

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Westlake Terrace Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 696

ELEANOR BRITTAIN

Interviewed

by

Joseph Rochette

on

November 19, 1985

## ELEANOR TERESA BRITTAIN

Eleanor Teresa Brittain was born on October 4, 1928 in Youngstown, Ohio, the daughter of Paul J. and Mary Mattie Slifka. Young Eleanor was raised and went to school on the south side of Youngstown, eventually graduating from South High School. She has many memories of Youngstown during the Depression-World War II period as a time when people were forced to band together and cooperate to meet goals beneficial to all. Pride, hard work, and respect, according to Mrs. Brittain, were important characteristics that were instilled in children during those years.

Mrs. Brittain lives on Hopewell Drive in Struthers with her husband Herbert. They have four children: Gloria, Robert, William, and David. She is a self-employed seamstress who also enjoys art, gardening, reading, and cooking as hobbies. Mrs. Brittain is an avid student of the Bible and believes that people should be more aware of other cultures and issues in the world. She has been actively involved in numerous organizations, such as the AFS, which deals with people from other countries in the United States. Mrs. Brittain is a member of St. Nicholas Church in Struthers.

Joseph Rochette

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INTERVIEWEE: ELEANOR BRITTAIN

INTERVIEWER: Joseph Rochette

SUBJECT: low income housing, inner city life, Depression,  
World War II, Youngstown's south side

DATE: November 19, 1985

R: This is an interview with Mrs. Eleanor Brittain for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Westlake Terrace, by Joe Rochette, on November 19, 1985, at 279 West Hopewell, in Struthers, at approximately 10:00 a.m.

B: I was from a large family. I wore a lot of hand-me-downs. I can remember one time when my sister told me that if I would scrub her bedroom, I could wear her yellow broomstick skirt. That was a skirt with a band that was all gathered around. Maybe they have a different name for it now, but at that time it was called a broomstick skirt. I loved her yellow broomstick skirt.

R: Was this during the 1930's or early 1940's?

B: Yes, it would be probably the late 1930's, early 1940's, yes. I was about ten or eleven.

R: In those days in a neighborhood, for example, where you lived, what was the relationship like between neighbors? Was it more cooperative?

B: Very friendly. Everybody was friendly. We didn't have a telephone. There was one neighbor who had a telephone. I can remember like if my father got called out to work, the neighbor's phone was the one that the mill used to call him out. Our grocery store man . . . The corner grocery store was where everybody did their shopping. You didn't have big chains like you do now. If my father was working . . . Our grocery store man lived on the north side. He would come over on the bus. His bus pass was in his pocket all day. He would tell my mother or anybody, "If you need to

go to town to pay the bills,"--that was how you did that in those days, paying your electric bill at the electric company and your gas bill at the gas company--"borrow my passes here." We would.

In the days of the hard times of Depression, my two older brothers joined the CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) which was a government-run program to provide jobs for young men.

We had a very mixed neighborhood. We had Italians and Jews and Slovaks and Polish. I can remember the woman who lived next door to us was Polish. My mother was Slovak. They would sit on the bench for hours and talk to each other. I thought how funny it was that they understood each other, but they did.

- R: From some of the other people I have talked to I was wondering if maybe you felt the same way . . . just how you mention in your neighborhood you had all of these different ethnic groups and religious and whatever; in those days did you really think of somebody being, as you said, an Italian?
- B: My best girlfriend was Italian. I had another real good girlfriend who was a Negro. The Jewish people did stay to themselves a little more. I think the family who had the phone was Jewish, and they had two daughters. I don't know what their father did, but they would go to lessons and things like this. They weren't really a part of the neighborhood gang where we would play house or roller-skate in the street or play Indian ball; they were never there. They were nice girls; they were a nice family. Yes, everybody got along. There was no division of race, creed, or color in those days, really.
- R: A lot of it might have had to do with . . . You mentioned everybody was poor. You were all in the same boat, so what difference did it make to bring up differences or whatever. When you were young, what things do you remember doing in your spare time as a kid?
- R: Pyatt Street Market is just off of Market Street. Now it is all closed in and very commercialized. There are still farmers coming in with their bushels of things. When I was young, that was new. They had just poured cement from one end to the other--this would be like a whole block--new cement, and it wasn't closed in. We could roller-skate there. You could roller-skate on one skate from one end to the other. That was a big thing to go up to Pyatt Street Market to roller-skate.
- I can recall another big thing. Like I said, my father

would have the weekly pass for the bus. On Sunday afternoon, my sister and I would ride the bus out to the end of the line and come back. That was a big thing. My father didn't have a car. Very few people had cars. Cars were so scarce that the street was a playground for the children. We played Indian ball. We got an old stick and a ball. You batted the ball and whoever caught the ball and where they caught it, had to stand there. You put the stick down and they had to roll the ball and hit the stick. Then it was their turn to bat. We also played kick the can, mud gutter, all kinds of things like ring around the rosey and such when I was younger.

Another thing I can recall was that my older sister would take us to the Stambaugh Auditorium. There were plays, live performances, at Stambaugh Auditorium. That was a big thing and Butler Art Gallery. I think my whole family, I especially, learned to appreciate art because we would go to the Butler Art Gallery quite frequently. All of us have an interest in art.

In the Summer there was Idora Park. That was a good thing. I hated to see it go. It was a great park. We would also visit relatives. You didn't visit like you do today because you hop in a car. It was getting on a bus. There were a bunch of us kids. At the time I was young, I had a younger sister and a younger brother. My mother got the three children on a bus and visited relatives, an aunt or uncle.

I was born on Dixon Street. Then we moved to Kyle because of the big family. It was a big, nine-room house. This overlooked the steel mills. The next street down was Woodland and the next things from that were the railroad tracks and the Mahoning River. Bums and hobos from the railroad would come to your house for food. They must have had certain houses marked because they always came to our house. We had a big family, but my mother always gave them food.

A boy down the street . . . In their house they had a bathroom in the basement. Many times we went down there and found a bum sitting there using the bathroom. They had that one marked down because they could come up the hills from the railroad and go right over to their house.

- R: The thing that is interesting about the bums and things isn't that you had to worry about them hitting you over the head or anything. They would come and just ask for something and go about their own.
- B: No, never. Another thing I remember was that we had a little, old lady in our neighborhood. She was bent over. It was so funny because if you saw something like that now you would say, "Oh, why don't they do something about her?" But she

would go up and down the street along the curb. Like I said, traffic was nil in those days. If you saw a car, it was a rarity. But she would go up and down the street, and any little piece of paper she would go through and look. You know how the stories are told; well, there were rumors that she lost \$1 million. But that woman was just part of the neighborhood. You didn't put her in an institution or wonder why nobody was taking care of her or wonder what she was doing.

R: She was just a character.

B: Yes, accepted her as she was, and that was it.

Of course, I was young in the days of the old icebox. The iceman used to come. You had to put out a card to tell how many pounds of ice. The iceman would know to stop at your house. You would put this little card out. When the iceman came, he would have to break off maybe fifty pounds, seventy-five pounds, one hundred pounds, whatever your card said you wanted. When he would break it, he would have his ice pick. Little chips of ice would fall. All of the little kids would come around and lick it like an ice cream cone.

R: That is one of the things. The iceman now has become sort of almost a myth. I think the milkman now is starting to go the same way.

What do you remember about downtown Youngstown during that time, down there on Federal Street?

B: It was a busy place. There were the theaters. It was funny; you could go to a theater . . . My husband was a movie addict; I was not. It was rare when I went to a movie. Once in awhile on a Saturday if I got my cleaning chores done, I could go to a movie Saturday afternoon.

That was another thing in our house, I don't know that it was predominant of the time, but in our house on Sunday my mother did no work. On Saturday she made a big pot of soup, and she made homemade noodles and she made enough to last for Sunday. On Sunday there was no work. On Sunday if you were going to go to church and put on a blouse or the boys a shirt with no button on, then you wore a different one because she wasn't going to sew a button on on a Sunday.

We didn't go to a movie on Sunday. You would think Sunday would be a nice time because you weren't doing any work so you could go to a movie. A Saturday afternoon was when I would go with my girlfriends. That was rare, very rare. Now my husband did; he went to movies a lot, and he can name all of the old stars.

R: What about things like shopping and stores or anything that would . . . You mentioned you went down there on a Saturday afternoon. What would you do on a Saturday when you would go downtown?

B: As I said I probably would go with my older sister or my girlfriends. Maybe mom had a bill that had to be paid. We might do that while we were in town. When I went to town--I'm talking about as a child; this would be like in the 1940's--I can remember town being very busy. It was never like it is now, so empty. I think it is pretty now with the plaza and the trees and all, but it was more practical and everybody was working.

Another thing . . . I said that we lived on Kyle Street, and Kyle Street was the second street off of the South Avenue Bridge or off of the Market Street Bridge. You could walk to town, but you didn't want to hit a train going under the bridge because that black soot . . . If you happened to be going over the bridge and a train was coming, you had to stop and wait for that train to go by and hoped the wind was blowing the wrong way. A lot of people walked too in those days. You lived closer to things.

I can't say much about town. I can remember McKelvey's, Strouss'. There was a Grant store, McCrory's, and Murphy's. My father took us to get our shoes at Brody's Shoe Store. I don't think he knew Mr. Brody from anyplace. I can remember all of us kids would go in there once a year for a pair of shoes. That was funny. I can remember that so clear, all of us lining up in the shoe store.

I was going to tell you about the steel mills. My one brother married a girl from New Jersey and brought his bride home. They had the front bedroom and the shade was drawn. My sister-in-law woke up and saw this glow flickering. She thought there was a big fire outside. She woke up my brother and said, "Eddie, there's a big fire out there!" With the shade drawn you could see this glow flickering. He put the shade up and said, "No, that's the steel mill." She said that she sat up half the night just staring out the window at these flames.

R: I suppose that was something too with the soot from the mills.

B: You were constantly cleaning. That was accepted. You didn't complain about it. In the summer our front porch was just like our living room because you lived on the front porch. You cleaned it every morning. We live in Struthers now, but we are fairly close to the mill. When we first moved here and the mills were going, I used to do that every morning. I would go out and get a rag and wipe off all of

the porch furniture and sweep down the dirt. Then it was okay for a day.

When they started saying to clean the air and clean the Mahoning River out for fish, we lived with that all of those years. You hear about these miners with the coal dust and all who are getting it in their lungs and all. My mother came from Pennsylvania and her father was in the coal mines there. Today they are talking about asbestos. Now they have this chemical spill and things like that. You always have something to scare the people.

- R: Probably in those days in this area you just grew up in that environment and you didn't think anything of it. It was just a natural thing that happened.
- B: You didn't think about it being harmful. You didn't think about getting rid of the dirty air; you just scrubbed the dirt away.

Another thing . . . I can remember watching my father come home from work. He had gotten off the bus and was walking up the street. A large twig had blown off of a tree and onto the sidewalk. My father--now he is coming home from eight hours of long work--bent down to pick up that twig and put it over to the side. When dad would rake leaves or clean, you cleaned the street too along and up the curb. He just did that. You didn't have to have environmental protection agencies then.

Just like my sister said about the Westlake projects, she said that they planted flowers. You had this little bit of property around your apartment and you planted flowers. Everybody kept up their place. If everybody keeps their own place clean, you have a lovely home.

- R: Touching on Westlake, first with you yourself, what are your first memories just about hearing about them being built or anything like that?
- B: I was a teen-ager then. A teen-ager really doesn't pay that much attention to things going on around the city. But my sister lived there. It was such a strange kind of a way to live. There were all of these apartment buildings, one after another. She had an upstairs apartment. Once you entered through the door, it was very personal. I can remember downstairs from my sister lived an elderly couple. From the outside everything look the same. You think that you are just going to see repetition of the outside, of the inside, or something. The Westlake Crossing was a whole new adventure for me. You would walk down the street on the sidewalk and there was a certain door which belonged to your sister.



Another thing I remember is the Lexington Settlement.

R: Right, that is the building that is up on Lexington Avenue.

B: I can remember going over there. They had Ping-Pong. My sister played cards with the women. They had a little card group. I thought it was nice. You were never alone; you always had a bunch of people around you.

R: In a way they created almost little neighborhoods when they built those.

B: They had a big foundation, but then years later the children began to abuse it at night. It had to be shut off. They created an atmosphere of caring for the people who lived there even though . . . It wasn't like they just wanted their money and that was it. Of course, they didn't because my sister said that you had to be from the low income.

She told me another funny thing. She worked at the hospital. Being that you had to be of a low income, her wages didn't count because they did not include the wife's wages at that time. Isn't that something?

R: I didn't know that. So they just counted the husband's wages as far as determining if you were eligible.

B: Yes, right. Isn't that something? Nowadays some wives make more than their husbands.

R: From what you remember how did people--not only people who lived there but people in town--look upon that project? Did people have a good feeling towards it?

B: I think so. I think that they thought it was something nice that happened in our town that the government was helping to make housing available. This was during the war. A lot of war brides lived there because their income would be low enough. In fact my sister's sister-in-law, her husband's sister, lived there; her husband was in the service.

R: Of course, the way they are now today the people who maybe don't know the background of it or know people who lived there originally have that negative thing. They think it is just a dump or whatever, and they don't realize it . . .

B: One of the questions another person asked my sister was if she had noticed any changes. Integration . . . There was Madison Avenue. It was a dividing line. Below Madison Avenue were the colored people, and above that were the white people. They did away with that, and the blacks were able to move wherever. My sister said it caused a lot of white people to move out. The neighborhood became noisier. I

don't like to say this, but this is what my sister said. My sister is not prejudice and I'm not.

She said that the housing had a maintenance man who used to cut the grass, shovel snow. This would encourage people to take care. They had somebody to take care of it, and then the people were encouraged to do likewise. If somebody was there to see that their place looked nice, then they wanted to keep it looking nice too.

R: From what you can remember, did it seem like it was families who lived there?

B: There were a lot of children. I can remember a lot of children. Of course, my two nieces were born there.

R: Maybe either you or your sister might remember something about this, but did it seem like--as far as the people, the managers or whoever--they were strict making sure that people kept their apartments?

B: I think they just did automatically, really. I baby-sat and I would visit my sister. It was a friendly atmosphere. I don't ever recall my sister saying anything that they had to do this and they had to do that. There was a free parking lot and they had areas for guest parking also. There weren't any fights. I don't ever remember any fights among the people. They were happy they had a nice home to live in. They took care of it. A recreation area was provided then. I can remember the fountain when it was going on, but I don't remember what the children had to do with it. That must have been later that it had to be turned off. That was too bad. I think the people didn't have to have strict overseers to make them take care of it; they just did.

R: People probably had pride in what they did. It was more of maybe an unconscious community as far as people who lived there.

B: My sister lived there four years from 1941 to 1945. She said that they had a schedule for doing your laundry. There were wired cages to hang your clothes in. You had a key to your cage. You had to hang your laundry up. They didn't have dryers in those days. The schedule would be for the simple reason . . .

R: Probably the numbers of people.

B: Right, to make it available to one person at a certain time. I imagine many of them traded days.

R: You said your sister lived there from 1941 to 1945.

B: Yes.

R: Of course, that is the war year period. Not only your sister but maybe you yourself, what do you remember about Youngstown? What are any of your memories during that war period, changes that took place?

B: I had three brothers and two sisters in the service. My sisters were not in the war, but they were in the service. My oldest brother just died a month ago, and he was wounded-- he became a paraplegic from war injuries. All three of my brothers were wounded in the war.

During the war, gas was rationed. Shoes were rationed, meat, eggs, cheese. You couldn't buy these things. I have a picture of a horse-drawn milk delivery; Isaly Dairy Company had the horse-drawn delivery truck. Times were hard, but you made the best of them.

I can remember that was when big headlines would come out about Hitler and the Japanese. It was very funny. I was a young girl during the war and I studied German in school. My German teacher came from Germany. She was a very beautiful person. She had taught my older sister before me German. Anyway, she remembered the beautiful Germany, and that was what she talked about in our class. She talked about it so beautifully that here is this ugly Hitler man that we hate. Yet, as a young girl, I thought that some day when I grew up I would go to Germany. I thought how beautiful it would be with the Black Forest and the dances and the songs. She made it very beautiful. I knew that Hitler was an ugly person, but I knew Germany wasn't and the German people, all of them, were not as ugly as Hitler and what we were reading in the headlines.

R: Do you think maybe she had any problems at all just because of that? I know kids can be . . . I have always heard that nobody could be meaner than kids sometimes.

B: No, and this was South High School too. That was the only teacher I kept in communication with after many years, even after my children were all born.

R: Being in high school during that period did they have war-related efforts and things?

B: Yes, buying bonds and stamps. I was in junior high school when President Franklin D. Roosevelt died. He had been president almost all of my life. It was really sad. We wondered what was going to happen to our country because he was the only president we knew. When you are a young kid like that, you don't think that you are going to like another president to carry on. But here this man died; what's going to happen?

I was a quiet girl. I minded my own business and did what I was supposed to do and that was it. When President Rossevelt died, two girlfriends and myself skipped school. We had our lunches packed, and we went to Mill Creek Park. We all felt so guilty. Every time we saw a car we thought it was the truant officer coming after us. That was the only time in my life I ever played hooky and that was the time President Roosevelt died.

R: When you were in school in junior high and in high school during the 1940's, was it probably in certain ways like what we have now, the dances and prom and those kinds of things?

B: Yes, we did, but I did not go to them. It wasn't anything religious or anything like that; I just didn't. I was a quiet girl. Yes, they had them. Frank Sinatra was a big craze when I was young. I admired his voice, but I didn't croon over him like they said other people did.

R: Maybe in the period after the war when things were over, did the same thing happen here in Youngstown that I guess happened in a lot of the bigger cities all over the country?

B: Yes, we lived near the steel mill. Can you imagine the whistles blowing? There was great rejoicing.

R: That would have to have been a feeling of I don't know what. Maybe it was a feeling of relief.

B: Yes, wonderful and happiness. I had the two older brothers who were in World War II. Both of them had been wounded.

That is another thing. I can remember when I was in high school. I can remember coming home from school and I saw a military car in front of our house. That was when they came for my mother to tell her that my brother had been wounded. I don't know if they still do that.

R: From when you talked to your sister about the time she was living in Westlake, were there certain things when you just mentioned it that maybe popped in your mind or memories that she had about it, feelings?

B: She was talking about the low income and her work at the hospital and that her wages didn't count. She talked about the cages. It was sad when she talked about the whites moving out because of the blacks moving in. She said that it just got noisy.

The picture that I have of this horse-drawn Isaly home delivery, the man driving it, he and his wife lived in the project. His name was Joe Leaner and his wife liked my sister's little daughter. She would come over and visit her.

Mrs. Leaner had a sister who had been killed in the gas chambers in Hitler's terrible rule.

No, I can't think that she brought up anything. I can just remember that the houses were neat, the people were friendly. My sister lived at the end. When you came from Griffith Street down the sidewalk, my sister lived at the end house, end apartment. All the way walking down the sidewalk everybody would say, "Hello," and "How is your sister?" They said something; they talked; they were friendly. I was just a young girl, but they were friendly. That is what I remember of it.

- R: The one consistent thing that people seem to mention is that you really didn't have to worry about making sure your doors were locked.
- B: No, in fact the sister who lived in the project later moved from there onto Dixon Street. She bought a little house there, and then they moved out onto Shields Road. To me, it was like out in the country, but you could go to my sister's house anytime. If she wasn't home, you didn't worry. If it was raining out, you would go in and sit down. She would be home sooner or later. The front door was never locked, never. That was really a good time to live.
- R: Do you have a good feeling about the period of the late 1930's and 1940's, your memories of it or just your feelings about it?
- B: Oh, yes, very much. Being of different nationalities, all of the neighbors got along. Isn't that wonderful? It was a very happy feeling.
- Talking about recreation, another thing we used to do was we would gather on the front porch. We had a swing on our front porch. We would sit there on that swing and sing songs and tell stories. My mother was a great storyteller. It didn't cost money to be happy. I think that was the important thing of those days. Nobody had money, and we could still be happy.
- R: It seems like in those days you had to use your imagination.
- B: Yes.
- R: Now all of these things do the work for you. Back then you probably . . .
- B: Everybody has the idea that happiness costs money. There is a song that says, "The best things in life are free," and they are.

- R: Probably back in those days just because the way the situation was, economic or whatever you want to say, that was what you found out. People back then, that was what you experienced. You just found out and you took it as that was the way it was. You didn't expect anything.
- B: I can remember my girl friend's father had a car. I talked about rarity of cars. They only drove it on Sundays. Then my sister who lived in the project had a car. This was a big thing. This was the first car in our family. It had a rumble seat. I used to sit in the rumble seat. We would go travel on a Sunday. The fact that my father didn't have a car or didn't drive never made me feel deprived.
- R: Thank you very much.
- B: I think that is about all. The street where I grew up, not Dixon because Dixon is right at the end of the freeway there, but Kyle Street, it is not there. It is not on the map.
- R: That probably makes you feel funny. All that part of your life was there.
- B: Yes, my growing years, all of my childhood years, you think of all the things like the big tree and you can remember the big hill and Pyatt Street Market as I said. But that street is not there.
- I attended grade school at Market Street School which is also no longer in existence. The school had a bell tower which different students pulled the ropes to ring the bell for beginning or closing of the school day. I do wonder what became of that huge bell when the school was torn down. I have a collection of bells, therefore my interest in the school bell.
- I call myself a steel baby. My father worked in the mill. Two of my brothers worked in the mill. My husband, my father-in-law, and two of our three sons worked in the mill, so I am a steel baby. I also worked for a period of time in the canteen in the mill; this is where I met my husband. My bread and butter was from the steel mills, all my life.
- R: Even I can remember the steel mills being open. I always noticed that when people came from outside of the area and all of the things that we took for granted, they would ride by the mills and be in awe. We just didn't think anything of it.
- B: My husband's relatives visited from California, and he

took everybody. In fact all of the children gave a talk in school. My husband collected . . . Sheet & Tube used to have a book. It was called the Bulletin. On the front they would always have pretty pictures. At first they used to be black and white and then they came out with colored pictures. We kept all of those beautiful pictures on the making of steel. We put them together and we gathered all of the information from inside of the book. This was for our children to present in school on a talk about making the steel. I still have that too.

R: Thanks a lot for helping us out. It helps us complete our picture more.

END OF INTERVIEW