GREENWICH VILLAGE SOCIETY FOR HISTORIC PRESERVATION

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ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

CALVIN TRILLIN

By Sarah Dziedzic

New York, NY

April 7, 2021

Calvin Trillin, AP Photo/Richard Drew

Summary of Oral History Interview with Calvin Trillin

Calvin Trillin has been a resident of the Village on and off for more than fifty years but refers to himself as a "resident out-of-towner" with deep ties to the Midwest and, in particular, to Kansas City, Missouri where he was born and raised. His father was instrumental in ensuring he attended Yale—deciding before Trillin was born that he would be educated there—and Trillin reflects on the observations he made traveling East and back during the years he was enrolled, especially regarding race and segregation.

After graduating, he spent a year in the South, from 1960–61, working as a writer for *Time* on the "seg beat," which included covered of the Freedom Rides, university desegregation, and other aspects of the Civil Rights Movement as it unfolded in the South. Trillin transferred to the New York office of *Time* in 1961, working on various sections there, and then began writing for *The New Yorker* in 1963. Within a few years, he began the *New Yorker*'s "U.S. Journal" series, which took him to a different location every month to describe a news story in its unique place and context. He is also a long-time columnist for *The Nation*, where he began the "Uncivil Liberties" column, and also developed his humorous rhyming verse about political figures and topical issues, which appears the regular "Deadline Poet" column. He has also authored numerous books, including memoirs, books on food and travel, and collections of his columns and political verse.

In this interview, Trillin describes his early days as a writer, his interest in living in the Village, and the various places he lived in the city before moving into his current home on Grove Street, where he and his wife raised two daughters. He reflects on his upbringing and the Midwestern values and priorities he was raised with, and offers his thoughts on how present-day political issues—such as voter suppression and white supremacist movements—tie in with what he witnessed during his reporting throughout the U.S. starting in the 1960s.

Compiled by Sarah Dziedzic

Oral History Interview Transcript

Dziedzic: Let's get ourselves recording here. Okay. So I'll just start by reading a couple things to introduce the recording and then I'll start asking you some questions.

Trillin: Okay.

Dziedzic: Okay. All right, before we begin, I'd like to start with a living land acknowledgement: Today, I'm on the traditional land of the Lenape people and we acknowledge for this archival recording, the Lenape community and especially their elders, past and present, and express gratitude for their stewardship of this land, for contributing to its geography, and for the use of their language as place names.

And today is April 7, 2021 and this is Sarah Dziedzic interviewing Calvin Trillin for the Village Preservation Oral History Project. And we're conducting this interview remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic and connecting via video call.

Can you start, Mr. Trillin, by saying your name and giving yourself a brief introduction?

Trillin: My name is Calvin Trillin and I've lived in the Village off and on for more than fifty years, I guess. What I do for a living is I'm a writer, mostly *The New Yorker* and some *The Nation*, and books and a variety of things.

Dziedzic: I'd like to ask about your early life, where you grew up and how you would describe your lineage and connection to that place and other places?

Trillin: I grew up in Kansas City. I was born in Kansas City and I grew up in Kansas City. My parents were first generation Americans. My mother was born in Kansas City. My father grew up in St. Joseph, Missouri, which is about sixty miles north, but he was actually born in Ukraine, and brought over as an infant to St. Joe. I went to public high school in Kansas City, and to Yale. That's the extent of my education. As I'm reminded by my family, on occasion, I'm the only one in the family without an advanced degree.

Kansas City has been sort of a touchstone for me. I've written about it and refer to it a lot, even though I really haven't lived there properly since summers in college, for the first couple of summers. But it's always been sort of—well, in a book I wrote about my father, I mentioned that when you ask people about their childhood, their upbringing, usually it ends up having a theme, like we have a noble family and you must never do anything to besmirch its name, or we're miserable because your father deserted us, or something like that.

When I thought about the theme I wanted to have for my daughters—I have two daughters who grew up in the Village—I think the theme would have been: despite all evidence to the contrary, you're being raised in Kansas City. I always thought there was a little white picket fence around my house. You can't see it but it's there. I describe myself sometimes as a resident out-of-towner.

Dziedzic: What are some of the practical ways that you created that feeling of St. Louis or the practice of living in St. Louis for your daughters?

Trillin: Not St. Louis—

Dziedzic: Oh my god! I'm sorry. Kansas City! [00:04:50]

Trillin: Well, cultural historians and cultural regionalists, I should say, when they talk about the country, they always say, when you think something is very American, you're talking about the Midwest and particularly the Upper Midwest, the values and the customs of the Upper Midwest. So people from the Midwest would be thought of as typical Americans or real Americans, or what New Yorkers would call out-of-towners. So I guess part of that is thinking in those terms of being an out-of-towner who had the values and the priorities of someone from the Midwest.

Dziedzic: And I wanted to ask how your father's family ended up in Missouri, in St. Joseph and then Kansas City.

Trillin: My father's family came to Galveston. I'm the first one to live in New York. This was at the turn of the twentieth century, about 1907–1908, something like that. I'd always wondered

why they came to Galveston when the history books talk about Ellis Island. We've never been at Ellis Island. And it turns out—I was grown, I was married, I was on the beach reading a book that had been written by someone I knew who sent me the book, and it was about Jews in the South. And it talked about how, at the turn of the century, the German Jews in New York were in pretty good shape. There wasn't any terrible anti-Semitism and they were prospering. And then this horde of politically and religiously crazies, in their view, came. And it said that Jacob Schiff, the Jewish financier, German-Jewish, was concerned about the conditions on the Lower East Side and embarrassed by these people. He gave $500,000 to something called the Galveston Project or the Galveston Movement, which routed them to Galveston instead of New York or Boston.

Actually, I learned later, they had to sign something that they wouldn't stay in Galveston. Jobs were arranged west of the Mississippi. In fact, I wrote a piece about it that started, "Who was Jacob Schiff to be embarrassed by my uncle, Benny Daynovsky?" I looked around for all the embarrassing things I could find about the Schiffs, which I have to say was not difficult, and I talked about my Uncle Benny. Actually, I was home in Kansas City for a wedding or something and some of the people who were still in St. Joe were there and I told them I hope to get the piece in somewhere before Uncle Benny's ninetieth birthday party. And his son said, "Don't mention his name. The Russian Army is still looking for him." So I guess they're all deserters from one side or another.

My father in many ways is very Midwestern. He had an accent. He sounded very much like Harry Truman when he spoke and he used phrases like "haven't had so much fun since the hogs ate little sister," that sort of thing. He was a bright line person about right and wrong and what was okay and what wasn't. I claim to be the only Midwestern boy who wasn't allowed to drive until he was actually the legal driving age. [00:10:00] I was told I had to pay full fare at the movies, even though I was a little kid and I could have gotten away for a couple more years with children's fare.

So I always say he was honest, if not to fault, at least to a point of irritation. So he grew up in St. Joe and then came to Kansas City, I think, probably when he was about eighteen or nineteen or something like that. He didn't go to college. Something I've also written about: he had read a book called *Stover at Yale*. It was one of those nineteenth century or early twentieth century books about this heroic person who both did the right thing for his friends and also saved

the Harvard game at the last minute, that sort of thing. I think he thought that's where industrialists send their sons, to Yale. So he wanted me to go to Yale.

He was a grocer for most of his working life and at his first small grocery store, one of the bread companies gave a rebate to grocers who displayed the bread in front and paid their bills on time. And he put that money away for me to go to Yale—not to college, to Yale—before, I think, I was born. So he had a strong influence on the way not only I behaved but where I went. I wanted to go to [University of] Missouri and drink beer with my high school friends but around the time of the end of high school, I decided it would be interesting to go to a place like Yale. He was very shrewd about it. He didn't push it but it was obvious he wanted me to go to Yale. And I sort of accidentally ended up with a naval scholarship and they paid for everything. There was no means test or anything like that. I didn't know how much money we had. You didn't talk to children about money. They said, you tell us where you want to go and then we'll tell you where you're going to go, if you want the scholarship. And I said, Yale, and they said University of Missouri.

So I went in—I remember where he was sitting in the living room and I guess my mother had already told him about the letter, assigning me to the University of Missouri, if I wanted the naval scholarship. I went in and I said, "It doesn't make that much difference to me. That's where I wanted to go in the first place. It wouldn't cost any money at all." He didn't even say anything. He just waved me out of the room. There wasn't a chance. So he had a big influence on my life obviously. Now, my older granddaughter—my girls went to Yale and my older granddaughter was supposed to start in September but because of the pandemic, she's deferred until next September. I have to admit I was pleased for him that we're extending that Yale connection.

Dziedzic: And how did you find Yale when you got there?

Trillin: Well, it was like a foreign place. They didn't dress like we did. They didn't talk like we did. This was in the '50s and those places were dominated by boarding school people. In the '50s, prosperous American families sent their kids usually to public high schools and they were sort of high-level public high schools. But our class at Yale was, I think, sixty-one percent private school and thirty-nine percent public school. [00:15:10] So they sort of set the tone. It

was kind of an understated prep school tone. They wore letter sweaters inside-out, so you couldn't quite see the letters.

I've often talked about, we were assigned a couple roommates, and one of them—I always refer to him as Thatcher Baxter Hatcher, because they all had three last names and nicknames—told me at one point that after the war, his family no longer dressed for dinner. And I thought that meant you could come down in your undershirt, something like that. I said, "My mom would never allow that." "Get upstairs and get a shirt on before you come to this table."

So it was sort of strange but I got used to it fairly quickly and I liked it. It's dangerous to say this in New York but I was actually happy in high school. I wouldn't want anybody to know that in New York. And I was fine at Yale. I liked it. There was a phrase that was used by one of my classmates, Henry Geldzahler, who was at the Metropolitan [Museum of Art] for awhile. He did a show of American art and he talked about who had deflected art in a different direction. And it works the other way. So I think for me, Yale was a big deflection, in a sense of where I would live—I never really went back to Kansas City—and also what I would think and how I would be. I think Yale changed a lot.

So I think deflection would be the right word. I didn't come away from Kansas City thinking I wanted to get the dust of that place off of my feet. I mean, I liked it. I assumed I was going back because I remember that, in those days, you had to do something in the gym freshman year. You had to either do a sport or—first, you had to take the dreaded posture picture. And then after your posture class, if you failed, you had to do a sport. Someone suggested squash and I remember saying—because you could really learn the sport, the coaches would help you—it doesn't make much sense for me to learn squash because the nearest squash court to Kansas City is in St. Louis, which is probably 235 miles. St. Louis being what we thought of in Kansas City as not the Gateway to the West, which they started calling themselves after they built the Gateway Arch, but as the Exit from the East. It was the last eastern city. There might have been a squash court in Kansas City that I hadn't heard of. My experience in those matters was pretty narrow.

But anyway, I think I went to Yale assuming I would get through and go back to Kansas City and this turned out not to be true. [00:19:57]

Dziedzic: Can I ask how you traveled between New Haven and Kansas City, over the summers and getting out there?

Trillin: The first year, I went on the train. And then my father, who always said that undergraduates should not have cars, decided that I could have a car. I think it was after my freshman year. So then I drove, and then of course, I had classmates on the way so I could stop. I remember first going on the train. Kansas City had a scholarship that was only a Kansas City scholarship. It was called the Victor Wilson Scholarship. If you could show that you couldn't afford to go to college—I may be oversimplifying this but as I understood it, if you showed that you couldn't afford to go to college, not to Yale, but to college and you got into Yale, they paid for everything, no bursary job, nothing like that.

I didn't have that scholarship because my father saved money for me and I think he could afford for me to go to Yale, which I think cost $1,600 then, room, board and tuition. But it meant that Kansas City had a much broader and numerous contingent going to Yale then say the equivalent cities like Tulsa or Denver, some place like that.

I remember on the train being with people from high schools from all over the city, except the Black high schools because I got out of high school the year before the Supreme Court decision and Missouri schools were legally segregated, although I had no idea of that. There were no Black people in theaters or restaurants. The theater that Black people went to, and some other businesses that Black people went to, were called Lincoln. I always said you can grow up in Kansas City and leave Kansas City and think that "Lincoln" meant colored people are allowed rather than know that he was a President.

So it was white and the people going to Yale were white. There was, later, a professor at Yale mentioned in the alumni magazine and it said he was from Kansas City. Then I recognized his name. We had been on the All-City Student Council together and High School Day in City Hall where we learned about democracy, and then Black kids went back to their schools and we went back to our schools. And it turned out, it was the same guy. So we got reacquainted. We always said we went to separate schools together.

So I remember when I got to New Haven being startled when I saw Black people in the movie theater. That just didn't happen in Kansas City. So it was sort of mixed and I think in our class at Yale, out of one thousand people, I think there were four Black people and maybe two

Asians, including one who was called Robert Yee Lee. I think we maybe made up his middle name if I recall, poor fella. [00:25:00]

So it was a different place then. It's obviously changed a lot now. I think if it hadn't, it would not have been taken seriously as a university.

Dziedzic: Do you remember where you felt that or observed that transition happening as you were going from Missouri to Connecticut or Connecticut or to Missouri?

Trillin: Do you mean when did I realize that I wasn't going to go back to Kansas City or whether—?

Dziedzic: Where you may have observed a difference in terms of the way in which the country was segregated. I don't know if, for you, you would have felt those differences as East and West or North and South, or simply just one state or city that stuck out in your mind as being a transitional point.

Trillin: Yes, I think it was Kansas City because we thought that the South was where segregation was. In those days, segregation and the South were the same subject. I think if we had been asked in high school, we would have said, oh, that's terrible. We're against that. But not quite realizing that we were living in a segregated city ourselves. It's just that they didn't have the rhetoric or the signs. Nobody got up and talked about the mongrelization of the races like people did in the South. So I guess I identified that sort of thing completely with the South and gradually realized that Kansas City was sort of halfway there, basically.

It was also mixed in Kansas City. There were Black people on buses. Nobody told them to sit in the back. And at the ball games, but not theaters, not restaurants. And people knew there was sort of a line where the Black neighborhood started. I later spent a year in the South as a reporter. So there was plenty of difference. When I was growing up, I think segregation in the South was thought of as a distressing but basically an immutable situation. Sort of like bragging among Texans or something like that, not a kind of a serious moral issue that we would have to settle before we went on to other things.

It was also identified by geography. I remember when Jackie Robinson became the first Black Major League Baseball player and reading a sports column that said he was going to have trouble with some teams because the manager was from Louisiana. You were sort of connected to your geographical place as far as your racial views go. So it was quite a difference.

Dziedzic: And how did you end up being the person who was spending time in the South and writing so much and reporting so much about desegregation?

Trillin: Well, I was in the Army after college and I had worked for *Time* in the summer, *Time Magazine*. My father thought of Yale, I think, as one of my classmates called it, kind of an escalator. You got to Yale and then because of that, you got your best job and all of that. At one point, I decided, God, maybe he was right. [00:30:02] I worked for *Time* in the summer because I was the chairman of the newspaper, the *Yale Daily News*. We said chairman rather than editor because editor wasn't pretentious enough. We had to call it chairman.

So after the Army, I went back to see if there was a job there and they had an opening in the South. Well, actually, I stopped in Washington [D.C.] for awhile very briefly and then went to the South. I went there in the Fall of 1960 and I was there until the Fall of 1961. The guy who hired me said I was the first person who wanted to go there. I just thought it was an interesting story and also involved regular people who had to make decisions about things, not just politicians or business leaders, something like that, but individuals. So I went there and I spent a year there, a year that happened to be very busy in what we used to call the "seg beat," the integration of the University of Georgia and the schools of New Orleans and the public accommodations of Nashville and the Freedom Rides. Because there were years where practically nothing happened, because Washington wasn't really pushing it.

I was the junior man in a two-man bureau and the person who preceded me had left six months before and the person who came after me, I remember—when I went back in there to do a piece on the University of Georgia desegregation after I got to *The New Yorker*—telling me he thought the civil rights story was over because there had been nothing going on for months. It was sort of accidental that I went there.

I guess I wasn't totally sure what I wanted to do for a living. It had something to do with writing. And I knew it didn't have anything to do with anything that required mathematical skill

or manual dexterity or anything like that. But after that year in the South, I thought God, how could anybody do anything but this? This is fun. So it made a big difference.

And then I went to *Time* in New York. In those days, *Time* and *Newsweek* both were done by what they called group journalism. There were people in the field filing stories but they went to a writer in New York who took a ten-page file and wrote seventy lines, including some stuff they'd steal from *The New York Times*. So then I was writer in New York and I actually wrote a novel about it called *Floater* because for awhile, I was the one who went from section to section. In those days, the news magazines were very rigidly divided into sections. So the religion writer would go on vacation and the floater would come in. He had done show business the week before. The regular writers, in the back of the book sections actually became quite knowledgeable about their field. The religion writer would have lunch with Lutheran liturgists and talk to their PR guys. Then he would go away and the floater would come in. And he sounded just as authoritative when he wrote. [00:35:00] You went physically to the guy's office and as you settled into this chair, you got what I thought of as instant omniscience on the subject.

I admitted, I think, in the jacket copy of the novel that I was the floater who tried to get out of the religion section by writing "alleged" in front of any historical religious event that seemed at all questionable to me. They just crossed out the alleged. They were used to smart aleks at the time. So I was a floater and then a writer in the national affairs section. Then I went to *The New Yorker* in 1963. The first piece I wrote was also the first book which was called *An Education in Georgia*, about the desegregation of the University of Georgia.

Dziedzic: How do you think working as a floater, or a generalist kind of, affected the way that you then went on to report or interview people in the field?

Trillin: Well, I was surprised when I started as a writer at *Time* how quickly you could get up to scratch on a subject if you were assigned on Tuesday to something and had to turn it in on Friday. You had a lot of resources and researchers, female researchers and male writers, not by accident, by policy. One of the researchers, Josie Davis, actually the daughter of Herman Mankiewicz who, the picture has just come out—*Mank*, about writing the movie with Orson Welles, *Citizen Kane*. His daughter was a very clever writer, they would run some of her stories but there weren't any bylines or anything at *Time*. She was still listed as a researcher.

At any rate, I think it helped my curiosity in a way and even now, many years later, in speaking about some subject, here I suddenly know a fact that I learned when I was in the education section, or, I did medicine for two weeks and ended up knowing a lot about a procedure called a loop colostomy, actually more than I wanted to know. And they killed the section both weeks, I have to admit. But I still claim some expertise in medicine. When the doctor who came in at the end of the week to read the section, to vet it, read my description of the new procedure of loop colostomies, he burst out laughing. I said, "It was not meant to amuse, Doctor." He said, "This patient is dead on the table the way you described this." Anyways, it gave me this little smattering of knowledge about various things, much of it not very important.

Dziedzic: I want to go back to Yale for a minute and ask about what—I know you've talked about how reporting wasn't really a kind of glamorous job at the time, or trade, and no one even used the word journalism except as probably a derogatory term. So who were the people that were working or involved in the *Yale Daily News*?

Trillin: Well, oddly enough, with the exception of William Buckley, who started a magazine, the *National Review*, I think I was the first chairman of the *Yale Daily News* to go into journalism. [00:40:05] It was thought of as sort of a hobby. It was a little area in New Haven that had two or three fraternity buildings. Fraternities in those days were sort of like New York men's clubs. You didn't live there or anything. You just went in, ordered a drink from a Black bartender, and signed a chit. And one of the nicknames of the *News* was the best fraternity on Fraternity Row.

In general, I think *The Harvard Crimson* was an exception. There was kind of a line of people from *The Harvard Crimson* going into journalism. But that wasn't really true [at Yale]. I think one other person in my class went into journalism. I think we were not that far from the seedy guy in the crumpled suit with a bottle of bourbon in a drawer and one of those thick pencils chasing a story. I think people still had that view of people who went into journalism. And also it was not thought of as anything that would bring you a good living.

I remember we had a cousin who was the purchasing agent for *The Kansas City Star*. That was our connection with journalism. And he told me once, "The only person who makes a decent living in journalism is Drew Pearson," who was a columnist in those days. But I think my father thought it was okay. If I wasn't going to be President of the United States. I always said

that his aspirations for me was I would become President of the United States, and his fallback position was I not become a ward of the county.

But generally, I think it was not the sort of thing that somebody from Yale would go into. But the *Yale Daily News* was in a building called the Briton Hadden Building. Henry Luce and Briton Hadden had worked on the *News* and then founded Time Inc. So it was not unheard of. I think it was thought of as seedy, is what it was.

Dziedzic: And when for you did it start to feel like not so much just a hobby and not a sort of seedy underbelly of culture but something that you needed to take seriously?

Trillin: Well, as I said, I knew I wasn't going to be a surgeon and I knew I wasn't going to be a businessman. And I knew I wanted something to do with writing. So it seemed sort of natural. *Time* was not a perfect place in many ways. As I said, there were no bylines. You were sort of part of a story, either the reporting part or the writing part or the editing part. And the farther away you got from what actually happened, the more power over the story you had. So the managing editor, without even seeing the files, could add a paragraph or something like that.

So I didn't think that I was going to work for *Time* for the rest of my life. [00:45:07] It was the handiest thing when I went looking for a job because I had worked there before. I don't mean I had any plans to leave. After some time of being a writer, because writing at *Time*, some of the writers actually did some of their own reporting, like John McPhee wrote the show business section. If there was a cover story or something, he went and interviewed the person himself. But in general, one of the things that makes journalism interesting, which is that you're out and about and meeting different people and everything, it wasn't true at *Time* if you were a writer because you were just in a building on Sixth Avenue. Whatever happened, it might mean you wrote fifty lines and it might mean you wrote one hundred lines but it didn't mean you went out and found out what was going on.

So it was an imperfect place to—it's not that I sort of lined up the places that I might work and decided *Time* was the place. It was just sort of there. So that's what I did. It was all sort of accidental.

Dziedzic: And can you go back to—you were starting to tell me about "U.S. Journal." It sounds to me like it was quite a different setup than what you were describing as the imperfect nature of how you were working at *Time*.

Trillin: You mean the "U.S. Journal" series I did for *The New Yorker*? I think what happened was, after a few years at *The New Yorker*, I got there in '63 and I think I started doing this about four years after. I thought that there were a lot of subjects that I wanted to write about that really didn't deserve twenty thousand words or something like that. *The New Yorker* in those days was running very long pieces and often in two or three parts in consecutive magazines. I thought that there were things that I wanted to write about that were just worth a few thousand words. I think I was starting to—I was having a little trouble getting started. My father died and when I went back to New York, I think I had time to sort of think about things. So I asked William Shawn, the editor, about it and he thought it was a good idea. So we settled on a piece every three weeks and three thousand words.

Magazine writers would say, how do you keep up that pace? And newspaper reporters would say, what else do you do? They didn't think that was a full-time job. And it was strange—*The New Yorker* didn't even have an AP [Associated Press] wire. So the question of how to find those stories turned out to be the hardest thing about it. But I loved doing it. I did it on a schedule of every three weeks, except for the summer, unless it switched around to running one of my daughters' birthdays or something. But otherwise, I would leave Sunday night if it was a hard place to get to, or maybe Monday, and then I'd come home at the end of the week. I don't think I ever stayed more than a work week at a place. [00:49:59] And reporting is sort of odd because in a way it fits into the space you give it, the time you give it. So if you report for a week, you could keep going. You have to stop somewhere.

So I always got home for the weekend and then I would write the piece. So it was a nice routine. I didn't see my girls when I was gone but I worked basically at home, and went in to type up the last draft and hand it in. This was of course in the days before all of the computer stuff. Then I would just be home until I left. I think my wife, she acknowledged it was nice to have me gone for a few days. It was one of those "glad to see the back of him" situations.

So I did that for fifteen years. I'm not quite sure why I stopped doing it. For one thing, I realized that I was sometimes doing a story that I had done somewhere else, I mean, not literally

but the type of story. I remember I did two librarian firings, one of them in Alabama and one of them in East Hampton. They were different because of the places. I mean, the thing about the "U.S. Journal" series is I was interested in the context of the placescape. *The New Yorker* had a series once by Philip Hamburger. He would go to a city and sort of sum it up, the atmosphere of what it was like and everything, but there's no particular story. But I always went to the story that happened to be in some city, but the more successful ones, there was a strong context of the city where it happened, or the town, in many cases. It was a good job. Every three weeks, I went to a different place and met a whole new group of people, a different subject every three weeks. So I really liked it. It was a good fifteen years.

Dziedzic: And what was the process of finding those stories and deciding where you were going to go?

Trillin: It was very haphazard. It included even desperate trips to the out-of-town newsstand in Times Square. There used to be an out-of-town newsstand. I think it was called Hotaling's and I would grab half a dozen papers. I liked particularly papers like *The Des Moines Register* because they had a little map of Iowa next to the Iowa stories. So I didn't have to look that up—when I was leafing through, trying to avoid the Associated Press stories from Washington. Sometimes people from one story tell me about another story or some people wrote in about a story. But I think it was the most difficult part of it. We didn't have any stringers out there or anything like that, like a news magazine would. I could mix it up. If I had done a very serious story, I might do a story about a crawfish festival or something like that. So I didn't have a constant reporting thing with a notebook in my pocket all the time. [00:55:00]

Dziedzic: And what was the cumulative effect of this travel and seeing so many places? Were there places or events that stood out? Was it more of a collective perspective that you developed?

Trillin: Well, some things you could generalize about. At one point, I realized that most of the arguments that Americans have about real estate, in one way or another [are similar], no matter where you are, but I really saw the differences in a lot of parts of the country. And there were places that I liked. I liked Iowa a lot. I liked doing stories there partly because, in the first place,

it looked like it was supposed to look with the farm stands and the corn cribs and the trees lining the driveway. I don't know how many stories I got from the out-of-town news stand, not many, I suspect but it was the only thing I knew how to do [laughs]. I was sort of eager to go to the next state. If I hadn't done a piece in Montana, I was sort of looking at Montana papers more than I was looking at New Jersey papers. But you obviously saw the differences.

And there was a wide variety of stories. A friend of mine in Nova Scotia said I often, in a conversation, started a sentence like, "I did a piece once on such and such." And I said, "Well, that's because the only thing I really know about it is what I've written about." It was so varied that, in almost any conversation, you don't usually—I saw that new movie about the Korean family in Arkansas. They were chicken sexers. And I thought, yes, I knew the Koreans were very good at chicken sexing. They would decide whether the chick was a male or female and put them in one basket or another. I said, I must have done a story on it. Then I was like, no, I don't think I did. So I'm still curious about where I learned that. I've never done a chicken sexing story, I have to say in my defense. It's a kind of interesting subject though.

Anyway, so yes, I thought I was lucky to do that. When I found what I thought was a story, I would go into Mr. Shawn, who was the only actual decision-maker editor. The other editors would get a piece to work with the writer on to edit, like there's something wrong with this line, something like that. But Shawn was the only one who actually made decisions about what to write about or when to run it or if to run it. So I would go in and say, "I'm thinking about doing a story about Korean chicken sexing in Arkansas." And ninety-nine percent of the time, he would say fine. The point was that there was a lot in the bank at *The New Yorker* then, a lot of pieces that people had written that they just hadn't run for a long time. They were just sitting there waiting to run. Part of talking to Shawn about it was in case there was a piece sitting in the bank that I didn't know about that was on the same subject.

But I think maybe two or three times in that whole period—there must have been over 250 of those stories—did he make a suggestion about where I should go. [00:59:59] So maybe one or two times that he decided those things. Like once he said that he didn't understand why most people thought Richard Nixon, who was then the President, had committed a felony but that most people were against impeachment. So I went to Kansas, but reporters hate those kinds of stories because they're totally unscientific.

There was a guy who had been on the writing side, had never been a reporter, and rose very high at *Time Magazine*. It was said, I don't know if it's true, that he once went to London on some managerial trip. He got there in the evening and sent a memo back the next morning. It started, "The people of England believe," and obviously only talked to his driver on the way back, because you can't really do it like a professional poll person would do it. You might just talk to the wrong people by accident.

So I went to Kansas. I decided in that case that if there was any generalization that could be made about that—I hesitated to make generalizations—that people like us, people like reporters, thrive on tumult and have trouble understanding how most people dread it. So the idea of impeachment is scary to most people as we've seen recently. When I was in the South, white people used to say that Black people could understand specific things but not general or abstract things, and I would always say, give me an example, because that's how my mind works. That's what I'm like. So I try to avoid generalizations. So it was sort of proforma going into Shawn to ask about it. That was part of the process.

At one point, I started doing a column for *The Nation* and I did that on what we used to call in my house the off week, because when I was doing the "U.S. Journal" series, I'd be reporting for a week and then writing for a week. And then the next week would be looking for a story and paying bills, things like that, the off week. So I started doing *The Nation* column on that week. It appeared in *The Nation* every third week.

Dziedzic: So I'd like to ask you about living in New York City. How did you decide to do that? What was your entry to the city?

Trillin: Well, I hadn't thought about living in New York City as much as that's where my job was. I mean, I had been to the city when I was in college and then, as I said, I spent I think one summer and then the summer after college in New York. So I wasn't totally unfamiliar with it. But if you were a magazine writer, that's where the magazines were. So I guess if they had been in Boston, I'd have gone to Boston. [01:05:04] I didn't think much about it but I liked it.

The first summer, I worked at Time Inc. I was on a clip desk most of the time at *Sports Illustrated*. The clip desk went through newspapers and clipped out stories with a straight edge that the editors might be interested in. Now it looks kind of primitive way of doing it. That

summer, I lived on the Upper East Side because one of my roommate's parents were out at a country house or something. So we lived there. And the summer after college—wait a minute, there was a third summer. Anyway, at one point, after college, I lived in the Village for the first time on 10th Street just east of Hudson [Street], sort of where the bus stop is. There's a little courtyard and I lived in one of the places. There were four or five of us in this house in the courtyard.

And then I went to Europe. I went to the *Time* bureau as kind of a temporary job while I waited to go into the Army, in London and then in Paris. Then when I came back, when I got out of the Army, I don't think I ever thought of not living in New York. And in the Army, I was on Governor's Island most of the time. So I would go in in the evenings. You had to get up at 6:30 or something like that. So I often fell asleep on the subway going home. The Number 1 [subway line] then made the turn, starting to go uptown before somebody shook me awake. So I sort of halfway lived in New York. I've lived here permanently since I came up from Atlanta in 1961.

I was trying to think about it, but I didn't think I had any romantic feelings about the Village. Except I must have had because, in the first place—and I once talked to a historian at NYU and this was true of the early bohemians that they lived in the Village not because it was different from where they came from, but because it was the same. It was not the same but close. It was human scale. There weren't all these huge buildings and it was more informal. But I specifically remember that when I was looking for an apartment, *Time* put me up at The Algonquin as I was looking for an apartment. Those days are gone but those magazines used to have a lot of money, spent a lot of money. Sometimes in a foreign capital, I'd see a really fancy sort of mansion and think it's an Arab embassy or the home of the Time Life bureau.

Anyway, I was looking for an apartment and I talked to a man about an apartment that was gone or something, and then he called me a couple weeks later because, I assume he thought I was a nice young man, polite, wouldn't trash his apartment. He said there was a rent-controlled apartment—rent control was the Holy Grail in those days—there was a rent-controlled apartment on 16th Street or 17th Street. But it was free and he was offering it to me. [01:10:02] I said, "No, I really want to live in the Village." I didn't want to live three blocks from the Village. I wanted to live in the Village.

So I eventually found an apartment. There was an apartment, I think, advertised in *The Times*, on Jane Street, and I got there and there were two or three other guys looking at the

apartment. So it was a little bit of a competition. And she asked me where I had gone to college and I said, "Yale." She said the last boy—she always called them boys—the last boy who was in there, he was Yale but he was the sort of Yale whose parents had to eat Corn Flakes to send him to Yale. That was her phrase. I could hear the crunching of Corn Flakes from Kansas City. I remained quiet about that, what a legitimate Yale person I was, or a Corn Flakes person. So I lived there on Jane Street, 70 Jane. Next to it was then the Éclair Bakery factory. So there was a wonderful aroma coming from the building. People would walk into my apartment and say, even after I had been there a couple years, you could do wonders with this place. But I really hadn't done any wonders to it. But it was a nice neighborhood and then I thought I would certainly always live in the Village.

I think for somebody from the Midwest, walking into a building and having an elevator operator take you to your home just seems so unnatural, more unnatural than all the unnatural things that supposedly happen in the Village. And Brooklyn was not a real option then if you weren't from there. I think when we were in our thirties, my wife and I probably knew one couple or two couples that lived in Brooklyn. Now practically everybody who is in any kind of publishing or journalism lives in Brooklyn. But I wanted to live in the Village.

In those days, I don't think the West Village existed as something that people distinguished. That was true when we bought the house too. I think it was just the Village. And then I always think of it as getting a free upgrade with no miles needed. It just got to be a totally new neighborhood by not doing anything. So I used to live in the Village but now I live in the West Village. The house hasn't moved. It's been there for 150 years or so.

Dziedzic: In that Jane Street apartment, what was your—I guess I'm assuming you were living there by yourself at the time?

Trillin: Yes.

Dziedzic: What was your daily routine when you were living there?

Trillin: When I was living there, practically the whole time—I was just thinking, I went to *The New Yorker* in 1963. No, a lot of the time I was working at *Time*—

The other weird thing about *Time*, I thought *Time* was more interesting internally than it was as a magazine. You had odd weekends. If you were in national affairs, you had a Tuesday, Wednesday weekend at one point, which made it more ingrown, but it also left people free on weekend days. But it gradually shifted towards a regular weekend. So I think most of the time I was a writer at *Time*, it was like Tuesday to Saturday. I would get up and—I don't know what I did for breakfast. I think sometimes I drank a can of V8 juice on the way to the subway. [01:15:03] I went to *Time*. That was about it.

When we got married, an Army friend of mine was about to go to Washington and we were going to get married in London—because we were going to London and I said, we'll get married in London. My wife's family wasn't really up to doing a wedding, a kind of traditional wedding. They liked me enough [laughs]—they didn't hate me. But we decided to just get married and we didn't tell anybody, except my Army friend who had a rent-controlled apartment at 12th and University [Place]. I don't think Jane Street was rent-controlled, it just was cheap. But this was a rent-controlled apartment. And we're talking about now old World War II rent-controlled, not rent stabilization, which meant you practically could never raise the rent. I think you could raise it fifteen percent between tenants but at 12th and University, there was a guy who was an editor at *The New Yorker* who had the penthouse and I think he was paying one hundred and some dollars a month. We were the high payers in the building, I think. We were paying two something. I can't remember what it was.

Anyway, we told him we were getting married and so we got that apartment. I got married in 1965 and then about the time—well, so we lived at University Place and 12th for four or five years and then my wife had the idea of looking for a house. It would have never occurred to me to look for a house. I mean a rent-controlled apartment with a super was what I was thinking about. So we looked around for a long time for a house in the Village and then she got pregnant. I didn't want to live uptown—I'd go home before I lived uptown, home meaning Kansas City—then I finally decided I was being kind of selfish.

So my wife actually had the check for an apartment to rent on Central Park West, and we saw one real estate person who showed us a house and we didn't like it. She then said, this house might be for sale but it isn't yet. We basically said, we'll buy it. So that's how I ended up on Grove Street. So I've lived here since—I think we closed in 1969. And then I remember we refinanced because there were two mortgages, it was all complicated. And it was right around the

time that there was a headline on *The Daily News*, "Ford to City, Drop Dead," when there wasn't going to be any help from Washington for New York. We closed the mortgage thing. We got out on the street and our lawyer for the house, who was a wonderful man named Wally Popolizio, said, now you got your house and your baby and everything's going to be all right. [01:20:00] Kissed Alice, kissed me. And then I thought, only a writer would have everything he owned in the house in a city that was going down the tubes. Who would be dumb enough about money to do that?

So I remember when we were looking for a house, someone said, correctly, Chelsea in about twenty years is going to be fantastic. It's really going to be a really good place to live. So you should buy a house not in the Village but in Chelsea. I said, well, twenty years, you're talking roughly about the time we're going to raise our family in Chelsea. I don't want to raise my family in Chelsea [laughs]. In other words, we didn't see it as an investment exactly.

There was a guy at *The New Yorker*, a lawyer, who was kind of a Depression-era person, a very cautious person, and he told me, do not buy that house. He was the only person in the editorial floors of *The New Yorker* who was not a writer or editor or something. He checked for libel but was also the mole for the Fleischmanns who owned the place. He was the only person most of us knew who had any business experience or anything like that. He told me and a number of other writers—I remember he told Ved Mehta, who was offered the starting co-op price, at The Dakota, no, you don't want to spend forty thousand or whatever that was, doing that. I figure he cost *The New Yorker* writers millions of dollars because he was trying to help! He told me real estate will never be higher than it is now. Just don't do it.

But we just did it. So we've been here ever since, since 1969, I think was when we closed.

Dziedzic: And what was the condition of the house when you bought it and what was the block like?

Trillin: I always thought the block was fine. The house was not fine. The house, in the first place, had two apartments that were rent-controlled, again the real rent control, not rent stabilized. It was divided into about six apartments, the house. There was a floor-through on the bottom floor and another floor-through on the parlor floor, I guess you'd call that the second

floor of a brownstone. And then two apartments on each floor above those. The people on the top floor had both of those apartments and they used it as one apartment. They had retired and he had worked for one of the publishers, I think Macmillan, that was on 12th Street for awhile. But they basically lived in this sort of gate house of their daughter's place in Long Island somewhere. And they were paying for those two apartments, I think, ninety dollars a month. Then Miss Downey, who was in one of those apartments, I guess on the third floor, was paying sixty-eight dollars or something like that. She was ill. She kept going back and forth to the nursing home.

So I guess one of the longest afternoons I've ever spent was when Wally Popolizio and Alice and I went to talk to the people on the top floor about leaving. [01:24:56] They were paying very little and the used the apartment very little. They were coming in once a month or something like that. It was ninety dollars. Our view of how that happened sort of depends on our world views. Alice thought that after a lot of people tried to get them out over the years that they saw this nice family with this cute little baby and they thought oh, come on. I thought they didn't particularly like paying the ninety dollars every month. But anyway, we arrived at an agreement. They were very polite. They were English people and Wally was used to going into a place with an Italian widow of some years and kind of putting out the one hundred dollar bills until they said "Basta!" That's how he described what he did. But you couldn't do that with these people. That was a long, embarrassing afternoon.

The little fiction we had was that we were going to help add to the gate house or renovate it or something like that, so they could live more there and not here. And also there were still currency regulations in England that you couldn't take pounds into the dollar zone. So we were going to England that year, that summer, so we basically bought our pounds from her sister, or something like that. I can't remember. It was a really complicated arrangement. [Laughs] And then they left.

There were two young women in the apartment that wasn't rent-controlled at all. It was a really weird law. And they made a big thing about it. Anyway, they left. We hadn't raised their rent or anything because we said we were going to eventually use that place. And Ms. Downing's niece a month or two later called and said Ms. Downing had died. Alice cried. And then she called the architect. At one point, the heat had gone off and Ms. Downing had thought we had turned the heat off. We said Ms. Downing, we're never going to do anything like that. You can stay as long as you want.

So then we fixed the house into two apartments. There was something called Mrs. Murphy's boardinghouse law or something like that [known as the "Mrs. Murphy" exemption to the Fair Housing Act of 1968], that all the rent-controlled stuff is no longer applicable if you just have two apartments. So we took the upper part of the house and I still rent the bottom, which has the garden. We have a roof garden—I didn't quite understand that. Where I come from, if there's a garden, you dig in. It's dirt. You're in the world. But anyway, fortunately Alice thought otherwise.

We've made some other minor renovations but we've been living here in this condition, as far as the apartments go, since about '71. I think this was over the winter of '70-'71. The people who were doing the renovations said oh, you could probably stay; we were living in that floor-through. But it turned out, we couldn't stay. There was just too much. [01:29:55] So we went from people's summer houses to various squatting places. We had one little girl at that point. We came back about '71. Fortunately for her and for us, the house is right across the street from PS 3. So both of my girls went to PS 3 and then to IS 70 and eventually Uptown for high school. They went to college and got advanced degrees, but I always say that if you wake them up in the middle of the night and say, "Where did you go to school?" They'd say, "PS 3." It really sort of imprinted itself on them.

It was then, before Abigail, my older daughter, was old enough to go, PS 3, when we bought the house, in fact—I can't remember if they called it a "600" school or a "700" school ["600" schools, precursor to District 75]. There was some designation by the school board. It was a school basically for incorrigibles. The neighbors loved having it there because they would just march to the subway and they never saw them. It was sort of like the mothers of this neighborhood had a demonstration. I think they actually pounded a sign into the building like Martin Luther or something. It became an open classroom school. They called their teachers by their first names. They didn't exactly have desks. When I think of what it was like, I think of what my friend Andy Kofkind said once when I said—I think it was Goddard or one of those places. I said, "What's it like now?" He lived up in Vermont. He said, "Cockamamie is the word that comes to mind." That's the way PS 3 was. But the girls loved it and I would watch them, the big one hold the hood of the little one's parka, and walk across the street after breakfast.

So it was a very fortunate experience, another deflection in the right direction.

Dziedzic: I did want to ask about—if inside your home, it's Kansas City, how was living in the Village part of your girls' life? Your parenting?

Trillin: Well, it's funny because Saul Steinberg did a cover for *The New Yorker* once that when he originally handed in the drawing, there was a street sign that said Bleeker Street. But he took that off because he wanted to make it more universal. But it has alligators in it, a lot of crazy stuff going on. And my older daughter thinks of it as her childhood. In her house, she has it now in her house, a blown-up poster of it. At PS 3, most—not most, but a lot of the kids were from Westbeth, which, not that long before, had been turned into this place that supposedly would allow artists and actors and things to stay in the Village at a reasonable price for their apartments. So a lot of their playmates were there or in SoHo. I remember my mother was here, and went with me while I took one of them to a playdate in Soho once, she said, she's not going in here. Do people live here? This dirty old-looking building? [01:34:56]

So then we started, of course, really just by seeing them pass by, started going to the Halloween Parade, when it was still going through the Village rather than up 6th Avenue. It started in Westbeth always with the macabre band playing and creatures coming out from Westbeth. I think it was Abigail, when she got to Yale, she was in downtown New Haven with a couple of other students and they said something about gay people across the street. She actually didn't know. She had been brought up—that's one of the things she didn't understand, like race stuff. Alice taught at a program at City for awhile, for underprepared students, then did television about aid to kids. The people we were close to came from all different places.

Larry Kramer was in my class at Yale. We didn't actually know each other when we were there. We had a lot of friends in common. We met at a fifteenth reunion. He was close to the family, particularly the girls, particularly Sarah, my younger daughter. When somebody was doing a book of essays about Kramer, I did one and Sarah did one. Mine started something like, "When I was asked if I could contribute to this book, I said I could do a piece on Kramer as a pain in the ass, but I supposed you have too many of those as it is." And Sarah started, "When I read about America's angriest AIDS activist, I can't believe they're talking about my sweet Uncle Larry."

They grew up in a different world than I did. But in the Village—it's not the same world as Uptown. I think after PS 3, they were just sort of Village kids. I'm grateful for that.

Dziedzic: I wanted to ask you a little bit about your writing. I'm going to ask some pretty broad questions and, as your gift is to pick the specifics that tell your story, I hope you can work with these larger questions. But I wanted to ask you, you've been writing about a lot of issues for fifty years or so that have really been put back into the spotlight with a different kind of scrutiny, I think, over the last—just this last year and then also the last five or six years. So I wanted to ask you about what were your impressions of the way that race and the way that white supremacy was being written about and reported on over the last year or so, based on your perspective that you have from writing about it for so long?

Trillin: Well, I'd like to say—I'd like to be able to say that we're finally going to treat this seriously. [01:39:59] But we had this sort of moment of truth before. I think—what's the word that people in Washington use now? Unpacking, the whole racial equity thing, it's so complicated. We've done such a terrible job on school integration for instance. The woman who writes about school integration for *The Times* had a piece once that said the height of school integration was in 1988, that we have been going back resegregating since 1988. Then you think, oh, we can change that. But then you think, wait a minute, how about the neighborhoods, all the red-lining? It's so built into everything. There's a Black comedian, I think his name's [Jerrod] Carmichael, I saw him once on television, and he said, "Being Black in America is exhausting." And I think that's true. I think we've got a long way to go and I wish I were more optimistic about it.

I do think this is a little different from—for instance, Black History Month this year, it seemed to me, the first time that I noticed people paid any attention to Black History Month. There were constant TV shows and Black themes. And Black History Month used to be something that you'd joke about in that they gave Black people the shortest month. But I do think there's an effort. I think Trump did a lot of damage not only for the courts, but also just the tone that made it all right for people to have those views and to pass those laws.

Like the Georgia law they just passed [enacting voting restrictions]. In the South, I would come across a lot of people who'd gotten beaten up trying to vote or had their house burned down or something like that. Of all the things that have happened recently, that's the one that outrages me the most. I don't use this term very much, but it's un-American. I remember, as a

boy, there were constant Get Out the Vote drives. That was supposed to be good citizenship. But I just decided the Republican party used to have policies and all the policies could be summed up with: if rich people paid less in taxes, everybody would be better off. And now that they don't bother with policies, what they really think would be summed up by: they can't vote against us if they can't vote. And keeping people from voting just seems to me outrageous. I just heard on television this morning, someone said, "Oh, Colorado has the same law," a similar law.

In the first place, it isn't similar. But also, when the Freedom Riders got to Jackson, they were arrested. I was in the bus station. They were arrested on the same disturbing of the peace laws that are on the New York State books. It's how you use it and when and why. I was thinking, those corporations, instead of just saying something—because they say this is unacceptable but they're accepting it—they ought to do vote drives. They ought to find out how they can increase the vote. Like for instance, I can't remember when the Georgia law shuts these polling places off at 5:00PM because people who work hourly can't get there. [01:45:04] Then give them the day off that day. Or figure out how to feed people on the line without politicking. They have resources, those people.

So I don't know. You can see that the vote counts. You can see that what happened in Mississippi and those places eventually—I mean, that's why the Democrats control the Senate, because of the Black votes in Georgia. So sometimes it's hard to remember how bad it was before. I did a piece on the fiftieth anniversary of the Freedom Rides because I was on that first bus. Somebody said to me when we were in Mississippi, who would have thought we'd have a Black President? And I said, I would have settled for a Black cop, just one. At that time, the mayor of Jackson was Black, the police chief was Black. I think a Black woman, if I remember.

It's not that no progress has been made but I think we have a long way to go, to keep up that sort of momentum because, as I said, when I went to the South, the first sit-in had been in February in Greensboro. I think it was two years before that, the Montgomery bus boycott. There were literally months and years between anything happening, anything proceeding. So I hope that we don't get into that cycle again. But I guess the amount of attention now is encouraging. And there are more than four people in Abigail's class at Yale that are people of color. I don't know what the percentage is but it's probably somewhat higher. It's not four.

Dziedzic: Yes, it's almost like for decades we had stories of individual success, like for example, a Black President and there is still attention given in that way. Like for example, a focus on Stacy Abrams and her organizing and at the same time, at a systemic level, there's even more and more oppression. It's not individual bravery that allows you to wait in line for so long without food and water.

Trillin: Right. And then the real question about those lines is: why are they there? They're there because they don't put polling places—any more than they have to—in Black neighborhoods. The people who run Delta aren't standing in that kind of line. They just go to their local white school and vote. It's always more than it seems. But as you say, individual success, yes, and there is a lot of that. The idea that people are demanding that the Cabinet not be a bunch of old white men, that's progress. But the systemic stuff, we have a long way to go.

Dziedzic: Another thing that you were pointing out a long time ago was how polarized people were around certain issues, just for example, around race, and I think that is still true and also immigration also has emerged as another kind of polarized issue. So how did you take in all of these sort of [recent] headlines about people or the country being more polarized than it ever was before? Did it feel that way to you?

Trillin: I think it is more polarized than it used to be. Also when you think about it, for instance, there used to be moderate or even liberal Republican senators. [01:49:57] This was of course in the days when the segregationists in the Senate who controlled the committees were Southern Democrats. But people like [Charles] Mathias and [Jacob] Javits, people like that. So it wasn't split that way. It's going to be split for a long time on immigration. I did a piece on Harvard Law School once when they were having a lot of controversy over something called critical legal studies. They said the bitterest events in those times were on appointments, who would be invited to be a professor at Harvard Law School, partly because then the numbers change as far as the majority in the Senate or whatever they call it. Partly because it's a picture of who they are.

The same thing is true of immigration because you're really talking about what the country's going to be like. I've always thought that, emotionally, that people are either pro or

con immigration, having a lot to do with their own past and their own upbringing. I came from an immigrant family. I think of them as immigrants. My father did everything to be an American and he seemed like no different from Mr. Cunningham or Mr. Doty around the corner. But I think of myself as someone who, if those people had their way, I wouldn't be here.

It's interesting that, in Charlottesville, one of the things that people chanted was "the Jews will not replace us," which sounded very odd. I had mentioned in a column that there was an emeritus art professor from the University of Virginia, who had joined the demonstration, not knowing what it was and he thought they were saying, the "The Juice will not disgrace us." He thought it was an O.J. Simpson [nicknamed "The Juice"] thing. But when you think, what in the world is that?

Apparently, there's a guy in France named [Renaud] Camus, not the Camus you study in college [referring to Albert Camus] but a different Camus, who has this theory about the darker races replacing the white race. And I think a lot of this is sort of dark/light stuff. And Trump has said, why aren't we getting immigrants from Norway? One reason we aren't getting immigrants in Norway is people are very happy in Norway. When they have those satisfied or happy polls, they are near the top, even though they would be considered socialists by Donald Trump. But think about how much more interesting this country is than it would have been if they hadn't stopped what was basically Asian exclusion.

I mean, in writing about eating, I mentioned once that having a quota for more English people who wanted to come, and having Chinese exclusion, is in culinary terms suicidal. You would have a lot of English restaurants.

I remember English friends of mine who were studying in America. One of them told me this years later. They came back on a ship together—this was when you went by ship—and when they got to Southampton [England] and they were looking down at all these pasty white English faces after having been in America for a year, they thought oh, my God, this is our country. [01:55:03]

And the other things I think about immigrants, immigrants are people who got off their asses and did something. Came. When you think about my grandparents, my mother's father got to New York where his, I think, half-brother was supposed to meet him, and he wasn't there. And he never found him, ever. So he had no relatives. But think of people coming to this country—think of these guys now that I'm trying to avoid when they ride their bikes on the

sidewalk—but still, think of the bravery of somebody being a delivery person in a country that he barely knows and he barely knows the language and barely knows the streets. But it seems to me that when people say it's a country of immigrants, that it's not a small matter. That's what it is and that's why it is what it is.

So I am not, as Republicans say, for an "open border" and all that, but I'm for immigration. I think the more, the better. But it's a real hot button issue because it's not just jobs that people are worried about immigrants taking. I think it's changing the country, or the country that they imagined was true in the '50s or something, and it not being their country anymore, losing their power. And I come from a family that we weren't even wanted in New York [laughs], they sent us to Galveston. So the idea that we ought to find all these Nobel Prize winners in these countries and take them, I don't think really works.

Dziedzic: You've written about people in their complexity, and in positions that you would maybe agree with and disagree with, and I just wanted to ask you about that challenge—that maybe, as a writer, is actually something that you enjoy. How would you characterize the process of instrumentalizing some of the people you meet and conversations that you have to tell your stories? I say instrumentalization as a kind of dehumanizing word but I don't mean it that way. I just can't come up with a better one.

Trillin: Well, I think it depends on what I'm doing. Say, in reporting a piece, I'm very conscious of being fair, even though I might not agree with the person's politics or his world view or something like that. In writing attempts at humor, I don't feel fairness is called for [laughs] necessarily. I've said, when people ask me, aren't you ashamed making a living writing underhanded nasty comments about respectable public servants? And my only answer is, it's not much of a living. So I think it's different.

For instance, my younger daughter, Sarah, made up a great word once, a great phrase, which is "aggressive dork." My girls could say something like he was a sweet kind of dorky guy, but an aggressive dork is different. [02:00:00] I wrote a piece in *The New Yorker* about—I can't remember what the subject was—but I said that Steven Miller was a personification of an aggressive dork. I guess, of all the outrages of the Trump thing, the idea that this guy, who is of the same background that I'm from: immigrants. There's a Yiddish word, shanda, which is not

just a scandal but a scandal that humiliates everybody everywhere. It's just awful. It's a shanda. So I'd be happy to put that in as a whatever you call an attempt at humor kind of opinion piece. But if I were writing about immigration, I would make sure that I treated it fairly, that the facts were right, and that also I sort of gave him his due.

So it depends because I do a lot of different sort of writing, less reporting than I used to.

Dziedzic: Is there any other kinds of writing that you do that you want to reflect on? I know you've written a lot of essays and novels and memoirs also?

Trillin: Well, I don't know how to reflect on them. I've written a few memoirs. I'm not really a novelist. I've written, I think, three comic novels but I don't really think like a novelist. A real novelist, you can imagine telling stories when he or she was twelve or ten or something. I have to kind of put it together. The verse, I do some political verse for *The Nation* every issue. Now it's every couple of weeks. I wrote once that *The Nation* publishes only every couple of weeks in the summer even though the downtrodden are oppressed every day of the year. And now they're every other week, even in the winter. It gives me a different point of view. I judge people by whether their names are good to rhyme. And I like candidates like Ross Perot and John McCain, nice, clean, iambic candidates, not like Clinton. I always referred to him as the "orange" of American Presidents. He doesn't rhyme with anything.

Bush rhymes with tush but that's disrespectful. It's not a good rhyme. There haven't been very good rhyming Presidents lately. Biden is equally awful. So it's a different way at looking at politics. I once said, oh my God, is the governor of Illinois going to get into the race? Blagojevich? What are we going to do with that? It turns out Blagojevich is not hard to rhyme.

I'm looking at these books here. The verse went much further than I expected. It was sort of an accident. When John Sununu was the chief of staff for George H.W. Bush, he sort of stood out from the Cabinet. He didn't look like the rest of them—nice, Ivy League Protestants in suits. Also he was really interested in showing that he was the smartest guy in the room. [02:04:59] And then I loved his name, Sununu. I used to think about it on the subway, Sununu. It has a nice flow to it, And I eventually wrote a poem called, *If You Knew What Sununu*. I sent it to *The Nation*. By that time, the column was syndicated. It wasn't in *The Nation*. The editor then, the wily and parsimonious, Victor S. Navasky said, "Write one of those every issue."

As I've said many times that when I first wrote a column for *The Nation*, I asked him what he was going to pay for each column. He said, "We've been paying something in the high two figures." It turned out it was sixty-five. I said, "It sounds like the middle two figures to me." So I had my high-powered literary agent talk to Navasky and I said "play hardball" and he got him up to one hundred. And God, when was that? It was probably thirty years ago. And I still make one hundred. Also for each poem, I make one hundred. But he pointed out the poems weren't as long as the columns. As you may know, I am the highest paid poet in the country because poetry's paid by the line, and *The New Yorker*, I think when I started—I have done some verses for *The New Yorker*—but they pay like ten dollars a line. I'd get one hundred dollars no matter how long the poem is. So if I write a two line poem, it's fifty dollars a line.

My father used to put a poem—he was a grocer for most of his working life as I said but he had a restaurant for awhile and he used to put a poem, a little couplet, on the menu at lunch, mostly about pie. "Don't sigh, eat pie," was his shortest one. In the American spirit of each son trying to outdo his father, I wrote a shorter poem, which was called—and the title doesn't count in length, *The Philosophical, Societal, and Political Implications of the O.J. Simpson Trial*. And the poem was, "O.J. Oy vey." That's shorter than my father's. My father's best poem was, "Eat your supper, Mom said gently to her little son, Roddy. If you don't, I'll break every bone in your body." He wasn't much on meter but he liked rhyme. Somebody said to me, "Well, such and such almost rhymes." And I said, "Rhyme is all I got." [Laughs] Almost rhymes really won't do.

I liked rhyming. It turned out they were books. Not, as I said, a natural novelist. Those are kind of tacked together things. What else? The reporting, I'm certainly doing less if any right now. Somebody told me, after several decades of sitting on that hard bench in front of the deputy police commissioner's office to see if he's going to talk to you loses its charm. I think that's true but if you're going to do it, you have to sit on the hard bench. So I'm less interested in that now.

Dziedzic: When you look back on living in the Village, is there a time you think of as being the Village heyday, or a time for you that was particularly this—it didn't stay bohemian but typifying how you think of it, how you define it? [02:10:12]

Trillin: Yes, I think—and this has partly to do with my family—when my girls were at PS 3 and we went to the Halloween Parade, we always had a party after the Halloween parade for people who were in the parade. Yes, it seemed just about right.

It's obviously changed, partly real estate. I think I started by saying a lot of things are about real estate. Like the people down the street from me are in the arts—they're not business people. There was an older couple that owned the house. I can't remember whether the woman had died or the man had died but they bought the house with the understanding that she would have part of the house until she died, and they did a lot of the work themselves. You don't see that anymore in the Village, that sort of thing. A hedge fund guy might come in and buy a house and then tear down the insides because rich people, particularly movie stars, have to sort of get rid of things before they put them up again. They're sort of like dogs peeing on their territory.

So that part has certainly changed. When people say how dangerous the city is, the Village, too, was in the '70s, but I didn't really feel that as much. We were careful. I guess I wouldn't go into Central Park at night. I didn't even go into Central Park much in the daytime. The girls after a certain hour had to take a cab home and have the guy wait outside. But my wife had grown up in the suburbs when people said isn't it dangerous for kids in New York City? She'd say, getting in a car with some of those seventeen-year-old drivers in the suburbs was as dangerous as anything you could imagine. [Laughs] Much more dangerous than New York.

So I thought that was a great period. It's just different now in the sense of partly who lives here. But it's still the Village to me. The West Village, not the Village. I used to live in the Village but not anymore.

Dziedzic: And I know that the pandemic has changed all of our daily routines and I know that at least for a time, you were outside the city, but I'd like to know how you've seen that change in the West Village?

Trillin: Well, my younger daughter—I don't want to use the word kidnap, but ordered, I think maybe, that I come to her house in darkest New Jersey when New York was really sort of the center of the pandemic. So from March until about three months, I guess, I lived at her house in New Jersey. I've been back here since August. And until it got cold, briefly, the Village seemed sort of festive oddly enough because of all the outdoor dining. There's even a cruising band that

plays. I hear them in the evenings, they're playing for a couple restaurants around the corner, I guess. So that part didn't change. I think it made everybody realize how being with other people was a central part of their lives. [02:15:00] Before you realize what's happening, you think oh well, I can't go Uptown. Maybe I'll go to the movies. You can't go to the movies. Well, maybe I'll meet with—you can't meet with him.

I think it was obviously restricting for everybody but I was amazed at how people went about their business in many ways. And the restaurants, we lost a couple—more than a couple—just around my block or two. One or two of them, I think, have as many outdoor seats as they used to have indoor seats. It doesn't mean that it hasn't been difficult for them. But I'm impressed about how people have managed to go about their lives.

Also I have to say, I very rarely see people without masks walking around the Village. It's noticeable if somebody doesn't have a mask on. So I think in a way we've sort of gotten through however much of the part of it this is fairly well. Of course, I worked at home to start with. So it wasn't any terrible thing for me to stay home. That's what I do. And I send things in by computer. It would have been much harsher without the communications that's come with the technological revolution of the last few years. I'm doing a video tribute tomorrow at the American Academy of Arts and Letters. I'd rather go up there and do it, but it works.

On Saturdays, I participate in this Zoom conversation with—oh, I don't know, eight or nine people, most of whom seem to be foreign policy people, which I don't know anything about but that's all right. You can talk to people because of things like Facetime and Zoom, which I think makes a huge difference than just being by yourself, talking maybe to the person at the grocery store, saying thank you. I think we're doing all right.

Dziedzic: Yes, that's good to hear. I admit when you described having a party at your house after the Halloween Parade, I pretty much just salivate at anybody who mentions a party of any kind at this point [laughs].

Trillin: I find myself, while watching movies when people start to move in one of those big group situations, I think hey, what are they doing? Then I realize this is people before the pandemic, you could do that.

We used to have people sort of come in from the parade and my girls and I—actually, we didn't even know about the parade at the beginning. We were out trick or treating and these people passed us and they said, "Come on, get in!" In those days, you could get in and out and there weren't any police. Even after the parade started to go up 6th Avenue, they would come home from college for the parade. But we gave it up at one point. It got to be too much.

Dziedzic: Well, thank you for that illustration. Those are all of my questions. So if there's anything else that you'd like to share about your career or your family or the Village, you're welcome to.

Trillin: Well, I don't think so. We've talked about a lot, I think.

Dziedzic: Yes, thank you for entertaining my questions and sharing so much. [02:20:01]

Trillin: Well, thanks for doing this.

Dziedzic: Yes, absolutely. It was my pleasure and I'll be in touch, probably about a month with your interview transcript.

Trillin: Okay, great. You mean I get to change myself?

Dziedzic: Yes, right, exactly. Put in some other footnote information or maybe—it's not a manuscript, it's a transcript, but we want to make sure you're happy with it.

Trillin: Okay, great.

Dziedzic: Okay, yes, yes, take care. Bye-bye.

Trillin: You too.

[END OF INTERVIEW]

Quotes from Oral History Interview with Calvin Trillin

Quotes:

"My name is Calvin Trillin and I've lived in the Village off and on for more than fifty years, I guess. What I do for a living is I'm a writer, mostly *The New Yorker* and some *The Nation*, and books and a variety of things…There was an apartment, I think, advertised in *The Times*, on Jane Street, and I got there and there were two or three other guys looking at the apartment. So it was a little bit of a competition. And she asked me where I had gone to college and I said, "Yale." She said the last boy—she always called them boys—the last boy who was in there, he was Yale but he was the sort of Yale whose parents had to eat Corn Flakes to send him to Yale. That was her phrase. I could hear the crunching of Corn Flakes from Kansas City. I remained quiet about that, what a legitimate Yale person I was, or a Corn Flakes person. So I lived there on Jane Street, 70 Jane. Next to it was then the Éclair Bakery factory. So there was a wonderful aroma coming from the building. People would walk into my apartment and say, even after I had been there a couple years, you could do wonders with this place. But I really hadn't done any wonders to it. But it was a nice neighborhood and then I thought I would certainly always live in the Village."

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Additional Quotes

"I grew up in Kansas City. I was born in Kansas City and I grew up in Kansas City. My parents were first generation Americans. My mother was born in Kansas City. My father grew up in St. Joseph, Missouri, which is about sixty miles north, but he was actually born in Ukraine, and brought over as an infant to St. Joe. I went to public high school in Kansas City, and to Yale. That's the extent of my education. As I'm reminded by my family, on occasion, I'm the only one in the family without an advanced degree.

Kansas City has been sort of a touchstone for me. I've written about it and refer to it a lot, even though I really haven't lived there properly since summers in college, for the first couple of summers. But it's always been sort of—well, in a book I wrote about my father, I mentioned that when you ask people about their childhood, their upbringing, usually it ends up having a theme, like we have a noble family and you must never do anything to besmirch its name, or we're miserable because your father deserted us, or something like that.

When I thought about the theme I wanted to have for my daughters—I have two daughters who grew up in the Village—I think the theme would have been: despite all evidence to the contrary, you're being raised in Kansas City. I always thought there was a little white

picket fence around my house. You can't see it but it's there. I describe myself sometimes as a resident out-of-towner." (Trillin p. 1–2)

"I thought that there were a lot of subjects that I wanted to write about that really didn't deserve twenty thousand words or something like that. *The New Yorker* in those days was running very long pieces and often in two or three parts in consecutive magazines. I thought that there were things that I wanted to write about that were just worth a few thousand words. I think I was starting to—I was having a little trouble getting started. My father died and when I went back to New York, I think I had time to sort of think about things. So I asked William Shawn, the editor, about it and he thought it was a good idea. So we settled on a piece every three weeks and three thousand words.

Magazine writers would say, how do you keep up that pace? And newspaper reporters would say, what else do you do? They didn't think that was a full-time job. And it was strange—*The New Yorker* didn't even have an AP [Associated Press] wire. So the question of how to find those stories turned out to be the hardest thing about it. But I loved doing it. I did it on a schedule of every three weeks, except for the summer, unless it switched around to running one of my daughters' birthdays or something. But otherwise, I would leave Sunday night if it was a hard place to get to, or maybe Monday, and then I'd come home at the end of the week. I don't think I ever stayed more than a work week at a place. And reporting is sort of odd because in a way it fits into the space you give it, the time you give it. So if you report for a week, you could keep going. You have to stop somewhere.

So I did that for fifteen years…It was a good job. Every three weeks, I went to a different place and met a whole new group of people, a different subject every three weeks. So I really liked it. It was a good fifteen years." (Trillin p. 12–13)

"I think for somebody from the Midwest, walking into a building and having an elevator operator take you to your home just seems so unnatural, more unnatural than all the unnatural things that supposedly happen in the Village. And Brooklyn was not a real option then if you weren't from there. I think when we were in our thirties, my wife and I probably knew one couple or two couples that lived in Brooklyn. Now practically everybody who is in any kind of publishing or journalism lives in Brooklyn. But I wanted to live in the Village.

In those days, I don't think the West Village existed as something that people distinguished. That was true when we bought the house too. I think it was just the Village. And then I always think of it as getting a free upgrade with no miles needed. It just got to be a totally new neighborhood by not doing anything. So I used to live in the Village but now I live in the West Village. The house hasn't moved. It's been there for 150 years or so." (Trillin p. 17)

"Larry Kramer was in my class at Yale. We didn't actually know each other when we were there. We had a lot of friends in common. We met at a fifteenth reunion. He was close to the family, particularly the girls, particularly Sarah, my younger daughter. When somebody was doing a book of essays about Kramer, I did one and Sarah did one. Mine started something like, 'When I was asked if I could contribute to this book, I said I could do a piece on Kramer as a pain in the ass, but I supposed you have too many of those as it is.' And Sarah started, 'When I read about America's angriest AIDS activist, I can't believe they're talking about my sweet Uncle Larry.'" (Trillin p. 22)

Oral History Interview with Calvin Trillin, April 7, 2021

Narrator(s)	Calvin Trillin
Address	12 Grove Street
Birthyear	1935
Birthplace	Kansas City, Missouri
Narrator Age	-
Interviewer	Sarah Dziedzic
Place of Interview	remote
Date of Interview	April 7, 2021
Duration of Interview	140 mins
Number of Sessions	1
Waiver Signed/copy given	Y
Photographs	
Format Recorded	32 kHz
Archival File Names	-
MP3 File Name	Trillin_Calvin_VillagePreservationOral History_zoomaudio.mp3 [84.4 MB]
Order in Oral Histories	47 [#1 2021]