



Claude Covington

Date of Interview: January 10, 2017

Place of Interview: Morton Grove Public Library

Interviewer: Chad Comello

Duration: 30 minutes

Transcriber: Elizabeth Ceisel

INTRODUCTION

Claude Covington has lived in Morton Grove for about 31 years. Originally from West Virginia, he served in the army during the Vietnam War before moving to Chicago with his family for work.

Claude was the head of maintenance at Morton Grove Public Library for 18 years. Along with reflections from his upbringing, Claude recalled his eventful first year at the library, which included major flooding in the building and a raccoon that got into the building's walls, and what he's been up to since retiring in 2015.

CC: Claude Covington

Q: Question asked by interviewer, Chad Comello

CC: My name is Claude Covington, Jr. I live at 5917 Washington in Morton Grove for 31 years, about 31 years, something like that. I moved up here from Ohio back in 1979. I worked at a company over in Niles here at Midwesco. I was plant farming there for I think 16 years. Then I came here to the Morton Grove Library where I started in May of 1997.

I was about two weeks in when the flood came in. I was here. I thought, "Oh my God, what did I get into?" So it was mostly caused by lack of landscaping outside. They had vines growing up the building and they got into the gutters and clogged it up. I think it was a stuffed animal stuck in the pipe. There was a tree on the northwest side of the corner of the building that had leaves and it built all that up inside the gutters and that. So I had all the vines taken down, cut the tree down. Got a lot of stink over that, over the residents of the village for taking the tree down, but it had to come down. Then there was about two and a half feet of soil between the parking lot and the building where the water ran over, and it would build up and run back into the building and flooded what's now the staff lounge. When they did withdraw books they used to store them down there when I started here. I got all that taken care of out there.

The first year that I worked here in '97 was the rough year because there was a lot of water coming in the building. On the west side of the building they had like a window well, but it was for the ventilation. It was producing water inside there. I dug it down to see if I could find a drain. There was no drain, so I

had to get a sheet metal guy out here and tell him what I wanted. It's still out there existing, the sheet metal on the building where the water can't get in there to flood the CSS anymore. Am I going too fast?

Q: No, that's fine.

CC: I'm just telling you the story.... That's about it... well, the roofs had a few leaks in the building. They had plastic where the leaks were run down to the soffits so you didn't have to fix them. Roofers fixed all the nails that popped up, fixed that all up for me. Like I said, the first year was rough here. Then in the Baxter Room they had an animal living up there that ate the building up. They fixed it, but they didn't fix it right and the water was coming in here. I had to have all new drywall on the west side of the Baxter Room put in and fixed all of that roofing and that.

Q: Was that also your first year here?

CC: Yes, that was all my first year here. That's why I say it was a very challenging year for me. I didn't know what I got into.

Q: What kind of animal was it?

CC: They said it was a raccoon. I didn't know what it was, but they patched it. They didn't fix it so the gutter was producing water in there too.

Q: For the flooding, take me through the whole experience. How did you find out about it and what were the first steps that you took when it reached the flooding?

CC: Well, somebody seen the water coming in the building down there, on the northwest side of the building. They called me, I went down there. And there was Mike, Kevin, and a few other people. We tried our best and we couldn't do it. This is another funny story. We had a wet and dry vac, we went to use it. Mike was using it. I said it's time to empty it; he picked it up, it had a hole in it, water was running back out after he was putting it in. So I had to go to—it used to be Courtesy, now it's a Menard's—I had to get two wet vacs to buy over there to bring back and take care of it. A couple other things that was a problem was the drains on the bottom of the stairways on the outside. They were plugged. I had to clean all those out. Nothing was working right.

Q: Was this during the day when it started?

CC: Yes it was, it was pouring down rain. Early in the morning, I think about 9:30, 10 o'clock.

Q: So then did you have to close the building at that point?

CC: No, we didn't close the building. We stayed open, because it was downstairs in the building. A lot of water was coming in, but we stopped it. We squeezed it all out into the furnace room drains.

Q: How long did it take to stop it from coming in?

CC: Well, when the rain stopped it all dried up and went away. Outside I had to poke in where they used to have the downspouts run directly into the drains. They had that plugged off because they had to run that out into the parking lot. So I punched a hole in there and the water ran down in there. I got most of it out, but between the building and the parking lot that was all tossed over with vines growing up the wall. So that was just soaking up the water instead of running out across the parking lot into the alley.

Q: So you have the flood, and then you have the raccoon that first year, what other—

CC: Leaks on the other side... then I had the roof leaks. That was about all of it. The sump pumps had to be redone, because they were plugged too. Wasn't properly maintained. The guy before me didn't have all the help to do all that.

Q: What other notable events do you remember from your time at the library? After that first very notable year.

CC: The fire system sprinkle rusted in the basement. They had to put new pipe in down there. On the southeast side of the building a car ran into the building, knocking the hookup, the far hookup; we had to redo all that. A few things in the parking lot had to be redone on the east side. The sewer drain was caving in, had to put a new one in there for the village. There was a lot of challenges here with that old building, needed a lot of maintenance done to it.

Q: And you were the guy to do it.

CC: Yup, I was here and I did it, eighteen years. But like I said, the first year was kinda rough for me because I didn't know what I got into. [laughter]

Q: But you stayed.

CC: Yeah, I stayed. I just stayed on and worked; whatever had to be done I did. We had a few lights fall. I had to repair them in the basement. Just little minor maintenance things.

Q: What's something you would like other people to know about what it's like to be a maintenance man at a library?

CC: Every day you got a challenge. Every day there's some challenge for you, unless it's a brand new building. Like the drains, the patio had plugged drains. You had to watch out all the time; it would run back into the children's. We had a plumber work with that, we got that done. On the west side of the building, like I said, we had that air vent there and I had the sheet metal guy come in—told him exactly what I wanted and he did what I wanted. Pretty happy with that, but mostly it was the vines growing on the building outside—that and the tree. Maintenance in the library sometimes is rough, can't please everybody. [laughter] I'm trying to think of what else... We had a few things. What have you got up there in the old board room? It's the computer...?

Q: Yeah, it's the computer lab now.

CC: We had a lot of leaks in there. We had a leak in there that drove everybody... I had roofers there. It would leak only when the snow was there. It wouldn't leak with the rain. Always leaked in the center part. That was all new drywall in the ceiling up there because we had to repair that because it got all wet. Lot of leaks were in the building. They don't have them now.

Q: [laughter] That seems to be a theme—the leaks—before you got the new roof.

CC: Yeah, the plastic was the worst I'd ever seen. Wherever the water would leak they would run the plastic down to the soffit to go outside, and that all had to be

replaced. I replaced all the gutters, mostly all the gutters on the building. The sump pumps were problems. I think eleven sump pumps in the building there.

Q: What part did you have, if any, during the renovation of the library a couple years ago? Were you still here for that?

CC: Yes, I was still here. I stayed until it was done. I left right after that.

Q: You'd had enough after that? [laughter]

CC: It was time for me to leave you know. [laughter] I was working with the contractors and the EPA guy, and stuff like that. I worked closely with them and with Kevin too. I'm an army veteran. I was honor and color guard for about three years in the army. I did funerals and parades and stuff, stuff like that.

Q: When was that?

CC: Back in the early '60s. I think I got out of the army—I went in in '65 and got out in '71. I stayed, reenlisted, stayed. '72 I got out, and I stayed for a year and then I joined the reserves.

Q: So that was right during Vietnam.

CC: Yeah, it was Vietnam War time. I spent time overseas. A couple tours overseas and I came back.

Q: So you said earlier that you're originally from Ohio?

CC: Yes, I am. I was born in Wheeling, West Virginia. I was raised in Ohio on a farm. My grandfather's farm, dairy farm. I went into the army; they drafted me into the army and he sold all his dairy rights to a bigger dairy company. We used to do our own bottle and delivering milk.

Q: You said your grandfather was a farmer; what about your parents?

CC: My mother was... I grew up without a father. My grandfather was my father.
[laughter]

Q: What was he like?

CC: He was a tough old guy. You didn't sass him or nothing. Dinnertime came and you sat down and ate. Up here dinnertime is in the evening. Down there in the south, dinnertime is lunchtime. When it was ready, you sit down and eat it, and if you didn't you missed out. But yeah, he was a tough old guy. [laughter]

Q: What about your mom?

CC: She was good. My mom was sick. She spent time in the hospital, so me and my brothers and sisters, we pretty much grew up on our own, with our grandfather.

Q: How many siblings do you have?

CC: I have two older brothers. An older sister, two younger brothers, and a younger sister.

Q: Big family.

CC: Yeah, I was the middle one. I always tell everybody the older ones beat me up and the little ones told on me. I was the middle.

Q: So I guess that implies that you didn't always get along with your siblings if they were beating you up.

CC: Well, we were close, but we had our spats. [laughter] We had to be close; we were pretty much on our own. It was hard. I moved up here because down there, after I came back from the army, there was nothing but coal mines and steel mills and I didn't want my kids to grow up in something like that. So I brought them up here. My daughter teaches at Park View. My son he works for Dodge, some kind of high tech sport car or something.

Q: Why Chicago?

CC: They said if you couldn't find a job up here you couldn't find a job nowhere else.

[laughter]

Q: It was worth a shot? [laughter]

CC: Yeah. I tried the coal mine. I worked in the coal mine. It wasn't my future. I left.

The reason I came up here, a guy told me he would give me a job. I came up here and it was the deep tunnel and I said no. You know they're building with the deep tunnel? For the flood waters, they release... it's through here Morton Grove, but I didn't go in there. It's underground. I stay on top. [laughter] I tried it. When I was in the coal mines, I was a continuous miner operator, so I cut coal. I'd sit and ran this machine. The EPA started closing mines down—this was in Ohio—I got transferred to West Virginia. I was a streamline runner and I streamline like the local motor train, and we'd pull the cars—they called 'em streamliners. They had streamliners pull the car. We'd pull anywhere between 50 and 75 cars down to dump and dump had a trip rider ride with me. They had what they called a motor. It was a small one that pulled ten maybe twelve cars out of the section, hook onto us, and we'd take down. It just wasn't for me. Good pay, but not for me.

Q: So when you did get here, you weren't in the tunnels, but were you still working on that project?

CC: No, no I didn't. I didn't go on that project. I did not. I started working over here at Crane Packing. I went in there one day and they asked if I could read a micrometer, so I said yes, I can. He pulled it out of his desk drawer and I read it to him and he said, "You got the job." So I read the micrometer to him. They don't use it—it's all computerized now. I worked there from I think September 'til late March or something. I got a job in my field; I wanted to do HVAC, heating and air conditioning right down the street over here. They're all sold out now, but I worked there for sixteen years. I went in there and I was a shop foreman and I made plant manager. From foreman to plant manager. But they went from private to public, got rid of all the high-paid people and I was one of them. That's how I ended up here at Morton Grove Library.

Q: When did you move to Chicago?

CC: In the latter part of '79. Just about in the 1980s.

Q: Did you have your own family by then?

CC: Yes, yes I did.

Q: Where did you meet your wife?

CC: My wife is really from Canada. I met her and her sister lives here. I met my wife in Ohio, because one sister was in Ohio, one here in Illinois and two of 'em in Canada yet, still two in Canada. There's only four girls.

Q: So you met in Ohio and came together to Chicago.

CC: Yeah, we married and came here.

Q: Did you have kids at that point?

CC: Yes, I had my son and daughter.

Q: The young family coming to Chicago.

CC: Been up here ever since!

Q: Did you move straight to Morton Grove?

CC: No, I lived in Skokie. I had a building there in Skokie, and I moved here in Morton Grove, I bought a house. Right over here by Austin Park.

Q: And that was in the '70s? Late '70s, early '80s?

CC: I bought the house here in Morton Grove, I think it was the first part of '85. 31 years here.

Q: So what was Morton Grove like at that time?

CC: It was different. Lot of companies that aren't here anymore. Taxes was cheaper, not now. [laughter] Yeah, taxes was cheap. It was interesting. Everybody always said I moved to Mortgage Grove not Morton Grove. [laughter] They used to tease me about it. Well, I liked Morton Grove. I always liked it, so I just stuck around.

Q: I guess you would have been raising your kids here. This is the home that they knew?

CC: Yeah, that's what my kids said. That we can't sell our house here because they grew up here. The park right across the street, they had the park and everything. Austin Park, you know where Austin Park is? So we were there. Like I said, my daughter's at Park View and my son's at Dodge, so they all got good jobs.

Q: Do they want to hold on to that house?

CC: I don't know what they're doing with it. [laughter] They both live up north. My daughter lives in Long Grove and my son lives in Beach Park. They have their own places. I don't think... my daughter built a new home in Long Grove. I don't think they want the house here.

Q: Just for sentimental value I guess.

CC: Yeah. I seen a lot of things go on here in Morton Grove. Changes. A lot of changes.

Q: You said the taxes were one thing, but what else have you noticed over the years?

CC: All the companies moving out and going to condos and townhouses and stuff like that. I remember Lincolnwood, Baxter and all that. Lawnware and all that there, they're all gone. Anything else you want?

Q: Now that you're done here, what keeps you busy these days?

CC: I do part-time work at the Niles Library. I work part-time over there. I was off for a year, after I retired from here and said it was too much, I can't be stuck inside. I got a part-time job over there. I work on Saturdays and do security there. During the week I open the building up and let people in.

Q: Can't sit still huh?

CC: No. I work Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday there and Saturday afternoon as security. I open the building up and everything. Some of the people start there at 5 o'clock in the morning; they don't wait to 7 o'clock. They come in, start at five, six, seven, eight, and at nine they go home.

Q: What do they do so early?

CC: They work in circulation. They do a lot of holds and stuff. They have a lot of containers. I don't know, for RAILS to pick up? Lot of containers.

Q: Anything else you'd like to share?

CC: Well, I told you about how I'd done a lot—I used to work at Emily Oak's. When I was working here I did part-time work at Emily Oak's Nature Center in Skokie Park District. I worked there for a while.

Q: What kind of work did you do there?

CC: Just like maintenance and did the grounds. I just the one park, Emily Oak's Nature Center. I didn't go from park to park. It was a very interesting job, but it got too much, working here and going there.

I had one interesting thing since I lived in Morton Grove. I was working at Midwesco at the time. I came home and I had a company car. Well, it was part mine, part company, and I get up—I never forget this—it was the last day of February, first March, and I just had the car over to hand wash, had it all cleaned. I get up in the morning, 'cause my kids were still home at the time and I would park in the street and my son would park in the street and my wife and daughter would park in the driveway. I come home and I get up in the morning to go to work. I go outside and my car is not there. My son's car is running, so I thought maybe my son took my car out to get gas or something, because he used to do that. So I go up in his room and he's sleeping yet. So I said, "What happened outside?" He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Your car is running, my car is gone." They stole my car. Right here in Morton Grove. They stole my car and they... my son had an Oldsmobile too and somehow when they got in the car and broke the steering wheel, it got the gearshift and the guy couldn't get it in gear, so they just left it running.

So about 30 days later, after insurance paid me for my car, the Chicago police called and they said, We have your car, it's sitting in a pound at North Avenue and California—come down and get it. So me and the guy went down there to get it and they said, "Oh, it's in row 12, back in, uh, 76 cars down." I said, "Oh, will you give a ride down?" He said, "No, you walk." We walked. It was a

long walk. I couldn't find that car and all the sudden, I see the front license plates. The only reason... they hit either a median strip or something on the way when they stole it—the guardrail or something—and bent the front fender. Rest of the car was stripped—there was nothing left of it. You know what tore me up? There was brand new tires and a brand new battery in there, and they never took the tires or the battery, just the engine and seats and everything else. And they did about a thousand dollars damage to my son's car because they bent something inside there. Had to redo all that. That was back in, I think it was around '90s, early '90s. That was an adventure here in Morton Grove. They said close to the expressway, they get on the expressway and then [laughter]

Q: Oh yeah, quick getaway. [laughter]

CC: Yeah. That's really the only crime I really had living here in Morton Grove.

