

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Westlake Terrace Project

Resident Experience

O. H. 728

MAX PELLESCI

Interviewed

by

Joseph Rochette

on

October 22, 1985

MAX PELLESCI

Max Pelleschi was born in 1939 in Youngstown, Ohio, the son of Benedict L. and Rachel Rossi Pelleschi. Young Max was raised and went to school in the Youngstown area. He attended St. Ann's School in Brier Hill and Ursuline High School. He graduated from Liberty High School. Mr. Pelleschi remembers Youngstown as a good place to grow up during the 1940's and 1950's, with many activities for young people and adults.

When Max was about one year old, he, along with his family, moved into the Westlake Terrace Housing development. At this time they were some of the initial residents. Westlake Terrace was the first such project of its kind in conjunction with the Wagner-Steagell Housing Act of 1937. As part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal program, it attempted to serve the needs of many low income families who could not afford adequate housing during the Great Depression of the 1930's and the war years of the 1940's.

Mr. Pelleschi presently lives on Fifth Avenue in Youngstown with his wife and children. He has his own business, Maxmillan Photography, on Belmont Avenue in Liberty Township. Mr. Pelleschi has no regrets about the years he spent at Westlake and believes that they contributed to the positive environment of his early childhood years.

Joseph G. Rochette

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INTERVIEWEE: MAX PELLESCI

INTERVIEWER: Joseph Rochette

SUBJECT: arts & crafts, settlement house, low income housing

DATE: October 22, 1985

R: This is an interview with Max Pelleschi for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Westlake Terrace, by Joe Rochette, On October 22, 1985, at 6210 Belmont Avenue, Liberty Township, at about 1:00 p.m.

Tell me just a background kind of thing, where you were born, where you are from and growing up and that kind of thing.

P: I was born on Broadway Avenue. I was born in a house. We moved to the Westlake Terrace when I was probably a year and a half old. My dad worked on the complex, and so we were one of the first to move in when it was completed. I believe we moved in 1939 or 1940.

R: What did your dad do?

P: He was a carpenter. He worked on that project. At that time, of course, it was the Depression. They were just coming out of the Depression. My dad was from Rochester, New York, and he came here because my uncle had gotten him a job here. Then he went to work for whoever the contractors was on the projects.

R: What are some of the earliest things you can remember about living at Westlake?

P: I remember the playgrounds; I remember the friends. You had a lot of friends to play with. We had a lot of activities. Of course, we had the settlement house. I lived in the upper part, which was right on Lexington Avenue. We lived in apartment 414 on Lexington Avenue, which was right on top

of the hill. Across the street was Evans Field. We played ball. There was organized ball there plus unorganized ball. There were swings and teeter-totters and all that stuff for kids. Four doors down was the settlement house where they had crafts, nursery schools, games and activities.

- R: Were there things other than sports--activities and things-- offered for children to do?
- P: There were crafts. Every summer they would open up a shower behind the settlement house. I don't know if they still have it. Instead of a swimming pool, what they had was this shower. It was built specifically for water to spurt out. Every afternoon in the summertime they would come in at certain times from 1:00 to 3:00 or whatever it was, and they would turn on the shower. All of the kids would go down there in the summertime right behind the settlement house. We would play in the shower. It was a very huge circle of concrete with a natural drain with this huge head of a shower coming out of the ground, and it would spray the water up in the air. We would jump over it and play games. That was our big afternoon.
- R: One time when we went down there, we saw one of those there. We wondered what it was. I don't think they use them anymore.
- P: Probably not. There are probably a lot of things they don't do down there anymore. I haven't been down there for years, but the activities down there were very wholesome. We slept with our door open. There were never any problems of any kind that I can remember.

I think it used to cost 10¢ or 25¢ or something like that to have a membership at the settlement house. I know it took us a long time to kind of get that money together. They would collect our pennies or whatever we had for our membership card. Then we had access to the library; they had a library there. They had a game room where we played Ping-Pong, and then they had the regular checkers, games and that kind of stuff. They had the Boy Scouts troop there. As a matter of fact, my dad was the scoutmaster of troop #7 at the settlement for years. They had square dancing; they had roller skating. There were many educational programs, and they had movies. On Friday or Saturday nights they had outdoor movies. They would set up a movie screen in back of the settlement. The whole neighborhood from all over the area would come. We would sit in our little chairs or sit on the ground, and they would show the movies. Usually most of them were Laurel and Hardy, that kind of movie.

All of this stuff was free, so a kid growing up, underprivileged at that time, was not aware of it. I don't know what income my dad had. He became a mailman when the war started. He was

delivering mail during the war. We were still living there until I was about thirteen; that's when we moved away. We moved to Liberty. The memories I have are nothing but good.

R: Just like any other neighborhood where anybody grows up, you would be friends with whoever was in the next apartment and just visit and all that kind of thing just like a normal neighborhood.

P: Yes, absolutely. Everybody was very friendly. We had some very nice friends. All of the kids who lived next to you were very friendly. There was a women's club at the settlement that my mother belonged to. Everybody was very friendly. People from across the court . . . There was a building on the right-hand side and a building on the left-hand side, north and south, and in the middle of the buildings would be the court. They would always be talking from one window to the other. It was a very friendly atmosphere. There were a few occasions where some of the people were in arguments, but that is normal neighborhood stuff that happens.

Everybody in our section was all white. They had it segregated at the time when I grew up there. Below Madison Avenue was where the blacks were, and up above was all white. They had started to desegregate a little at a time starting just before we left.

R: So that would be around the early 1950's?

P: Yes, probably 1952, 1953. I was a freshman at Ursuline, and then we moved out and I finished up at Liberty. It was probably about 1953.

R: When you first started school, where did you go to school?

P: I went to St. Ann's. St. Ann's used to be on Federal Street. They tore it down because of the freeway, but we used to walk. All of the kids from our neighborhood were St. Ann's kids. I went to parochial school throughout my entire stay there. I never went to a public school until I went to Liberty.

R: Even despite how the projects were segregated like that, would blacks, just as well as whites, come up to the settlement house there?

P: Yes, we had basketball games with them. That was never segregated. The only part that was segregated was the housing itself. I never remember anything about discrimination at that time because we used to play with them. The black kids used to come up, and we played basketball; we knew everybody. I never really felt that there was any discrimination.

R: What do you remember about your particular apartment itself, what it looked like?

P: A lot of concrete. They were really built. The kitchens were metal; the cabinets were all metal; the floors were concrete. They had linoleum over the kitchen floor, and there were rugs in the living rooms. We had what you would call today, a townhouse. There was a downstairs and upstairs. Downstairs there was a kitchen and living room. Then upstairs we had two bedrooms and a bath.

R: Did they have maintenance men and that kind of thing like for plumbing?

P: Yes, I believe the guy lived close to us. The rent office used to be down at the bottom. I believe that is where it still is today. If there were ever any problems . . . I don't remember any really big repairs or anything like that having to be done. I don't remember anything with plumbing going on, but I suppose there were leaky faucets maybe or something like that. They had maintenance men to fix it.

R: You were talking about them being made of concrete. I had talked to a fellow who had been a bricklayer on the construction. He was saying that the only thing that wasn't concrete or brick or plaster or whatever in them was the rafters. He said that everything else was, and it shows you how really solid they are.

P: Yes, it is solid. I don't remember ever hearing anybody next door, so the walls had to be pretty thick. I believe the windows were made of steel if I'm not mistaken. They weren't wood frames; they were steel frames.

As our family grew we moved from 414 Lexington to Griffith Street because what they were doing in the late 1940's was opening up and making the apartments larger for larger families. They took an apartment that was actually two singles; one was up and one was down. They made it so that now you had one apartment out of the whole thing, so you had four bedrooms. We were one of the families to move to a four bedroom. I really didn't like it as much because I didn't like the area as much. We were in a pretty nice area, and then we had to move down Griffith Street. I didn't know the kids there.

R: It was almost like moving to a different neighborhood?

P: Yes, exactly.

R: While you were living there, did you notice if people seemed to always be moving in and out? Were new people seeming to come in a lot?

- P: It was pretty much stabilized at one point, especially during the war. There were a lot of single parent families where the father was in the service and the wives and the children were living there. I think they got preferences, as a matter of fact. We had a lot of that. They weren't moving out so much. I noticed after the war, however, that that was when the movement started. I think the people got a little bit disturbed when the blacks started moving in and they started desegregating. I think you found more of a quicker movement at that point. At that point there still wasn't that desegregation thing. I think people felt threatened probably more by the blacks.
- R: So there was some feeling there?
- P: Yes, I'm sure there was. Like I said when I think back on it, I'm sure that at that point there were more people leaving than normal. There was more influx of blacks coming in. We never felt that before because they were always down on the other end.
- R: Even by looking at a map of the project or even where it is at, one thing that is down there is what used to be the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) in the black section. I was told that originally when that YMCA was built that it was built for blacks.
- P: Blacks? Yes, it was. They also built a pool, which was an all black pool. The North Side Pool was white and it was segregated. There were no blacks allowed at the North Side Pool.
- R: Was that John Chase Pool there then?
- P: Yes, John Chase is what we used to call it. They built that because I think there was some flack probably from the black community that they couldn't use the North Side Pool, so they built the Chase Pool. I wasn't allowed to go down there because I wasn't black. At the time it really didn't bother me, but we had to walk further because we had to go up to the North Side Pool. The Chase Pool was down the street from us, which was closer, but we had to go to North Side.
- R: Probably when you were older and maybe out of Westlake in the early 1950's, at that time did people still go downtown?
- P: Yes. We used to go downtown all the time. I remember taking my dates. We used to go to shows downtown. That was kind of going out. We used to go downtown to go out. We used to go to movies at the Paramount, the Palace. The Palace was gorgeous. Powers is the old Warner. The Paramount was the one that was just sold. The Palace always struck me as being the prettiest, and they tore that down. That was a shame.

R: That's what most people say.

P: During that period of time we used to go down. When I was in high school, that was our night out. When I was younger, we used to take the bus downtown, and downtown was always crowded. You would go down on the bus; there were people all over the place.

R: Did you usually go down on a Saturday or on the weekend?

P: Yes, Saturday when my mother would go shopping and that, we would go on the bus. Then when we got older, a couple of us kids would take the bus and go down there ourselves and go shopping and whatever kids do, just to be in the crowd to have something to do on a Saturday afternoon. We used to walk down a lot of times too if we didn't have the 5¢ or 10¢ to get on the bus. We used to just walk down.

R: The buses then, would they pretty much go . . . Where would you get on a bus at?

P: We had to go across Lexington to Ford, and we got on at the corner of Ford and Lexington.

By the way, we had a lot of school friends, also when I got older, who did not live in the projects. They lived around the neighborhood. The people from around the neighborhood could also belong to the settlement house. There were outsiders who were allowed to participate in the activities at the settlement house at that time. You had all races, all nationalities. It was a melting pot that the kids grew up in not knowing who was a "honky" or who was a "Dago"; they really didn't know.

R: That's kind of interesting because it is natural kids are going to make friends with people who live outside of it so that they would let them all come in and use it.

P: As long as you had a membership. Like I said it was 25¢ or 10¢ for the membership card. I don't know why you had to have one.

R: Did the settlement house have any kind of a director or supervisor?

P: Yes, it did. I think his name was Mr. Hughes if I'm not mistaken. I could be wrong on that, but I think Mr. Hughes was the director. My dad used to help. At the time he was a social worker. They didn't pay social workers; that was a gratis job. He went to Hiram College for a summer course on how to be a social worker. He used to do it gratis. It was his contribution to the war effort. He would work with the settlement house with the Boy Scouts; he would direct the

athletics like the basketball tournaments that they had, so he was very close with the settlement house and so was my mother. Of course, we lived so close.

There was also a woman who lived at the settlement house. They had an apartment over the settlement house. I don't know what her title was, but she was either secretary to the settlement house or whatever it was; but she actually lived there. There was an apartment there, so we were very closely associated at that time.

As a matter of fact the settlement used to have a summer camp. I don't know if they still have it. It was next to the Boy Scouts camp out in Canfield. It used to be the settlement camp. There was a name for it, but I can't think of the name of it. We used to go out every summer. You go a week. Each child was only allowed to go for a week. I went to camp at the Boy Scouts camp every week during the summer. There were only so many boys and girls allowed to go. We had cabins and they had a mess hall and crafts and games and that kind of stuff out in the boondocks.

R: Whoever planned the things . . . It just wasn't a housing development. It was more of a community development with the idea that they had activities for the people and services. It just wasn't an apartment complex.

P: Right, it was. Compared to today's government it was well-run and well-supervised and never a problem. I don't know how it is run today, but that would be interesting to compare how they run it today as compared to how they were running it in those days. I think those people who worked there did not get too much. They got paid, but their pay probably was very minimal. That was their career though. I know Mr. Hughes did not live around the area. He came from somewhere else.

As far as I remember, of course, not being an adult at that point in my life, you just think everything runs smoothly. They always had activities going on. They had horseshoe and washer tournaments. We used to play washer and horseshoe tournaments in the summertime. They had craft buildings where we would work in clay. We had a woodshop. We worked with clay a lot, building with our hands. I won a first prize for a clay racing car. They had it in a display window. That probably instilled my love of the arts from what I got as a child. I was doing that probably since I was three years old. We used to build things and they had a teacher to help you. It was like a day care.

R: Were those people volunteers?

P: My dad was a volunteer. They probably had some volunteers

and probably some paid.

When the settlement got the first television, we used to watch Milton Berle. The whole community used to come in and sit in the television room like a movie room. We would go in and see that program or whatever program it might be. There wasn't too much television on the air at that time. They would line up folding chairs and everybody would sit down and watch it in the dark just like you would watch a movie. Adults would come in and children would come in. It was the entertainment center of the whole complex. It was really interesting.

You probably wouldn't want to walk through the projects today. I have walked through it many, many times in my life. I probably wouldn't want to do it now. It has gotten an awfully bad name. Being poor is one thing, but to be poor and mischievous and deceitful is something else. Some people grew up with values. You might not have grown up with a lot of money, but you grew up with values. We never thought of hurting anybody or stealing anything or breaking into anybody's house. I think they have that problem down there today.

R: The people we have talked to so far . . . That seems to be the thing that we have found out. It is a combination of things. One of the things is the change in the clientele. It seemed like when the projects first opened up in the 1940's, that they were married couples. You had to show a marriage license. It was a strong family thing. People we have talked to into the late 1940's and into the mid-1950's . . . It seemed there were more of single people moving in and living with other people. Before, it seemed to be built around families.

P: Right, that was exactly how it was.

R: That maybe had something to do with it.

P: The moral fiber . . . After the war the men wanted to come home and build homes. That was their big thing; they wanted to build a house. They got a chance to see other areas, so when they came home, they wanted to build a home and have a nice, little yard, which we really didn't have to speak of. Westlake Terrace is just like anything else. They are there to make money. They have to collect rents, and they have to pay the bills. When they started getting too many vacancies, it was just like anything else; they got desperate. I think that is what happened. It was a very moral time. If the neighbor lady had a man at her apartment and somebody would complain, she would get a visit from the manager.

Everything was quiet. There was no commotion; it was peaceful. If you visualize a community that you would see on television

in the 1950's, that was the type of place that it was. It was family oriented; you are absolutely right. I never thought about that, but it was.

R: You touched on this when you said how they would come and check up on you. Would they come regularly for maybe an inspection?

P: I'm not too aware of that since I was young. I think they did have somebody, an officer of some sort. I think he lived a couple of doors down from us. I don't remember what his title was, but it was an officer of some sort.

R: When you finally did move from there, do you remember anything about that? Did you have sad feelings?

P: At the time we moved I think we were ready. I think it was starting to deteriorate. We moved from the city. I lived in a farmhouse. We came from the city to a farm area. It was getting to the point where it was starting to deteriorate a little bit. The people weren't so nice who were starting to come in. It was kind of like when you are at a party and you know it is time to leave. All I do know is that while I was growing up I don't regret having lived there. But I don't think I regretted leaving. I think I was becoming aware of where I was living at that time. I was about thirteen years old. You now realize that you live in the projects, which you never had that feeling before when you are smaller. You don't know.

It did have a good name. When it first opened up, there was nothing derogatory about it at all. I think starting in the 1950's it started to get a little bit of a name. People from all over the neighborhood were moving. I noticed people who lived down on Lexington Avenue in the homes were moving up further. Migration had kind of started a little bit. No, I didn't have any regrets.

R: I wondered when that stigma might have started.

P: It probably was about that time. I don't remember being unhappy. At that time we didn't have any busing. I had to walk to Ursuline. I had to transfer schools to go to Liberty. I did miss Ursuline. My parents weren't going to drive me back and forth all the time. Liberty was a good school. I just wasn't used to being in a public school situation because I always grew up in the parochial schools. That was a change for me, but I adjusted very well.

R: When you went to Ursuline, was it pretty much people who lived in that area in those days?

P: All north side?

R: If you lived further away . . .

P: No, as a matter of fact it was all over the city.

R: You just had to find a way there.

P: Yes. People who lived on the south side of the city would take city buses. They would transfer downtown; then from downtown they would transfer to north side buses or walk.

R: They just used the regular bus system?

P: Right, exactly. They would have transfers. I think they gave them a special weekly rate or something like that, and it wasn't that expensive. Ursuline was a large school, and they had to expand. In the 1950's they were just making the addition to the school. I had classes in that little, framed house, up in the attic, in one of the houses. I think my typing class was way up in the attic. I think the house is still on campus. I remember going to typing class in the attic. They were running out of room. Then they built the addition to Ursuline; then they built Cardinal Mooney. Now the enrollment is going down again. Ursuline drew because it was the only Catholic high school in the area. They drew from the whole area. People drove their children to school. The ones from the south side, east side, west side were taking the buses to downtown. Then from downtown they would disperse.

R: When you went to St. Ann's, did that have from first grade to eighth grade?

P: First to eighth grade.

R: In those days did mostly nuns teach?

P: Yes. I remember my first grade teacher was a lay teacher and also my second or third grade, and they were two sisters. They were lay teachers, but most of the other teachers were nuns. Our nuns were from the Ursuline order.

We never switched classes. We stayed in the room. As a matter of fact there were a couple of grades where we had double classes like fifth grade and sixth grade in the same room. There was just a little aisle between us. They taught the fifth grade lesson while we were studying our sixth grade lesson. Then they would come and give us a lesson. They were together because St. Ann's was always a small school.

St. Anthony's was close by too. So there were two Catholic schools in petty close proximity in Brier Hill. St. Anthony's was the Italian parish. St. Ann's was kind of an open parish. Although I'm Italian my dad got active in St. Ann's, so that is where we went. That was a beautiful church. That is a

shame that they tore it down.

R: Yes. That church really served as a focal point for that Brier Hill area for the people there.

P: Yes, it was a beautiful, beautiful church. Of course, the school was made up of mishmash pieces that they kind of put together. They added one room and then another. They had a hall under the church and we used to have a minstrel show every year. They moved it from St. Ann's to Ursuline. It was the St. Ann's Minstrel show. Bob Hagan used to be the director.

R: During the period when you lived at Westlake and in Youngstown, generally looking back, if somebody would say, "What are your feelings about that time period in the late 1940's and early 1950's, about the whole thing, " what would you say?

P: Great. I would say Youngstown was a very active city. We were privileged to live where we were because the kids from Brier Hill had to come up to Evans Field. I only had to go across the street. The kids from the upper north side had to come down to Evans Field to play ball. We had the basketball courts outside and inside.

We were the first ones to be allowed to have memberships for the settlement house because we lived there. I think they limited the memberships to so many. I think the community was open and friendly.

As far as crime was concerned I never remember anything happening. There were no traumatic experiences that you would remember as a child. There probably was crime. Our families were in such close proximity that we were doing then what the block clubs are doing now. We watched out for one another. I'm sure we knew when there was a stranger around. Everybody knew what was going on in the neighborhood. It was that kind of a neighborhood.

Youngstown was booming; downtown was great; the shows were fantastic and beautiful. They were crowded. The activities were downtown. Business seemed to always be down there. I think in that period of time Youngstown was a booming city. It just seemed that Youngstown was a viable community and nice and friendly.

R: Thank you very much for helping me out with Westlake.

P: You're welcome.