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Oral History Transcript: On Energy with Daniel Russell

Chloe Brettmann

Okay, I'm Chloe Brettmann, third year undergraduate at University of Chicago. And I'm here with my grandfather, for the oral history project for Energy and Society II. Do you want to introduce yourself, Poppy?

Daniel Russell

Okay, now the only thing is the screen that I'm looking at has a post on the front, it says this meeting is being recorded by host or participant. So can I put got it? Okay. So now I see myself, I see you. So now what was your first question?

[He's referring to the message that Zoom uses to notify participants if the meeting is being recorded, which was blocking his view of the zoom window.]

Brettmann

Do you want to just say a little bit about yourself and who you are?

Russell

Okay. My name is Dan Russell. And I am a grandfather of Chloe Brettmann, who is hosting this meeting and who has requested an interview with me with respect to certain questions with respect to energy issues, confronting society at this time. Okay, I live in Elizabeth, New Jersey. I have lived here for all of my 89, going on 90, years. Next month. So, and fortunately, I'm still here after 89 years....I've lived my whole life in Elizabeth, New Jersey, which is a city 13 miles outside of New York City, in the New York metropolitan area. I'm a widower, my wife having died two years ago, and I have four children, and four grandchildren, one of whom is Chloe Brettmann, actually she's my second oldest grandchild...But maybe we'll leave it at that as an introduction and proceed from there.

Brettmann

So my first question is just I'm curious if you can tell me anything about if you remember how your house was heated when you were growing up? If you have any memories of what kept the house warm?

Russell

Oh, I don't recall specifically. I grew up in a four family house [i.e. four-bedroom house] on Elinas St. Elizabeth. That's my earliest recollections. I lived there until I was approximately seven years old. Now my recollection, not so much from where I was living in this four family house, but the neighborhood that I grew up in, was a neighborhood which consisted of mostly four family homes, similar to the one I was living in. And they were, most of them, as I recall, were fueled by coal. And we used to have a coal truck that used to come around and deliver the coal. And so that's how I presume that the house that I was living in was also coal fired because they were all coal fired houses at that time. And we had a coal truck. They used to come around, and they would deposit a ton of coals—or coals in lots of, I presume, a ton. And they would come around with this truck and they would have a big chute and the coal would then be dispensed from the coal truck, via the chute into the basement of the houses where you have the coal bin, and that's how the coal was distributed, as I say by the coal truck. And that would be what people would use to start a fire in the basement—a coal fueled fire. And, that would be used to heat the house through steam heat. I think. I'm sure it was steam heat. In other words, the coal burner would heat up the water in the boiler in the cellar, and that boiler was where the water would then be converted to steam, and that steam would then rise through radiators. And those were in the various rooms of the houses. And that's the way that we would maintain heat during the wintertime in order to fuel, heat, the houses, so that people could have a comfortable life.

Brettmann

Do you know, was that the case for Gaga's [my grandmother, his wife] house, the house you're in now?

Russell

Yeah, I believe so, I didn't live in this house in my formative years. I recall that the basement used to have a coal bin. So I presume that it was originally coal fired, but then somewhere along the line it was converted to gas heat. So this house went from coal to gas. We never had oil heat in this house, as far as I know. There was always a gas fire heat, that was similar to, in other words, the house was heated similarly with, you know, steam heat, but they use oil instead of coal to fuel the furnace. [I believe he meant gas, instead of coal to fuel the furnace, here *not* oil]

Brettmann

So when was the first time you remember living in a house that wasn't heated by coal?

Russell

When I moved into this house, which I've been in since I was married. But the family lived here, the Gleason family [my grandmother's family] lived here. And I don't think there was ever a coal

fire furnace [when the Gleason's moved in], I think when they bought the house it was probably gas by that time.

Brettmann

So, I maybe want to segue a little bit. Um, because I'm thinking about how you were in the army, correct?

Russell

Oh, yes. I was in the army in 1954 and 1955. Right.

[This question led to a detailed description of the layout of quonset huts, but he didn't have much to say on his experience with energy there]

Brettmann

Okay. So then going back, thinking back to Elizabeth, and kind of more to your childhood. You've told me before about different things that either your mom or your grandmother would cook for you. And so I'm just curious if you can tell me about any memories that you have about food or cooking from growing up?

Russell

I really don't have any recollection of when I was living with my mother and father until age seven. After that, I wound up with my grandmother from age eight to 18. And the thing I can remember is a couple of items. Number one, see, my grandmother did most of the cooking, because my father had become ill and went into a hospital. And my mother had to go to work. So I was living with my grandmother at that time—and my aunt, a sister of my mother's, and my mother, and I [were all living together]. And on the cooking end of it, my grandmother did most of the cooking. And I can remember it was kind of basic cooking. We'd always have a Sunday dinner around one o'clock in the afternoon. And that was mandatory attendance at her dinner that she would cook on Sundays. And then at night, she would—my grandmother—would cook [another] basic meal. And it was always rather simple. But you know, we'd generally have a meat dish. And then on Fridays, we always had fish because we were Catholics, at that time, and you couldn't eat meat on Fridays. You had to fast. So we generally had fish. And the fish we'd have, we used to get a lot of like fish cakes, you know, which were cod fish cakes with some sort of a tomato sauce on top of it. I didn't particularly like that. But I remember that was sort of a Friday night. And periodically we'd have some sort of other fish, you know, for Friday night, but Sunday was generally a pot roast or something a little more elaborate. The other thing I remember is we very rarely had dessert. You know, dessert was not part of the menu. And although from time to time, we might have some rhubarb, or my grandmother might make cake every once a month or something like that. But the mood was rather plain.

Brettmann

And you've told me about—Are you talking about the Lazy Daisy cake?

Russell

[Laughs] That's right. My grandma would make a Lazy Daisy cake. And that was sort of a big treat that she would make periodically. Other than that she wasn't a fancy baker or anything like that. But in fact, I think we talked about this Lazy Daisy cake not too long ago, and I think I might have looked it up on a computer, or you looked it up on a computer. And we decided that maybe either you or I would make a Lazy Daisy cake. The next time we got together,

Brettmann

Maybe when I'm there next week...

Russell

For sure!

Brettmann

Do you have any memory of what you ate while you were in school, what you would eat? Like, would you pack lunch? Or would you buy lunch at school?

Russell

Okay, I... Well, the one thing I remember about eating, in the early years, my first school I went to for elementary school was from grade kindergarten through the sixth grade. And the thing I remember there is that we got from somewhere, a carton, a little carton of milk. And we'd have that for, that would be our, like 10 o'clock in the morning, we'd have a little break, and we'd have a little carton of milk. I always would look forward to that. But when I got to the seventh grade, I went off to a middle school, or what we used to call a junior high school, and we would pack a lunch. But the first six grades, we came home for lunch. And so I ate at home. But in the seventh, eighth and ninth grade, we stayed in the school for lunchtime, and we ate in the cafeteria. And everybody at that time, myself included—well my grandmother, with whom I was living with, would make a lunch [for me]. I used to get two sandwiches. And every once in a while she did—she would take those sandwiches and put them in a bag, you know, and we carry them with us to school when we went off to school. And then at lunchtime, we had a particular time in the cafeteria, half hour, three quarters an hour, when you all congregate in the cafeteria. And you eat your sandwiches at that time. My grandmother every once in a while used to give me a treat, and she'd put a Yankee Doodle in the bag. And my friends used to find out about it and they used to make fun of me because they would go put a note and, well, they would get hold of my lunch bag. They put a note in there. And they'd say, you know, they made comments in the note about whether I got the treat or there was nothing in there. They say “no, treat today, Dan.” And, you know, they'd give me that note, ostensibly, from my grandmother, you know, it's

kind of a running joke. But I remember we used to like Yankee Doodle, and you could buy three Yankee Doodle for a nickel at that time. So anyway, she would stick a Yankee Doodle in there every once in a while as a special treat. The other thing I remember about my lunches, they consisted essentially of spiced ham. And I mean, spiced ham was the cheapest ham you could get at the store, as compared to boiled ham or something like that. But spiced ham, that's what I ate for actually almost from seventh grade through high school, I would eat spiced ham sandwiches. And every once in a while you might want to switch with one of your friends. And I used to have some Italian friends and they got peppers and egg sandwiches. And I tried to switch with them and trade a spice ham for peppers and egg but I didn't have too much trading leverage.

Brettmann

Tough bargaining chip.

Russell

That's right. So yeah, there was no big demand for spice ham in that cafeteria group.

Brettmann

Sure. Fair enough. All right. Well, another question that I've just been thinking about is—and you can talk about, you can think about when you were really young, or maybe as you got older, and when you first had kids—but just I've been thinking about how you got around places? Like you were saying, it sounds like, you would walk to your junior high school. But I am just thinking maybe about your experience broadly with cars, trains, buses—just sort of what your family and you personally did to get around?

Russell

For transportation. Okay, going back to my elementary school years, we would walk back and forth to school. And it was close enough. I lived on Pennsylvania Avenue. So it was probably maybe a mile, guessing. And we would walk back and forth to school in the morning, and also at lunchtime, and to come home after school, we would walk, you know, back and forth to the house. When I got to seventh grade, then I was in the junior high school, which was a little bit further away. And so at times, we would, again, walk back and forth to school, which was a little further ways, about a mile away. And I did that until I got to the 10th grade. Then I went to the local high school, Thomas Jefferson High School, which was in downtown Elizabeth. And that was further, that was sort of maybe a mile and a half, two miles away. And to get there, to downtown Elizabeth, I would have to take a bus. I would walk up from my house over to—walk about two blocks over to—what we call Newark Avenue, where I would get one of three buses and the buses would take us to downtown Elizabeth. I would get off and then walk a couple blocks to school, which was a couple blocks away. And I did that until I was a senior in high school. At which point, a friend of mine had access to a car. And so periodically he would, we made an arrangement, he would pick me up and I would drive to school with him as a passenger

in his car. And if he couldn't make it then I would try to hitchhike down to school at times. And that was a bit of a problem because sometimes I couldn't get a ride. I'd be late to school. And that did cause a problem with my school attendance. But we got through it all right.

Brettmann

Would people often pick you up?

Russell

Oh yes. Yeah, at that time, more often than not, I'd get a ride. If this friend of mine, John didn't have the car. I tried to hitchhike and I'd get a ride hitchhiking. Now you get out there with your books and your pack and stick your thumb out as the cars would come along, somebody would pick you up and bring you downtown. I did lots of that even later on in life. When I got to the army, I did a lot of hitchhiking. I would hitchhike back and forth, because I was stationed up in Massachusetts. And on the weekends, I would hitchhike from Massachusetts, back to New Jersey. And then on Sunday night, I'd go back up to Massachusetts, I'd get out on the highway, stick my thumb out and get a ride. So anyway, that's how I got back and forth.

Brettmann

Okay. And so when did you first have access to a car? Did your family ever have a car?

Russell

Growing up? No, I had an uncle who had a car, but my mother and grandmother with whom I lived, they never drove in their whole life. So there was no car in our family. But we would get back and forth, there were a lot of buses at that time. In fact in my very early recollections I remember we had, in Elizabeth, we had streetcars but yeah, but that's very early. They did away with the streetcars in the early, or late 1930s, maybe early 1940s. And they were replaced by buses. And first of all, initially, some of the buses were electrically powered. You know, they had wires over the street, and the buses would run with cables attached to these wires. And they were powered electrically. But mostly they did away with that later on. Buses later on were gasoline operated buses

Brettmann

That's super interesting.

Russell

I remember when I went to Holland a few years ago, when my oldest son Dan went off to live in Holland, and we visited over there. I remember, they had streetcars in the Netherlands. And, they still have them over there now. But anyway, we even had them in New Jersey for a while.

Brettmann

Okay, and so when did you..., do you remember when you first had your own car?

Russell

Ah. My first car was when I was in college, before I went into the army. I had an uncle, actually an uncle by marriage, who had an old car, and he gave it to me. And it was the 1936/1937 Chevrolet. And I had that car around 1950/1951. And what I can remember about that car was it had a leak in the radiator and mortar used to leak out of it. And the fellow nextdoor said to my grandmother, with whom I was living in the time, they asked her whether or not my car was fueled by water, because every morning I would get up and go out before I got in the car with a tea kettle full of water, fill the radiator with water, so that the car would function, and then I would drive off. So it's Mr. Foreman who lived next door to us. He was inquiring as to whether or not my car was operated by water, because I was always putting water in it before I went off for the day. But I used to drive to, I went to college at Seton Hall which is oh, maybe 10 miles away from you know, from home. And I would drive up there every day. Not every day, I mean, there were some other fellows who had cars, everybody had an old car. And you know, we used to share rides, I would drive maybe one or two days a week. And we always had passengers and some of the other fellows, they would have their cars and we'd share the driving experience.

Brettmann

I'm curious, jumping ahead in time a little bit. Do you have any memories of the 1970s oil shocks?

Russell

1970 what?

Brettmann

The oil shocks and the gas lines?

Russell

Oh, I do yes. Because what I remember was funny. The thing I remember about it is that we have a gasoline station down the corner from where I'm living. And I knew the fellas who operated the station—Bill and Mal were their names. And I remember during the oil crisis when people couldn't get gasoline and had to line up in order to try to fill up their tanks with gasoline, which everybody was doing at that time. And Bill and Mal, well all of the local people were bringing them pies and goods. Because they were sort of like celebrities in the neighborhood. They tried to bribe them to see if they would, you know, would save them some or maybe move them up in the gasoline line, or do some sort of nefarious activity in order to get gasoline. So they used to try to bribe Bill and Mal with pies and cakes. Well other than that, we had to wait in line to get gas. I remember the news used to circulate, you know in the neighborhood, when they got a load

of gas in, because oftentimes they wouldn't have gasoline. You know, they have to wait for a shipment to come in on a big gasoline truck. And then everybody would line up to get gas. And then it would run out after a while and they'd have signs up [that said] "No Gas." And so you'd have to sort of try to run around and guess, you know who had gas and gasoline to keep your car running. So that's what I remember about it. But there were lines all over the place. So I think they had put up...I think they had put price limitations in effect, so that they couldn't charge exorbitant prices for gasoline.

Brettmann

Um, alright, so maybe now, I'm just curious if you can think of—you've just talked a lot about your life growing up—what do you think maybe are some of the biggest differences between your life while you grew up there compared to your kids? Because you all grew up in Elizabeth.

Russell

We did. Let's see. Now my, my children all hauled off to college... In my experience, we didn't go away to college. We day-hopped. And so for example, I went to Seton Hall, which was a local school, most of my friends also went to local schools...So we lived at home and went off to college, which was a different experience from my children. So that was a difference.

Brettmann

And what about, I'm just thinking about like, when you were a kid versus when, you know, my mom was a kid, what you did for fun and what they did for fun and leisure?

Russell

Okay, um, differences between my play experience or my recreational experience? One of the things we did in my area that they didn't do was we did a lot of...in wintertime when it snowed, all of the kids, myself included, had a sled. We used to, for example, where I lived down on Pennsylvania Avenue, we would all go out on the hill with our sleds and go down the bottom of the hill. But we also used to hitch on cars, which is something I don't think my children ever did. In other words, you take your sled as a car would be—when there was a lot of snow—a car would be going around, and you would do what was called a belly wap (sp?) on your sled. And you had to grab onto the back of the fender, or back bumper of the car. And, you would go along and be pulled by the car until the driver realized there's some kid on the back of his car, and holler at you, and you have to get off. We had a lot more, a lot more of that stuff used to go on. We don't have that much snow anymore. And so I don't remember any of my children ever doing any, any car hopping. [Tells another sledding story]. So what else? Oh, the other thing was at Echo Park. They had a pond over there. And we used to ice skate there as kids. I was never very, [I] didn't do much ice skating, but I did go outside skating with my children, my two boys and my daughter whenever it used to freeze, but it doesn't freeze around here anymore. Plus they have a...they built an ice skating rink. So we don't do too much outdoor ice skating here. But we

did do that, when I was growing up, kids used to go over and ice skate. And as I say, I also skated with my children when they were young. Anne, I remember—my wife—telling me, she was never really good at ice skating, because she couldn't stand up on her ankles or they weren't strong enough

Brettmann

Poor Gaga... Okay, well what about your experiences with television. Because I've heard a little bit from my mom about what it was like for her to not have television for a while, but what about for you growing up? When was the first time you did have a TV? And just any memories that you have about TV when you were growing up?

Russell

Well, the first thing I remember was when television first came on the scene back after the Second World War. Nobody had a television. But you could say, well, my first recollection was we used to get down to one of the stores, one of the electric stores down in the center of Elizabeth on Broad Street. And they used to have in the store front, a television set. And periodically, they would put on programs and you could watch them. You know, I don't know that there was any sound. But you could watch the screen. And that was sort of a big deal. Then I remember... In either late high school or in college, a friend that I knew growing up, they had a television in their house. And we used to go over and watch it on Friday nights, because they put the boxing matches on. So we used to go over to his house on Friday night. And it was a screen that was, I don't know, like 12 or 14 inches, and that's where I used to watch the fights on Friday night. That was my first introduction to television. I can also remember people used to have TV sets, but we never had one. Initially, we didn't have one when I lived up on Pennsylvania Avenue. We may have had a television set when I was living on Keats Avenue during my college years, and, I can remember, I think my grandmother had a TV set there. And we used to watch like the Sunday night shows, and it was, what's the guy's name? Names? Yeah, I have trouble recollecting things sometimes.

Brettmann

It's okay, I probably wouldn't know who it was, anyway.

Russell

Yeah. Right, you wouldn't know probably, but they had some special shows on. But the other thing I remember is after I got married, when I was growing up, I was a great reader. I used to read a lot of books and things. And so I became convinced that, at that time, that television was a detriment to reading. So after I got married, I kind of made a pronouncement that we're not going to have any television in the house. And so for 10 years, I guess people wanted to give us TVs and I always said "no, we're not going to have any television in the house." Because I want to

encourage my children to read books instead. I thought it was a detriment to education. [detailed description of why he eventually allowed a TV in the house after more than a decade.]

Brettmann

Okay, okay. All right. Um, just sort of before we wrap up, do you have any memories of like, for instance, I just started paying my own electricity bills for the first time, and I never thought about electricity much beyond that and I don't think of it beyond that now. And I'm just curious, if you, like, when I say the word electricity, what do you think of? You know, in your life, what the role of it is, do you think about it a lot? Do you remember what electricity was like growing up versus now?

Russell

I can remember a couple of things. Number one, money was always pretty tight when I was growing up in my family. So the way we used to pay the electric bill was, they used to—I lived with my mother and grandmother and aunt. And they used to send my aunt down to pay the electric bill. Every month, she began to pay the electric bill. And my aunt was not a responsible person financially. So at times, my grandmother would give her the money to pay the electric bill. And she would go, she would spend the money for some other purpose. So we got notices from the electric company about how the bill was not paid. And my grandmother and my aunt and my mother were getting in big fights over the fact that the electric bill was not being paid. And there they [the electric company] were threatening to cancel the electricity. And that was a source of consternation in the family, over the electric bill. The other thing I remember about it was my grandmother and mother were always very conscious of the wattage that was being used and the wattage that we were generating, because you had to pay for that actually. So we would have like 15 watt bulbs and outlets. So you'd use a lot less electricity. So that was always a concern—the amount of the bill. I never paid the electric bill myself, but I know my Aunt Peg used to go down and ostensibly pay it and not pay [the bill]. And that became a cause of problems.

Brettmann

And when you say she went down to pay the bill, do you know where she would go to pay?

Russell

Well they would send her to go to the electric company that had an office, in downtown Elizabeth... They used to get out and pay the electric bill every month. You know, whatever it was, \$15 or whatever the electricity used to cost.

Brettmann

All right. Well, that's all that I had written down that I wanted to chat about, is there anything off the top of your head that you feel like you didn't get to talk about that you'd like to talk about with regards to energy or something even sort of peripherally related to energy?

Russell

I'm just thinking about gasoline. Of course, you know now the price of gasoline is skyrocketing. It's over \$4.20 a gallon because of the world crisis [the Russia-Ukraine war], and the ban of gasoline imports in Europe, but other than that, I don't remember too much, except, well, okay, I do remember something, you know. I remember when we were young, a friend of mine had a car and actually had his brother's car. And it was like a 1935 Ford or so. And I can remember one time we were out with him. And we were used to chip in for gasoline for the car—all the fellows that were in the car. And we all we had, between the three of us, I think we only had 13 cents. So we went into the gas station to get gasoline because we were almost out of gas. So the fellow started wiping the windshield on the car. And when we would tell him how much gas [we wanted to buy], we said, we told him we wanted 13 cents worth of gas, and he stopped in the middle of the windshield. He was halfway through, but he was only gonna get 13 cents. So he wasn't going to wipe the windshields of our car. But, that's I mean, filling up a tank of gasoline, at that time, was an adventure. You know, because half the time we were wondering whether we had enough gas for the car. For example, we would spend time in the summertime driving down the shore, on the weekends and things like that. And we'd always try to make sure we had enough gas to get down and back. And so that was always a question. Did we have enough gasoline? Did you have \$2 or \$3 in order to put enough gas to get in the car and get down back to the shore? So that I remember.

Brettmann

Alright....

Russell

The other thing was, I remember when I was in the army, I was stationed down in Arizona, and we would drive back [to New Jersey] when we got time off, you know, leave from the army. And we would get two weeks off every year. So we drove home. And at that time I didn't have a car. But somebody down there on the base in Arizona had this car, so the owner of the car would get a few fellows that wanted to come home to New Jersey and we would all chip in and pay for the gas, and we would drive all the way home. And we would drive non-stop and one fellow would drive. If you had two in the car, one would sleep and the other fellow would be in the company of that driver to make sure you didn't fall asleep. It's a couple thousand miles and it took us a couple of days. I remember we stopped in Columbus, Ohio. We would drive straight through from Fort Huachuca, Arizona, which is down on the Mexican border and drive all the way

through. We stopped at Columbus, took a shower and then continued to drive. And then we'd drive to New Jersey.

Brettmann

And where would you shower?

Russell

There's a YMCA in Columbus. Somebody knew about it, so we could stop there and take a shower. Okay...[Short conversation about the YMCA that he goes to now and COVID restrictions]

Brettmann

Well we can start wrapping up, but, if you do think of something, you can write it down and give me a call and we can start our recording again and add it to the transcript.

Russell

Okay. Yeah, you know, I'm trying to get the name of that fella who used to host that weekly TV show...that I would watch with grandmother... It'll come to me in 10 minutes from now. No. I mean, I know it as well as my own name. Just can't pop into my mind.

Brettmann

You can call me when you remember it.

Russell

Okay. Okay, anything else?

Brettmann

I don't think so. I'm gonna pause our recording first before we sign off Zoom.