

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Westlake Terrace Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 724

ROBERTA ALICE SNARE

Interviewed

by

Joseph G. Rochette

on

December 10, 1985

ROBERTA ALICE SNARE

Roberta Alice Snare was born on October 12, 1936 in Winona, Minnesota, the daughter of H. Arthur and Mildred A. Woodrow. At an early age young Roberta returned to the Youngstown area with her family. Here she was raised and went to school. She attended Covington School as a child and eventually graduated from South High School. After graduation she attended National College in Kansas City, Missouri and received an A.B. degree in sociology in June of 1958.

As a child, Mrs. Snare lived with her family in the Westlake Terrace Housing development located in Youngstown. It was the first such development of its kind in the United States under the Wagner-Steagall Housing Act of 1937. As a part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal program, the low income housing movement, and Westlake in particular, was an effort to relieve people's suffering caused by the Great Depression of the 1930's. It provided adequate housing for those who were unable to afford apartments and houses on their own.

Mrs. Snare presently lives on Collins Street in Youngstown with her husband, Perry, whom she married on April 3, 1959. They have three children: Sally, John, and Judy. She is a member of the Western Reserve United Methodist Church in Canfield. Her hobbies include camping, sewing, counted cross stitch, reading, travel, and square dancing.

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INTERVIEWEE: ROBERTA ALICE SNARE

INTERVIEWER: Joseph G. Rochette

SUBJECT: Westlake Terrace Housing, downtown Youngstown,
1940's, personal anecdotes

DATE: December 10, 1985

R: This is an interview with Roberta Snare for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Westlake Terrace Housing, by Joe Rochette, on December 10, 1985, at 1011 Collins Avenue, in Austintown, Ohio, at approximately 11:00 a.m.

Tell me a little bit about yourself, where you were born and raised and those kinds of things.

S: My family was from Ohio. We had just moved up to Winona, Minnesota a couple of weeks before I was born. I was born in Minnesota, and we lived there just two years when my dad died. We came back. I was the youngest of five. We came back here. The only family we had was my dad's parents, so we came back here in 1938 and lived with them. I'm not sure, but we lived with them for about a year. Then we moved into the housing projects as soon as they opened.

R: While you were going to school like for first grade, where did you go to school?

S: Covington. It was new. I didn't realize that it wasn't even there when we first came back, but my sister was saying they went to some other school on down a little further until Covington opened.

R: So at that time that was a relatively new school?

S: Brand new, yes.

R: What grades would that be?

S: First through sixth.

R: After that grade where would you go?

S: To Hayes Junior High. Then my older sisters went to Rayen and my brother went to Rayen.

R: What are some of the earliest things that you can remember about Westlake, about living there, impressions, anything like that?

S: We just lived. In each square, in each block, there was different playground equipment. We had the monkey bars. We thought we were the luckiest because some places just had a sliding board. I think there were maybe swings in some of them, but we had the monkey bars. You stayed pretty much in your . . . Well, we did because we weren't allowed to go very far. You stayed pretty much in your little court there. We lived just the second one down from the top end from Lexington. Up there in the center outside of Lexington there was the sprinkler there in the summer-time. They turned that on, and we would go up there and play. We thought it was great. We went up to Lexington Settlement a lot, but it is the Hagstrom House now.

R: Right.

S: Yes, it was called Lexington Settlement. We went up there a lot for games and craft things and just playing, and then across the street to Evans Field. We were fine; we had a lot to do. There were a lot of kids to play with. There were always kids . . . and fighting. We used to fight a lot. There were so many kids living so close. It was just one thing after another. You would be fighting one minute and friends the next minute. There were probably fifteen to twenty families in that one, little area. There was one older couple down at the far end of our row who were like grandparents to us. It was just a good place to be for all of those kids.

R: Did you live nearer to Griffith Street or to Wirt Street?

S: To Wirt. We lived at Wirt, yes.

R: When you would go to the settlement house there, would they have things planned like planned activities and things that you could do?

S: Yes, they had regular programs. You could go in the different rooms if you just wanted to play games like table games with people. They had the gym open most of the time. The main thing I liked doing was crafts. We did something like ceramics. You poured into the molds and made your own things and dried them and sanded them and painted them. We made wood things.

R: Would they have . . . were there volunteers?

S: I imagine they were volunteers.

R: But they would have somebody there to show you what to do?

S: Yes, there was always a lot of adult supervision. I remember one woman especially who I liked so well. To me she was an adult, but she might have been twenty years old. I liked her so well. Her husband was getting out of the service, and they were moving somewhere. I wanted something to remember her by, and she gave me a little pin that had been her's. People were just good to us. It was a different day and age. It was nice.

R: Really being a little kid there, in a way, you were more fortunate than kids who just lived in regular areas. There was something there for you to do.

S: Yes. I can't ever remember being bored or sitting and wishing there was something to do there. If you were mad at the kids in your section, you went over to another section and played or on up to the settlement. There was always plenty of room and plenty of stuff to do.

R: With a lot of those activities, would they be divided into age groups? Would you be with kids your own age?

S: I don't remember that. I imagine it would be.

R: What do you remember, if anything, about the apartment where you lived itself, about the way it looked?

S: I would like very much to go back and see it. I have driven up Wirt Street and thought about knocking on the door. There was a hill in front of our house which now is a slant going up in front of the row (of apartments) we lived in. I thought it was a hill, and it's not; it is just a slant. As I remember it they were nice apartments. Of course, they were brand new when we moved in.

I was reading in the paper just a couple of weeks ago about the conditions now. We had roaches because we lived right . . . There was a paper chute right under our apartment, and we did have roaches. My mother worked constantly at getting rid of them until a kid threw a match in there and burned it. That was the end of our roaches. Along with the fire, no apartment or anything burned. The sprinkler system came on, but he must have burned the roaches and killed everything.

As I remember there was a huge kitchen. When I think of what my mother had in there, we had a big, round kitchen table. She had what you would call a china closet now, I guess, and a dresser and a sewing machine. There was a lot in that kitchen, so it had to be pretty big, as big as I remember. There was a big kitchen and a good size living room. We had a three bedroom apartment because there were six of us. They must have just been normal size bedrooms, but it was very nice.

You could hear through the walls on either side very easily, people going up and down the steps. We used to talk through to the one people on the one side, especially on Saturday mornings. We would just lay there in bed and talk through to them. We used to talk about digging a little hole, but we thought we better not do that.

R: From what you can remember were people pretty much responsible for their upkeep maybe if they had to be painted or something like that?

S: I know being raised by the mother I was raised by that we took care of things. That was why we didn't dig the hole through the wall; we took care of things. We didn't think, well, it's not our's; we don't have to. We took care of things. People planted flowers around. We just had a little area just in front of the front window where you could. Everything else was paved. I don't remember us ever painting. I would think that the painting was done by the projects. They must have sent people. I know there was ugly brown paint halfway up coming down the steps probably to keep little fingers off of the white walls or something, but I remember that ugly brown paint. That was just the way they were painted.

R: Were there ever any kinds of maintenance men or people like that?

S: I don't remember; I really don't. I would just assume that when something went wrong, they sent somebody to fix it. With it being new, maybe not that much was done. They kept the large grass areas mowed. Thinking of snow, we loved snow. It didn't matter if sidewalks were shoveled or not. I don't remember; they must have been. The walks were all the way down through. They must have been kept clear somehow, but I don't remember how.

R: When you were in school, with other kids you were with was there any kind of feeling because you lived in the projects? Did kids ever say anything?

- S: Not that I was aware of. So many going to school . . . That was where they lived. I'm sure there were other areas that it served, but so many there lived in the projects. I wasn't aware of any feelings. I had friends who lived down on Belmont, and I went down there and they came to our place. As far as I know I wasn't aware of it.
- R: Were there any kinds of little stores or little things in the area there where as kids or whoever you could just get candy or anything like that?
- S: Yes, there were three, small grocery stores. One was over on Griffith and another was on Parmelee. Then up next to the side of the playground there was one. Yes, there were three, little stores. Then in the summer we walked up to North Side Swimming Pool and went swimming. There was a bakery up there. We used to stop in. With 1¢ or 5¢ you could get almost whatever. You could really stand there and take a long time deciding what you were going to do with the 5¢.
- R: As a young kid like going swimming in the summer, what other kinds of things would kids do to entertain themselves?
- S: One little girl next door had a bike. She was the envy of the whole place. I think it was a tricycle. Most of the time she shared it. We all did ride her bike, but we went up there and went swimming. We just played games. We played hide-and-seek, kick the can, stuff like that. There was always someone you could play with, roller-skate. We used to ride our sleds on that huge hill out front. We did a lot of walking just to a lot of places.
- R: Really back in those times wherever you went within a reasonable distance everybody pretty much walked.
- S: Yes, we never had a car. There was a bus line over on Park or something. There was a bus line, but still we walked downtown. My mother walked to work all the time. We walked wherever we went.
- R: Even after you moved out of there let's say going into junior high school or high school or whatever, what were your impressions about Youngstown itself maybe focusing on downtown Youngstown, going down there? What things were different from the way it is today?
- S: My daughter is just turning a paper in tomorrow she has to write on revitalizing downtown Youngstown. Everybody she mentions it to has the attitude of blow it up, burn it down. She went down and walked around and talked to some of the merchants.

When we were kids while I was growing up, downtown . . . There weren't the malls. Downtown was the place to go. Everything was downtown. It was a very thriving area. We knew the Mafia was around, but what did it mean to us? When Henderson ran for mayor, he gave out little brooms saying, "Sweep the city clean." I remember wearing this little broom. What does a kid ten, eleven, twelve years old know about sweeping the city clean. It was just very thriving.

You were proud to be from Youngstown. When I went away to school, I was very proud to be from Youngstown and what was here and the mills, being the big center for steel and all that it was. Just everything was downtown.

My mother worked in the Erie terminal building just west of town a little bit. She worked until noon on Saturday. That was our big treat, whoever got to go down and meet her at noon on Saturday, spent the afternoon downtown. McKelvey's and Strauss' were the only two big department stores. From where Powers is now clear down past the square, they were all big and thriving. It was all full of stores and very profitable.

R: So there were all kinds of shops?

S: Anything you could find. There certainly are a lot bigger cities, but anything you would find in a normal city you lived in . . . It was just a good, profitable place to be.

R: The feeling toward it is almost the opposite of what it is now. People now make fun of . . . like kids saying, "Oh, you are from Youngstown."

S: Yes. My daughter went to Grove City. We were over there, and we were eating with some friends in Perkins. My husband ordered the godfather sandwich. This other man says, "Good thing to have coming from Youngstown." There was none of that. Maybe the older people had a little feeling, but there was enough good to counteract the bad. No, there was never any feeling that you were from Youngstown.

Around the mid-1960's we were one of the first areas for teacher strikes; we were one of the first areas for nurse strikes. Little by little, one thing after another, one thing added to each other, and we started to get a bad name. Our relatives from all over would write and say, "Are your kids out of school," and "hope you are not sick." I think it was a gradual thing for just where and when everything happened.

We have friends who we are still in contact with from living in the projects who will not say that they lived there when we moved out of Westlake. They lived there and will not admit it. I thought it was a lifesaver for us because my mother had nowhere else to go with five kids.

R: We have run into that too. We have had people who have called us on the phone. They will say that they lived there and tell us all kinds of things. We will ask them if they are willing to be interviewed, and they don't want people to know that they lived there. The people who we have talked to . . . Everybody has pretty much said the one thing that it served its purpose at the time and that for their particular situation, just how you mentioned, it was a lifesaver. As far as people's experiences, and the people who they knew, they have been really overwhelmingly positive at that time when they lived there. We haven't found it to be a negative thing, really, at all.

S: No. Like I said we were the first ones to live there in our apartment. My mother was living with her in-laws, which with five little kids wasn't good for them or for us. It certainly wasn't good for my mother. When this came along, she put her name on it (the waiting list) to go. I remember over all of those years how thankful she was.

My brother is a friend of this fellow who wouldn't admit that he lives there. My brother gets very upset. He thinks that you should do the best you can and be thankful for it and that you shouldn't be ashamed of your past like where you lived. I admit that I would not want to live there today. Just like I said I would love to go knock on the door to see the apartment. I'm not going to do that. I will drive up Wirt Street and look around.

I was taking courses down at Youngstown State. I had an opportunity then to go up to Lexington Settlement to observe the nursery school. I was real happy to go in. I walked all through the building remembering things.

R: That would have probably really been neat to go back after all of those years to see.

S: She had a list of places we could go. I thought that the Hagstrom House was what it was. I asked her where it was. She said that it was up on Lexington Avenue near the projects. I told her that I would go. It was neat just to walk through remembering that we did this and we did that.

R: When you went back that time, were they still doing a lot of the same kinds of things?

S: I just went and observed the nursery school. I was taking early childhood education; I just observed the nursery school.

My sister and I were talking. She said that it was every day, and I think it was one day a week; I don't know. They had a lunch that they served us up there. I assume you paid what you could or a minimal amount. I think we went up there for lunch one time a week, and it was a big treat to go. You didn't have to stay in school and eat your little sandwich out of your bag. You could go. You got out of school for that hour instead of staying while the rest of the kids went home. My sister says that it was every day and she is older so she may know.

R: So they must have had some kind of kitchen or something?

S: Yes. We never thought that we were getting a handout or a free lunch. It was never subsidized like what you think now and all. There was no stigma or anything that I was aware attached to it. It was there. It was an opportunity to go so we went.

Another thing she and I were talking about . . . The whites lived north of Madison Avenue and the blacks south. This was the government segregating people. I never thought a thing of it. That was just the way. They lived there and you lived there. We were raised very much with no prejudice and never thought a thing of it until I got older and realized what it was. That was the government doing it and that was in the 1940's. That was only forty-five years ago, and we were up north. You think all of that stuff happens down south.

R: Would blacks come at all up to the Lexington Settlement House?

S: Yes. Of course, we all went to school together. In fact, my sister said that when we first moved in when she was in either kindergarten or first grade, they went down to the school which they called Monkey's Nest. She said that she sat there in the class looking around and started crying. She knew something was wrong, but she didn't know what. She said that it finally dawned on her; she was the only white person in her class. Even the teacher was black. It was just where we happened to live. Up until then she . . . She had seen blacks now and then, but coming from Minnesota

in the little town we lived in, I doubt there were any. Those were her first impressionable years. I would say that half and half were at Covington. Half were black and half were white.

- R: Maybe it was just the thing the people didn't think. Everybody kind of went about their own way. You really didn't think about that.
- S: The emphasis that is on it now is good, but yet without the emphasis you just went about your own way. You didn't make a big issue of it. I'm sure they came up there because it was right there at the north part in the same brick building. I had the feeling that it was just for the projects. I could be completely wrong. Maybe other neighborhood people came. I just always had the feeling that was our's, our special place to go.
- R: It was built at the same time and in conjunction with the whole thing. I know some people have mentioned something about a membership or some kind of thing like that. It was a small amount like 10¢ or something like that. Sometimes kids who lived in Brier Hill or something like that would be able to . . . if there was still room after the kids who lived in the project were there.
- S: I don't remember that.
- R: It really has to be strange even today having lived there like you said when you drive by it and see it today.
- S: I got very upset reading that in the paper. Of course, anything can go downhill and decay in forty years. Yet when something that good started out . . . Whatever they said the average rent was and the average income, the rent has stayed much lower in proportion to the income now from what it was. My mother paid half of her income for rent. She made \$40 a month. I know times are different. It is still not that different. You don't pay half of your income for rent. She made \$40 a month, and she paid \$20 for rent.
- R: I think it is something like \$80 now.
- S: Yes, \$80 something for it.
- R: You know people are making a lot more now.
- S: Yes, because then they said the average income was \$5,000 or something. That doesn't come out to half.

My older sister went away to school, so she didn't count. As my older brother got a job and then the next sister got a job, they added their complete income to my mother's as the total family income. My sister says that they still do this. They were both good at giving to my mother, but no way did they come in and hand her their paycheck. They totaled those three checks together. They said that we were making such and such and that it was too much to live there. It made it tough then. We did have to move.

My mother had a friend who every now and then would go down and pay the rent; we would go down and pay the rent, and they would say that it was already paid. The woman was doing this to help my mother. Come the next year when they were reevaluating your income, they added--say the woman paid the rent twice--that \$40 to my mother's income. In effect it did more harm than if the woman had just given my mother the \$20 and said, "Go pay your rent."

Yes, when I saw that in the paper about what the rent was and what the income was . . . Maybe that is adequate rent to pay; maybe it is plenty. I'm not questioning that. It hasn't stayed in proportion with rent and income.

R: You had Westlake back in the 1940's and early 1950's. It was the way it was. Then today you have it to where after 10:00 you don't want to . . . It is like war zone.

S: Yes, the people living there themselves are fearful of coming and going.

R: One lady we talked to said that she wouldn't mind going back but that she would only live on Federal Street. On Federal Street there is more traffic. I guess they put the older people and the more settled down people . . . When you go up there on Griffith and that area that is away from the main drag . . . The people we have talked to have gotten into some different things.

Back in the 1940's and 1950's when people first moved in, it was really a family oriented complex. It was that kind of thing. After a few years people came in and lived with somebody and then their kids lived there. That is a thing that just gradually over the years until today . . .

S: It is still serving as homes for those people. It is still serving a need, but not what they or anybody else would want for them. I'm sure they would be much happier if it was what it was back in the 1940's or 1950's. They could move in there and be safe and have a content house to live in.

- R: I would think too that a lot of it might be the YMHA (Youngstown Metropolitan Housing Authority) being involved in so many different projects. They don't have probably the time and the money to devote to Westlake in keeping the upkeep and all that kind of stuff that maybe they once did.
- S: But if they are responsible for it, they should be. The laundry room downstairs was something else. If my mother was down there washing, we would go down, but you never went down there at night. As far as I know nothing ever happened. You just didn't go down there. There was a huge, big room where everybody kept their own washer out around the edge. I don't know if you signed up for times to wash or if you just went down. If you were lucky, you could push your washer over to the stationary tubs and wash. Then there was a really big room with cages where the clothesline was strung. That was where you hung your clothes to dry.
- R: So everybody had a washing machine.
- S: Yes, you had your own washer.
- R: When you think about looking back over the time that you spent there, overall what things do you think stick out in your mind about living at Westlake or the contribution maybe that it made to people at that time?
- S: It gave us a place to live, basically. It gave us a place where we could be on our own as a family. We could all be together. We weren't split up. My mother was advised to put us all into homes when my dad died, which of course, didn't happen and never would happen. If we had stayed with my in-laws and a couple of my dad's sisters, we would have had like six adults telling us what to do all the time.

My mother was a very strong person and very kind. I don't know how much she would have taken from them as far as them being our bosses. I'm sure that if it would have gotten to something that she didn't like, she would have stood up for it, but to keep peace, she might have endured a lot that she didn't need to endure. In that way we had a place where we were a family and we were together. We were raised in the way that my mother wanted us raised and taken care of.

We always had a very strong, close tie. We never thought we were poor. We were poor; we never felt it. That was where we lived, and we were very fortunate to have lived there.

You always had someone to play with. There was always something going on. If you didn't like one thing, there was something else to do and of all ages. We were twelve years apart, so there were people of all ages.

As things progressed there was a theater eventually up on Belmont. There were large grocery stores, the little neighborhood grocery stores. There was whatever you needed as far as I know. It was a nice area. I just think basically it gave us a place to live where we could be together.

R: I'm sure there was that feeling too when you said about being poor. Everybody was in the same boat really.

S: Yes. With me being the youngest I think my mother said she paid one of the neighbors 10¢ a day to keep me while the others were at school. This woman was thrilled to get the 10¢. There wasn't somebody living two houses away who had ten times as much as you did. I don't know whether they felt poor or not. I assume they didn't. Like I said, the one girl had the bike and she was the envy of . . . I used to think she was a show-off because she was out riding around on that bike. You shared things. Like I said, she let us ride her bike. If one person had a pair of roller skates, somebody else used them. Everybody played with whatever somebody else had. Everybody didn't have a sled, so whoever had a sled let everybody use it or a wagon or whatever. Not every family had ten toys and the next family had ten toys. If you were lucky, you had one.

R: I suppose not only the kids but the adults too that wherever they could help each other out, they probably cooperated.

S: Yes. One person would have a bus pass. You would buy a pass for a week for so much. You would ride on it. One person might have a pass. If they knew you were going downtown and they weren't using their pass, that pass would go to you or if there was a sickness or a death. It was close.

We had a flood. My brother came home from work after working all night. They had turned the water off to do something. He turned the faucet on and no water came out, so he left the faucet on and went to sleep. When I came home from school, the water was just running down the steps and out the front door from the upstairs bathroom. The neighbors had been banging on the walls trying to get him awake. Just everybody in that house, cleaning out, sweeping out the water . . . My mother came home from work. She walked in and there were all of our belongings out on the lawn drying out. Everybody was saying, "That poor boy; that poor boy." All the neighbor women who were home came

and helped us sweep out the water and carry the rug out to lay out and dry. Yes, they all came.

I can't think of other things, but I know everybody was there for each other. One woman's husband was in the TB (tuberculosis) center. She went every week to visit him. I think she had four or five kids. People watched the kids while she was gone and just did what was needed to be done. That would have happened anywhere in that time. I think people were more neighborhood concerned. I'm sure there were negative things, but the good outbalanced them.

We still see the woman who worked at the office down where we paid our rent. I can't think of her name though. She and my mother were friends until my mother died. She would still see her and talk to her.

Some people had telephones; some didn't. It wasn't back where telephones were a necessity. My mother felt it was a necessity because she went to work and left the five of us at home. We had to have a phone, but not everybody had a phone. So the neighbors would use each other's phones. I know there were quite a few who didn't have one.

They were different size apartments. I don't know if the rent would have been based on the size of the apartment or income or a combination. You wouldn't need the three bedroom apartment unless you had five kids, so your income was going further than if you only needed the one bedroom apartment. I don't know how it was based. I know it was definitely partly on the income, but whether it was on size too I don't know.

R: Okay, thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW