

CHEMICAL HERITAGE FOUNDATION

BETH PILLING

RESOURCES FOR EDUCATION AND ACTION FOR COMMUNITY HEALTH
IN AMBLER (REACH Ambler)

Transcript of an Interview
Conducted by

Lee Sullivan Berry

at

Montgomery County Planning Commission
Norristown, Pennsylvania

on

6 January 2014

(With Subsequent Corrections and Additions)

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Principal Investigator: (name, address, phone and email) Frances K. Barg, PhD, Anatomy Chemistry 141-2, 215-746-1830, fran.barg@uphs.upenn.edu

Co-investigator: (name, address, phone and email): Jody Roberts, PhD, Chemical Heritage Foundation—315 Chestnut Street, Philadelphia, PA, 215-873-8281, jroberts@chemheritage.org

Emergency Contact: (name, address, phone and email): Frances K. Barg, PhD, Anatomy Chemistry 141-2, 215-746-1830, fran.barg@uphs.upenn.edu

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ABSTRACT

Beth Pilling grew up in Spring House, Pennsylvania, near Ambler. She remembers the area as being farmland, open and green, with small businesses in the towns. She attended the local public schools until high school, when she went to a private academy in the Chestnut Hill area of Philadelphia. She obtained her degree in horticulture and landscape architecture from Temple University, Ambler. Because Ambler was considered on “the wrong side of the tracks” she had little interaction with it, and she remembers the White Mountains as being just part of the landscape; there was no concern about asbestos then.

Pilling became administrator of the Montgomery County Open Space Program; because open spaces are both local and regional, she became much more involved with a number of aspects of the Borough of Ambler. As representative of Montgomery County she attended all the meetings of Citizens for a Better Ambler and then the community advisory group (CAG). She describes different factions in the CAG and holds that the most active and vocal are those who simply want a cause. She believes that the rejection of the high-rise project reflected concern more with loss of green space and the view than with fear of asbestos. Yet another faction, she says, pushes whatever outcome it desires; here she also notes that she is on the Board of the Wissahickon Valley Waterfowl Association, whose bid for the reservoir would be affected. She does not praise the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) either, saying that it will leave the site contained and safe but useless.

Because the future use group could not agree on anything it was disbanded, and Pilling is pessimistic about the future of the site. She says the EPA should have determined to what use the citizens wanted the site put and remediated to that purpose; or the CAG should have determined what possible uses there could be, and the costs of each use, and chosen one. She feels that the EPA was not good at communicating its requirements and its limits or its other experiences and the CAG was too unwilling to compromise. Still, the CAG has brought the issue to national attention, and the several municipal groups continue to try to work together, despite some loss of civility. Pilling hopes Ambler can keep its local identity but also develop regional appeal as a hub on a greenway.

INTERVIEWER

Lee Sullivan Berry earned a master’s degree in medieval studies from the University of Notre Dame, and a bachelor of arts degree in religious studies from the University of Pennsylvania. As a staff member in the Center for Oral History, Berry conducts background research and oral-history interviews, edits transcripts of completed interviews, and coordinates with interviewers and interviewees to finalize transcripts. She was the lead interviewer for the REACH Ambler project and has presented her work at meetings of the American Society for Environmental History and Oral History in the Mid-Atlantic Region.

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