

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

History of Leetonia Project

Resident Experiences

O. H. 767

FLORENCE HOLT

Interviewed

by

Ted Carchedi

on

June 2, 1986

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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INTERVIEWEE: FLORENCE HOLT

INTERVIEWER: Ted Carchedi

SUBJECT: stores, streetcars, family, World War I, schools,
transportation, churches, area businesses, Depression

DATE: June 2, 1986

C: This is an interview with Florence Holt for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, by Ted Carchedi, in Leetonia, Ohio, on June 2, 1986, at 3:15 p.m. This is a history of Leetonia, Ohio

Florence, you said you were born in Leetonia. You are a life-long resident and you were born in 1906.

H: Yes.

C: Was your father or mother a lifelong resident of the town as well?

H: No. My father . . . No, neither one of them were.

C: They came from where?

H: My father was a country boy. He came here and grew up here. My mother had lived on a farm west of town here.

C: Why did they come to Leetonia?

H: He dated her and they got married and moved here. They bought a house here in Leetonia over on Summit Street. They lived over there all of their lives, really. My father was a rail-roader. He also carried mail for the town, carried mail for years. My mother was just a housewife who had three children. They had three children, me and I have a twin brother and a twin sister. We all went to high school. We went to the high school here. We didn't go to college.

C: What was your maiden name? What was your father's last name?

H: Groner.

C: You said he was a railroader.

H: Yes, he was a railroader.

C: Was that the reason why he came here to Leetonia because he got employment here?

H: No. He just grew up here and he worked for the railroad in the office down here for the Pennsylvania. Then he got a better job as baggagemaster in Salem. Then from there he worked in the yards there. He learned to move the trains. He worked on the turntable there. Then he took the test for the . . . carry mail. He passed that. He did extra work. He would come home from . . . It was a night job he had then. He was doing that when he was around fifty I would say. Then he took that work and he carried both sides of the town as a substitute. Then he decided finally that he just might carry regular and he took the test. He could have had either side but then he decided that it was best for him to stick to the railroad, and that was what he did. He got his pension then. It wasn't anything like social security is now, but he got it pretty good. He came back here and he retired when he was sixty-five. He had decided that he might like to carry mail but then he decided that maybe it would be too hard for him as he got older; then he just stuck to the railroad. It worked out all right. He was a night watchman for them as he got older. He did all right.

C: How long did he work for the Pennsylvania then, up until when?

H: He worked most of his life. He got the job down here in the office of the Pennsylvania and worked there. He was pretty good at books. He got more money. He got out of the office. He got \$50 or \$60 a month. We were doing good in those days.

C: What was life like during World War I? Did the people in the community . . .

H: I remember high school when the vets came home from the First World War. The church bells rang. I remember it real well, those fellows coming home and how they came around and everyone thought it was so wonderful about the ones who came home well and good. We thought it was just real nice to have them home. Of course, it was. They came around and even told in the schools what happened to them. I remember everybody, all of the kids, just sat there and listened. We learned a lot.

C: Were there a lot of World War I veterans from Leetonia?

H: I really can't remember. It has been so long, 1918. They were young fellows then; they weren't that old. There aren't too many old duffers left. I'm seventy-nine myself and all of those fellows are gone.

C: I think there is one left from World War I.

H: I don't know who that is even.

C: It's Andy Duko.

H: Andy Duko. Carl Stewart was just a young fellow. Maybe you have heard of him.

C: He just died recently.

H: Yes. He was in, but I think he was only seventeen. He enlisted in World War I to get in and he was real young. He just died recently too. Is Andy Duko the only one? I guess.

C: He's still alive yet.

H: I know Andy is way up in his age; he must be.

C: He is eighty-eight or eighty-nine. What was it like for the people in the community when the war got started, what type of spirit or atmosphere? Do you recall any of that?

H: I can't remember much about it, much of anything going on during World War I. I was only twelve then.

C: You were a pretty young girl.

H: When the war was over, I wouldn't have been twelve until that fall.

C: What was it like going to school?

H: We thought the schools were a lot of fun. They were, of course, nothing like they are now. There were no buses. Everybody just walked to school. Now they take the kids around everywhere. We had a lot of walking and hayrides and things, nothing much going on really.

C: Where did you attend school, what building?

H: South Side and North.

C: But there was an old South Side School.

H: Yes. There was a nice, old school down there. They tore that down. I can't tell you what year they did that either. But they tore that down and built that . . . See, there are four grades down there now. Do you remember the old school up on the hill? There was an old school up there on that hill, and we went to high school there. We walked over there.

C: Was that on Elm Street?

H: Yes.

C: They tore that down in the 1930's during the Depression.

H: Then our kids never went to that school. All of their school was down here. Then when they went to high school or to grade school, their junior high school was a new school. I'm talking about my children.

C: What was it like going through school back in the early 1900's? What were your teachers like? Would you say it was a lot different than it is today?

H: No. We thought the teachers were pretty nice. All of us sat in one, big room in the old school. All of the high school was in one, big room for study periods. That was freshman, sophomore, junior, senior; they were all in one, big room. We all saw each other for studies and periods and when we came in in the morning. We all commuted back and forth and there weren't very many rooms up there. They taught all of the basic things; they taught hard things, geometry, all of the geometries and physics. They had a lot of stuff that they don't teach much now. I took four years of Latin and that was a big mistake, but that was what they offered and I took it. They had French and everything.

C: Would you say it was a lot more work?

H: There weren't many people in high school. It was just the people from here. There was no bus service or anything like that, just us from here. Everybody out to the edge of town walked in. I had friends in my class who lived way out there. They walked about a mile and a half into high school every day.

C: Most of the people who went to school were like Columbia Street, upper Columbia Street.

H: Yes, they came in. I had a friend who walked from way out there at the edge of town to the high school every day. She never came on the streetcar. There was a streetcar that came in. She could have walked down there and came in over here, but she never did that; she walked. Everybody walked then. He walked from Washingtonville if you know where Washingtonville is. He graduated from high school when he was a sophomore there and his dad would have had to pay for him if he was going to go to Salem to go to high school, but he walked down here and finished his four years.

C: Now Washingtonville had a high school, but it wasn't a four year high school?

H: Just two years.

C: It was a two year high school.

H: That was all you could go. His dad brought them all to this four year high school. They had four boys who walked down here to high school and graduated in Leetonia.

C: We are talking about your husband here.

H: Yes.

C: So it would be quite different, you would say, going to high school back then.

H: Oh, yes. No one was catered to, nothing, really. We didn't know the difference. What you don't have you don't miss.

C: Right. That's true.

H: We thought we were having a good time, but I guess we were.

When Pat Kelly built the show here in Leetonia, that really laid the . . . Did he build that about the time of the First World War or right after? I can't remember.

C: Now Pat Kelly, he had the movie theater and didn't he have a couple of other business establishments?

H: He had a park. Yes, Pat was a pretty leading man at one time. Everybody went to that theater. It was nice too. It was nice for Leetonia, yes. We had everything here about what we needed. We had a pretty flourishing town in a way.

C: What other types of businesses were there besides the movie theater and the park? You said your husband's father owned a machine shop.

H: He started working in it in 1907. Then he gradually bought it. When he died, he owned it. During the war he had built a new shop. He made a lot of war materials for the Second World War and made a lot of things and he gradually built . . . The old shop was so bad that he had to replace it and they built a new shop right after the war was over. The main war was over, the one in Germany.

C: What was your father-in-law's first name?

H: Eldon.

C: Where was the first machine shop?

H: Right there. They just built it on the same ground.

C: Oh, it was on the same ground?

H: Yes. They owned a lot of ground and they just dismantled that

and moved it over; as they built the new one, they moved over.

C: Can you tell me what type of things they made for the war? Were there other small industries or businesses that also contributed to the war effort?

H: Yes. I don't know whether the Crescent's made much for that, did they? We have had other businesses come into town, but at that time there wasn't very much industry. The old Cherry coke ovens were gone, yes.

C: They were gone by the time of the Depression?

H: Yes, they were gone. That was after the war was over.

C: World War I?

H: Yes.

C: Do you know anyone who worked at those mills, Cherry Valley, maybe Grafton Iron Works? Was there anyone in your family who worked there?

H: People worked there all day, I'll tell you. I had an uncle who was a master mechanic over at the . . . But he is dead. That was years ago. He was master mechanic at the furnace and he made good money. He made \$250 a month when people were making \$75.

C: That was pretty good money.

H: Yes, \$250 a month was pretty good. Everybody thought he was doing well with what he made. He sent his kids to college and everything on it.

There is not much actually to tell that I can remember. The Depression was the worst thing.

C: Tell me about that.

H: People here in town were so proud. These people were starving, but they wouldn't let on.

C: How did they get by?

H: I don't know. I actually don't know how they did do it. A lot of people wouldn't accept as they do now. They didn't expect things to be given to them. Nothing was handed out free to them, nothing. The government wasn't handing out. They didn't have FDR [Franklin Delano Roosevelt] helping then. That was long before FDR's time and helping. It was pretty bad. Everybody seemed to kind of get through it. I guess there are a lot of hungry people today.

- C: In your family then pretty much there wasn't too much of a problem?
- H: We never were that poor. We never were that rich either but then we never were wanting the things that we needed.
- C: You had everything on a day-to-day basis?
- H: Yes.
- C: I imagine a lot of people in town had gardens and raised animals or something.
- H: My dad was a thrifty kind of a man. He was always improving us all. He wasn't the kind who sat back and expected someone to give him something because he never got it. His father died when he was four years old and he was on his own. Those kind of people get along, get out and work for themselves. He held two jobs in other words.
- C: I imagine there were a lot of people who sat back and took from the government as much as they could.
- H: They weren't taking anything then. There was nothing given then when I was a young girl. Everybody had just what they had. There was no FDR then to give them anything.
- C: During the 1930's when the WPA [Works Progress Administration] and all of those came out . . .
- H: That helped.
- C: It put a lot of people to work.
- H: A lot of people had to work. At least it created jobs which they don't do now. There is nothing created really.
- C: Not as created as it was then. They had the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] for the young boys and they could go to work, males from age eighteen to twenty-five; they were ready to go to work at these camps. Those programs obviously helped a lot of people during that time.
- During the 1920's and 1930's I heard stories about the so-called Black Hand and the Mafia. Can you relate information?
- H: I know very little about that. I don't think they had much around like that in Leetonia. At least I never heard of it. They might have had it. I think that is more for city folk, don't you think it is?
- C: From what I understand they used to have a pretty big impact. There were assassinations and killings here.

- H: There was talk about the red row one time having killings, but I thought that was just among themselves.
- C: What was the red row?
- H: I don't know. I just have heard that since I was a child. There used to be murders over in there.
- C: Weren't those the company houses for the people who worked at the Iron Works?
- H: Yes.
- C: What about in the business district in town along Main Street in there? What kind of businesses can you tell me about that existed there as you were growing up?
- H: I remember there were good hardware stores. My uncle had a good one too, Simon Groner, and there were good dry goods stores down there. We had nice stores, really, better than than we do now; everybody goes to the mall. Yes, we had some pretty good businesses for that time.
- C: You said your uncle had a hardware store, Simon Groner?
- H: He was a relative of my dad's, Simon Groner. He sold his a number of years ago. He was a much older man; he is older than my dad. My dad was born 1875, but Simon still had his store when I went to high school. It was a good store.
- C: Where was that located at?
- H: Right on Walnut, coming down the street on the right there. It is gone now. It was right where the bank is now, where Bank One is. It was right in there.
- C: What were some of the products? What were some of the commodities? What could you buy there?
- H: No electric washing machines or anything like that. They just had the average whatever. It didn't have a whole lot of anything. When you take out the electric washing machines and other things we have now that they didn't have then, I don't know what they had. In fact I never went in there. Kids didn't in those years. It was a good store. The hardware businesses were really different. There again it seems as if it is going to some of the bigger places too than the smaller hardwares like it used to be.
- C: People, as you said, go to the big malls. It is probably less expensive, really, to go to a big chain . . .
- H: I like to go here in town. You have more of a selection in a way, yes. We haven't been down to Youngstown in a number

of years. I just wonder about that from what I hear about how bad it is.

C: Speaking of Youngstown, years ago when Leetonia had streetcars . . .

H: Everybody liked to go over there to shop, yes. People here in town rode those streetcars every week, some of the ladies who did the shopping. They didn't even go down here to buy. They wanted to go over to McKelvey's and some of the big stores.

C: You could take a streetcar from Leetonia. As it was going to Youngstown, what places did it stop at?

H: North Lima and Poland, it just went right down and went right down South Avenue. I think it was real close to South Avenue. I lived over there on Summit Street. It was real close to the border there. We would go to Salem; we would go to Youngstown. The one was called the Y and the other one was the Y & S, Youngstown and Salem. We would go to Lisbon; that was a popular place. There was a restaurant over there. It was quite a place over there.

C: If you would go to Youngstown, how much would you pay on the streetcar? Do you remember?

H: I think 25¢ or something like that and 15¢ to Lisbon or Salem. Maybe it was 35¢ to Youngstown. I think it was 12¢ to Lisbon and 15¢ to Salem, just some little bit of nothing.

C: How long would it take you to get there?

H: Not very long, maybe twenty-five minutes or something like that. It was seven miles either way, seven miles to Lisbon and seven miles to Salem from here, but Youngstown was a little further than that, fifteen or twenty, somewhere around that. It was just cheap to go. A lot of people went over there and they liked to have their lunch over there in those cafeterias, and those big stores, some of the ladies who would do that; that would be an afternoon outing. They would get up early in the morning after their husbands went to work and go over there and stay all day. Maybe they didn't buy very much but they would look. I was never much of a looker. I liked to go when I was going to buy something. I liked to go look at everything and then I would buy. Some people would like to go and look and look and look.

C: It was like a recreational . . .

H: The shows over there . . . Oh, we looked for a lot of those shows over there at the old Hippodrome. You wouldn't know about them; they are all gone.

C: In Youngstown?

- H: At the Palace Theater. We saw some mighty good things at the old Palace. I was young when that was built. The Palace was a beautiful place. Everything came in from New York in there when I was young. Really, there were more things to see over there.
- C: You can't help the economy in how it destroys a city. I guess the same thing happened to Leetonia over the years. Many businesses have gone out, gone out of town or gone out of business completely. I guess it has affected the town in that way too.
- H: The few businesses here in Leetonia, some of them have just gone too. We have very few now left. Our shop has gone through a few bad times but they have never closed down, not once.
- C: And it is still going pretty good now too.
- H: It is still going, yes. Our son runs it and my husband. There were four boys, but our son runs it. He has kind of kept things going even today in bad times. It made a living for us and about ten other men. That helped a lot.
- C: Was your husband the owner?
- H: Yes.
- C: Did he have brothers also helping him?
- H: Yes.
- C: How many brothers did he have?
- H: He has four brothers.
- C: And they were all involved in the business at that time?
- H: Yes, at one time. Two of them left; two of them got better jobs away and the one is dead. He has always stayed right here.
- C: How many sons do you have?
- H: I have one boy and I have one daughter. We only had them because that was during the Depression and there wasn't very much money. They were born and grew up then.
- C: Can you tell me about the churches, Florence? You said there were different types of churches that existed before when you were telling me earlier that aren't there now.
- H: That was a group of very nice people who settled here . . . I don't know how long ago that would be about the German Lutheran church, but then they joined. They gave up their church because

so few belonged and they joined our church, St. Paul Lutheran Church, and they became a part of us.

- C: So there was a German Lutheran church and then there was an English Lutheran church. Then it combined.
- H: Then they combined, yes. That was the way it was.
- C: Was the German Lutheran church strictly speaking German when you would go to services?
- H: They could all speak German but they spoke English too.
- C: Do you know when that was when they merged?
- H: I wasn't very old. It must have been back in the 1920's.
- C: Were there other denominations?
- H: Yes, a nice Methodist church here, Presbyterian, Catholic, Menmonite. We had all of them.
- C: Is there an Episcopalian church in town?
- H: No.
- C: Did there used to be before?
- H: No. There was just the Presbyterian like I named and the Catholic, English combined which was the Lutheran church, Methodist, and that.
- C: You mentioned before that you went to high school. Did you complete all of your years in high school?
- H: Yes.
- C: What year did you graduate?
- H: 1924.
- C: What was it like going to high school? Can you describe it?
- H: We thought it was a lot of fun. Of course, there wasn't very much to do. You had to walk everywhere you went.
- C: You would have graduated with Florence Wilhelm, is that right?
- H: Did you talk to her?
- C: Yes.
- H: Yes. She moved to here from the country. Yes, she and I were

friends. She is just a little older than I am. We both belonged to that same church there. That was our Lutheran church. We both belonged to that one; we both walked to high school.

C: Were there football games and things like that going on?

H: We had a football field that we went up there to see games. There was nowhere to sit; you just ran up and down the field and watched the games. Those were the kinds of things we had, nothing really.

Florence Wilhelm, of course, didn't grow up here in town. She came from Pittsburgh and lived in the country.

C: She told me about her experiences in high school about teachers treating the kids and vice versa and that the teachers did a lot in the school.

H: She told you about what went on in high school. I can't remember too much that was . . . Those of us who were good students, if we got good grades, the ones who did get good grades got out of the examinations. Florence and I were two who stayed well enough and were smart enough to get out of all our examinations. We never took examinations. When you had ninety or above on your report card, you got out of your exam. She and I were two of those who did that.

C: Is that right? How many did you graduate with? How many people were in your graduating class?

H: Twenty-four in my class. There was about 100 in high school. There were about that many in each class.

C: Do you know of any others who went to college?

H: Yes. I can't remember from our class. There were foreign people in our class, mostly. They didn't go to high school and college. Some of the people moved away from Leetonia. I don't know what happened to Olive Taylor and Mary Samon. Some of those Catholic kids, they weren't all the same age. Maybe there would be two in the same class. We never could understand that. Ed Dean, I think, went to college. He was a Catholic boy. I didn't know where the Catholics went.

C: You mean certain religious denominations went to different types of schools?

H: I don't think the Catholics ever went to the same colleges. No, I don't think they did. I really don't know, but I do know that some of them went to the state schools like Ohio State. The ones from my class, I don't know.

C: Is there anything else you want to tell me that we haven't covered, anything at all about the town? I know it is kind of hard to pick things out from a long time ago.

H: There is just such a little bit to tell about it of what you would think would be interesting then. There are more interesting things going on in late years since things have come about and everything. Of course, now nothing is too good either.

C: Okay, thank you, Florence.

H: Yes.

END OF INTERVIEW