

Transcription

Narrator: Jack Vizer

Interviewer: Rance Olliges

Date & Place: October 29, 2001 – Lincoln Place Community Center

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE A]

Olliges: The date is October 29, 2001, I am interviewing Jack Vizer at Lincoln Place Community Center. My name is Rance Olliges. This is Tape 1 side A. And Jack, could you give me your full name, your date of birth, and your place of birth?

Vizer: Okay, my name is Jack E. Vizer, and I am 73 years old. I was born October 3, 1928. And I was born in the house here in Lincoln Place on Olive Street that my parents lived in.

Olliges: Okay.

Vizer: Not at a hospital, but in the house itself. My people, I should say my dad really, and my grandfather who came from Hungary in the 1900s some time. I don't exactly remember the exact date, but something like the 1906 or something like that. And they came and looked around at the area because my grandfather had a brother that had came to the United

States. And he lived in New Jersey, but before he moved to New Jersey he lived down in this community, in fact my dad bought the house that he had. And they worked in the steel mill, all of them. The reason for that was that my dad at the time he came to the United States couldn't speak any English at all. But he was fortunate that the man that owned the General Steel Casting Place, or Commonwealth Plant that they called it was a, a very kindhearted person that appreciated the way that the farm people were brought up and the type of working people that they were and they were able to be assured that if they came to America to stay, actually to stay a while, they would have a job in the steel mill. So, my grandfather, and my dad, his brother, returned to Hungary and I think they stayed there for about like two years. And then came back to America to stay.

My dad, he's a funny type of a guy. He always complained about income tax, but who doesn't, but my dad loved the United States. Which I am real glad that he did because I thought my dad was probably one of the hardest working people that you'd ever see, and his brothers were so close together that whenever somebody had something to do on their house whether it was painting it, roofing it, or whatever. The other brother would go down and help, and vice versa and it was kind of a deal that you wondered, you know boy isn't that nice that you know two brother could work together so closely and never argue, always get along, you know. So that's the way they came to America.

I am the third born to my dad, my dad had a older son whose name was Louis Vizer, his mind snapped on him. It was sort of like backwards, he could, he had double pneumonia and almost died from that. Fortunately, he come through it, but it took like a year in the hospital. He lay in the hospital for about a year. In those days they didn't have penicillin and things like that. So, serum had to be flown in from Chicago to St. Louis and they put these serum tubes into an opening in his side. And that's the way they treated pneumonia at that time. It weakened his lungs. Then, I had a sister Marie the second to born, and then myself.

My mom, she worked in the place up here that they called the National Enameling and Stamping Company and it was NESCO. They made pots and pans, roasters, stuff like that. And in fact, you can still buy electrically operated roasters from NESCO. They are like a Hamilton Beach. But anyhow, my mom worked in this place for a long time while we were young, and only because times were hard and you couldn't make it on one person's salary, and the fact that my brother was in the hospital it made it kind of rough.

I can say that in my family as I grew older, and I went to high school, and World War I, I mean World War II happened. Why I even got a job in a steel mill. I was fifteen years old at that time. I was going to high school. During the day, and during the evening would put in eight hours in the steel mill, come home, sleep, wake up six o'clock and go back to school. And it was a five day, six day type of a turn. I worked swing

shifts and everything else. The money I made when I got my check, and they used to give your checks out right in the steel mill itself. They had a guy who come around and call your name out and hand you your check. Now I could remember the guy would hand me the check and I turned around and there was my dad. I put that check in his hand and that was the last I ever saw of it. It kind of made me really really kind of mad at my dad because there were kids here in Granite City, believe it or not, that whose father would give them money. They always had money twenty, forty dollars like that in their pocket. You know for a kid that is a lot of money. And they always seemed to be going with nice looking girls and had automobiles and stuff like that. Here I was you know in high school, I would ride the bus to school and sometimes even to save money I would walk to school and saved a fifteen cent bus fare.

And I am talking about a time when you could go to a movie theatre, which we had two of them right down here in Granite. One was the Realto and the other one was the Washington theatre, and you could get into these movies for fifteen cents. For fifteen cents you would see two movies. And you would see some shorts sometimes, sometimes some cartoons like Popeye some of those like Bugs Bunny and so on. And sometimes they would have a reel called the movie toon news that I think on one of the stations like the educational station once in a while they will bring back some of those. And popular science, stuff like that they had little skits in there that went into. So when you went to school, to the

show rather, you would, you could spend about four hours there. A box of popcorn would cost you ten cents you know. All your candies were about ten cents. I used to remember that I couldn't myself come up with the money to go to the show. I would have to ask my dad to give me fifteen cents, ten cents for a box of popcorn, and that was it.

Olliges: How much money did your check end up being that you had to hand over to your father?

Vizer: Well, at that time during World War II, I was making about a hundred bucks a week, and that was a lot of money in those days for a kid to be making.

Olliges: And handed it all to your father?

Vizer: I worked in an area in that steel mill that they called The Giant Jolter, and what that was was a machine that made sand castings of the tank hull and the tank turret for tanks. And it was a hard job, I shoveled wet sand all night long with a number twelve coal shovel. And I used to, I'd remember my dad come up and feel sorry for me. He'd say, "How are you feeling?" and I'd say, "Aw great pop, you know boy I was out there shoveling sand like I was going crazy." You know, but when he went away I would be huffing and puffing, but anyhow I worked at that job for a while and there

was a man that was killed doing the same job I was doing. It kind of frightened my dad, so he talked to his boss and had me transferred over to the foundry up there where I pasted together sand cores and stuff like that they had there. It was hard work for a fifteen year old kid. But I was really amazed you know when they poured steel because this is not like Granite City Steel. There they had big open hearts that melted the steel and then it came out of spout into a kettle, a big kettle. And at one time, this foundry even had what you called the "World's Biggest Kettle". And they dumped the steel in there, and when they did there was a guy standing up on the platform over the top of the kettle with a fire proof suit on, and he would pitch so many bars of nickel for each ladle of steel that they poured in, and that was for these tank turrets, and the only reason that they put the nickel in there was to keep it from rusting easy, you know.

We would make these things and send them out to sometimes they would have fifteen of them on a flat car and a couple days later here they'd come back and there would be ten of them on a flat car that they brought back that were no good because they took them down to army and fired twenty millimeter shells at them and fifty caliber machine gun bullets and planted a pocket inside the steel where the bullet went in and actually wedged right into the casting. So those were no good, they would bring them back, we would melt them down, and remake them.

They also made what they call a double turbine frame for a locomotive, and these were used in Brazil. They had some here in the United States,

but we didn't use too many of them because diesels became prominent, so the old steam locomotives went out, but the army still had to buy them because the diesels just would not have enough power to take these trains that they had in Argentina, Brazil, and places like that up on the mountains. I don't care if you would put four of them together, you wouldn't make it. But the steam locomotives and the double turbines would. It would drive it up there like it was nobody's business.

I worked there in that steel mill for about three years, and then the war had hit, and by that time I was near graduation. I graduated in forty-seven, January forty-seven, and at that time jobs were real hard to find because men were coming back from the service. And when you speak of service, we had a lot of boys that were in service, one of them was Andy Phillip. Now Andy Phillip was in service, he played for, he was in the marines, he played for what they called the Phillips 66 Oilers. And these guys were semi-pro, but good basketball players. They could have made any pro team in the United States. But they had the luxury of having so many players that nobody could beat them. They just had a phenomenal win you know without any losses and I just bring this up to show you know that we didn't have a lot of boys here and we lost a lot of them, a lot of them were killed during the war. Fortunately for us, for a small community, we didn't lose that many, but we did lose some boys.

Olliges: Now, you were talking about Andy Phillip, and the 1940 basketball team

seemed to be one of the claims to fame for the neighborhood. Could you tell me some more about that 1940 team?

Vizer: Nineteen when?

Olliges: Forty.

Vizer: Forty?

Olliges: The championship team.

Vizer: The championship team. You know I really for a long time didn't even like basketball until I got old enough to come to here, and to this place here, the Community Center. And I, you know, had friends that played basketball and I used to come here and watch them because I could never play to their standings. They were good basketball players and I wasn't. But I still liked to get out there and play with them even though I made a fool out of myself. I did. Andy Phillip used to come to this place and his brothers played basketball in this building here. And he always wanted to play with them but they thought he was too small you know, "You don't want to play with us guys, you got to get up there." He kept pestering them until they finally put him in a game and they began to find out that

hey he is some basketball player because he could play with them and over them. You know. So, he had talent.

The team itself was comprised of all kinds of nationalities that came from this area. Most of them were Armenians. Andy Phillip was Hungarian. They had a fellow by the name of Gages that played on the team and I think Gages was part German. Then they had a bunch of Armenians: Evon Parsaghian, Huggy Hagopian, Sam Radian, who was the other one, there was another Armenian. Dang it, I can't think of his name now, but anyhow they had a Bulgarian on there by the name of Dutch Rapoff. And the team actually this bunch of kids actually didn't go out for basketball in high school. Number one, we had a bad reputation down in area of being the "other side of the tracks" and it was something even when I graduated, and after I graduated that the kids of Lincoln Place couldn't live down. We were always the "other side of the tracks". People were afraid to come down here, but anyhow that's the way the team got formed down here.

The kids would play basketball together and our games were not games where we said, "Okay, we're going to play until somebody, we'll play four quarters and whoever wins, wins." That ain't the way they played here. What you would do is come down here on Saturday and you'd sit down on a long bench that they have on both sides of the wall here the length of the building. And they'd have people out here that they selected and they'd start playing basketball against one another. And they would

play till they couldn't stand up, and then they would send in a substitute and the same thing would happen to him. He would play until he couldn't stand up. And the games were such games of length that you could start in the morning and it wouldn't end till about eight o'clock in the evening. And the scores were just phenomenal, you were way up there. But anyhow, that's the way they played down here. It was good, hard basketball physically and it really helped you out because you were able to withstand a hell of a lot of torture, you know, that some other players probably couldn't.

But anyhow, the teams begin to get tired of playing one another so what they did, they formed a team they called the Warriors. And the Warriors would play anybody that would take them on. If they had some people over in St. Louis that played for a high school and they had a team you know that played in the Catholic League or something like that. They would play them here. And more than likely, they would beat them because these kids just knew how to play with one another. And I could remember listening to the championship game, and I don't remember exactly what the team was, it's been so doggone long, that I thought it was Pekin but it might have been Dundee or something like that. But anyhow, they didn't give Granite City much of a chance of winning. Every time they'd play a game, they'd say that was about as far as Granite City was going to go, but for some reason or another Granite City got through that game and won it. So when they played for the championship that was it.

They said, "This is it, there is no way they are going to beat this team."

And the game got down to where it was in the final seconds of the game and Granite City was losing, and not by much, but I think by about a point. And there was only like I say maybe about ten, eleven seconds on the clock and Andy Phillip took the ball out of bounds. And he passed the ball into Huggy Hagopian, Huggy Hagopian dribbled a little bit, passed the ball back to Andy Phillip. Andy saw Evon Parsaghian, in those days the center of that basketball court we used to call the keyhole because that's the way it looked. It looked like a keyhole. But he found Parsaghian in the circle by that free throw line, threw him the ball, he went up and took a shot, the ball was in the air, the whistle for the game blew, or the horn, and after that whistle had blown the basketball went through the net, and Granite City won.

And it was kind of miraculous, but I tell you what it did, it gave Lincoln Place a sort of pride, it really did. He's got, like I said, he just was, they were a phenomenal bunch of guys. Very courteous, I never heard one of them cuss. I don't say that they didn't, I say that I had never heard any of them you know curse.

Olliges: And most of them came from this neighborhood?

Vizer: Huh?

Olliges: I said, and most of them came from this neighborhood?

Vizer: Oh yeah, hey the starting five was right from Lincoln Place. There were only two guys who came from what we call our uptown district which was on the other side of the tracks. That whole area, West Granite, East Granite, Middle Granite or whatever the heck you wanted to call it. They were the other side of the tracks, the good side. We were the bad side. The only thing that was kind of bad here that you can't that this community could not grow and the reason for it is during the war they built the Granite City Engineer Depot here, which is down two blocks from here. And that ate up all of the land that could have been used for expansion in Lincoln Place. On this side of the building which is about two blocks up, you find what they call 20th street. That's the end of Lincoln Place. That begins West Granite and you could see we were boxed in. Then they built the Granite City Engineer on, not Granite City Engineer but the Granite City Lock and Dam twenty-seven here that ate up some of the ground that they couldn't expand on. So we more or less got boxed in. We got the steel mills boxing us in on one side. The Army Depot and the Lock, and then finally West Granite and down on the other end there, Brooklyn. Which is in, not Brooklyn, but Venice and Brooklyn area. That's the other end of our property line there.

I myself, when I came out of high school, I just idolized every one of these players. I thought they were the greatest basketball players to ever

put on a shoe and get on the basketball court. The problem with most of them were that they were not that good scholars. There was a few of them that even though they didn't get any kind of scholarship that they went to college and I think a couple of them even became lawyers. Andy Phillip got a scholarship. When he entered Illinois University, Illinois University you know was getting around the conference and all the teams around this area that look out for Illinois. They were loaded and they were. They went like three years and won the Big Ten everytime championship. The fourth year they, the fourth time they won was when Andy Phillip had come back from service because right at that beginning of the fourth year he went into the marines, so the team kind of fell apart because most of the guys were going in service at that time. So when Andy came back, they had a pretty good team, but not the team they had before. But Andy played with such skill and stuff like that that I can remember that he was drafted by what they call the Chicago Stags. It was a brand new professional football team, not football team, but basketball team that was being formed. He played with guys like, you might laugh at the name, but a guy who actually played with the Stags, his name was Salslosky. And I remember, I used to hate him because he was the kind of guy when you passed him the ball, he shot it. Boy, I mean, you know he'd say well he scored a lot of points, I'd say, "Yeah, but take a look how many shots he made you know how many shots did he take and what percentage of it." I'd say "He was a ball hog", you know, but anyhow, this team kind of

after it got started and they were in Chicago for about a couple of years. They went bankrupt.

So then Andy was drafted by the Philadelphia Warriors and he played for them through one of these seasons, and I think before the season even ended he got traded to the Fort Wayne Pistons, now you probably remember some of these names because they're still around, but they're not in Fort Wayne, you know, like the Fort Wayne Pistons are no longer there, but anyhow. He played for them and at the same time Andy had a craving to be a baseball player, and he was in baseball for the St. Louis Cardinals for what they call the triple A farm club. And the only bad thing about his playing baseball was the fact that he got spiked in the knee, and from that time on his knee was never the same. They'd always have to tap it and take fluid off of it and he began to slow down. At the time that he played basketball and before Cousy, who played for the Boston Celtics, got into playing basketball with the Celtics, Andy Phillip was the leading assist man in basketball. Then because of his knee injury, then Bob Cousy took over the lead. Andy was up there, but never like he was before. He was never the same person, but anyhow, like I say once he was playing with the Fort Wayne Pistons it was pretty near the end of Andy's time with playing professional basketball. I think for two years he played with the Celtics. They bought off his contract and he played for Boston for two years. At that time, they gave him the name Ol' Handy Andy Phillip, which was really nice. You know there was one part that I forgot to tell

you about, but I could remember that his father would call me up and his father would say, "Hey Jack, how would you like to see a basketball game?" "I'd like to see it, but I don't have money to go, tickets are too much." He says, "Well Andy gets tickets." He says, "If you want to come I'll save you a ticket and you could come with us." So I went with Andy Phillip down here to the Arena, it's gone now, but they had an Arena up here that they'd play basketball in and I could remember that we pulled up into the parking lot and we'd start entering the building. Andy got paged to go to the office that there was something that he had to discuss, anyhow. He told me, he says, "Here hold my bag and I'll go in there, you stay here with pop, okay." So here I am I'm standing with this little grip bag that they had, they had his shorts, his t-shirt, and his socks, and his tennis shoes, and his cushioned knee pad things that he wore. And all of a sudden some little kid's running out to me. And he says, "Gee mister". He says, "Do you play with the Chicago Stags?" You know, I had to kind of laugh like heck because you know these guys were monsters.

You know when you talk about basketball I think Andy went into the pro ranks when the pros were really becoming prominent and I mean you talk about George Mikan, you know Andy played with him. But what the heck is his name? The Stilt...

Olliges: Wilt "the Stilt" Chamberlain?

Vizer: Wilt, yeah, played with him. When they come to St. Louis they'd play a team that they called the St. Louis Bombers and at that time the prominent shot was to take the ball over your head like this [motioned hands over the head] and jump straight up in the air and pump that ball up there, and I mean it'd go I don't know how many feet up in the air, and then through the basket, swish, you know, it wouldn't even shake the net a little bit you know. But like I say, George Mikan and some of those guys played with Andy and they all liked Andy because he was an easy person to get along with. He took his bumps and his grinds in basketball, never never once retaliated. You know he was just that type of player. He was a good [stresses] athlete. But and this St. Louis Bomber team they'd play, Andy played up against Bob Petit, and Cliff Hagen, Doogie Martin, I don't know I can't remember what the other guys' names were, but anyhow, they were a darn good basketball team. Petit, in particular, he was always up there when he shot. He was in those days twenty to thirty points was a lot of points to make, and then they had this Cliff Hagen who could really handle a basketball. He was almost like a Bob Cousy was because Cousy could really dribble, but that's that team that they played here in St. Louis.

They were all good teams like I say, I enjoyed going, and I enjoyed being with his father and him, and I could remember that while he was playing basketball he was married to a girl that was in the Ice Capades. Beautiful blond headed gal that could skate. Awe, she was beautiful,

beautiful skater. But she passed away, she had pneumonia, not pneumonia, but cancer. And he lost his wife that way. But like I say, with Andy the thing was that he wanted to be a baseball player so bad that he could taste it. But where he made his money and his fame was his basketball.

Olliges: How many years did he spend trying out baseball?

Vizer: I think about three, four years like that he played in the minors.

Olliges: How long was his basketball career?

Vizer: His basketball career was quite lengthy, I think Andy played for around twelve years or something. In those days, with the type of basketball players that were out there and the type of game they played there was a lot of people to get, you know, so you didn't last quite as long as maybe Michael Jordan and some of them. But see the game's different. Michael Jordan heck you know when he goes in to shoot a basket he's allowed to take two and a half steps to the basket and then shoot you know. And I could remember in Andy's, and it's still that way, that if a guy was dribbling a ball and he shuffled his foot they'd take the ball away from him you know. Now here's a guy that takes steps two and a half steps to the basket. If anybody needs two and a half steps, it sure in the devil isn't

a guy that's almost seven foot tall you know. He could afford to have to shoot from some distance around that three point arc and say, "Hey, if you make it in from there you get two points." You know. That's the way I saw it. But anyhow, people just went there to see spectacular shots and to play a good dribbler, to play good defense, that kind of fell by the wayside. It's kind of a shame because you know I sit back and I look at the game and this is becoming violent, you know where these guys foul you and they're not fouling you, they want to start a fight with you too. And I can't understand it you know I said, "Look, hell these guys are supposed to be athletes that people go to see and kids are proud of you now because of the fact that they're great athletes. And I said, "They're everything but great athletes." You know.

Olliges: They allowed better sportsmanship back then huh?

Vizer: Oh yeah, oh yeah, a heck of a lot. You know, and I could tell you like when Andy played or started to play with the Stags he played up against one guy, his name was Joe Foulkes, and this guy at that time he was one of the leading scorers they had in professional basketball. He was a tremendous shooter. Mikan you know like I say, his height that's the first time they ever run across somebody that had height like Mikan had. And Mikan was great because of one reason too and that was because he was bulky. He was a bulky son-of-a-gun and I mean he was solid you couldn't

move him. And that's where he made his baskets underneath you know. The other guys just couldn't compare to him he'd just bowl them over to get to the basket you know.

So, this at that time you know like I say that the people here in Granite were really proud of Andy and also the other guys on the team because when Andy passed away, that was about a month and a half ago. I was talking to one of the basketball players that played with him and that's the guy I forgot that I said there was another Armenian kid and I couldn't think of his name, John Markarian, but I told him, I said, "John maybe you guys don't realize it, but I'm going to tell you right now you guys made Andy Phillip." I said, "He couldn't do that by himself." I said, "You guys praised the heck out of him." I said, "I'm Hungarian and I'm proud that there was a Hungarian kid down here that played basketball that great, you know." But I said, "I realized that as he was playing that he's had some pretty nice guys in back of him too, you know what I mean." That really helped out and that's the way he got into the pros.

So, yeah , this team I mean and this community I don't know how other people felt about him, but I was proud to live down here. Listen I'd walk this street and my chest would swell out to here[holds both hands extended from chest] you know I was just I just thought it was the greatest community you could live in. When we were kids going to high school you know there was always some place you could go. We went to dances like at the VFW in Edwardsville and they had the White Swan night club

and the Bellviste and a bunch of doggone places over in East St. Louis. Courts and shurns and places like that, but what it was is we'd go out there and we danced and that's what they liked to do to kids in those days. A lot of them jitterbugged, a lot of them slow danced, but they were all good dancers and we had a tremendous time, we weren't cut short having a good time. I mean we always had some place to go, I feel sorry for kids nowadays. Where can they go? You know I maybe shouldn't mention this, but I could remember that heck I was seventeen years old, still going to high school. I could walk into the White Swan and see the best strip teasers on the circuit. Right there in that night club. And I could sit down and drink a mixed drink you know and sit down and actually drink that drink, have the police walking and look around. There was no ruckus, everybody was behaving themselves, turn around, and walk out. They wouldn't even ask you to see a card whether you were eligible to drink or not. So, you know the only thing about us is that we knew how to take care of ourselves to. We didn't drink to where we got loaded, or to we were so numb we couldn't you know couldn't even talk without stumbling on words and everything else. But it was a great time, it was the forties, in the fifties, and even into the sixties. Great times out here as kids and like I said I really feel sorry for the kids nowadays because I look at them and I say, "You know they're always looking for something to do and unfortunately it's something that's wrong to do." And that's bad to them.

I could remember too when you were talking about life down here, I wanted to be in boy scouting but my dad would never let me. He would always say, "I got work for you to do." And he did most of the time. I mean I worked Saturdays, Sundays, at home you know. I don't care if it was you know holy day or whatever it was. I worked, that's the way my dad felt. And he'd always tell me, he'd say, "na na na na", he says, "you don't have no time for that, I don't want you running around in the woods you know, I got work for you here to do" So he used to get me mad so I guess around 1970 I got involved in scouting. And I started out as a committee man and I didn't spend too long in that position, and then I became assistant scout master, and finally scout master. I really liked scouting I thought it was probably the nicest thing that a person could do to help the youth of America out. And I was proud to be a scout master, the only thing is I had kids that were capable of being a lot better scouters than they were, but they wouldn't try for their badges. When they went to camp they were more interested in running around in the woods, swimming, you know, out on the rifle range, or out on the archery range and that's about it. You know they weren't interested in getting up into the ranks to where they could make it to eagle scout. I think I was at it for about twelve years and I made I think six eagles. Two of them came from the Army Depot, their father was a colonel and one of the boys, his name was Kevin Greene. He had a brother that was Keith. Kevin played in pro football and I didn't even want to believe it at the time that I saw him that

it was the same person because at the time I knew these two boys they were tall and lanky and then all of a sudden to see Kevin and he's muscular, he's built, but he started through the football program here in Granite City High School when he came here. And he was doing weight lifting at that time so he just carried that through college and finally into the pros where he became a darn good football player. So you know that made me kind of proud.

I have a kid from down here who is on the fire department now that I am proud of. He also goes around in that emergency vehicle they got out to the wrecks on the road and stuff like that. I could remember one of the kids that was on the camp staff out there now right now he is a lawyer. His name is Bill Brink and I'm proud of him because we've sat and talked many times and you know I told him, I said, "Look if you have that kind of desire, by all means go ahead, grab that ring and run with it." I said, "because one of these days you're gonna be kicking yourself right in the tail end for not doing it." And I was kind of tickled when he went to school and actually became a lawyer, you know I felt like I did something to help him out, give him that nudge in the right direction.

I've seen kids that come into my troop that their speech was very bad, not that mine's great but these kids were really bad. And have one of them come to me just recently was in service, and still yet is, but at that time tell me "Jack you know", he says, "If I hadn't been in scouting I don't think I would've gotten through boot camp." He says, "That's the

only thing that saved me was that I was in scouting.” And his speech everything is just changed completely, the kids nicer, you know it just gives you a feeling, hey doggonit, some of it washed off you know some way or another something stuck with them that I told them.

Olliges: It gives you great pride?

Vizer: Yeah, and I’d have still been in scouting except that while I was in scouting I began to notice you know that they had a great abundance of people that worked there, I mean that went to camp that their occupations were such that we could actually form like a working battalion in camp and have enough people that knew a little bit about everything you know that we could get by. We could build anything we wanted to build. All we needed was the money. So we formed a group that we called the Moccasins and that’s what it was, it was a battalion like that we when camp would close up we’d go into camp and we’d build brand new staff cabins. I think we built some twenty staff cabins and a bunch of brand new johns and stuff like that that they needed in camp and we did a lot of work with the telephone systems and electrical system. Just did work around the camp and we would still probably of had that group, but what had happened is one day they called the guy that was head of the Moccasins to the scout office and they said that they heard that they were taking money that was donated to us to build things and we were

buying food, liquor, and stuff like that and taking it to camp. Which wasn't true, every penny that they gave us we spent on materials. I don't say we didn't have beer at camp, but the time that we had beer at camp there was no kids, no minors. They were all adults, everybody behaved themselves. We never got to a point where we had a drunkard up there or somebody trying to get into a fight or something like that. I figured these guys worked hard enough they want to go have a glass of beer or a bottle of beer they are quite welcome to it as long as they behaved themselves. But anyhow, they told us our services were no longer needed so I fell out of scouting because of that, but I still believe that if somebody wants to contribute something to help the boys, that is one organization that I would recommend because I think it builds the boys. It really does.

[END OF TAPE 1, SIDE A]

[BEGIN TAPE 1, SIDE B]

Olliges: The date is October 29, 2001, I am interviewing Jack Vizer at Lincoln Place Community Center. My name is Rance Olliges. This is Tape 1 side B. And Jack is going to talk about his family life.

Vizer: Well, like I say you know when I graduated in forty-seven from high school I was kind of glad that you know that I at least went through the

high school and I could tell you that it was no pleasant experience for me because for some reason or another we like I say, if you were from Lincoln Place you were on the other side of the tracks, and that was all that was to it and most of your teachers would let you know it too. But one thing I did do in high school was take up drafting courses. When I went out there I wanted to be a chemist but then I took a little bit of shop to give you a little bit of each shop in order to try to find out what you liked the best and I put that drafting pencil in my hand and it just felt good like it belonged there.

So that's what I wanted to be, but like I say at that time most of the men would come back from World War II and it was hard finding a job so I went to work for a company called International Shoe, and I worked only a total of five years for them and then finally I got drafted into the Korean War and I went over to Korea. And I'm not gonna even say too much about Korea except that being out there sometimes had made me sick because of the way some of the people lived. And I really felt sorry for them. A little later I'll just give a little bit more reference to that Korean War, but right now we'll stick with how I fared, and just where I ended up.

But anyhow, I worked for International Shoe and they'd made some promises for me that when I went into service that when I come back that they were going to do for me. Well I came back and it just didn't happen. And one of the deals was, that if I ever got married I'd get a five dollar raise. Well when I got married I only got two fifty, and that really

steamed me. But anyhow, I finally seen an ad in the paper for a draftsman for McDonnell Aircraft and my wife got me applications that I filled out and I finally got an interview with McDonnell Aircraft and they gave me a test, a drafting test. And I scored very high on that and they hired me, and they hired me at a salary that was almost double what I was making at International Shoe. So I went back and I told them I was giving them two weeks notice and the boss at that time he asks me. He says, "Well what did they offer you, maybe we could match it." I says, "I wouldn't even want to tell you what they're gonna give me because I think I'd embarrass you too much, so we just forget you made that remark, but I can't refuse the job."

So I went and worked for them. It was nice. I liked working out there and I would've really liked to have stuck with them mainly because I kind of like aircrafts you know. And I could feel that you know that the only thing that I didn't like about the place was that every time a little something would happen, well they'd lay off people. And I'd seem to get laid off always, and the way it seemed like they worked that thing was when you got laid off the first time your time your IBM card had a little punch in there that said "laid off". I was fortunate every month or so that I was out of work there, I'd get hired back again in some other position, but back with the company. So that when I got laid off again, it seemed like they threw all these cards into the machine and the thing is we're gonna find out who were laid off because they had already been laid off, so

they're used to it. So now your card fell out again, so now you says, "Well, every third one that falls out of there we're gonna lay them off." So they'd count, and I'd always seem to be in there. So I got the five years, I think I got laid off about three times. Always got a job back with them. But anyhow, the fourth time that I got laid off, I started looking for another job. And I was looking for what they called the Mark Building which was on Tucker Boulevard in St. Louis, right next to the police academy and there were some job descriptions that they were writing up that they needed a draftsman and these guys thought that I'd fit the bill, but they hadn't gotten the okay on the job descriptions so I told them you know I says, "I'm kind of worried, I'm laid off and I need the money and the Corps of Engineers you know they want to hire me as a draftsman. They want to hire me at a GS-5 and you're offering a GS-7, I'd rather have the GS-7." And that guy says, "Look at it this way. Why don't you go work for them? And when we get these job descriptions. We'll give you a call." He says, "You won't mind coming over here for a promotion, would you?" I said, "No." I said, "Well okay fine." So I went back and told them at the Boatman Bank building that I'd accept the job. So I waited, and waited, and waited and heck these guys never did phone me back from the Mark Building. So I phoned them back you know I told them, I says, "You know you guys think you would let me know you know when these jobs are filled, are gonna be filled." And I said, "I hear now that they're already filled and you know you hadn't even informed

me anything about it.” He says, “ Well, we would’ve liked to have you Jack.” He says, “Except for one thing, we got notice from the government that what we needed to do was fill positions and get people off of the unemployment line you know, and you were working already, and so you know it just happened that that’s the way it had to work out. That we had to take somebody from outside that wasn’t working.” So I was really teed off because that I lost two grades that way. But as it turns out, it was probably one of the luckiest things I ever had happen because I got into a department that was in electrical design and I loved the job that I had. I mean it was just wonderful. I felt like no matter what they asked me to do, I could do it. And I did this job for twenty-three years. I worked in the office and I elevated my grade from a GS-5 all the way up to a GS-11 technician. From a draftsman general to a technician, and I was the first person in design branch to get the grade of GS-11 technician. Nobody else was that high, but shucks it seems that once we had this Nixon in there and he got caught with this building that they burglarized and it got to be that if you worked for a government, you were a nobody. And all you were out there for was to take the taxpayers money and not give anything you know for the money you were getting which was a total lie but anyhow I stuck with them for about three years after all of this stuff going around and the atmosphere in the group too and the other groups inside the Corps of Engineers was getting to the point where it was

starting to bother me. I began to get as gloomy as everybody. I says,
“Boy, this is no way to feel.”

So I found out that there was a job opening up in Alton, Illinois, a new Lock and Dam twenty-six that they were building on the Mississippi here. So I went up to see the group where they had the person that hired all the people that went to work in the field for the Corps of Engineers. And he told me, he says, “Jack I tell you what, we’ll give you this opportunity to go out there and work, but I tell you what it will be for a ninety day tour.” He said, “I tell you why I’m gonna do that.” He said, “I want you to go out there and I want you to work. When your ninety days are complete, and you want the work that you’re doing, and you want to stay out there, fine. We’ll write up papers to have you transferred just like that.” And he says, “Well, if you go out there and you work and you don’t like it, after ninety days that job that you had with the electrical section will no longer be there for you. You’ll be offered to somebody else.” Well, I says, “It sounds reasonable, it’s pretty nice.” So I tried it. The boss that I was working for up there before I even had sixty day done called me into the office and he asks me, he says, “Are you serious about working out here?” And I says, “Well, I wouldn’t have come out here unless I thought you know that I was serious about it.” So he says, “Well, we’d like to write up paperwork on you to have you transferred from design branch out here to construction as an electrical inspector. How do you feel about that?” I

said, "Be my guest." So you know doggonit I was the luckiest guy in the world because I found a second job that I loved.

So now here it was that I filled in thirty-four years with the government and I loved the jobs that I had. How good were those jobs? When I went to work I'd whistle. That's how happy I was. I was really just the happiest and most content one person you ever seen in your life and I loved the people I worked with. The Corps of Engineers, the people there were so intelligent it scared the living daylights out of me. I could think of only one time that I felt bad, and that was when I worked for McDonnell Aircraft. They had a guy that was working there that I looked at and I thought, "Jesus, this guy looks like he ought to be in the back of a car with a mule." You know, that's the way he looked. I mean just absolutely duncy. So one day, they put me to work with this guy. He was the lead man and God I walked in there one day and I says, "You know, by golly this guy is the second thing to a genius." I mean he was the smartest son-of-a-gun I have ever seen in my life. I mean that, he was intelligent. He really was, but one thing I like about having done these things that I did, criticizing a guy, was the fact that I found out that what you first do is take a look at the person. The next thing you do is find out what he does. And the next thing you find out, does he do it well? If he does it well, don't criticize him you know. So I stopped criticizing people like that. I said, "Well". I just got to a point where I just felt that every person had value. You just had to find out what that value was and I learned this quite

young. So I was real tickled because it helped me all the way through my career.

Why did I leave the Corps of Engineers? I didn't have to, I could've stayed longer than I did. But at that time they were having a hard time trying to get new people into the Corps of Engineers and people like me were holding them back. They couldn't fire me because it would take an act of Congress. So what they did is they came to me one day and they said, "We're trying to keep some of our younger players, people, so I tell you what. If you guys." The ones that are the older ones, and I wasn't the only one that was at this meeting. There was about eight of us and they said, "If you guys retire, I tell you what we'll do. We'll give you a twenty-five thousand dollar incentive to leave the Corps of Engineers and retire." So I sat there and I thought, "Well hey, twenty-five thousand dollars, that's awful hard to put in the bank, even with the salary that I was making." Well, how good was my salary? I could tell you that when I worked. Saturday's are overtime, I was the highest paid employee in the Corps of Engineers I'm not kidding you. It's no lie, but anyhow like I say I took a look at that twenty-five thousand dollars and it swayed me. If I had to do it again, would I do it again? No. I was a much happier person working. I don't like retirement. I don't.

Olliges: Didn't work at all after that?

Vizer: Like I say, when they offered me this money. Heck, it was like two weeks and we were out of the Corps of Engineers eight of us. Everybody that was at that meeting retired. [coughs] But, even in retirement I can't complain too much about what I'm getting, you know, retirement. It's pretty damn good money for a person that ain't doing anything. So I make about two thousand dollars a month plus about another one hundred fifty-three from social security and that's clear. Take the taxes and everything and put it back into that. When I retired, I retired with sixty-six and two-thirds percent of my salary. I can't complain about that. But I just you feel now that I'm retired I just feel like I'm of no importance.

Olliges: And living in Lincoln Place ever since?

Vizer: You know, I don't know how you feel? But when you have a job that has importance to it, you begin to feel very, very important yourself, you know. And when they take that away from you, you're lost. I'm not kidding you, you're lost and that's the way it was for me. I did a lot of schooling with the government, I worked different places, I was on projects with different engineers, Corps of Engineering establishments. But we did jobs in Nebraska. We did another one down in Louisiana. Our primary job in the Corps of Engineers was to, well I shouldn't say to, but it was in flood protection. We were there strictly for flood protection. We built during the time I was in the Corps, sixty-three different pumping

stations down the Illinois side and Missouri side of the River that pumped storm water sewage and all that to the river in high river stage. We had five different locks and dams that we took care of. We had four reservoirs and one of them is in Hannibal, Missouri. It's sort of like a small town sulk. It's a beautiful place. If you ever get a chance, get up around Hannibal and you'll drive across a little town they call Center. Very easy to remember, Center. And you'll turn off and you'll go into Center and you'll come out there to this reservoir out there. It's beautiful. It's a turbine job, got turbines up there creates electricity. Like I say, there's a lot of things I did for the Corps that I really made my job a lot of fun.

Olliges: So, why did you decide to stay in Lincoln Place and live here?

Vizer: Pardon me?

Olliges: Why did you decide to stay in Lincoln Place and live here?

Vizer: Well, I looked at a house in, why I guess you wouldn't call it even East Granite, not West Granite, but anyhow closer to Pontoon Beach. And it was a big house, two story house and the size of the rooms and everything impressed me. But, I am not a pretty good carpenterist you know, so what I did was I took my dad to see this. So he didn't say nothing much while I was talking to the guy who owned the place. My

dad would walk around and look at the building, down in the basement and so on, and after a while he calls me over to the side and he says, "I want to show you something." So I says, "okay". So they had a door that was on the side of the house that led to a driveway, it was a gravel driveway, and he goes up to it and he opens the door and he takes the side of the jam and he starts hitting it with his fist. And he says, "You hear that?" I said, "Hear what?" He says, "Listen real close." So he hits it. I says, He says, "You know what's happening?" I says, "No." He says, "Step back from the house, I'll show you." He says, "What's happening is termites took that jam and it ate up that jam up to the second story followed the two by four and went up to the roof." He says, "Now look at that paper, roofing paper, and everything that's on this house, shingles." And he says, "Notice how it lays in the gutter like?" I says, "yeah." He says, "They already ate away the ends of that house over there." He says, "This house is gonna cost you some money to really fix it up you know to be a house that you'd like to live in." He says, "It would cost you too much."

So somehow I found out about this lot that I have here now and the guy that owned the lot is actually the guy that helped. He was the top honcho in building this community center and a lot of beautiful homes, that brick homes that are down in this community he's built. He was a doggone good carpenter and a construction man. But anyhow, he helped me with this house and actually the lot was his. He sold me the lot for a thousand

dollars. I couldn't buy in a lot anywhere for a thousand dollars. This one had the sewer, the gas, everything was right there. All I had to do was dig at the edge of the sidewalk where he told me to dig and I found the gas line. I found the sewer line. I found everything you know that took to connect up to the house and this you know approximately saved me two thousand dollars if I had to have the city come and plug the sewer, not plug, but open it up for a sewer for me. And then the same thing with the gas and everything. It would have cost me, but I saved that kind of money. And this guy helped me build that house. I didn't pay him a penny. He would come over and he'd say, "The only reason I come here.", he says, "Because I like your dad." I says, "I'll tell you something if you like my dad, I like you too, you know because my dad likes you." I said, "I don't want to say anything, you know, more because I don't want to get you mad or say the wrong thing." But his guy would actually come down and help me build this house and I'm thankful I had him. The money I then I saved on property tax living down here would make up for the money I would lose if I'd try to sell the house because if I'd built anywhere in Granite I could tell you that at that time which I built my house which was the '60s it would've run me approximately four thousand dollars for a lot. And again, your utilities you'd have to have put in, so that's gonna cost you extra for that. To have a contractor come down and build a home on it it would have been unheard of even for me to try to even build a home you know.

So by building it down here, and getting a permit, and having the people to help me like my uncle, my brother, me, this contractor, and my dad. I built that house, material, bought all the material, fifteen thousand dollars. Put that house up for that amount of money. Now, you notice it excludes labor, but the labor was free. Add the labor to it and it would have run me you know about the same price as I would have paid for the material in those days. It would run fifty-fifty so that would have been another fifteen thousand. It would have been a thirty thousand dollar house, plus a thousand I paid for the lot. If I tried to build that anywhere else in Granite. You could take that thirty thousand dollars in 1960 and double it. It would cost me about sixty thousand dollars to build a house. And not like they're building them now.

I mean when you're talking about building your homes were very modest. You know if you went inside my house I've got a living room, I've got a kitchen, two bedrooms, a bathroom, two rooms up above that were bedrooms, but my kids are gone so they're no longer used, but I don't have a dining room. My dining room is my kitchen. That's the way I lived when I was born. That's the kind of house my father built. That's the kind of house I built, but nowadays, gee, you know it's nothing now to go down and look at a house and they want one hundred eighty thousand dollars for it. So, all I could say to a person, you know, is, "Hey, if you got the ability and know how to get through college by all means do it, because that's the only way you are going to buy a home like that."

Because that's the person that's going to have the money is the guy that's educated. Your steel mills you know someday you might go down here in Granite City Steel and not see a person, just a bunch of robots running around you know. That's the kind of society that you're growing up in. I'm not happy with it.

I left engineering and I haven't told you that portion, but I'll mention it now that I didn't like machines. I didn't like the automated drafting machines. And the reason for it was everything that they put out was identical. The names were different, but the printing, the way it was drawn and everything was all drawn the same way. I lost my individuality. I practiced my printing for twenty some odd years to the point where I had beautiful upper and lower case printing you know and I had a certain way I did my drawings that made them unique. That drafting machine it wasn't unique. It was the same all the way through, so I kind of didn't like that, and that's was one of the reasons that I left too.

Olliges: Now you talked about how everything's been changing. How do you think this community has changed since you started living here?

Vizer: Well, I tell you the good people are gone. I mean, you know, it burns me up because it seems that all I do nowadays is carry them out to the graveyard you know [coughs]. And you don't see these people out here on the streets and on the sidewalks talking like they used to. You know

like these farm people, no matter what they were doing always had the time to come out and say, "Hello" to you, you know, shake hands with you, talk a little bit with you, you know. Just it was a wonderful life. They helped one another. You don't find that too much. You know what means me, is that I could remember going to this one guy's house and I asked him, well this is before I built the house that I own now, but anyhow. I'd ask him, "Well how's your neighbors?" He says, "I don't know I never see the guy." I says, "Well, don't you talk to your neighbors?" He says, "Well, if he don't want to talk to me, I don't want to talk to him, and that's the way it is." You know, no closeness, you know.

Olliges: Not like it used to be?

Vizer: Yeah, it's all gone. When I was a kid I used to remember families would gather together like my family. Christ, there was three different families here, they're all the same, they're Viziers okay. But my grandfather was in the Hungarian Moosize and he told me, which was the Hungarian infantry, he says, "This is the way we spelled out name in Hungary, and this is the way I am going to spell it here." Now the reason some of them changed was the fact that there was too much Johns, too many Louies, and you got letters mail mixed up and Christ you'd sit there and you'd read a letter and say, "Well, who the heck is this, well I don't know?" To find out it was for some other relative here in the community.

But anyhow see down here they decided to go split the way they spelled their names. So, my family's stuck with the V-I-Z-E-R. Then, another family took V-E-I-Z-E-R which spells the same way Veizer. The third family group took W-E-I-Z-E-R, Weizers but they're all Vizers. They're all related. We used to have big barbeques and the whole clan was out there you know what I mean. You don't see that no more. There's a few people who will go out and maybe with a friend and barbeque out at the Pier Marquette or someplace like that. Listen when we went to Pier Marquette, we took over. I mean to tell you, you know, that's how many people were out there. And all nice people just, you know, just wonderful. They knew what sweat was you know. People today they don't know what sweat is.

Olliges: They worked hard and kept the community together?

Vizer: Sometimes they'd sweat and it'd stink and I says you know something, "To me it smells like roses." I said, "Then you could really tell a guy's really giving out." You know. So that way the neighborhood's changed. Like let's say now I get to a point where I don't, I'm beginning to fear that one of these days I'm gonna get one of these people to move next door to me and I ain't gonna want to talk to him, and he ain't gonna want to talk to me you know. Although, my time's kind of running out you know. I don't think I'll see that day, but it could happen. I don't know, you know,

you just, you just see things that like buildings that we had down here that are deteriorating and tore down and nobody even trying to do anything to try to save that building or try to make that building fit to live in again. And what's happening here is the city comes in here and tears this damn place down. And here you got a basement in here, and instead of tearing out the concrete in that basement and filling it with dirt and making it just a beautiful lot that somebody might want to buy and build a home on. People won't do it because they know that thing's got a foundation and it wasn't taken out and it's gonna cost them a fortune to have it removed so they can build a home on it. And it gets me mad that that's the way they do it all over the place. I don't know where you got your education from? Whether you're from Granite or?

Olliges: No, I'm from a small town called Breese.

Vizer: Breese?

Olliges: Yeah.

Vizer: Breese, Illinois, I know where that is. It's out there toward Carlyle.

Olliges: Yep.

Vizer: Yeah. Yeah that's a nice town. A little sleepy hollow one. But heck I could remember Carlyle was like that until we built the reservoir there. Now it looks pretty nice.

Olliges: Yep. Now I'm living in O'Fallon though. But I'm moving out this way slowly.

Vizer: But I'll tell you something, I could tell you that I couldn't have made it through college. And the reason for it was my math was bad, but I never had people that I could go to, you know, when I had problems with that. That would help me out like most of the kids who are young. They're friends and they stick together and they work their assignments together and everything you know. I never had that and it made it kind of difficult for me. But I'll tell you something I could tell you this that I could kick myself right in the seat of the pants for not trying though. I should've tried. It's too late now you know and somebody says, "Well, why didn't you when you got married?" I said, "You try doing schoolwork with three kids that's raising hell with the wife." And I said, "It's not so easy to do." So like I said it took working with the government and the fact that they sent me to school that I got confidence to do things, you know, that and get by with them that I wasn't as intelligent and sometimes it was the other guy's fault. I had to take the National Electric Course which is a book about so thick its got about five hundred and some odd pages. If you

could memorize everything that's in there, you could write your own check. But I found out that I scored sometimes higher than any engineer, but then again to I have to be honest and say there were some portions of it when I read, I can't even interpret. I'd have to have an engineer interpret to it for me.

So we all have our value but gee I'll tell you I'd give anything if this neighborhood were to only be like it was when I was a kid. I would. I could sit here on a corner on a summer day and it's just like going to a movie. I could see every one of the guys I grew up with and I could start remembering. It was just like a flashback you know and say, "Gee you know that was a great time, where in the heck are these people?"

Olliges: Well I guess that about does it.

Vizer: Yeah.

Olliges: Well, thank you for the interview

Vizer: I thank you for having it and sorry somebody told you I played with the basketball team here. I don't know who would've told you that but.

Olliges: It was still a great interview, thank you.

Vizer: I tell you if you want more information on Andy Phillip. I don't know what connections you got with trying to get over to the Granite City High School, but they have a building out there that they call their Hall of Fame one you know. And there is a lot of stuff in there about Andy Phillip. Some of the other athletes you were after because you see the thing that I didn't say here and I should've because we had a kid like a Bulgarian kid that lived down here whose name is Gilbert Georgeff. He's a darn good basketball player. Norman Martinez, not Norma but Joe Martinez he's another good basketball player, and they played here in Granite and they had doggone good team in Granite a year or two except that it seemed like when they got to like a championship game or something like that or close to a championship game there would always be some little error that lost it for them. The guy that I was talking about he was the principal at Hillsboro High School in Hillsboro, Missouri. He's a good friend of mine. We used to build model airplanes and I could remember he had one that had four thousand parts on it. We worked all year putting that thing together. Took it out, flew it for thirty seconds, it crashed and that was it. [laughs] I mean it just did a loop to loop and that was it. Right now, for me I've kind of gone back a little see I'm building three remote control airplanes. I almost got all of them done. I mean, needs a little work on this one, a little work on that one you know and it's just that I kind of got tired. I kind of got burned out and maybe this winter when the snow's coming and I don't have anything to do I could complete them up, but I

look at them and I say you know, "Hey, for a seventy year old guy that's a pretty nice looking damn airplane you know." I was surprised that I could still do it and it looks as nice as any of them I've ever seen you know.

Some guys say, "So what's you gonna do with them." I says, "One goes to my youngest son, one goes to my oldest son, and I've got one I'm not going to fly it. It's just going to be there in case one of them crashes, tears up his, I got another one to go to him." But listen, it was nice talking to you okay.

Olliges: It was nice talking to you, thanks.

[End of Interview]