess somebody—I was involved at Saint Paul's at the time, on the [unclear], in various ways. And I maybe sort of self-appointed myself to go down and greet them. I don't think I was there officially at all.

PR: You had never met them.

CR: No, I had never met them.

PR: No.

CR: And so I introduced myself to Bob and Bobbie, and the young kids, the three younger kids, Kathy and the boys. And I was at least a friendly presence, and somebody to ask questions of. And we just instantly hit it off, and they were very grateful to have somebody there. The rooms were empty. I think I—I don't know how Mike came.

PR: He went with you.

CR: [Unclear] Did he come with me?

PR: Yes, he came with you.

CR: And so I introduced him. Bob said, after we did the introductions and got a little bit at ease with each other, Bob DeWitt said to Mike, "Do you wrestle?" And Mike said, "Oh, I have. I went out for it last year," or something. Bob said, "I've got a new move."

AG: [Laughs]

PR: It's typical.

CR: And said, "Let me show it to you." And so, as I say, nothing in the room, no furniture.

PR: [Unclear]

AG: Oh, okay.

PR: I think so.

CR: What?

PR: I think it's registering on the—

CR: Feedback?

PR: Yeah.

AG: Oh. Maybe I'll just—let me try just moving it over here.

CR: So they got down on all fours, on the bare floor, and Bob DeWitt got in a position where I guess all wrestling starts from.

AG: Mm-hm.

CR: And you remember Bob well enough to remember how lithe and athletic he was.

PR: He was—sure.

AG: Oh, no. I don't—never knew, you know.

PR: Ann never knew.

AG: He was well before my time, in Philadelphia, yet. So he was a short, light—?

PR: He was short, slight.

AG: Yeah?

PR: I don't think Bob was more than 5'8". He was about Mike's height, 8 or 9. He was not tall. Neither was Bobbie; they were both short.

CR: But very—

PR: He was a gymnast.

CR: —agile.

PR: Mm-hm.

CR: So he did these quick moves, and Mike went down like that! [Laughs]

AG: [Laughs] Poor Mike! He doesn't even know this man, and the first thing that happens is he gets thrown? Maybe it was a metaphor for what was to come in Philadelphia!

PR: Absolutely! [Laughs]

CR: But it was hysterical, the whole afternoon. And the house was a zoo, and the kids were running around. And we just—we had a fun afternoon! And Bobbie was lost. So then—

AG: Lost?

CR: Oh, she just—she didn't like the place, clearly.

AG: Mm-hm.

CR: It was way too clubby, and she felt as though the neighbors were too close, too much, and looked across—it's a pretty neat little community, if you like pretty neat little communities. And everything was there. The church was there; the club was there. Playing fields right in front of you, private schools—the whole kit and caboodle. And that's not what she felt they were coming to. [Pause] And she was—she had a pretty strong cynical streak. Wonderful sense of humor!

AG: [Laughs] Unlike any other clergy? [Laughs]

PR: [Laughs]

CR: Yes, unlike any.

PR: A lot of them lack it. Luckily, there are some who have it.

AG: I was also referring to the cynical streak. [Laughs]

CR: Oh, yes!

PR: Well, I was pretty aware of that, too. [Laughs]

AG: Had she liked being in Cranbrook? Or was she ready to get out of there, and thought that coming to Philadelphia was going to be coming to a more urban—?

PR: All I know about that is what I've picked up from Becky, who also became a good friend of mine—of ours. I don't think she was happy there, either. I think Bobbie would have been happy in some farm country, where the women would sit around and trade knitting patterns, and she could go out and dig in her garden.

AG: Mm-hm.

PR: She loved things like that. Social life was just—

CR: Anathema.

PR: —not down her alley, at all. She agonized, and it was terribly, terribly hard!

AG: Mm.

PR: When things got heated and really, quite unpleasant, she was able to roll with that almost better than the social things that—they were called upon to go to—don't you agree with that?

CR: Yes.

PR: She could get her teeth into something that was heated, and controversial.

AG: Mm-hm.

PR: But the frou-frou talk, and the suburban lifestyle was not her.

CR: We would drive together to diocesan conventions, as things came to be. And I said, "Okay, Bobbie, you're the expert. What are your expectations of this convention, specifically?" And she said, "Well,"

and then she'd launch into: "Keep your eye on Paul Washington. Keep your eye on somebody else. He's going to make an ass of himself." Cuthbert Pratt, probably. [Pause] And we'd roar with laughter. And then on the way back, we'd tear it all apart, and see how well she did, and laugh, and laugh, and laugh.

And I think that—that the relationship we had just allowed them to, you know, blow off steam, and get a lot out of their system. And it was very helpful to us, and our relationship with them, because you know, we could talk about anything, and share concerns. And we would go over there, either for a planned, or an unplanned, meal. We relocated them in Ambler, which was a perfect place for them. They found the property they wanted. I can't remember who it belonged to. Some really nice guy had bought it from the—

PR: The Kurtz's were involved, somehow.

CR: The Kurtz's had restored the house.

AG: Mm-hm.

CR: I guess they bought it from the Kurtz's.

PR: I think so.

CR: But it had some land, which Bobbie needed. She needed to put her fingers in the good earth, as did Pooh—as does Pooh. So she and Bobbie had a lot of gardening instincts in common, and they traded all sorts of secrets about that. And that relationship grew as close as mine with Bob.

PR: Yeah, why don't you talk more about your relationship with Bob, at this point?

CR: The fact is that both of them were really important.

PR: Yeah.



CR: And our relationship with the kids.

PR: Yeah.

AG: Mm.

CR: Because it was very close. And I would—Bob would tell me, “I’m not going to be able to get to John’s hockey game this afternoon.” And I said, “I think I might go in your stead,” and did, a couple of times, at least. And John has written me letters about that, and what it meant to him. And they’re just wonderful kids, now! They both left Philadelphia as soon as they could, and went to Idaho to live, and establish themselves, which they certainly have done. And Kathy was a sort of wild middle daughter.

PR: Mm-hm.

CR: And a handful. And she—she had a relationship with several guys; wound up marrying John Kaiser, who was Paul Kaiser’s son. Paul Kaiser was the CEO of Tastybake.

AG: Mm-hm.

PR: Tastybake.

CR: Tastykake.

PR: Tastykake.

AG: Mm-hm.

CR: Which is still a thriving enterprise, I gather.

PR: I guess.

CR: I don’t know whether it’s Philadelphia, or—

AG: Yeah.

CR: Is it?

AG: Oh, yeah.

CR: Is it still owned by Kaiser?

AG: I don't know if it's still owned by Kaiser's, but it is a critical part of Philadelphia culture, as I—

PR: Yeah, like cheese steaks, yeah.

AG: Yeah, yeah. Because I learned. I'd never had a Tastykake, and I asked a group of people, "Tastykakes?" At which point, all these women my own age started talking about, "Oh, well my favorite one is this one!" [Laughs]

CR: [Laughs]

PR: And they're all—yeah.

AG: And you know, "When I was growing up, this one that we always had on picnics." And it's—

CR: It's part of the culture.

AG: It's part of the culture.

PR: Things ain't changed. [Laughs]

AG: Yeah! [Laughs]

CR: So they were sort of the forerunner of cupcake craze, I guess.

AG: Yes, I guess. But they were kind of—in Philadelphia, I guess they were kind of the Hostess Twinkies of Philadelphia.

CR: Yeah.

PR: It was the Hostess Twinkie, yeah.

AG: But everybody's got their favorites, and you cannot go wrong by bringing Tastykakes to an event.

PR: Yeah, that's right.

CR: [Laughs]

PR: Or put it in a lunchbox.

AG: And I have certainly served them myself. Especially when people are new to Philadelphia, I will say, “And these are Tastykakes. You need to understand them.”

PR: Yeah, yeah.

CR: [Laughs]

PR: And it’s part of the culture.

AG: Yes.

PR: Yup.

CR: You will not understand Philadelphia unless you get it! [Laughs]

AG: Well, you certainly will understand Philadelphia less, unless you— unless you explore a number of cheese steak options.

PR: Cheese steaks, yup, and hoagies.

AG: And get to know Tastykakes, yes.

PR: And hoagies.

CR: [Laughs] Oh, yeah. They get all cheesecake.

PR: Cheese steak.

CR: Cheese steak.

PR: Cheesecake—no, that’s New York.

CR: Oh, cheese steak.

PR: Cheese steak.

AG: Well now, you were treasurer of the diocese, but you seemed to have become more active as part of DeWitt’s circle of friends and advisors, workign on things beyond the titular role of treasurer. And I assume he was trying to, like, hold down a job at the same time.

CR: I had a job. I was working at Brown Brothers, Harriman, at the time.

PR: You became his official administrative—

CR: And then we invited—I guess he invited—yes, he invited some big time Ford and General Motors executives to come to his house. He was now in Ambler. And we got him out of Chestnut Hill within a year, about a year.

PR: Was it that soon?

CR: Yeah.

PR: It doesn't matter.

CR: Bobbie couldn't stand it anymore.

AG: Mm.

CR: And the cops would come and spend the night outside their house, because they had been threatened so often.

AG: Oh!

CR: And so there was a full-time cop parked, on active duty.

AG: Wow! And that's just after a fairly short period?

CR: Yes.

PR: What was the timeline between his arrival, and the Girard?

CR: Well, Girard was a little later.

PR: But that is what triggered the hostility?

CR: Well, the race [unclear].

PR: Yeah.

CR: In Chester.

PR: Yeah, okay.

CR: Is what triggered it. And then Bob would say, "I have to—I would have to wait for something to bring me the *raison d'être* for an active role on my side of it." And that was triggered by—[pause] it's in the history. Oh, there was a challenge about white boys only.

PR: Yeah, at Girard.

CR: At Girard.

PR: Yeah, that's the whole—

CR: Yeah, but that was separate from the Chester race riots.

PR: Yeah, yeah.

AG: Mm-hm.

PR: Yeah.

CR: Separate, but related.

PR: Yeah, because of the same thing.

CR: Because it was clearly coming down to a race problem.

PR: Yeah, yeah.

CR: And Bob went out to Chester when the riots were happening.

AG: Mm-hm.

CR: And finally he called the Governor, Bill Scranton, and he said, "You've got to do something about this. This is bad." And the Governor did what he could do, and raised the flag, and behaved very well, I think, as an Episcopalian and as a governor, to quell, or at least dampen, the situation. But it wouldn't dampen very much, and very quickly thereafter Girard was—was elevated to a—something you could focus on in a legal manner, and get in the courts.

PR: Yeah.

CR: Do you know Dick Simmons?

AG: A little.

CR: Dick has come across some of the most incredible background of Stephen Girard! He said he really was an incredible man, and he's studied him. And this would be right down your alley. He's collecting all this information, which [unclear] is available to him in Charleston!

AG: Hm!

CR: Because that's where Stephen Girard's background is.

AG: Mm-hm.

CR: And he comes to Philadelphia, and he establishes all this great stuff.

AG: Mm-hm.

CR: But he's an incredible man, and Dick's intention is to write his history. And he said, "Imagine! I have almost unlimited access to his papers, and everything!" It's just too rich not to study, and write the history. But he's not given credit for all he accomplished. In any event, he does accomplish a lot in Philadelphia, and becomes a very powerful man, and establishes endless scholarships. So, the question of who gets to go to Girard, and whether they go for free, is on the table now.

AG: Mm-hm.

CR: And how do you define orphans? And it is any orphan, or just white orphans? Or just orphans of Episcopal clergy?

AG: Mm-hm.

CR: What, exactly?

AG: Yeah. In other words, what does this nineteenth century institution mean, in the middle of twentieth century life?

PR: Yeah, yeah.

CR: Yeah, exactly.

PR: In the heart of the black community.

AG: Yeah, yeah.

CR: Walled against the black people who walk the sidewalks.

AG: The first time I saw Girard College was quite stunning.

PR: Isn't it? Yeah.

AG: It's like, wow!

CR: Yeah!

AG: This really is a walled-in—

PR: It was—is.

CR: Yeah, it keeps people in and out. [Pause] So Girard split Philadelphia. The whole Philadelphia tradition knew exactly what was meant in the wording of the will, and refused to accept any other view of it. And radical Philadelphia also knew what it meant, but diametrically different. And it divided Philadelphia in a—in a way that was just familiar to everybody, no matter what part of society you found yourself a part of. Pooh and I couldn't go to dinner parties anymore, without—without knowing that this was going to be a rough night.

AG: Mm. I was going to say—what does this mean for you guys?

CR: Oh, it was hell!

PR: Yeah, it was tough.

CR: It really was. It was very awkward.

PR: Because you have the older generation, who just couldn't get it. They just couldn't, a lot of them!

AG: Why did they care about Girard so much? Or was it symbolic?

PR: It was the black—it was symbolic.

CR: It was symbolic.

PR: It was strictly symbolic.

AG: It was symbolic of changing old institutions in general?

CR: Yeah.

AG: So they were defending Girard, in a way, to keep all the other institutions?

PR: More black-white.

AG: Yeah. But I mean, well, because institutions like the private schools, and the Cricket Club, and at Penn? This issue is everywhere.

PR: Yeah.

AG: So, was this the spark?

PR: It was the spark.

CR: Oh, I think it was definitely the spark.

PR: For that area, it was the spark, I think.

AG: Mm.

CR: The basic fear was that: what do wills mean anymore? If somebody writes a will, and what do laws mean?

AG: Mm, just like the battle over the Barnes?

PR: Yeah, the museum, art gallery.

CR: Yeah.

PR: But I think that, but deep down, for a lot of the people, it was the black.

CR: Oh, yeah! Absolutely!

PR: That was the real—

CR: That was the real issue.

PR: Yeah.

AG: Mm-hm.

PR: And for say, Chestnut Hill, where there wasn't a black face, except in the kitchen, or in the—you know, there were very, very few, this was a threat.

AG: Mm-hm.

PR: I think in so many simple words, it was a threat. And this bishop was a threat to their lifestyles.

AG: And he was supposed to be one of their own?



CR: Well, bishops were supposed to be.

PR: Bishops were supposed, yeah.

AG: That's what I mean, the Episcopal bishop was supposed to be—

PR: Yeah, protective, yeah.

AG: —on their side? Yeah.

PR: Yeah, and this guy came in, and turned things upside down.

CR: And we represented him, so—

PR: You were officially his administrative assistant.

CR: Well, yeah. I was getting to that. I mean—

PR: You hadn't quite been it.

CR: Bob brought in this mucky-mucks from his previous life in Detroit.

And he would say, "I know it's been a full day, but can you come to supper tonight, in Ambler?" And, "Sure. What's up?" "Well, I've got a couple of guys from Detroit who know me pretty well, and they've flown in. And they're pretty savvy guys." One was a vice president in Ford, and I can't remember now—I think another guy was from one of the big companies out there. And they were organization types. So they—Bob had been told by somebody at [pause] Episcopal Church headquarters in New York that he should consider having an administrative assistant, because his—his plate was too loaded.

AG: Mm-hm.

CR: And he said, "Well, it would have to be—at this point it would have to be Charlie Ritchie. But he's treasurer of the diocese, so that probably is not a good way to go." And they said, "Well, consider anything and everything, but I think you really need to consider this." And I guess it was—by then it was Bishop Hynes, newly elected. So these guys from his [pause] Cranberry days—

PR: Cranbrook.

CR: Cranbrook, came in, and the night was given over to discussing what it meant—you know, let's define administrative assistant, and then, worry about finding somebody to fill the bill later. And the more it was defined, the clearer it became that Bob did, in fact, need somebody in that role. And I had to admit, I probably was the guy to play that role, partly—largely because of our relationship. And there was nothing I couldn't say to Bob DeWitt, and vice versa. So it was a really unusual, including, "Your nose is dripping," which it did all the time!

AG: [Laughs]

PR: [Laughs]

CR: [Laughs] But [pause] he would—I drove to town almost every day, and then he realized that it was more efficient for him to drive to town. So he said, "Why don't I pick you up?" So we could have more time to plan the day. So we got to doing that quite often. I drove, I guess, Mike to school, dropped the girls off at the skating club? We had a very—

PR: No, that—no. Well, that—there's a time frame in there. The girls were heading off to boarding school. But I've got to do some research to help you, Ann, on time frame here, because I'm—have to go in here, to make sure we're on the same timing.

AG: Well, speaking of time, that we've been talking for forty—over forty-five minutes. And my vested interest is making sure that you keep wanting to talk to me, and that you don't go, "Oh, I don't want to come. She wears us out every time!"

CR: [Laughs]

AG: So I think I promised you, you know, no more than an hour, and we're pushing up against that. So, you've got to be the ones to call this, but Pooh, you're the keeper of the time here. I don't want—

PR: I'm going to have to leave it to you. You're the one who says you've had your—

CR: It's quarter after twelve now.

PR: Yeah. Are you--?

CR: I'm about ready to—

AG: Stop for now?

CR: Yeah.

AG: Okay.

PR: Stop for now, I think.

AG: Why don't we stop for now?

[End of Interview]