

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Poland United Methodist Church

Parishioner Experience

O. H. 692

ERNEST WITHERS

Interviewed

by

Wilfredo Rivera

on

April 23, 1980

ERNEST MOORE WITHERS

Ernest Withers was born on October 31, 1889, the son of Robert and Elizabeth Withers, in New Castle, Pennsylvania. Due to various social factors during his childhood he was unable to complete or acquire a formal education. He married and raised a family of three.

Ernest was employed by John H. Carbaugh Plumbing Company from 1903 to 1907. He went into private business in 1907 and is presently handling all of the affairs involved. He is an active member of Poland's United Methodist Church, B.P.O. Elks, and the American Legion. His personal interest lies in the construction of homes and other related activities.

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INTERVIEWEE: ERNEST WITHERS

INTERVIEWER: Wilfredo Rivera

SUBJECT: family structure, ethnicity, prejudice

DATE: April 23, 1980

R: This is an interview with Mr. Ernest Withers on the 150th Anniversary of Poland United Methodist Church by Wilfredo Rivera at 412 South Main Street Poland, Ohio on April 23, 1980, at approximately 2:15 p.m.

Mr. Withers, could you tell me where your father was born and mother?

W: My father was born in Scotland and my mother was born in Londonderry, Ireland.

R: Can you tell me some of the stories that you recall about your family's past?

W: Well, in the first place, my mother was brought here as a governess for George Oliver of Oliver Steel in Pittsburgh. When I was still in Olive High School, he was president of the Pittsburgh School Board and he asked me if I was any relation to Lizzy Withers. "Nope," I said, "Nothing but a son." He said, "Well, she was my governess. We brought her to this country." I said, "I know that."

R: What country was your mother from? From Ireland you said?

W: Yes, Londonderry, Ireland. That's where Oliver was from also.

R: Where were your parents reared? Were they reared back in the old country or were they reared here in the States?

W: Well, my dad came to this country when he was seventeen. He had a brother in Kansas and he went out there. His brother was moving the trees for the railroad line from Chicago to Kansas City. He went to work for him. Then

he finished that job and he went down to Mississippi and did the same thing. From his experience at cutting down trees, he went into the building business in New Castle and he continued even after I started in good with the plumbing business. Dad was 80 and didn't retire until 1925. We have acquired several apartment buildings.

My mother, she was all the help in the world. She died January 20, 1929.

R: Did your father or mother ever live in Poland, Ohio?

W: No, they always lived in New Castle.

R: So, in what year did you come to Poland, Ohio?

W: October 1941.

R: What was your first job once you got into Poland?

W: I was in business for myself. I still had my New Castle office when I came to Poland. I still worked in Western Pennsylvania and Eastern Ohio. The war came along and that curtailed the activities of building. But we managed to get along by working on our own buildings here. When the war was over, we couldn't do everything everybody wanted done. I jumped the gun and I knew it was going to happen. I bought up all the materials I could. I bought everything I could buy then. After the war, I sold materials to Youngstown, Columbus, Akron, Canton, and New Castle. I had it in stock and they couldn't get it. I was also doing a lot of heating. During the war I bought out American Radiator Company stock and also American Radiator Company of Philadelphia stock. It made good business. If a plumber wanted a bore, he had to put an order in and wait for it. He had to put an order in. There was no direct distributing by the manufacturer. Well, I had hundreds of bores in stock of all sizes.

R: During this time while you were into business in Poland, Ohio, were you a member of the United Methodist Church? Was the church established back then?

W: Oh yes, the church was established. I originally belonged to the Grace Methodist Church in New Castle and during those four years we didn't go to church. I had no affiliation with church. My son was growing up, going to school, and all his friends were in Poland. He didn't like going to Sunday school. He said he just wanted to go home after church. One time he was running around with the minister's son at the Presbyterian Church and he thought he wanted to go to that church, but he decided he better go to the Methodist church. He really made up our minds.

R: What year did you get married?

W: 1941.

R: That was the time that you first came into Poland, more or less, and started a business here?

W: We got married in 1941 and lived in Warren until we came to Poland in October of 1941. I bought this place in February, 1942.

R: Was your relationship with your mother and father a distant relationship or a close relationship?

W: A close relationship which also existed with other family members, the whole family.

R: What did your parents most stress and why? Hard work, religion, education or a career?

W: Hard work.

R: Why?

W: Because that was what they were brought up with.

R: What are some of the values that I just mentioned within your family that you stress?

W: Oh, I only stress one fact in life, to do a good honest day's work for an honest day's pay. That's the only thing I have to say.

R: When did you leave your parent's home, at what specific age?

W: Well, I married my first wife in 1910.

R: What did your parents want you to do with your life? Did you agree with them?

W: Work. Work was all they knew.

R: Any specific area?

W: Oh yes, my father wanted me to be a doctor, but I didn't like that at all.

R: Okay, as a young person, what type of job did you want to have? What did you want to do with your life?

W: I settled with what I wanted to do in the plumbing and heating business.

- R: Are you totally satisfied with your commitment with your plumbing and heating?
- W: Perfectly.
- R: Would you say that your parents were very strict?
- W: They sure were.
- R: Would you say that either one of your parents were always away at work and neglected the family?
- W: No, never.
- R: Were you brought up in an ethnic neighborhood?
- W: Well, all we had was Irish, Scotch, Germans, and English. After we were brought up then the Italians moved in. My wife was Italian. Then the Welsh moved in on account of building tin mills in New Castle. My first wife, by the way, was Welsh. We always had a happy life. There were no quarrels in the family that amounted to anything.
- R: Were you asked to leave your ethnic neighborhood?
- W: Oh no, no. I was on the south side of New Castle until I was twenty years of age. It was an ethnic neighborhood. Polish, Italians and Welsh lived there. After we got married, we moved up to the north side. Then we moved to a suburban home five miles east of New Castle on a five acre estate.
- R: Which of your parents wanted you to work?
- W: Both of them.
- R: Which parent stressed education?
- W: My dad, my father. He was a wood chopper. When he arrived in Pittsburgh he went to night school for two seasons and his penmanship is still out of this world, wonderful handwriting. Along with his penmanship, he had a hell of a good head for figures. On the other hand, mother could only probably write her own name. It was hard for her to write a letter, but she did manage to write me a letter when I was in the service in France.
- R: What percent of your earnings did you turn over to your parents?
- W: All of it.
- R: Why?

- W: Well, that's the way we were brought up. They took all your pay and then gave you back an allowance what they felt that you should have.
- R: Were there any troubles developed because of the money situation?
- W: No, never.
- R: Were you the first-born child in the family?
- W: No, I was the second. I have an older brother.
- R: And did your older brother work?
- W: Oh yes.
- R: At what age did he start working?
- W: He started at seventeen. He learned the blacksmith trade and then he quit that and went into railroading. He railroaded all of his life until he died.
- R: While he was working, did he turn over his earnings to his parents?
- W: Definitely, until he got married.
- R: Were there any members of your family that continued on with their education?
- W: Oh yes, my brother Bob; he was the fourth child. He graduated from the University of Pittsburgh as a pharmacist. But later on he went to theological school and became a Methodist minister. My youngest sister--she's eighty now--went to Allegheny College and graduated there as a teacher. She taught four months then she went to the University of Pittsburgh and took a business course and worked 25 or 30 years for the Coast Guard. Then when she retired from that she became a secretary for the Episcopalian Hospital in Florida. She's still living down there. She's only eighty, and got married last year for the second time. Her first husband was invested in stocks when he died, and so was she. They each had \$200,000, but he died. He died about fifteen years ago. She has one son in Florida. He took after his old man. He's a stockbroker in Tampa.
- R: Who handled the finances in your household while you were living with your parents?
- W: Well, that was split. The old man kept charge of the savings and gave her an allowance to run the house, let's put it that way.

R: Did you ever want to leave your present job or the job you had before you retired?

W: No.

R: Why?

W: I was always satisfied with what I was doing.

R: Would you say that you are successful in your career decisions?

W: Modestly, I would say I was.

R: You don't have any regrets getting into the business that you got into?

W: None whatsoever.

R: What are some of the values that you stress to your children today?

W: I would say that the best value is a clear mind and know what you want to do.

R: Do you stress religion?

W: I don't stress religion, but I believe in religion. If you didn't have religion this would be a hell of a world.

R: Relating to the United Methodist Church located over here on 224, can you tell me your first initial day as a member of that church?

W: My first date of that church?

R: Your first day as an official member of the church.

W: The church wasn't there originally when I joined it.

R: Can you tell me where it was located?

W: It was where the Union National Bank is.

R: What happened?

W: It burned down on April 1, 1957.

R: What was the cause of the fire?

W: Like you would say all fires are caused, electric wiring. I warned the trustees at the time because the organ was right above the kitchen. The kitchen was in the basement. I had to do some repairing of the kitchen ceiling and that

ceiling was just soaked with grease. I happened to reach up and see bare electric wires, which were to the organ. I reported this, but they didn't do anything about it. And that's where the fire started.

R: What was done after the church burned down? What were some of the actions taken by some of the members of the church?

W: Before the church had burned down they selected a friend of mine, Robert O. Lewis, and myself to either buy properties around the church and remodel it into a bigger church or find a new location, and start from scratch. So while we were making our survey we had eight different locations in mind and the church burnt down. Then it was a question of relocating there or somewhere else. We couldn't buy any other property around the church to build a suitable church. So after working on it, I just decided to add three acres on 224, but it was in Boardman, Boardman Township. I offered the church free. It took them over a month to decide to accept it because people still wanted a Poland address. It's still Boardman Twonship after twenty-four years now. They've never been able to get it annexed to the village because the people in the neighborhood don't want to be in Poland Village. They bought their homes in Boardman and they won't stand for it. At one time, why, it was quite an uproar. As far as the fee for wanting to rename Boardman Church to First Methodist Church of Boardman and our church Second, that didn't do very much. People wanted to call it the Poland United Methodist Church and after all that we moved it back to Poland.

R: I understand that you were a member of the council of whatever with the church back then also.

W: I was a member of the board of trustees.

R: What did you, as a member of the trustees, promote for the church?

W: They elected me as a trustee for the purpose of getting the church built.

R: How long did it take for completion of the church itself?

W: The fire occurred April 1. I think the contracts were worded in July. We laid the cornerstone on November 24, still 1957. Then we had our first church service in the fellowship hall on June 22, 1958. We moved into the sanctuary on August 27, 1958. It wasn't completed, but we made it so that it could be used. We used folding chairs. We didn't get the auditorium finished until the following year. It's been a very, very progressive church.

There was an awful lot of workers in those days, people that wanted to help.

R: All the work that was done on the church at that specific time, was it done on a voluntary basis?

W: Always. All the landscaping was done on a voluntary basis, all the painting inside the church was voluntary, a lot of the carpenter work, hanging the doors. The contract we had originally was only for the structure, not a finished structure. A few frames were put in but no doors. The stage wasn't built. Volunteer carpenters put the stage in across the hall. All the kitchen cupboards were voluntary labor. It was just wonderful. I think I spent about two years of my life directing and getting volunteers to do the work.

R: At that specific time, how many members were there in the church?

W: More than what there are now. Around 11,000.

R: And how many are there now?

W: Eight hundred.

R: Why the decline?

W: The whole country is declining. It's a way of life. All churches are losing membership.

R: Do you have any idea why this is so?

W: Well, smarter men than myself can't answer that question. I don't know.

R: No idea?

W: No idea, but people are more for pleasure than they are for either work or religion. That's my own opinion.

R: How many years were you a member to this church?

W: Since 1953, that's 27 years.

R: And within those 27 years, are there any other events that might be of some value to me at this specific time?

W: At the moment I can't think of anything. We can't get volunteers today. If any work is being done in the church, it will have to be paid for. There are no more volunteers.

R: Can you tell me, when the church was burnt down, who was

the present leader of the church?

W: Cyrus McCormick.

R: Can you tell me a little bit about this man?

W: Well, he was a wonderful man. He taught Sunday school over there in McKinley Class. I was in his class for fifteen years until he died. He had a general knowledge of building. He was an electrical engineer. He worked for Republic Rubber for years and years. In fact, they sent him down to Mexico City to build a rubber plant down there and he was gone for about a year. He could quiet any meeting. He was the nicest talker, and he could calm people down in five minutes. He wanted me to be chairman of the building committee.

R: After Mr. McCormick passed away, who became the leader of the church?

W: That makes a proposition. I would say there hasn't been a real leader since he passed away.

R: How many years do they usually wait before they elect a new leader for the church?

W: Every year.

R: On an annual basis? I was told it was every five or six years.

W: They have had leaders that didn't even attend the meetings. I haven't been active in the meetings. I haven't attended any for ten years so all I know is whatever we did before this, what's going on.

R: Mr. Withers, what does the 150th Anniversary for the United Methodist Church of Poland symbolize to the people, the community, and yourself?

W: Well, I don't know. It's just a way of life. I don't know any reason except the same thing as celebrating your own anniversary, whether it's your 25th anniversary or 40th or 50th. It's just a matter of life, a way of life.

R: Who promoted this celebration?

W: I have no idea.

R: Do you think it might be the doings of the present leader, the present minister of the church.

W: Oh, I think it's the minister that is in back of it. It

might be a few old members. I know they're talking about it, but I haven't heard any of the details so I don't know.

R: How do you feel about this celebration? What are your reactions towards it?

W: I think it's a good thing for the church.

R: Are there any other events that we haven't touched in this interview that might be of relevant importance to the interview itself?

W: I don't think so. I think you have covered everything.

R: Okay, Mr. Withers, on behalf of the Oral History Program of Youngstown State University and myself, I want to express my deepest consideration for your time and effort. Thank you sir.

W: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW