

# **Edwin Fancher**

An Oral History Interview  
Conducted for the GVSHP Preservation Archives  
by  
John Berman and Roberta Gratz

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## ABSTRACT

Edwin Fancher (born 1923) was a co-founder and part-owner of the *Village Voice* from the 1950s until the 1970s. In this oral history, Fancher describes the origins of the *Voice*—how he met his business associate Dan Wolf, what the local New York City press scene was in the 1950s and why he and Wolf decided to launch the *Voice*. He also identifies the *Voice*'s early financial backers, including Norman Mailer and Howard Bennett.

From there, Fancher discusses the early years of the *Voice*, including the paper's financial difficulties and growing rift between him and Wolf on the one side and Mailer on the other, regarding the direction the paper should take. Fancher speaks with pride of the talented writers who worked for the *Voice*, such as Niccolo Tucci, Mike Harrington, Jerry Talmer, John Wilcock and Mary Nichols. He also discusses the paper's role covering the local scene—both the artistic community and local politics. Included in the latter is Mary Nichols' influential reporting of the fight to close Washington Square Park to traffic. In addition, he recreates the lively environment of the *Voice*'s offices in the 1960s and explains his and Dan Wolf's respective roles in running the paper. Fancher concludes by discussing the controversies regarding the sale of the *Voice* in the early 1970s, as well as its subsequent ownership by Rupert Murdoch.

INTERVIEWEE: Edwin Fancher  
INTERVIEWERS: John Berman and Roberta Gratz  
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GRATZ: Can you start at the beginning? How did you and Dan [Wolf] connect?

FANCHER: We met in January 1946. Dan and I were both back from the wars, he from the Pacific where he was in combat and I from Italy where I had been in combat. We both became students at the New School for Social Research on 12th Street.

GRATZ: Which has already started by then?

FANCHER: The New School started in the 1920s.

BERMAN: Right, after World War I.

FANCHER: We [Dan and I] became acquainted and took courses together and became very close friends. I studied psychology and took a couple of degrees at the New School. Dan did various things, became a writer working for the Columbia Encyclopedia and so on.

GRATZ: What was he doing at the time?

FANCHER: We were both on the G.I. Bill studying full-time. We were part of that whole group of veterans that came flocking back, particularly at the New School. There was a lot of excitement and many writers, and lots going on there. We

remained good friends. I went on to become a psychologist and had various jobs in psychology. I was finishing up my psychology internship when Dan said, “Let’s start a weekly newspaper in the Village because the *Villager* really doesn’t represent the culture of the Village as we know it.” We were part of what could probably be called a kind of a bohemian culture, focused around the San Remo and Louie’s Bar. We were friends with Jimmy [James] Baldwin and Kerouac and Ginsberg—a whole lot of literary people. And so he and I started talking about that [the newspaper] in late 1954 and he said, “We need money. Maybe Norman Mailer will bring some money in.”

GRATZ: Was he part of your circle at that time?

FANCHER: He was a friend of Dan’s. He was not really a friend of mine, but Dan knew him. I had a small inheritance so I had \$5,000 to put into the newspaper and Norman had \$5,000 and we figured that with \$10,000 we could certainly—

GRATZ: Buy the world!

FANCHER: So, we hoped to start, we planned it for the spring of 1955, expecting to publish around Labor Day. I think it ended up being a little later than that, I think it was October 24<sup>th</sup> when we did get an issue out. And we very soon ran out of our money so we brought another investor in who helped us out and I borrowed some money.

GRATZ: Who was the new investor?

FANCHER: It was a guy who was also an old friend of mine from the New School named Howard Bennett who had just come back from Mexico. He was a philosophy

student at the New School. So he brought in some money, Norman and I each invested a little more and that got us into the spring of 1956. By then Norman had started a weekly column in the *Voice* and he insulted everybody in this column—absolutely everybody. And there were a lot of letters attacking him. We thought it was wonderful, but Norman was very restless at the time and he got very angry when some typographical errors occurred. He blamed Dan and had a fight with him and that was that. Then, he [Mailer] took the position that he just didn't agree with us about the direction of the *Voice*. He thought it should be much more radical than it was and should go out with a burst of glory.

GRATZ: Who were some of the writers?

FANCHER: Niccolo Tucci who had been a writer with the *New Yorker*. Harrington. Mike Harrington.

GRATZ: Was Harrington published yet for his books?

FANCHER: No, not his books. Jerry Talmer was enormously important to us.

GRATZ: Jerry was a colleague of mine and is still at the *Post*.

FANCHER: Jerry was the only one who really knew how to run a newspaper. He had been the editor of the *Dartmouth Daily* and was very important, not only as drama editor (which he was excellent at), but just in the mechanics of getting the paper out. John Wilcox was important also.

GRATZ: For the record, Jerry went to the *Post* just before I did, early 1960s, as a theater reviewer.

FANCHER: Yes. Right.

BERMAN: Now, were all these people writing as freelancers for you or were some of them actually on staff?

FANCHER: Mostly freelancers, but Jerry was on staff and John Wilcock was on staff.

GRATZ: The *Voice* was notorious for not paying.

FANCHER: Well, we didn't have any money! We would pay our payroll on Friday and the bookkeeper would say, "This is a good week, we can postdate the checks for Monday" or "This is a bad week it will be postdated Tuesday or Wednesday." I mean this happened quite often.

GRATZ: So Jerry was a staff writer. Did you have others?

FANCHER: No, because there were so many people who wanted to contribute like Tucci or George, no not George but Gilbert Seldes. They contributed every week. Wilcock asked him if he could write an article and he ended up writing for us every week. Then, when we're going for a year, Jules Pfeiffer came in and started his weekly cartoon. We had another cartoonist, I can't even think of his name now but he was Swedish. He came to us after he saw the *Voice* and offered his cartoon for free. They didn't have any words in them; they were all silent cartoons and we ran them for years.

People came around to us who wanted to write about art and dance and do book reviews. What happened was that as soon as we came out, a lot of mostly

young writers came out of the woodwork and wanted write in the *Voice*. Between Dan and Jerry and myself we knew a lot of writers around the Village.

GRATZ: In the context of the time, clearly the *Villager* was not reflecting what you wanted to write about; you emerged as a reflection of artistic New York, not simply the Village. Aside from the *New Yorker*, what other publications were welcoming to the avant-garde in the arts? Who did you see as competition?

FANCHER: Well, we certainly saw the *New York Times* as competition. Very early on, Dan would send young reporters out to cover political stories. They would come back, write the stories and Dan would say, “That’s not what the *Times* said.” And the reporter would respond, “That’s because the *Times* is wrong. Their reporter left half way through the meeting.” We began to feel that local news was important for us to cover. We saw that we also had to be a citywide paper.

GRATZ: When did Mary Nichols join the paper?

FANCHER: I’m not sure. It was pretty early. She was a housewife in the neighborhood who was interested in the political scene. She came in and wrote about it.

GRATZ: What were some of the issues that you dealt with after you started that were civic rather than simply artistic issues?

FANCHER: The Village Independent Democrats were just getting going—a reform political group that really came out of the reform movement started by the 1956 Stevenson campaign.

BERMAN: Carol Greitzer mentioned this.

GRATZ: And VID was really Carol Greitzer and Ed Koch and that whole leadership.

FANCHER: Right. And they were, of course, fighting against the whole DeSapio club with people like Passanante, who was very powerful at that time.

GRATZ: It was a real good guys/bad guys, black hats/white hats scenario.

FANCHER: That's right. Passanante actually later joined the VID. At one event I ran into Passanante. We had criticized the open-air art show, which had been a tradition in the Village for a number of years. Passanante came up to me and said, "Ed, you can get away with a lot of things but if you continue to attack the open air art show, your newspaper is going to go down."

GRATZ: Wasn't this also the era of Robert Moses and the West Village urban renewal?

FANCHER: That was a little later but that became a major battle for the *Voice*, preventing Moses from putting a sunken highway through Washington Square.

GRATZ: And that's where Mary was writing.

FANCHER: Yes. She was probably the main person.

GRATZ: My memory is that Mary Nichols was crucial in covering Village battles, civic battles, in terms of community development issues and you guys were probably the first ones to take Jane Jacobs seriously.

FANCHER: Yes. And Shirley Hayes, too, who was really the leader of the whole campaign to get the Square closed to cars. Jane may have also written for us. Certainly she represented a point of view that we thought was important.

BERMAN: It sounds as though you were filling a void. You were informing people in the neighborhood and citywide about public affairs in a way that they had never been informed before. I wonder if you could talk a bit about that.

FANCHER: I think so, yes. We had an idea of having an open newspaper. That was the main idea. We had two ideas, really: one was an open newspaper and the other was to survive, which was very difficult. It took seven years to really break even.

GRATZ: We need to almost re-create the context of the era. Even the *New York Times* was much different than it is now. When I worked at the *Post* in 1963 there were seven daily newspapers in New York. We had the *World Telegram* and the *Journal American* and the *Herald Tribune*. The competition among all of them made coverage in the city better than it is now. The *Times* had Edith Evans Asbury living in the Village, writing about issues involving the Village. She loved when I started writing about landmarks because it was an issue that she cared about. So the *Times* were also covering a lot of the development issues in the city. When I go back and do research about that time period, I use many articles from the *Times*. Mary [Nichols] was always better but it is not like today when there is a real vacuum.

FANCHER: When the *Herald Tribune* went out, a *New York Times* reporter dropped by—something they did from time to time. He said, “This is a terrible day for the *New York Times*.” I said “Why?” He said, “As long as the *Tribune* is going, we can keep the *Times* honest.”

GRATZ: Which is how I felt when the *Post* was bought by Murdoch. I remember how I would write stories in the *Post* and my mother would read the same article in the *New York Times* two months later and remark how interesting it was and I would say, “Mom, I wrote that article two months ago.” Some people don’t believe anything until they read it in the *Times*. I never kidded myself that people read what I wrote but I do know that the editors of the *Times* read what I wrote and therefore it influenced what they wrote later. The same thing happened when *New York Newsday* went out.

FANCHER: The other thing we did that I think was important was that the *Voice* started to do criticism of the press. Nat Hentoff wrote a column of press criticism and I think that is very important.

BERMAN: One of the things I was thinking about was how you saw yourself doing things that hadn’t been done before and thus other papers felt the pressure to cover similar stories and do good neighborhood and urban reporting. In some of these early struggles, what do you think you did that was different? What information did they receive from you that they would not have gotten anywhere else?

FANCHER: I don’t know why but I think that because we had reporters out there who are interested in urban environment, had a philosophical commitment to the city and had not been trained in journalism school, they had a freer approach to the stories. I think they went out and wrote what they saw.

GRATZ: Exactly. I remember an important conversation I had with Paul Goldberger once which I really clarified the difference between our way of looking at things and I think this reflects something you represent. You not only were out there but you kept up attention to those things. You didn't just write one story and forget about the issue or come in when the battle was over and bemoan as the bulldozer went over....

FANCHER: I think that is very important.

GRATZ: I remember when I was involved in the whole campaign to save the Marasco and the Helen Hayes Theatre and I desperately tried to get Paul to write about it. He said to me, "At some point I'll write a story but I am not going to cover it like a war." But the fact is that it was a war. It was a civic battle. You covered battles. You kept the news flowing from the front so the public was informed. You don't have that today unless you have a Cuban child. We have stories in our own neighborhoods and no one is covering the way you guys did.

FANCHER: We were also trying to be a publication for writers. Writers would start following a story and they would get interested in a story and they would want to follow it through.

BERMAN: Can you give an example?

FANCHER: Yes. Mary Nichols on the closing of Washington Square to traffic and the campaign against the Lower Manhattan Expressway. She wrote that story for a couple of years, I guess, digging and digging and digging and keeping the story on the front burner.

BERMAN: Were you guys the first ones that actually started writing about that campaign?

FANCHER: Probably not, but we were the most dedicated.

GRATZ: It is an interesting story because one of Moses' greatest fans early on was Marian Heiskell and the *Times* was very pro-Moses. Things turned when he went after the playground at 67th Street—the children of the editors of the *New York Times*. But the view of Moses from the community perspective was the *Village Voice*. I don't know if they ever covered the Bronx issues but when it came to lower Manhattan, Mary was on top of it as soon as it happened.

BERMAN: Was there ever any kind of a sense of uneasiness on the part of you and Dan when it came to going after someone as powerful as Moses?

FANCHER: Absolutely not. I loved it. That was the fun of running the *Voice*—having people like Mary who were willing to do that kind of work.

GRATZ: I remember coming into your office in the early to mid sixties and it was like an open door. You never knew who you were going to run into.

FANCHER: That's right.

GRATZ: Dan loved it. You were always sitting on the side quietly. You were never part of the main conversation but you were taking it all in. It was like the play, "A View from Sidney Brunstein's Window", which seems to have been modeled after the *Voice* with Dan as the center of this various, interesting circle. For me, a kid

fresh out of college, I felt like I was meeting the interesting people on the New York scene.

FANCHER: People were always coming in and out and sitting down and talking. It was a great scene.

GRATZ: Did that translate outside of the walls of the office and on the pages of the paper? Was this where people wanted to be? Was it the Elaine's of the day?

FANCHER: Well, I don't know. I have never been to Elaine's. The Lion's Head was certainly the drinking hole.

GRATZ: Did people go from the office to hang out together at places like this?

FANCHER: Some did. Newfield, Flaherty. Flaherty was an interesting guy—a former longshoremen who wrote an article on Lindsey. Dan read it and liked it, put it on the front page of the *Voice* and Joe was so happy that he quit being a longshoreman and took a staff position with the *Voice*. He then became a campaign manager when Norman Mailer ran for mayor. But besides people like Koch and Stern who came around we also had a lot of young writers who found this a stimulating environment.

GRATZ: I was one of them.

FANCHER: There was Paul DeBruhl and Stephanie Harrington and Paul Cowan.

GRATZ: Remember the article by Margaret Hentoff making fun of her husband and other *Voice* writers for the radical chic of middle class whites holding a fundraiser

for the Black Panthers of Fire Island? There was a party for Stockley Carmichael out there and Margo did a piece with the image of the black maids standing on the walk of the party for the black radicals with only white people attending and her husband was one of the sponsors, as was Dan.

FANCHER: I remember that piece and Dan loved it!

GRATZ: Can you talk about Dan a little? Where was the division when it came to your respective roles?

FANCHER: Dan did most of the work. He was the editor and he worked most directly with the writers. I took charge of the business side of things—circulation and distribution especially. But he and I had lunch every day to discuss what was going on with the paper and stories that were coming out and so on. We shared a vision of what we wanted the *Voice* to be. The only disagreement we ever had was over selling it. I never wanted to sell the paper.

GRATZ: Why do you think he wanted to sell it?

FANCHER: I think he felt burnt out. He was 54 years old and his father died of a heart attack at 54. Money-wise, he had saved up very little and he was just exhausted. He wanted to get out and get some money.

GRATZ: Did [Clay] Felker approach you guys? Is that how it happened?

FANCHER: No, Carter Burden bought controlling interests in the *Voice* and we had a five-year contract to run the paper. By the fourth year, he had, behind our backs,

made arrangements to sell the *Village Voice* to *New York Magazine*.<sup>1</sup> It was a complicated story. Carter was hard to figure out and I was never sure what was going on behind the scenes since he never communicated with us. He became friends with Paul Tuffaut who was connected to Clay Felker. Now, *he* was an Elaine's-type person. Anyway, Clay Felker talked Carter Burden into selling his controlling interests behind our backs without giving us his 60-day notice that we were supposed to have had.

GRATZ: Where was Felker at the time when it came to *New York Magazine*?

FANCHER: He controlled it.

GRATZ: For a while he had both interests?

FANCHER: Yes. What happened was that after Felker bought the *Voice*, he came down to run it and after about six months he caused so much animosity that he backed off. Several writers quit at this time. Ron Rosenbaum tore his check up and threw it in his [Felker's] face.

BERMAN: This was when now?

FANCHER: This was in 1974 or 1975.

FANCHER: He fired Mary Nichols. He fired three of the four editors including Diane Fisher and Dan Wolf, of course. Several people left although we certainly encouraged them to stay since most of them needed the money!

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<sup>1</sup> Carden Burden acquired the *Village Voice* in 1970. It was merged with *New York Magazine* in 1974.

Felker then started a magazine called *New West*, which was supposed to be like a Los Angeles version of *New York Magazine*. Felker got three million dollars from the board of *New York Magazine* for this new venture. Apparently he ran through all the money in three months and came back for another three million and the board said that they wanted to see his books—his detailed bookkeeping records. They had a big fight about it and suddenly the board sold the *Voice*, *New York Magazine* and *New West* to Murdoch, who owned the *New York Post*, for 14 million dollars.<sup>2</sup>

GRATZ: Felker had a reputation of being a high spender. It wasn't simply that the magazine [*New West*] was losing money.

FANCHER: We heard that he wanted the board to buy his co-op on 57th Street and his house in the Hamptons and they decided to simply sell to Murdoch even as Felker tried to blackmail the board.

GRATZ: When Murdoch bought publications, that was really the end of journalism as we knew it. At least Felker knew about journalism. Once Murdoch took over the *Post*, that was it.

FANCHER: Not the *Voice* so much. He pretty much left the *Voice* alone.

GRATZ: Didn't it filter down?

FANCHER: No, he knew that if he fooled around with the *Voice*, he would have been in trouble.

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<sup>2</sup> This sale occurred in 1977.

BERMAN: Did you see that as a testament to the work that you and Dan had done—the fact that Murdoch was afraid to go after the *Voice*?

FANCHER: Yes, to some extent. I also think that Murdoch saw the *Voice* as a valuable economic property and he didn't want to fool around with it too much. He ended up keeping it just long enough to sell it.<sup>3</sup> He really hated the *Voice*. He cared about his bottom line.

GRATZ: The writers who wrote for the *Voice* did not write for it because this was their career. This was not what they lived on. They wrote for the *Voice* because it was conducive for people who wanted to write what they wanted to write and you couldn't do that anywhere else.

BERMAN: I was so struck by what Carol Greitzer told me—that one of the main reasons the campaign to close Washington Square Park to vehicle traffic was so successful was because the *Village Voice* was covering the story. Mary Nichols was writing about the issues and then others were writing, too. I feel like what wasn't being documented before was being chronicled. It seems as if you were building something.

FANCHER: Yes, I think so.

GRATZ: It seemed as if there was no way the *New York Times* or the other publications could avoid the issue and some were actually more supportive than the *Times*. Ray Rubinow and the Kaplan Fund were critical as well. But none of these things would have been effective if the coverage wasn't there as well. I see this today in cities where there is good local reporting. It makes all the difference.

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<sup>3</sup> Murdoch sold his interest in the *Village Voice* in 1985.

FANCHER: The *Voice* no longer has a real news department.

BERMAN: Well, it also doesn't have that real neighborhood base which is something that it seems like you had in those days. You dealt with national stories but you had a local focus about what was going on at the grassroots....

GRATZ: Were there things that you and Dan wanted to do that you couldn't do because of financial limitations?

FANCHER: Actually, I think some of the best things we did were done when we didn't have any money. We had some very devoted, enthusiastic, loyal people writing for us who saw the *Voice* as their paper. They weren't making a living but they were doing what they wanted to do. It was the kind of paper that Dan and I wanted and that we enjoyed.

BERMAN: Can you give any specific examples of any other stories besides Mary Nichols reports that focused on any other issues of concern to the Village?

FANCHER: Not off the top of my head. Remember that we did a lot of stories about the [Vietnam] War. Jack Newfield did a lot of stories about judges and corruption. We supported what seemed like an important movement in the city that was challenging conventions. We had a lot of writers going to California and to Europe. We even had Ted Jones writing from Timbuktu! He was a black poet. We had Mike Zwerin writing a jazz column, which included pieces that covered the jazz scene in Moscow. Our feeling was that anything that came along that was interesting was worth attention and energy.

BERMAN: What was it about that time that made it a ripe moment for this kind of publication?

FANCHER: I don't know. We were there and interested. The off-Broadway theater was taking off and the off-Broadway theatre meant a great deal to the *Voice*.

GRATZ: The *Voice* was also responsible for helping it [off-Broadway] grow.

FANCHER: Absolutely. We started the Obies.

GRATZ: The fifties, culturally, were considered a wasteland. The forties were considered the heyday of the creative arts. The people who were resisting or taking different course were some of the people that we have mentioned here including Kerouac and Ferlinghetti. They saw themselves as outsiders and this was the center of outsider arts and politics.

FANCHER: I also think that we were rebelling against the old Left party line reflected in publications like the *Nation* and the *New Republic*. Dan and I felt that there was a kind of liberalism that was so predictable. You pick up the *Nation* and you know exactly what their position will be on everything whether you know anything about it or not. When we started the *Voice* one of our goals was to avoid being like the *Nation* or *New Republic*. What we wanted was an open newspaper that would have liberal points of view but other points of view also and not to be burdened by ideological preconceptions.

BERMAN: Iconoclastic?

FANCHER: Yes.

BERMAN: But it seems that was partly generational. You were younger and that old Left that might have been writing for the *Nation* was coming from a different place perhaps—the Depression and the New Deal generation. Was that part of it, too, do you think?

FANCHER: Maybe, but Dan and I were also from the Depression. We grew up in the Depression.

GRATZ: I grew up in the Village at the same time. My parents were very much a part of that old Left. My mother used to sit and do needlepoint at Liberal Party meetings. She was so excited when I got a job at the *New York Post*. And the *Voice*, that was it...The Village was the center of all that. Even my father in his dry cleaning store. His clientele was a roster of the creative and the liberal voices of the city.

BERMAN: So it wasn't just generational. It wasn't just that there were young people saying, "This is our paper and we are trying to forge something different?"

GRATZ: The Village was the cradle of interesting thought in all corners—

FANCHER: I think so, yes.

GRATZ: —the arts, politics, dress, fashion. And then it shifted. The sixties represented a new generation of kids with a different mindset but it was still a new frontier.

BERMAN: I was wondering about you coming along in 1954, which was as the McCarthy era was starting to wane a little bit with the Army-McCarthy hearings having just taken place. The worst part of the anti-Communist crusade hysteria had an incredible impact on American culture but I wondered if the ebbing of this might have created an opening that you were able to take advantage of.

FANCHER: Well, I think we were very aware of the McCarthy era and its impact. But we had decided that we were not going to have a communist newspaper and we really didn't give a damn if anyone was going to intimidate us. I don't know if we had any communist writers or not. Certainly Mike Harrington was a socialist and he wrote for the *Voice* a great deal. We probably did have some communists writing for us.

GRATZ: But also the press was not devoid of these kinds of voices. This was Jimmy Wechsler's golden glory at the *New York Post* right up through Nixon. That was one of the *Post's* strongholds. It was not a vacuum.

FANCHER: By the time we started, the McCarthy era was really over. It was either dying or politically dead.

BERMAN: You mentioned in passing about Norman Mailer having a conflict with the *Voice* about its direction. Can you say more about that?

FANCHER: He had just written *Advertisements for Myself*, which was full of violence and far out sex, and at that time he was angry at the world and he wanted the *Voice* to take very radical positions and we were not on the same page.

GRATZ: Who were the standout personalities of the Village in those days as you recall?

FANCHER: Carmine DeSapio was one, absolutely. Ed Koch became another soon and Carol Greitzer, as well.

GRATZ: How about [Art] D'Lugoff?

FANCHER: No, he was minor.

GRATZ: How about any of the Community Board members or community-based leaders?

FANCHER: A man named Powers who was head of Greenwich House. Maxwell Powers. DeSapio was the dominating political figure, though, no question.

GRATZ: He was the one everyone could rally around and against.

FANCHER: That's right. He controlled the local club and had influence in the state as well.

GRATZ: How would you describe Ed Koch in those days?

FANCHER: He was very ambitious and optimistic. He had a good sense of humor. He was our lawyer for a while before he ran for the city council. He handled ...we were picketed. Do you know about this?

GRATZ: No.

FANCHER: We had a newsstand distributor named Danny List, kind of a crazy bohemian kid. He had a little truck and he distributed the paper to the newsstands. So when the *Voice* got really big, the mail delivers union came in to see me one day. These two big burly guys who looked right out of central casting sat down and said, "We want you to use union labor." I said, "Fine, talk with Danny"—he had these pickup bohemian kids who he hired one day a week to distribute the paper—"Go sign them up. I don't care." They said, "No, no, we want you to go with—" I think it was Atlantic News or whatever the big news distribution company was. We didn't want that. So they put a picket line in front of our office and we had people walking up and down in front of where we worked. I'm not sure exactly what Koch did but he did something to broker some kind of agreement.

GRATZ: Were you surprised by what happened to Koch when he became mayor? Were Dan and Ed that close that they became bound at the hip?

FANCHER: Only after Ed became mayor. I think he [Koch] became more serious than he had been before. His perspective seemed to change but I'm not sure if I can put my finger on it but it definitely changed.

GRATZ: A theory of my own: Mary [Nichols] was very instrumental in creating Koch in the early years. She helped shape his thinking. He fought against Westway, fought a lot of the big issues many of which he took a total about face on when he became mayor. As soon as he became mayor, she was shunted aside. Do you remember any of that?

FANCHER: No, I guess I wasn't really aware of it.

GRATZ: I brought the news to Mary on a joint visit we had made to see Jane Jacobs in Toronto. It was the day after the *New York Post* (recently bought by Rupert Murdoch) had endorsed Koch, which was a turning point in the election. When I got to Toronto, I said, “Okay Mary, I got big news for you.” She was working at the time for Kevin White in Boston and I said, “Well Mary, your boy is going to be mayor.” She spent a lot of time that weekend saying, “Oh my God, how am I going to choose?” because she really liked working for Kevin White. Koch asked Mary to come back to New York City and be in his Administration. But the one who could not tolerate Mary’s presence was Bess Myerson and Mary really got shunted aside and that began a whole shift in who Ed listened to. From then on it was a whole different ball game.<sup>4</sup>

FANCHER: I didn’t know that Ed ever listened to Bess Myerson.

GRATZ: Apparently, she pulled a lot of—well, I wasn’t privy to the machinations of what went on but it was clear from the results. The Ed Koch who hung around the *Village Voice* was not the Ed Koch who became mayor.

FANCHER: I think that’s true.

GRATZ: I always wished I could have talked with Dan about that.<sup>5</sup> I saw Dan a bit while Ed was mayor but at that point he was just—although every now and then he did have something critical to say and when I was writing some stuff that was critical he was in his own way winking at me.

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<sup>4</sup> Mary Nichols was hired by Kevin White, who was the mayor of Boston, as Communications Director in 1977. Later that year, she joined the Koch administration as the head of WNYC Communications. She left in 1980 after a dispute with Koch. Eventually, she returned in 1983 and remained as head of WNYC until 1990.

FANCHER: Dan was really quite critical of Ed. Sometimes Dan would say to Ed, “You know that’s the dumbest idea I’ve ever heard.” He also said that Ed very often didn’t listen to him.<sup>6</sup>

GRATZ: Did it have any impact?

FANCHER: At times it did and at times it didn’t. He did tell me at different occasions, “Ed did this and that. I told him not to but...”

GRATZ: But he [Wolf] hung in there, loyal as could be.

What happened to the *Voice* then? Were there still people at the *Voice* who you would hear from? Did you stay connected?

FANCHER: Not really. I’d see Howard Blum every once in a while. Lucian Truscott would come by to see me. He is writing a new novel now and living in Los Angeles. I saw him at Gabe Pressman’s son’s Bar Mitzvah. There are very few people still at the *Voice* who I knew.

GRATZ: Of your memories, what would you say stands out in terms of the highlights of those years, of that era?

FANCHER: Two things stand out: one is the closing of the park [Washington Square] to traffic. That was one of the outstanding things. Beating DeSapio was another. Establishing the Obies, the off-Broadway theater awards is something that I feel very good about.

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<sup>5</sup> Wolf died in 1996.

<sup>6</sup> Wolf became an advisor to Koch after the latter was elected mayor in 1977.

GRATZ: Speaking of the park and Moses, it's been a few years since I read *The Power Broker*. Does he [Caro] credit the *Voice* at all?

BERMAN: No, he really doesn't, and I was so struck by how much Carol [Greitzer] credits the *Voice*.<sup>7</sup>

GRATZ: He doesn't credit Jane [Jacobs] with much either as I recall.

BERMAN: No. Given that the book is 1,400 pages there is a lot he still leaves out.

GRATZ: Well, there are some interesting theories about that. It is a real flaw in the reporting.

BERMAN: He [Caro] points out that the whole thing with Tavern on the Green made Moses vulnerable for the first time so it became a situation where reporters felt that they had permission whereas before that it was really "hands off." The *Times* pretty much gave him carte blanche...

GRATZ: It is important to note that the *Post* was more critical of him [Moses] earlier. Joe Kahn and Bill Haddad [sic?] in the Title 1 scandal that really exposed the whole urban renewal scam for what it was. He became vulnerable because he picked on a neighborhood where *New York Times* editors lived. But the *Times* never touched the Title 1 story. It would be interesting to go back and see how much they covered the Washington Square Park thing—probably not dramatically but certainly more than they would today.

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<sup>7</sup> Berman conducted an oral history interview with Greitzer for the GVSHP on December 8, 1999.

BERMAN: Obviously Mary did a great job and they did a good job on the organizing but I was wondering what is your overall sense of what made that campaign so successful? I mean every body told Shirley Hayes that her demands were too extreme. A lot of people said that you can't say "all cars" out of Washington Square Park, you could say that it could be a smaller roadway than what Moses was planning but why was she able to start this and have it galvanize so much?

FANCHER: I think it was because of the repetition. Week after week after week we and they kept pounding away, pounding away with this issue. Politicians began to think, "Oh, my God this is getting out of hand, this is out of control."

GRATZ: And they played dirty and the public understood it. I have a little vignette in the SoHo chapter of my book about Jane getting arrested and I quote Carol as well. Carol Greitzer and Jim Fitch both saw Jane as kind of their Joan of Arc and Jane getting arrested for making a fuss at a public hearing chaired by the head of the Planning Commission James Feldt who was under Moses' thumb, for just leading a civic protest. People were very worried because she was under arrest and the lawyers were saying that they [city authorities] were not going to be nice about this.

They played dirty and Mary always reported that and that got a lot of people angry. All civic battles are led and won by singular people whom everybody tells, "you can't do it." They never believe it. The Village is the frontier of those kinds of battles. The battles in the Village reverberated nationwide. When Moses was defeated here that was a very important signal nationwide because there were a lot of battles dealing with highways through cities that were won. Many were lost also and it is one of the great causes of the demise of American cities.

BERMAN: It seemed like everything kind of worked together. The media started really digging at him [Moses] rather than just treating him with kid gloves partly because you started getting more community activism, too.

GRATZ: But he [Moses] stayed a potent force and I remember when he was the head of the World's Fair in '64 and it was his last hurrah but it was a successful one and the *New York Post*, Joe Kahn and Sidney Zion did an expose of Moses and his gang at the New York World's Fair and it was killed. It never ran because of the advertising and the pressure. And Dolly Schiff, well, there were certain things you couldn't push her on. There were areas where she wouldn't give in but Moses was able to get all those people who invested to invest in the World's Fair and if the *New York Post* had run that series it would have been very threatening to the very economics of the fair which of course failed anyway as every World Fair does.

FANCHER: I remember a reporter for the *Tribune* who told me that when a story that he wrote came out mildly critical of Moses, Moses got on the telephone with Mrs. Whitney [the publisher of the *Tribune*] who was a friend of his, of course, just like at the *Times*, they were all friends of his. They had dinner together. He was on the phone with Mrs. Whitney saying, "What are you doing to me?" And, "Don't you know that that it is your reporter that is doing this and that to me." So he was an operator.

GRATZ: And he would try that on a lot of people and succeeded with some papers but it was nothing but a joke to call Dan or Ed on anything! Do you remember anybody trying? I mean, nobody would even bother.

FANCHER: No, we never had any pressure on advertising. The worst that ever happened was some restaurant would get a bad review and they would pull a tiny ad.

GRATZ: Well, also the political people who were your targets were also well covered, so it's not like you were suppressing what they were doing or saying. They were well quoted and in journalism, as long as you spell the name right, they can't quite come after you if you are writing one side of the story. The other side was covered with a point of view.

BERMAN: I was wondering if there were ever any stories concerning the Village that there was any trepidation about putting out. Are there any examples of fear or anxiety about a response you might get from a story?

FANCHER: Hmm.

GRATZ: Do you remember coverage of 8<sup>th</sup> Street and the Mafia at all?

FANCHER: Well, Mary [Nichols] did some stories about that. I don't remember if Newfield did anything about it or not. We did have one story that almost landed Dan in jail. It was the riot at the prison in Attica. One of the leaders of the prison riot, I don't remember his name, wrote an article in his own handwriting and smuggled it out, about what was going on in the prison up there. And we published it.

Dan's usual practice after a story came out was to destroy the copy. He didn't want the copy around so he threw it away. In this case he didn't because he said, "Jesus, I'm publishing this from a guy I don't know and what if he denies that we wrote it and sues me. I could be liable for a suit. I've got to keep the copy. It's in his

handwriting. I have evidence.” And, in fact, the District Attorney subpoenaed him to produce the copy and he said, no, he wouldn’t do it, it was a violation of sources and they really threatened to put him in jail. He was all ready to go to jail and then they thought better of it. Putting the editor of the *Voice* in jail would have been pretty ridiculous so they backed off.

GRATZ: That’s interesting because it is really playing out of an issue that became much more prominent during the post Watergate era. They don’t do that as much now, they just suppress all information. You can’t even get at any information out of most government agencies these days. That was in ’74. What other moving events of that era were pivotal to the *Voice*? Did you cover issues in the Village dealing with NYU’s expansion? Was that a major contention?

FANCHER: It was a contention but I wouldn’t say it was a major contention. We did do stories about NYU trying to take over the park all the time and trying to gobble up everything. Certainly there was attention paid to it.

BERMAN: One of the things that Carol [Greitzer] mentioned that disturbed her a lot was the politics of the decision to make the Village a historical preservation district. She wanted it to be much larger than it ended up being. She wanted it to go all the way to the river and to go south of Washington Square Park and she talked about how the Board of Estimate made it impossible for there to be informed democratic discussions. She is disturbed about what is going on there now in the far West Village which was primarily warehouses and believes that if it had been part of the preservation zone it wouldn’t be happening the way it is.

GRATZ: That’s why it was left out.

FANCHER: Yes.

GRATZ: There is always a reason why borders are drawn the way they are. Historically, the perspective that Carol may not be remembering is that the Village was the second historic district in the city. [Brooklyn Heights was the first.] This was an astonishing accomplishment in and of itself. Preservation was new. This was a rare place where you could validate preservation principles that were way ahead of the time. I dealt with some of those principles in the SoHo chapter of my book. If it weren't a pure federalist house, the Landmarks Commission wouldn't have designated it. The Landmarks Commission was afraid of its own shadow. That's what I won awards writing about. That the Landmarks Commission was its own worst enemy. And that was in 1972 and '73 that I wrote those articles. The Village was already way ahead of everybody and it was beginning to spread to SoHo. But back then only people as smart as Jane, Mary, Carol and people like that were saying that the district should be bigger and include what was then commercial warehouse and the meat market. In those days, you could not get preservationists to consider commercial buildings as worthy of district designation.

FANCHER: It seemed pretty radical just to get what we got. I know on 11th Street, just before the *Voice* started, the beautiful Rhineland Gardens—remember those?—they were torn down to make room for P.S. 41 and then on 10th Street, the Studio Building on 45 West 10th, a wonderful old building from the 1870s or 1880s for studios, for artists, and many famous artists had their studios there. So these were two very big important historical landmarks that were demolished before the *Voice* started so we're very interested in the issue of historical preservation the neighborhood.

GRATZ: Also, 2 Fifth Avenue where Ed Koch lives today is another example.

FANCHER: And the Brevort on 9th Street and Fifth Avenue.

GRATZ: Right. The Village was a battlefield in that era for preservation issues. There were victories and there were defeats all over the place. So, designation itself was a victory. When I wrote about that whole thing with Margo Gayle and all those other people who were part of the fight to save SoHo in the seventies, remarked about how preserving Cast Iron was unheard of up until that time. It wasn't a federalist house, it wasn't included. It was the Georgetowns, the Villages [not the small "v" here], the Rittenhouse Squares of the country that preservationists were fighting for and they didn't want to hear beyond that and they certainly didn't care about community issues. The Village was way ahead in the preservation world in that respect and they were not one in the same. Even within the Village, they were not one in the same. You had real architectural purists...such as the big fight over Jefferson Market Courthouse. That was a major turning point. The jail came down. That was a fight.

BERMAN: I remember hearing about that jail from a short story by Grace Paley.

GRATZ: Right, and there was the Lowe's Theater on Greenwich Avenue. Even I remember that.

FANCHER: We had a huge jazz concert there. Art D'Lugoff ran it. Jean Sheppard was the master of ceremonies. Billie Holiday came up from Philadelphia. Jerry Tallmer drove up with her and picked her up. I remember she was drunk out of her head but she sang anyway....

[Break in recording]

GRATZ: You [to Berman] leave out a very important element in the fifties, which everyone always leaves out, and someday I will write this—or hopefully others will. Transportation. It was the birth of the highway..... And what politician did to actually use the highway and urban renewal programs, of which major examples exist in the Village, used it to manipulate the bringing in of federal funds to the City. And the refashioning of cities. And when you get into the reading about the politics of the '56 Highway Act, which Eisenhower conceived as comparable to the German Autobahn, which went from city to city, but never through cities. The only way that it got passed through Congress was that the big city machine leaders, the Carmine DeSapio, Richardson in Pennsylvania, and Daly in Chicago—all of them controlled their Congressional delegations—and there was no way that that legislation could pass without the big city vote. So the legislation was rewritten to combine with urban renewal and be available in cities. So whether it was the West Side Highway or the Lower Manhattan Expressway—all the Moses' highways that were on the books from the '29 plan just absolutely took root in the 'fifties under Moses' guidance.

BERMAN: Well, he was the only one who had money also. That's the thing that Caro points out. This man had all the money.

GRATZ: But he changed the vision for the country. And that's why I make such a big point in my last books about how SoHo changed the way the nation views its cities and Jane led the fight against Moses' Expressway which is what created SoHo. Plans for the Expressway emptied out SoHo so that artists moved because nobody else would. And that's where it all began.

BERMAN: That's a thesis in itself.

GRATZ: It's a chapter that I wrote. There's plenty more—there's a gold mine there. I only touched the surface, quoting a little, as I say, of Fitch, Margo Gayle, and Jane, of course. But SoHo was the extension of the Village. I also in my first book—because of course all of this had an immediate effect on me—my family at that point lived on 71 Washington Square South where Bobst Library now is. My father had four dry cleaning stores in the Village. The plant was on West Third. The main store was at 8<sup>th</sup> Street and MacDougal. In fact, I have a photograph that somebody found for me from the 40s that said, "Larry Brandes Cleaners."

Moses tore down my father's plant for Washington Square Village. My father needed to find another plant. The Mafia was moving in on him on 8th Street. Basically, his partner got involved in the Mafia when he went off to the National Guard, and he was drawn to the suburbs as a child of immigrants. But Moses was reshaping the Village in a way that my father couldn't stay in business, we couldn't stay in our apartment, and easily drawn to the suburbs where a good offer to my father for a shopping mall store, and a vision of flowers and whatever, and my parents were a little tired of Little Red because of teachers marching in the May Day parade and things like that. As my mother would say, "A little too left," for her. So we left and here I was this kid who grew up wearing blue jeans and telling dirty jokes with the boys at Little Red Schoolhouse into Weston, Connecticut in 1951. Talk about culture shock!

Moses not only had the vision, that he exported nationally, but he showed how to do it. And he created all the national legislation that he could cash in on and everyone else did, too.

FANCHER: He was like Hitler. They were both geniuses. Both very smart, and knew how to do things.

BERMAN: And especially after World War II there was such a void in leadership in New York City. Impellitteri, what a joke he was.

FANCHER: O'Dwyer was probably worse, because I think Impellitteri was not even dishonest.

GRATZ: O'Dwyer was dishonest. I know my father used to talk about these guys coming around.

BERMAN: So really you had ten years of really no real—Moses was the President of New York City, basically.

GRATZ: New York State.

BERMAN: That's true.

FANCHER: And he had the media. He had the media, personally. And one of the things that is always very destructive is when the publisher and editor of any media become friends with the power people. You're lost! You can't become friends.....

I remember on many occasions there were stories that would come in. Dan would read them and say to the writer, "Well, you know, this maybe is libelous." He would call up Victor Kovner and say, "Victor, let me read you this." And Victor would say, "Okay, we'll run it." That was the attitude....

BERMAN: Just a quickie before the end. Why did DeSapio end up supporting eliminating the cars from Washington Square? Why did he come around on that? Do you know? Did he think that was the way public opinion was swinging?

FANCHER: I think it's very simple. I think that at a certain point, when there is enough screaming and hollering, and your friends grab you and say, "Carmine, what the hell is going on here? You're going to lose the next election if you let this continue!" And he got frightened. This is the way politics works. He said, "I'll just allow a little road like it was before." And they said, "No, you can't do that. It's too late for that now. You're going to get murdered if you don't close the park. This crazy lady, Shirley Hayes, and Mary Nichols, are going to murder you! You're out of business." And he said, "Okay."

GRATZ: And their strategy was "no compromise." Defeat the proposal, and then, if somebody wants to propose an alternative, but don't compromise. And I remember hearing that also from Mary and Jane about Westway when I was writing about Westway. Don't get bogged down with offers of compromise. Defeat the enemy and then talk about an alternative. And so it was either for or against, and sooner or later politicians see the wind change....

[End of Interview]