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SAVANNAH COMMUNITY MEMORIES PROJECT
“FAITH IN ACTION” RESIDENCY
INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

INTERVIEWER: TOM KOHLER
DIRECTOR/CAMERA: ERIC DARLING
PRODUCER: MICKEY YOUMANS

SUBJECT: JAMES BUTTIMER



James Buttimer

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11:39:20:05 [Eric Darling]: Thank you. After Mickey settles, we can go, Tom.

11:39:25:18 [Mickey Youmans]: I'm done.

11:39:26:19 [Eric Darling]: Anytime.

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11:39:28:17 [Tom Kohler]: Jimmy, thanks for being with us today. We appreciate your time.

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11:39:31:04 [James Buttimer]: You're very welcome.

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11:39:32:05 [Tom Kohler]: If you don't mind, if you would say your name and spell your name for us.

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11:39:35:12 [James Buttimer]: Okay. My name is James Buttimer, B-U-T-T-I-M-E-R.

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11:39:44:00 [Tom Kohler]: And then just if you wouldn't mind, just talk about yourself a little bit, you know, where you were born, where you were educated, and sort of how you see yourself as a Savannahian and a person of faith.

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11:39:55:03 [James Buttimer]: Okay. I was, I was actually born in Glen Burnie, Maryland, right outside of Baltimore. It was the reason being my father went to Catholic University. My mother was raised in Chevy Chase, Maryland, and she met my father at Catholic University. They got married and my older brother and myself were both born up there. I was six months

11:40:24:11 old when they came back to Savannah.

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11:40:27:08 [Tom Kohler]: Still counts.

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James Buttimer

11:40:28:04 [James Buttimer]: That's right. Right. Non-native. And so my, my early education was at St. James Catholic School. At the time, it was actually considered a mission. They, the nuns that came down to taught us were from Pennsylvania, from outside of Philly. The Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. And they're still there, but they, this was

11:40:59:21 considered mission territory for the Catholic church. And so St. James Church originally was a mission church. And I'd say probably, you know, it was interesting. A third of the school was probably Protestant and that, that also followed me into my, my high school years at Benedictine. And where probably a third of the school was Jewish on Jewish holidays. You

11:41:30:04 know, it, it was a different place. So, so that you could, you could see that the services that the church provided were, were welcomed by a, a wide variety of, of people in the city, not just Catholics. And then after I went to the University of Georgia for a couple of years, but then I dropped

11:41:58:16 out and I, I worked construction probably for 25 years and until I hurt my back and in my forties, went back to college and finished my undergraduate degree and then got a master's in history at Armstrong. And then following that, I ended up going into I, the ILA, the International Longshoreman's Association. And I worked on the, the docks at Georgia Port Authority for

11:42:30:06 about 22, 3 years. And, and had recently retired not too long ago.

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11:42:37:11 [Tom Kohler]: Congratulations.

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11:42:40:09 [James Buttimer]: Well, it's really funny though, because people ask you, how do you enjoy your retirement? And I'm like, well, I've lost three good friends.

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11:42:51:06 [Tom Kohler]: Yeah, I hear you. Yeah,

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11:42:56:17 [James Buttimer]: It is not, it's not kinda what I was thinking the golden years were gonna bring, you know, but, so it's, I'm struggling with that now and that's, that's been I, and I'm trying to find ways to get active in other things, you know, and this project is very dear to my heart. I'm, I'm, I'm, I welcome it.

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James Buttimer

11:43:24:05 [Tom Kohler]: If you would talk a little bit about, I mean, growing up your family, how many kids where'd you go to church? What are some of those wonderful sort of Catholic memories, if you will, community Catholic memories, if you would?

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11:43:36:02 [James Buttimer]: Well, I came from a, a big family, a big Irish Catholic family. There were seven boys. And we went to St. James. We were in St. James Parish. Went to St. James School, you know, and it was, I can remember, gosh, it must have been in the late fifties. There was a hurricane that came in and the school bus couldn't run. So Monsignor

11:44:07:19 Toomey, who was the pastor of St. James, actually drove around in his big Buick and picked us up and took us to school and this sort of thing. It was, it was just so different back then. Savannah was, you know, you still, you still had that really old sense of Savannah, you know, none of the roads had been widened yet and all that. You had these big, massive trees

11:44:31:21 everywhere. It was just a really special looking place.

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11:44:38:08 [James Buttimer]: And so we went, we were in St. James Parish. And at that time, you know, we had it at an early age. Like I was in fifth grade, I think, when John F. Kennedy was assassinated. And I can remember the nun that was in charge. She was very young. It was her first assignment to, to come down to Georgia from Pennsylvania. And she was so shook up, she couldn't speak. And she came in and just wrote it on the blackboard. And,

11:45:14:13 and I did. And you know, at that point I was 10 years old. I didn't understand what was going on or what, why this would happen, you know? And, and, and, but of course, you know, the Irish were head over heels, you know, with Kennedy being elected and this being a representation of cementing your place in the greater society and that sort of thing. But I

11:45:43:07 was, as, when I was a young child, my grandmother and grandfather lived, still lived downtown. They lived on Huntington Street between Price and Habersham. And we used to go down there and stay. And my grandmother was really old school. She never learned how to drive. And when we stayed with her every morning, we'd get up and usually my older brother, Joseph and myself, and she would walk, take us to the cathedral for mass, you know,

11:46:13:04 and the first thing she would teach you when you went in was where the poor box was. And you never passed the poor box without putting something in it, even if it was a nickel, you gave. So, and I was, I was in, out of, out of my

James Buttimer

- 11:46:40:06 father's family, there were two girls and both of 'em joined the Sisters of Mercy, the local religious order. And both of 'em had, had, had, and when I was real young, my, the, my older, the older aunt, my, my Aunt Betty, who was actually known as Sister Bridget, she was up in Baltimore training and then all at that point. And, and the younger sister home, Marie was still going through St. Vincent's. And, and then she too ended up going into the
- 11:47:12:07 order. And, and she was actually the principal of St. Vincent's for several years. And I really attribute a lot of, a lot of what I was really taught and showed about.

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- 11:47:34:21 [James Buttimer]: I, I'm, I'm not religion in, in a way, but even beyond the religion, be what it, what it was responding to was through the women in the family. And it was through my aunts, it was through my grandmother, my mother, and my, and my, my aunts, my, the other, my brothers, my father's sister-in-laws and all. And they were the ones that really seemed to, when I'm, when I think back on it, I mean, they, it's,
- 11:48:06:11 it's almost all, all of the teaching I had and the learning I had about religion, about God, about spirituality came from them. And so it, and then, so when I got to, when I went back to school, I was in my forties, and I've, I decided at that point that I would like to do something. When you get to the master's level, you have to show proficiency with primary
- 11:48:38:17 sources. And nobody had ever done any primary source material research on the religious order that was here. And so I decided, well, just to honor their vocation, that I would, I would take that on as my master's thesis. And I would do a history of the religious order in Savannah. It was formed by Bishop John England, who was from Cork in Ireland. And he,
- 11:49:09:22 he actually came to Charleston in eight, in 1820. And then in 1829, established a religious order there. And in 1845, they branched out to Savannah. And you could really to see the need for it. I mean, it was just the, when you look at that year, 1845, the Savannah Poor House and Hospital
- 11:49:38:10 had seven times the number of Irish in it than any other ethnic group. And, and remarkably, they were the only ethnic group that included women. There were 16 Irish women in the, in the Poor House and Hospital. And it, you just had this sense of the trauma that the people that were experiencing during that famine era. And, and the, the, you know, the height of
- 11:50:10:04 violence, alcoholism, mental illness was just unbelievable. And so, and it was women again, who organized the whole enterprise of bringing a religious order to Savannah.

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James Buttimer

- 11:50:26:16 [James Buttimer]: And they actually, on the entrance to St. Vincent's, up above it, there's a, there's a, it's the old slogan of Constantine when he, when, when his whole army converted to Christianity and had to sign of the cross, and it said, in this sign, you will conquer. And they took that, and they marched through the worst parts of the old fort and Yamacraw the two slums on the west, east, and west side of the
- 11:50:57:00 city through these areas. And they ended up having a series of fundraisers and all. So they ended up bringing the order to Savannah. And what was really remarkable about this was the fact that a lot of the women who were in the religious order had immigrated from Ireland specifically to join that religious order. They didn't come looking for work or husbands, but it
- 11:51:25:19 was because of the Bishop John England. He was very well known in Ireland. He, he came from Cork. His family had suffered, he through an eviction, through, you know, the loss of many members of the family due to disease and starvation. And what had happened there in Ireland at that time were the women from the southwest, in particular, the province of Munster, they really made these organizations that addressed the issues of poverty,
- 11:52:00:09 hunger, disease. So they brought that with 'em to Savannah, which was really immense. The first mother superior of the order, she came over in 1834. And the, actually, it was another woman with her that came, they were from Cork and Kerry, and they came with Bishop England. And, and this was
- 11:52:27:02 very interesting because what happened at that time, you had the, you had the, a real vicious nativist movement that was going on in, mostly in New England, but it was coming down into Mid-Atlantic states too.

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- 11:52:41:20 [James Buttimer]: So they were supposed to land, I think, in Boston. And what happened was, it was a nativist crowd, and it was led by Lyman Beecher, who was the father of Harriet Beecher Stowe. So he was also an abolitionist. And, but the, the deal was, there was a large portion of abolitionists who were also nativists. Not all of 'em, there weren't, a lot of 'em didn't agree with that too, but, but he, they ended up, as they were
- 11:53:14:10 approaching Boston, they burned in orphanage in Charlestown, Massachusetts, over the heads of the nuns and the orphans as they were trying running for their lives. And this started this big massive outbreak of violence that went all down the eastern seaboard, down as far as probably Maryland. And it, it was several churches burned the institutions they were trying to
- 11:53:43:19 stab, but there, there was also some murders. There was death in the street, so they couldn't land. And what happened was the mayor of Charleston found out about this, and he got 250 of the leading Protestant families in Charleston that

James Buttimer

signed an agreement that they would protect not only the, the sisters, but their institutions. They had a school and an orphanage. And so this was their first impression when they

11:54:16:07 came to America was the, the, the nativism in the north and the tolerance. It wasn't, it wasn't that there wasn't prejudice, but it was, it was much lower. It wasn't nearly as intense as it was in the Mid-Atlantic and New England states. So this stayed with 'em all the way up to the outbreak of the Civil War. The same women were still in charge of the order at that

11:54:44:13 time. And it was, it was just, what, what I see what, and then, and then they, they, they actually worked and they went to Augusta in 1839 during a very bad yellow fever epidemic in the, the head of the medical school there died.

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11:55:07:04 [James Buttimer]: And, but they, they ended up meeting the doctors, working with them, and they became part of this. They, they became the first nurses in Georgia and South Carolina. And, and up north you actually had laywomen who were interested in nursing and start and started expressing this. But in South, there was much more constrained roles of women. They weren't seen out in public doing things like this. They were

11:55:38:07 supposed to be in the home, the cult of domesticity and all that. So, so they actually punched above their weight, really big in the south, in the deep south because of the restricted roles of women. But religious women were allowed to do these things without approbation. So it was really, it was, it was just a they, and it was an opportunity they seized and really ran with. And they were able to do a lot. They started the first school

11:56:10:13 systems, the first hospitals. And so I was just really impressed with that. And I, and one thing that the, the success of it, I mean, I was raised Catholic, but like a lot of Catholics now disillusioned with the church, and particularly what they've done with the priesthood and the, and, and, and more and more, it just

11:56:42:17 seems that, that there's a large faction of the old line in Europe that just doesn't want women to have any power ecclesiastically, you know? And so it's, you know, you know, I know a lot of friends like that, that, that have, aren't as active as they used to be on a formal basis, but they carry, you know, the, the, the teachings and all that we've had primarily

11:57:10:15 from women with us through our lives. And we try to, you know, we try to live life according to those principles, but without the, you know, the mandate of the Catholic church or the, even the approval of them.

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James Buttimer

11:57:32:11 [Tom Kohler]: Let's, let me ask, let's talk about those principles. What are those principles that these women, nuns inculcated, is that a fair word? Yeah. Into the, into the Catholic community that that continues to, I mean, what, what are

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11:57:48:22 [James Buttimer]: Those? Well, you know, the thing that, that was really amazed me, and, and I was so, I was so lucky that, that I read this one article that guided me to this soldier who was from Texas in the Civil War, was wounded at Chickamauga. Three days later he ends up on a rail car in Augusta. He was shot through the foot and it was gangrenous and Augusta

11:58:19:09 had maybe 750 hospital beds. They had 10,000 wounded. So the doctors were just exhausted. And all they wanted to do when they saw a wound like that was amputate, get it out of, and he begged them not to. And one of the sisters, and they, they came up at that point, they had a branch house in Augusta, and they were, had worked closely with the doctors in the medical schools there during epidemics and things like that. So they sent sisters on rail cars up to Augusta, and they ended up forming

11:58:51:14 the third Georgia hospital. And they were treating 'em in there. And they heard this man begging to say, and they asked if they could, if, if they could attempt to heal him. So the surgeons let him, and they ended up saving his leg. Well, it was amazing 'cause this guy didn't have any formal education. His name was Bill Fletcher. By the turn of the century, he was

11:59:19:12 the wealthiest man in Texas, the two, he, he, he exported the first load of yellow pine in America, and he invented some of the first had industrial logging equipment. And so at the, in the first, the first two phone lines in the state of Texas were run between two of his mills. And so this is in the late 1890s, he decided, well, you know, I've always wanted to do

11:59:53:22 something to repay what these, these religious women did for me.

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12:00:02:08 [James Buttimer]: And so, in, in being a Protestant, he had no idea of the differences in the religious orders, or anything. So he goes to the Sisters of Charity in Beaumont and says, I want to build a hospital for you. So, and at that time, there was no hospital either in west Louisiana or east Texas. So he, he logged the timber, milled it, built the hospital. And for 40 years, he and his family would take clothing and food and money

12:00:38:18 at Christmas, they'd load wagons up in drive. And I actually met his granddaughter. She came to the Irish Festival when I was working there, and she spoke on our cultural stage and ended up inviting me to go out to Beaumont. And,

James Buttimer

and I addressed a, a group of Boy Scouts at a, at a convention there. And it was basically about the, the what so impressed her

12:01:08:12 grandfather Bill Fletcher, about the religious order. And you know, it is funny because the more I got into it, the more I researched not just him, but the, the topic. What was interesting was that a lot of the, the soldiers that came from rural areas, they'd never met Catholics. And they'd been taught all these things, you know, that weren't necessarily true. And, and so, yeah. And so

12:01:37:23 they, and he said, he said, I've been taught by my, he said, I've been taught by all the old ladies back home, Black and White, that there was no place in heaven for a Catholic. And it was like, but what was really amazing about this is what really struck me, and this is what I told the scouts, what they were instructed by their superiors was never to let the

12:02:03:18 catholicity of their order, the pieties and the, the daily routines, you go through the rule, never let that interfere with their acts of mercy. And so when, when you see inevitably these Protestants, and so many of them ended up converting, but they would, they would say, they never said, I want to be a Catholic. They said, I want to be, I want to be in the religion of the sisters. I so that that the, the practical aspect of it, and, and, and the,

12:02:43:00 the basis of it is the teachings of Christ and the life of Christ. You know, that you look out for the poor, the sick, the imprisoned, all these things. And that's what they did. So what these Protestants encountered was not what they thought was Catholicism. They thought this was the essence of

12:03:05:06 Christianity.

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12:03:08:23 [James Buttimer]: So, and it was, it was just, I, I got to go see Bill Fletcher's grave. We went out to the cemetery. I mean, he, he donated a ton of money to the University of Texas. But it was really interesting when he died in 1915, now this was the year Birth of a Nation was brought in and was shown in the White House by Woodrow Wilson. You know, at his

12:03:39:21 funeral there were large numbers of Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, and Black Americans. So he, and he was not affiliated with any particular Protestant sect. He, but he was a very deeply spiritual man. And he and I, and, and, but it, it, it really amazed me. None of, none of his family

12:04:11:08 converted to Catholicism. But every year they would take these wagons full of food, clothing, and money to the sisters in, in Beaumont to keep their, to keep their hospital going, and for them to do the outreach they were doing to the citizens in that, in those states.

James Buttimer

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12:04:31:05 [Tom Kohler]: So you're tying, if I understand it right, you're tying a war injury that happened during the Civil War.

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12:04:39:03 [James Buttimer]: Yes.

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12:04:40:15 [Tom Kohler]: And nuns were, I think in your words, sisters were sent up to Augusta. Right. And I'm assuming some of those were sisters from here,

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12:04:52:14 [James Buttimer]: Right. Oh, yeah. Yes. They were all from Savannah.

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12:04:55:12 [Tom Kohler]: They were from here, and, and they saved his foot.

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12:04:58:02 [James Buttimer]: Right.

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12:04:59:00 [Tom Kohler]: And in 1950...

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12:04:59:18 [James Buttimer]: 1915 was when he died.

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12:05:04:05 [Tom Kohler]: When he died, he died in 1915. And The Birth of a Nation was being shown in the White House.

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12:05:12:06 [James Buttimer]: Right.

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12:05:13:22 [Tom Kohler]: And do you mind for our viewers a little about what is The Birth of A Nation?

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James Buttimer

12:05:18:15 [James Buttimer]: The Birth of the Nation was a film that was it actually, what, what it's, what it's touted as doing is the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan in the 20th century. By the late 19th century, by the late 1880s or so, even Bedford Forest, who is attributed with forming the Klan, had washed his hands of 'em. It, it was not what they were, they weren't

12:05:50:15 looking for this, you know, alternative military terrorist organization initially. And when it became that, a bunch of the ones who formed it just walked away from it. And it kinda went underground. But in the early 20th century, and you had, you had a, you had a lot of the immigrants now were coming from Eastern Europe, Jews, Czechoslovakians, and, you know, all kinds of people that, that the country had not seen in large numbers of on

12:06:22:14 before. And you had another incidence of, of the nativism that was coming out. And so the, the film portrayed the Ku Klux Klan as protecting the, the White race, particularly women from the, you know, the, this, the lies that

12:06:48:23 would, that would come out basically attributed to the, the, to the nature of Black men and the threats they pose to White women. And, and so the, the fact that this was shown so openly and really embraced by Woodrow Wilson, who, who was originally from Augusta and as early, early, and he was from North Augusta there. Right. And, but, and, and so it was really shocking in

12:07:22:00 a way to see, and I mean, it was nakedly racist. It wasn't, they didn't pull any punches.

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12:07:31:04 [Tom Kohler]: I I, I, I'll be honest, I, the, the story is so pheno, it's stunning. Yeah. I'm just trying to catch my bearings a little bit to, to make this connection between a man's foot. Yeah. That has to be saved. And then the role he played in for the rest of his life.

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12:07:48:18 [James Buttimer]: Well, you know, it's interesting because he, when he writes about it, in, in his memoir, he wrote a memoir about, and I've got some copies, I'll get you a copy of it. But you can imagine if you were in war, you haven't been home, you haven't seen your, your mother, your wife, your sister, you, you hadn't been around a lot of women, and all of a sudden you're wounded. And he said it, he, I mean, he spoke of the, the accent, the Irish brogue, and, and, and the, the, the fact that they

12:08:19:12 were so concerned with him and took the time and the effort to, to get rid of the gangrene and to save his leg. And he said, you know, I fell in love with the accent and the uniform as he called it, that they wore. And he said, and that, and he, I haven't got over it yet. This was in the nine 20th century, early 20th century. So, I

James Buttimer

mean, in a lot of ways, they, they probably would've reacted to any kindness that was shown to 'em, and a lot, but they were particularly impressed. And it

12:08:52:17 wasn't, and, and it was interesting because it wasn't just the, the, the Protestants in the Southern Army, a lot of 'em that were in the Union Army, you had, you had a whole regiments that were formed by abolitionists, and they did a bunch of damage to Catholic property. And, and so, and you, you

12:09:19:09 had one of the major generals up in Memphis after, and when they captured Vicksburg, they, he refused to feed the Irish orphans. He wouldn't, it wouldn't allow rations for the orphans. And even though the, the group of nuns that were there were from, you know, Pennsylvania and, and, and, you know, but, but he was a, he was an abolitionist.

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12:09:48:09 [James Buttimer]: He had a very mean nativist streak. And so he had to be ordered by the, by the high command to feed these orphans. You know? And I mean, that's the kind of, so, but, but yet, there was a, several of the sisters that came here, they had relatives that went to, to Charleston that either siblings or cousins, and they would communicate back and forth. And, and it was interesting because some of them treated wounded

12:10:23:08 that eventually were sent down into South Georgia, into prison and died in, you know, in Andersonville and a lot in, and in Savannah. They were sent a lot of 'em who were near death, and they nursed them back to life in Savannah before they transferred 'em back up north. And they were going through, so they, they saw, they, they were treating these Union soldiers,

12:10:52:13 including the Black Union soldiers from the 54th Massachusetts who were, who survived or were captured at, on Battery Wagner, the, the fighting around Charleston in 1863. And there was one, one Union soldier officer wrote to the sisters, and it was a really amazing letter. But he said that, just like what Bill Fletcher

12:11:21:19 said, he said, you know, I've always been taught that there was nothing good to come from the Catholic church. And he said, but I have to admit that if Christianity exists on this earth, it that it certainly exists in your religious order. And so they, they ended up, they had so many letters written from Union prisoners and wounded that they actually paid, I think

12:11:51:08 it was about \$12,000 to the sisterhood in Charleston to repair some of their buildings that were damaged in the shelling of the Battle of Charleston Harbor.

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James Buttimer

12:12:01:20 [Tom Kohler]: You had mentioned, I was curious, you mentioned you worked on the docks, and when I think about working on the docks, I think about the, ILA, I think it's 1515, and I named, I think about that as kind of a, of an African American world, if you will. Right. Relationship between the Irish Catholic community and the Black community, particularly with regard this idea of interdenominational or the way that, the way that

12:12:33:19 the Catholic community has, has been important to other communities. Yeah. In Savannah.

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12:12:41:04 [James Buttimer]: Well, you know, I, when I was real young, and I'd go down to my grandparents, I mean, there were a lot of times there were, there were men who would come up either singly or two or three of 'em begging for food or help. And I'd say most of them were Black there, but there were Whites as well. And it was so odd to me because it was something I couldn't really understand. I didn't, why were they in this, why did this happen? How come they were like this? And, but my grandmother would feed

12:13:14:13 them and she would, she would keep money, little foods up the side, kinda waiting on 'em, you know, sometimes. And, and it got bad. I think a woman had gotten raped at the end of the street there by a Black man. And, and so my, my grandfather and my uncles were always telling her, you gotta quit doing this. You know, you're just gonna bring trouble. And so if, if it was getting, you know, if it was late in the afternoon when they might be coming home or

12:13:42:17 something, she would kinda, and I'll never forget this one time, there were two of 'em came up and she was concerned that either some of her boys or, or my, my grandfather was gonna be coming home soon, and there was a Chinaman's little store on Price, on, on like Gaston Lane on Price Street. It faced Price Street. And she told 'em to go around there, and she gave me a nickel and gave me a bag of like these old hot dogs she had, she'd been

12:14:16:01 holding and stuff and all. And I ran around there and gave the food to these guys, you know, and got me a creamsicle. And, but I can remember, you know, how in, and my aunts who became nuns both told me that during the depression, she was, that she said they would mark this, the curb in front of your house to show that it was a good place to, to try your luck. You

12:14:47:02 know? And so, so I, I can remember that from God, I was on maybe four or five years old, you know, and I mean,

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12:14:58:00 [Tom Kohler]: Is it possibly, that's one of your first memories, period?

James Buttimer

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12:15:01:15 [James Buttimer]: Yeah, yeah. And it's, it is, yeah. Very much so. And, and it's funny because she was, she was clairvoyant. That's what I mean, she was old school, old, she was old world. And, but, so I, we, we, and we'd ride the bus with her and things like that. But I mean, I can remember walking to the cathedral and, and, you know, that's when, that's

12:15:33:23 what I really miss about Savannah was when the historic district was a place, was lived in, you know, and, and it was part of your daily life, and you, you know, and it wasn't just for tourists or that sort of thing,

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12:15:51:10 [Tom Kohler]: It was a different day.

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12:15:52:13 [James Buttimer]: It was day indeed. Yes. Yeah. But I, I can remember, you know, the ones that did come by and how they were taken care of. And, and that always stuck with me

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12:16:06:14 [Tom Kohler]: Through, through the years. Have you, I mean, just in your own personal life, have there been times when you have reached out and either organizationally or personally just reached out and done what needed to be done for someone else?

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12:16:20:21 [James Buttimer]: Yeah. You know, there, and to me that that was more interesting than some of the organized stuff that gets, that just gets kind of lost in the bureaucratic weeds, that kind of, but when there was, there was a, a couple of Black women that used to cook for the, for this organization. I was in the Ancient Order of Hibernians at the Irish

12:16:52:01 Festival, and I worked with 'em at Kevin Barry's, and this was be when I was going to school, and I would, and I worked in the kitchen with 'em, and I basically took out the garbage and stuff like that. And, and so the one, the one woman had a absolutely horrible thing happen. Her, her daughter got divorced and moved in with her, with her three young sons. Two of 'em were

12:17:21:14 toddlers. And, and then one night, and Cheryl was working at that night at Kevin Barry's, the daughter had, it was a sitter there watching the kids.

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James Buttimer

- 12:17:35:11 [James Buttimer]: And she went around, went out to this little club there on Waters Avenue and to dance, and was being pestered by this younger guy that was there. And she finally, I guess, embarrassed him in front, and he waited outside and shot her in the head when she came out. So when my friend is coming home from work, she sees the tape in the parking lot there and knew something bad had happened, and she got a block further
- 12:18:09:15 to her place on 40th Street, and the daughter wasn't there. And the sitter was like, I don't know, she was supposed to be back. And she went over there, and I don't know if you can remember this, Tom, but it was, it was a, a notorious case in a way. The body was not accepted by Memorial, who was trying to get the city to demand that the other hospitals take a bigger
- 12:18:36:07 share of the indigent load. So it was sent to Candler hours later, it was sent back to, and it went, did this happen for like six hours? And finally Memorial took the body and, and processed it. And, and so here's this woman now, trying to raise her three grandsons and work. She still had to work and all this stuff. Well, coming up on Easter, she was cooking Easter's dinner, and the pot was on
- 12:19:10:01 the stove, and it, it spilled in the fluid. She had third degree burns on her feet. Then maybe six months later, she had a massive stroke. And one that, I mean, it, she, she never recovered from fully. She had to learn to talk and walk again. She was one side was completely paralyzed. And, and it
- 12:19:36:15 went through just this nightmare of bureaucracy. We thought we were doing a, a good thing. I got a friend of mine in the AOH, Joe Mulherin, who's a lawyer.

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- 12:19:48:19 [James Buttimer]: He got me in touch with a, a woman who specialized in social security and we're, and we got her on Social Security. But lo and behold, because that would be like, I think 750 a month, they were gonna give her, that meant that now she could, wasn't eligible for the medicine she was getting, that she had to have for the stroke and all. And so it was like, you're giving with one hand, take one the other. And so I, you know, I I, I got a few people together and we, we
- 12:20:22:10 started just giving her supplemental money each month. And so I went by there one night just to check on her and see how the kids were doing all this. And she's cooking dinner in the kitchen. And I mean, she's, you know, it's real difficult for her to get around. There's still, you know, and so I'm walking behind her while she's standing at the stove, and there was a,
- 12:20:49:06 a, a, a little throw rug on the, and when I stepped on it, I went all the way to my hip. It was covering a hole. And I was like, and, and I said, God, Cheryl, what? And she goes, oh, you know that. So I went to an AOH meeting and I said, look, you, we all know this lady. She's helped us tremendously at the Irish Festival. And, and, and a lot of y'all know her from Kevin Barrys and this

James Buttimer

12:21:19:11 sort of thing. So one of the, one of my friends there that I grew up with, actually, it was a contractor, and he said, and I was telling him what had happened. And, and my wife, Theresa Wexel, she's a civil engineer, she went under the house and identified all the rotting pieces and things that needed to be replaced and this sort of thing. So my friend then he said he would, he, he would bring a crew one Saturday, we'd get together. And, and

12:21:53:05 so, and then we broadened it.

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12:21:55:14 [James Buttimer]: We, when we went to the house and looked at it, he said, look, he said, we need to get her a new kitchen. So we, we got a, a gas stove, a refrigerator, all at the replacement. Then we had to. But what was so cool, the day it happened, my friend shows up in the labor he brings with him, are five young Hispanic men who were from a little town in Mexico, a couple hours from Mexico City. And it was, it was so neat because

12:22:29:05 we had to go under the house. We had to jack it up, we had to remove all the, the rotting stuff and all. I mean, it took all day and it was difficult work. And then after that, we had to refloor the kitchen and then put the appliance was in there and all that. And about halfway through this, and then by this time the, you know, we're, we're said, the, the kids are still in the house and all that. And so my friend came up to me and he

12:22:57:01 goes, Hey, I, I got some good news. And I said, what's that? And he goes, his workers, the Hispanic guys, the Mexican boys, they said they didn't wanna be paid. So, you know, he, and then, so we finished doing the work and all that, and I ended up, and, and, and Cheryl wanted to cook for em, you know, and but I

12:23:27:08 mean, they were filthy and it was getting dark, man. So I told 'em, I said, my, my brothers told I had a restaurant at Wasaw Sound Seafood down. So I took him over there and was just sitting with him talking. And I, and I really didn't know what to say. I just thanked him. And the one fellow who was kinda like the foreman who spoke English a little better, he said, I

12:23:56:00 said, it was a good thing you did that today. You know? And he goes, well, he said, maybe one day we might need out and somebody will help us.

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12:24:09:06 [Tom Kohler]: There it lay. Yeah. This has been an amazing interview, and I'll tell you why. 'cause we didn't have to look at the paper once

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12:24:35:20 [James Buttimer]: I...

James Buttimer

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12:24:40:04 [Tom Kohler]: Not once. And I, I think we should stop it right here. Okay. That, I mean, we could talk 10 hours. Oh, yeah. And we may get there.

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12:24:48:14 [James Buttimer]: And you know, one thing I wanted, while it's on my mind, I wanted you, you asked for a reference for anybody, please. And the gentleman, my friend that had the construction company, Billy Breemer, he has done not only work, he's going to Africa and built houses for people. And I don't know if it was through Habitat for Humanity, you know, but, but he's done, he, he's very, now he doesn't live in Savannah anymore. He is a little south, right down around Midway now, but I'm sure he'd be

12:25:21:10 willing to participate in something if,

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12:25:24:10 [Tom Kohler]: Oddly enough, we lived down the street from each other for a little while. And a childhood memory I have is, we were playing on the Firschcott's patio, and he got a fish hook stuck in his head. Oh, and his mother Caroline.

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12:25:41:21 [James Buttimer]: Caroline, yeah.

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12:25:42:13 [Tom Kohler]: She was a piece of work.

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12:25:44:02 [James Buttimer]: Yes, she was.

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12:25:44:13 [Tom Kohler]: Caroline yanked that thing out, like it didn't matter. And he howled! I remember, you know what he and I saying, I, oh lord, I'm glad she ain't my mama. But I mean, that's for me, one of those memories. I can close my eyes and see that.

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12:26:00:10 [James Buttimer]: Oh my God, that hurts. The thing...

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12:26:01:20 [Tom Kohler]: You say, Billy Bremer,

James Buttimer

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12:26:02:15 [James Buttimer]: That's where my mind goes.

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12:26:04:09 [Tom Kohler]: Oh, that's great.

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12:26:04:22 [James Buttimer]: But, but he's, he's active in (Tom: That's good to know.) charitable work and a lot of it's related to religious activity.

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12:26:16:05 [Tom Kohler]: And then just, just so again, our listeners, AOH is the...?

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12:26:21:00 [James Buttimer]: Ancient Order of Hibernians. Yeah. Not to be confused with the Hibernian Society. And it's a, it's, it's an Irish organization that is peculiarly Catholic. It was formed in the 19th century in response to nativist attacks. Initially, it was an underground society. And because then, and when I was doing my research, I actually wrote to the, the AOH chapter in New York, the head us off, and asked him what the

12:26:53:10 earliest record of was in Savannah. And because I didn't, I couldn't get anything below before 1880, but he said at an 1850 or 1854 convention in New Orleans that they actually had two representatives come from Savannah. So it was an underground society here even then, and didn't really emerge into the light till after the war.

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12:27:18:18 [Tom Kohler]: Your grandmother, in a way, ran a little underground operation.

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12:27:22:08 [James Buttimer]: Yeah, she did.

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12:27:23:08 [Tom Kohler]: She ran a little underground operation. Yeah. And you happen to see it. Yeah. And it turned you in some ways, into who you have become.

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12:27:31:08 [James Buttimer]: Exactly.

James Buttimer

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12:27:32:09 [Tom Kohler]: That be fair?

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12:27:32:23 [James Buttimer]: Exactly. Yeah.

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12:27:36:13 [Tom Kohler]: Well, I have no idea what to expect, but this was beyond expectation in so many ways, because this is not criticism, but, you know, we've had two interviews before you, and they've been wonderful, but they have not been personal. And, and we've gotta, we've gotta have it all. Right. In my experience, it's harder to get the deeply personal than it is. I mean, people love talking about what other people are doing, right. This

12:28:06:16 organization or that organization. Right. But to be able to hear this thread of how, of, of how a person's deep faith, it sounds like she was almost a mystic. I mean, the deepest, mystical means of the faith and how it just has flowed, flowed forward.

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12:28:26:23 [James Buttimer]: Yeah. It's, it's, it is funny because the Buttimer name is not a true Irish name. They went to Ireland and one of the plantations in the mid 16th century and became, as the English would say, more Irish than the Irishmans got. They were the biggest pain in the ass because, and, and ended up coming to America where her maiden name Deegan, that is an ancient Irish name, and around the Waterford area. And, but she had a lot more the, the old world to her, you know, and she would, she knew

12:29:01:10 more about my grandfather's family than he did, because she stayed at home with his mother and sisters. And they would speak at night about the old days in Ireland and that stuff. And my grandfather would would have to refer to her to get information on his own family.

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12:29:19:02 [Tom Kohler]: Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, that's great. It's also interesting, just as a side note, this won't, but Bobby Hanson, who was in earlier, you know, Stevie Bryan in here, real? Oh,

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12:29:30:16 [James Buttimer]: Yeah. Yeah.

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James Buttimer

12:29:31:07 [Tom Kohler]: You're close between. And so you've got this little Jewish kid, you know, he's about four feet tall, you know, you, and there's a whole thing going on there about how tight you hit generationally. Yeah. And that would go back to, for you and Steve, to BC

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12:29:45:15 [James Buttimer]: To ninth grade. Yeah, yeah. And, and of course back then he was, he was really so cool because he was in the band, you know, he was in the Checkmates, right. I mean, my God. Yeah. Right. And we would go to the Battle of the Bands to see 'em and Yeah. And, and

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12:30:04:05 [Tom Kohler]: So, but, but, but that kinda, that example of Benedictine being a place where people from different faiths Right. Did show up. Right. And you know, just to say it right, there's something about a BC boy, if you're going to BC you become a BC, my experience, you become a BC boy, and that's a tight bond,

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12:30:21:22 [James Buttimer]: You know? It is. And I, I'm, I I, I don't know, did you, do you have somebody coming in? Do we need to? We can, no, I'm just saying it is with, I was riding by there one day, Tom, this is in the student parking lot, you know, I made pretty good money on the docks, but I'm looking over there and there's a, there's a, a brand new, mint Sierra truck, a GM Sierra truck with a lift kit with the oversized tires on it,

12:30:57:02 hooked up to a trailer, pulling a golf cart in the student parking. And I'm sitting there going, God damn, I've never had a coat on a truck like that. And I'm like, you know, but I mean, the money now, and it's, you know, when I was there, when Steven and I were there, it's 350 bucks a year. We could make that during the summer. My, my brothers and I, we paid for our own way for, you know, and now it's

12:31:23:10 like 15 grand or so. And I'm, I'm, I mean, it's a different world. And the Irish have, they've forgotten where they came from in a lot of ways. To me. They just, they, you know, I mean, when we were kids, some, you know, like the neighborhood I lived in, halfway down the street, there was a guy that had a hardware store. He might've been a million, but he lived in the same neighborhood, the same, you know, his kids went to the same schools. It was

12:31:54:02 like, you know, it it was, yeah. It was just a different time.

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12:32:02:08 [Tom Kohler]: The "we" was a Yeah, yeah. The, "we" was a bigger "we." Right.

James Buttimer

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12:32:05:20 [James Buttimer]: Exactly. Yeah.

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12:32:07:01 [Tom Kohler]: I mean, yeah. "We" has flipped back to "me."

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12:32:10:15 [James Buttimer]: Yes.

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12:32:11:15 [Tom Kohler]: And, and that does come in cycles. And we're in the "me" cycle right now.

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12:32:17:00 [James Buttimer]: Well, this, this novel, it deals with what, what was amazing, when I was doing my research on the sisterhood, they lasted from 1845 to 1893. And then they affiliated with the Sisters of Mercy, which they are now. And they were kind of bullied into doing it by the, this hierarchy that was coming from Europe and telling them they needed to be affiliated with a real religious sorter, like, you know. And

12:32:52:03 so it was during this time, from 1890 to 1920, all the archives of newspapers that were in Washington, there's a big fire. They all burned. So I'm trying to find out personal information about the last group of women who are now American born, first generation American born. So I'm, I'm

12:33:18:00 going, I had to go through every newspaper for like three months. That summer. I was up in the historic, and I found this history that just blew me away about the first integrated parade in the city of Georgia. The, the first Labor day parade in the city of Georgia. These two unions together, the Black and the Irish that, you know, and, and the, the how they came. And a lot of it came from the work that the women did. 'cause

12:33:48:06 St. Joseph's infirmary was the first hospital in the state that treated Blacks and Whites under one roof. It was a separate ward, but they were in the same institution and any other city that probably would've been riots, but in Savannah, Savannah has been so pragmatic and just so you know what works. And they've been a lot more tolerant too, and I think Martin Luther King recognized that when he came here, and I think this is part of the

12:34:21:01 reason why, why there's a reservoir of, of historical good feeling between the Irish and the Blacks, the Jews and the Blacks, the Greek community and the Blacks is

James Buttimer

because of what they have learned from their fathers, grandfathers, grandmothers, and all this of the ties that from long ago.

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12:34:45:01 [Tom Kohler]: Well, the, the story about how when Malcolm McLean brought the Bishop Yeah. The, the committee of 100, the Bishop, it was Malcolm and whoever the Bishop was at that time, built a committee of 150 White people, 50 white people, and methodically desegregated the city. Yeah. I mean, that would be maybe, yeah. Another example of, of what you're describing.

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12:35:08:17 [James Buttimer]: No, I know. It, it is, it is, it is. And Savannah's been blessed in that sense. I mean, it's had some good practical leadership and for some reason, a lot of the flame throwers went other to other cities, evidently. But it is been a, it, it is, even when you compare it to like Charleston and stuff, you know, I mean, in places like that, it's, it's got its own charm in a, in a social sense, I think our social

12:35:39:10 history is second to none. 'cause when you, and one thing for in, in the future, anyway, one of the main things that, that, that did not happen anywhere else in America. The Catholic schools were founded before the war. After the war. The federal mandate was you had to have, now you had to have a school system. You had to start educating not just the White kids, but the Blacks as well. And so outta necessity, they, they, they converted the Catholic schools

12:36:16:10 into public schools. And the Catholics would show up 30 minutes early for religious instruction and then whatever. The rest of the day that the only other, the only other state that tried it was Minnesota. And it only lasted three years. Very contentious. Nowhere else, 40 years in Savannah, 40 years they had Catholic public schools. And it didn't happen anywhere else. It

12:36:43:09 was just here. And it was because of the pragmatism, I think. And nobody objected to, and then when it ended was right around 1915 when the rebirth of the Klan, they started attacking Catholic institutions and things like this, as in fact, they were really, really anti-Catholic then, because they blamed the mayor of Augusta for the, the, the leader of the populace, Tom

12:37:11:06 Watson, losing the governorship of Georgia. They, they said that more people voted in Augusta than lived there. They might have been. Right. Right.

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12:37:23:15 [Tom Kohler]: Well, thank you and oh my gracious, there's so much more. Well, I'll talk to these guys. Okay. We need to figure this out 'cause there's so much more that you can help us with. But I, I can't, again, I can't tell you how much I appreciate that story about how this time went by, this very personal way of being

James Buttimer

present to people and doing the right thing by people who are pushed to the edge.
Yeah. I mean that you

12:37:55:13 don't get to hear much of that.

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12:37:57:14 [James Buttimer]: Well, thank you, Tom. Thank

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12:37:59:02 [Tom Kohler]: You. Appreciate.