

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Smoky Hollow Project

Resident Experiences

O. H. 793

DOMINIC CONTI

Interviewed

by

Annette Mills

on

May 8, 1976

DOMINIC LOUIS CONTI

Dominic Conti moved to Youngstown with his family when he was two years old. He was born in Cleveland, Ohio on January 8, 1916. His parents are Rose and Louis Conti. He married Adele Carlini who was from Smoky Hollow on November 4, 1943. They have one son Louis.

Mr. Conti attended Madison Grade School and East High School. He is a member of Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church. He is a member of the Golden Eagle Club #213, KOF #3144, ITAM #3, Amerital Club, Arco Club, and the Paralyzed Veterans of America. His special interests are sports and he has various hobbies.

Dominic Conti served in the U. S. Army Infantry from February 2, 1942 through September 16, 1946 when he was discharged. He was wounded in action which left him paralyzed and in a wheelchair since World War II. He has received various honors, awards and other recognitions. Mr. Conti reflected back as to how his friends from the Smoky Hollow area gave him the courage to move forward and overcome his handicap.

Mr. Conti is employed in the city of Youngstown. He has been with the Tax Department since January 18, 1954 and is now the tax commissioner. He has held this position for the last four years. At the time of this interview he was still employed by the city of Youngstown.

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INTERVIEWEE: DOMINIC CONTI

INTERVIEWER: Annette Mills

SUBJECT: World War II, culture, schooling

DATE: May 8, 1976

M: This is an interview with Dominic Conti for the Oral History Program on Smoky Hollow. The interviewer is Annette Mills at Youngstown City Hall on May 8, 1976 at 12:30 p.m.

Mr. Conti, would you like to start now please?

C: First of all, let me start out by saying that it is indeed an honor to have Youngstown State University and Annette Mills come down and interview me, particularly about Smoky Hollow which I am very fond of. Smoky Hollow--to my way of thinking and I'm sure to many boys from Smoky Hollow--is a little area that is not isolated, but is a suburb--what we call a suburb of Youngstown, Ohio.

We from Smoky Hollow are rather proud to have our heritage in the Hollow. We grew up there; we fought our way through good times and bad times and the end result is that we've had a lot of good boys come out of Smoky Hollow. My particular childhood consists of . . . I was really born in Cleveland, Ohio, but I came to Smoky Hollow at the tender age of two. My dad was in the grocery business, and we were more or less like the kings of the neighborhood. During our Depression days, dad, having a grocery store, we had many things more available to us than the rest of the neighborhood. But Dad was in the business and he extended credit to people and the people have never forgotten him. As time went on, we gradually became more influential in the neighborhood and started wandering up to Harrison Field, which was more or less the center of Smoky Hollow where everybody congregated from day to day.

Getting back to the grocery store days. We as kids used to play out on the street and about nine o'clock in the evening,

when dad closed the store, everybody went home. I think it was quite different in those days than it is today because today I think the kids start out around nine o'clock in the evening to wander away. We had discipline. I mean discipline to the point where your parents tell you to be home at a certain hour and we were home at a certain hour. We enjoyed our days in the Hollow. We used to have neighborhood teams, sports activities; we used to go up to Harrison Field and challenge teams from other streets in the Hollow. I really had an enjoyable childhood. Reminiscing back to those days makes you wonder what's happening to society today.

We're rather proud, as I say, of Smoky Hollow because we've had a lot of good boys come out of Smoky Hollow. Just to mention a few: Coach Dom Rosselli up at Youngstown State; superintendent of schools, Mr. Pegues; various doctors, Drs. Mario and Ed Massullo; Don Butchy as a coach; Ed Finamore who is presently the park and recreation commissioner. Truthfully speaking, the Hollow had all good kids. We haven't had one boy that ever went bad on us in the Hollow, and we're proud of that.

While living in Smoky Hollow, we attended Madison Avenue School. We would go to school in the morning and come back at noontime. Then walk to school again for the afternoon session and then in the evening come back again. Andrews Avenue, at that time, had an old streetcar track and we would go up to Andrews Avenue and across McGuffey Road to Madison School. During my days in Madison School, I recall that they used to talk about the school sinking because there used to be an old coal mine underneath there at one time. In our time that we spent at Madison School, we never did see anything sink. We got our education at Madison School.

From Madison School, most of us wandered either to Hayes Junior High or East High School. East High School was just opening up at the time. I first went to East High and then they told us that the dividing line that separated the two districts between East High and Rayen High School or Hayes High School was the river. We lived north of the river so we had to go to Hayes. But I didn't care for Hayes School and I used my aunt's address on the east side. Fortunately, they accepted us up at East High School.

We went to East High School and we graduated in 1933. The boys from the Hollow, most of them--Dom Rosselli, Ed Finamore--they went to Rayen School. we used to have a little competitive spirit between East High School and Rayen School. Whenever we would meet on the battlefield of sports, we always had more incentive. We enjoyed it very much.

Unfortunately, I didn't go to college. I graduated in 1933 during the Depression days. My dad was in the grocery business

and then he got out of that and we went into the tavern business. I was just eighteen years old and I assisted dad in the tavern business from 1933 until 1942 when the war broke out.

I was called into the service and I spent from 1942 to 1946 in the service. It was enjoyable even though I had a misfortune and I came out a disabled veteran to the point where I am presently using a wheelchair. But, that hasn't stopped me in my endeavors to try to work my way through, be part of society. I spent time in the hospital. After I came home from the hospital in 1946, I didn't do anything actively for a period of about four or five years. One of my good friends, Frank Kryzan, was elected mayor of Youngstown and asked me if I would like to go to work for him. I said, "Yes." And I did. I started to work for him in 1954 in the finance department as a tax clerk. I worked my way up and presently I am the tax commissioner of the city of Youngstown. I enjoy my work very much.

In so far as actual training prior to coming to work here, I never had any. I was rather fortunate. I was good with figures and had a rather good memory which is a prerequisite for this type of work. I enjoy my work and I try to give the city a good day's work.

I made mention about my service time. I was called into the service on February 2, 1942. From there I went to Columbus, Ohio--Fort Hayes. We were inducted just like all other inductees. The first day that we got our uniform we had to go out and have our picture taken in uniform to send it back to the family. During our processing, prior to our being inducted, they asked us what branch of the service we would like. Having a brother in the service prior to my going in, I recommended that they give me Medical Corps. Well, I woke up one morning in the Infantry. I spent my time in the Infantry through basic training. From there I had the opportunity to go to Fort Benning, Georgia, where they had an officer's training school. I became a teacher in machine gun and range finding, and had an occasion to meet many people. As a result I kind of liked the work that I was doing and thought maybe I would like to be an officer in the U. S. Army. I applied for it and, fortunately, I became one of what they call the "ninety-day wonder". I came out a second lieutenant and spent about six or eight months in the States prior to going overseas. I was associated with the 26th Yankee Division out of Boston. We went overseas July 26, 1944, just after D-day. We landed in Cherbourg; it was the rainy season at the time. From there we were committed to action about a week or so later, after we picked up all of our supplies and things. Unfortunately, November 11, 1944, I was hit by some shrapnel and I became paralyzed. Since 1944 I've been in a wheelchair--thirty-one years. I have no regrets whatsoever because the good Lord has been good to me, even though I am limited in what I can do.

I spend much time associating myself with civic enterprises, various clubs. In fact, one of the clubs that's dearest to my heart is the Golden Eagle Club from Smoky Hollow-- Memorial services connected with veterans. Every May, Memorial Day, we have a memorial service at the corner of Rayen Avenue and Walnut Street where all the celebrities and all the public officials from the city of Youngstown attend. It's an affair that lasts anywhere from forty-five minutes to an hour. It brings to mind some of the less fortunate boys that made the supreme sacrifice such as Himey Fine, Billy Santore, Pete Marinelli. In fact, we have around nine or ten boys. We have a plaque with their names of it at the corner of Rayen and Walnut Street, a memorial plaque.

Reared in Smoky Hollow, naturally, we went through the Depression days. The Depression days were quite hard on everybody. As I stated in my previous statement, my dad was in the grocery business and it wasn't too tough for us. The Depression days were such that if you had a nickel or a dime in your pocket, you were wealthy. We used to hang around Harrison Field, not having anything to do other than just stand around there twiddling our fingers, talking, playing ball, and discussing things.

One day, one of the fellows had a thought in mind, "Why don't we form a club?" And we did. We formed the Golden Eagle Club and that was the origin of it. It at least gave us an opportunity to be indoors, through the assistance of Mr. Chase, who was superintendent of the parks at the time, and a fellow by the name of Charles Atkinson, who took an interest in the boys of Smoky Hollow. He used to come down; he was a college graduate and I don't think any of us were at the time. He would come down and discuss things with us. We formed debating teams. He taught us how to get up in front of crowds to talk. He formed our vocabularies, where we used to have slang vocabularies. Even schools had tried to help us, but Mr. Atkinson was more instrumental in forming us to become better citizens than, I think, the schools itself.

Just to give you an insight of what a typical day in Smoky Hollow was: You would get up in the morning. During the summertime--nobody had any jobs at the time; we were all young, fourteen, fifteen years old--the first thing we would do is probably a little chore for mother around the house, then wander up to Harrison Field. During the playground season there would be an instructor there. We would either play ball or do something of the kind, help the groundskeeper prepare the field for a ball game, or play ball with the boys or maybe we would have a game with some other team throughout the city, try to bum a ride to the west side, east side, or someplace where we were playing ball.

In the summertime it wasn't too bad to spend a day, but then

came winter; winter was a little tougher. In those days, if my memory serves me right, we used to get snow starting some time in November and early December and the snow would last maybe until March or April. But today things are a little different. We don't get as much snow and the winters aren't as severe as they used to be. I can recall, going back to my high school days, when we'd go to East High School in the morning, come back at noon for lunch and go back, twenty-four and twenty-six below zero. But today we don't run across weather of that kind.

During our "growing up" days in the Hollow in the wintertime, we used to have a boy nicknamed "Horse". He was always kind of handy with his hands, and he'd make what we would call a toboggan sled where you can get maybe ten or fifteen fellows on it. We would go up on old Maple Avenue and ride that sled down. There would be somebody down at the railroad tracks--before Andrews Avenue--where the streetcar used to go by, watching out to let us know if the car was coming. We would have a bonfire down there. Somebody would get some potatoes and we would roast potatoes. But, getting back to another statement I made earlier, at nine o'clock everybody would head for home.

The winters were rather enjoyable. They were cold; we had fires in front of our neighborhood homes. Somebody would bring potatoes or we would get some hot dogs. We would stand around talking about what we were going to do. We would build huts. Everybody more or less had a hut.

One thing in particular in the Hollow, you had to have a nickname. Pigeon Desmone, many people know him by "Pigeon"; they don't know what his first name is. We had Dom Rosselli who was called "Chipper". We had "Yap" Ross. We had "Horse" Italiano, "Chink" Guitano. They used to call me "Geepers". Those are the things that you remember of the Hollow; some of the things that today you look back and they make you wonder how you survived those days there. Yet looking back, they were wonderful childhood days.

As originally mentioned, I was born in Cleveland, Ohio, but my folks moved to Youngstown when I was two years old. My mother and dad, my brother Tony, and my two sisters, Viola and Lucy, we moved up on Wood Street. From Wood Street, we moved onto Summit Avenue which was right next to Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church. We stayed there for a period of around six or seven years and then dad opened up a grocery store on Summit Avenue. From there we wandered down to Emerald Street, where dad opened up a grocery store at 227 Emerald. He was renting from a fellow by the name of Mr. Perosi. From there he built a building across the street at 235 Emerald Street in 1927. He stayed in the grocery store business at that location from 1927 to 1933 when we opened up a tavern on Fifth Avenue.

In 1933, Prohibition was raised to the point where we were able to secure a beer and a wine license. I stayed with dad from 1933 until 1942 when I went into the service. Coming back from the service, being incapacitated, dad decided that he couldn't operate the tavern any longer on his own, so we sold the tavern.

My brother and two sisters are still living. Unfortunately, my mother and dad have both passed away. We have a lot of aunts and uncles in the neighborhood. Even though we moved out of Smoky Hollow in 1937 up on Bryson Street, my heart and soul has and always will be in Smoky Hollow. We, from the Hollow, will always say, "There are people who are from the Hollow and there are people who wish they were from the Hollow." We from the Hollow kind of pride the fact that we were born, raised, and reared in Smoky Hollow.

We've mentioned many things about Smoky Hollow, but I don't think we've mentioned anything about the type of people, the ethnic groups that lived in Smoky Hollow. Smoky Hollow is made up mostly of Italians; they had a lot of Slavish people, Slovak. We had Irish; we had Negroes; we had the German people. But generally speaking, it was made up mostly of Italians and Slovak people. The Italians lived on Emerald Street, Carlton, Valley Street, Audabon, portions of Adams, Court Street. The Slavic people lived on Kirkland Avenue, Oak Park, and Adams Street, generally speaking. Walnut Street was a mixture. We had some Irish on Walnut Street; we had some Italians. The Negro people were more or less concentrated around the Elm Street and Meadow Street; not that we didn't want them, it's just that they never wandered into those types of areas.

Now the Hollow was a cooperative group of people. You knew your neighbors next door. If you needed any help they were there with their assistance. In those days there weren't too many people that had automobiles. A few automobiles in the neighborhood and everybody relied on that person to take them here or there. Everybody was willing to do it. Telephones were another thing. Not too many people had phones in their homes. We, fortunately, being in the grocery business, had to have one. I'll tell you, we would get bothered at anytime of the night, anytime of the day with people wanting to use the phone. But that was part of living in Smoky Hollow. You knew that they weren't obligations that you had to render to people but you knew that they were part of you, and you were part of them and you wanted to help them and they would help you. We were more or less accommodating to one another. Being in the grocery business, you always strived to make that extra nickel and get an extra customer. You would bend over a little more for some of your neighbors, your customers, your friends. It was part of our living at Smoky Hollow.



During hard times, dad extended credit to people. Truthfully, I think to this day, dad has collected every nickel that he had coming from the people. Maybe at the time they didn't have it, but the Depression wore off and people go to working. They would come along and give him his five or ten dollars. Eventually, I think everybody paid their bills in full.

I did not want to come back home [from the service]. I got married while I was in the service. I married a girl from the Hollow, the Carlini girl, Adele. I got hit with shrapnel overseas. I didn't know how bad I was, then when I found out how bad I was, I didn't feel as though I could face the people back home. I was released and came back to the States February 2, 1945. My folks came down, my wife came down, and I did not want to come back home because, oh, I don't know, you're self-conscious of the fact that you left a physically-able person and you come back now in a wheelchair. We did discuss it and I finally made up my mind that I was going to come back home but with one understanding: That my folks would not say anything to anybody about a certain time when I was going to come home. I advised my mother, my family, and also my in-laws not to tell anybody that I was going to be coming home. They didn't say anything to anybody.

I was discharged from the hospital on June 30, 1946 and I was flying into the Youngstown Airport. I came into the Youngstown Airport about nine o'clock in the evening and much to my surprise-- I looked out the airplane window--there must have been two hundred people there. The airport was new and people were just out on a good, hot summer night to see a plane come in and take off. Believe me when I say this, if I could have taken off after looking out that window seeing all those people, I would have taken off and never came back. Unfortunately, I had to get off the plane. I got off and in that crowd my families were there. Plus there must have been fifteen or twenty people that I knew. It was a little adjustment that I had to make. That started my adjustment period. The boys from the Hollow all came up to see me when I got home.

One night in February 1947 the boys had my brother-in-law, Art Pesa, pick me up and take me out to dinner, not knowing that this was going to be a surprise for me. We get up to Ma Perkins up in the Niles area there and here there's twenty-five or thirty boys from the Hollow there. They had a surprise dinner for me, which I appreciated, but thinking back now at the time I didn't because I was rather reluctant to being seen in a wheelchair. They had the surprise party; we got along very well. The boys would come up to see me.

Since that date we've had, in January, as close to my birthday as possible, what we call a Smoky Hollow convention down at Our Lady of Mount Carmel Church. We get notables from the whole area here; we have anywhere from a hundred and fifty to

two hundred people attend. It's a "stag" affair in the sense that they come there, elect our own mayor of Smoky Hollow, people make little talks. Generally speaking, it's a place where you meet friends from year to year. We reminisce about the good old days in the Hollow. We have our own mayor; he makes a little talk to us. The mayor of Youngstown is always an honorary mayor. Public officials more or less look forward to attending our Smoky Hollow convention. And I myself look forward to it. We've grown in size; we've lost a lot of boys. I think, if memory serves me right, the last convention we had in January of 1976, we had a total of around forty-five or fifty boys that had passed away, who had prior attendance in our convention. But, those are the things that we recall; those are the things we look forward to; those are the things that bring to mind what your days were like in Smoky Hollow.

Some of the people that were in Smoky Hollow who were born and raised with us, reared with us, have done very well for themselves. Just to give you a few examples: Eddie DeBartolo lived on Valley Street. When you mention the name, Eddie DeBartolo, who is the plaza king of the world, I would say, he has a lot of pride in Smoky Hollow. Whenever you'd meet Eddie anyplace, he's not ashamed to tell anybody he was reared and born in Smoky Hollow, which makes us feel good because here's a man that is a multi-millionaire and yet I'm sure his heart is in Smoky Hollow. We had another boy, Pegues, Robert Pegues, who is presently the superintendent of schools. He lived on Andrews Avenue. Whenever you meet Bob, Bob always comes up with the fact that he's a Smoky Hollow boy. We had two doctors, the Massullo boys. They were from Emerald Street. One is Edmund Massullo who is a noted surgeon here. The other one is Mario, who is up in the Warren area. Then we have Don Butchy, who was the coach at Cardinal Mooney. Don didn't live in the Hollow too long but Don's brother, Bill, married one of the girls from the Hollow, Carmel Donofrio. Don lived at the corner of Emerald Street and Walnut Street for a period of time before they moved to the south side. And, our good friend, Dom Rosselli. Dom Rosselli, I think, everybody knows what Dom has done for himself. Another fellow, Felix Malone, is vice-president of the Malone Day Company in Youngstown, a subsidiary up in the Warren area.

All in all, the boys from Smoky Hollow--although things were tough during those days--knew that they were going to make good of themselves. Another are the Fine boys who at the time lived on Walnut Street. There were five brothers. They are running Sandle Loan Company in Youngstown and have done very well. Another boy, Rocky Kraus, who runs the Record Rendevous. We could go on and on and mention many names of the boys of the Hollow and what they have done for themselves. A lot of them were less fortunate, didn't go into business, but they were good upright citizens. They reared good families. Their children are offspring today that are in the limelight within

the city and outside of the city. A good example is "Zippy" Morocco. "Zippy" lived on Adams Street there, went to Ursuline High. Lou Sequella. These boys have done very well for themselves in the sports field. We have Phil Morgante who became a prominent attorney. Unfortunately, Phil passed away at a very young age. Then there is Dominic LaFore. We have had numerous teachers. We have Carl Nunziata, who was just recently disabled in the Vietnam War. Carl today is the vice-president of the Dollar Bank. Carl is one of our more or less prominent civic leaders in Youngstown; he takes an active interest in everything. That's what the boys from Smoky Hollow have done. There's many, many more that memory doesn't give me time to think of, but generally speaking, as I mentioned before, we did not have one bad boy come out of Smoky Hollow. Everybody that came out had an incentive in mind as to what they wanted to become. Some were successful and others were not. Even the ones that weren't successful--didn't become a doctor or a lawyer--they were successful in their own fields. Smoky Hollow has a heritage that we're so proud of that to our dying days, we'll always remember Smoky Hollow as it was.

The boys from the Hollow who were fortunate in being able to go to school didn't have it that easy like they have today, where the parents more or less, pay their tuition, give them a checking account and then they draw from that. They have a car. In those days, it was a little tougher. Every boy that went to school had to earn his way through school by good, hard work. I'm sure Eddie DeBartolo, a graduate from Notre Dame, had to work his way through school. Eddie, if my understanding is correct, waited tables while going to school, worked nights. Eddie became an engineer. Phil Morgante's another one. His dad didn't have the means in which to send him to school. His dad used to push a little popcorn cart around. I'm sure that the popcorn money was just enough money to take care of the family needs and poor Phil had to work hard for whatever he got. And anybody else. It wasn't easy going to school in those days.

A dollar was a dollar. In fact, whenever we had a dollar we thought we were wealthy. Today, the kids, if they don't have a twenty dollar bill in their pocket, they're broke. We used to hang around Harrison Field and we formed our Golden Eagle Club. Anybody had a quarter, it was a lot of money. Just as an example: We would go to Cleveland. Somebody would have a car. We would have enough to pay for a ball game and fifty cents in which to probably buy something to eat for the day. Today you wouldn't think of going to Cleveland--a bunch of kids--unless they had twenty or thirty dollars in their pocket. Well, the cost of living is higher today; we realize that.

I think the closeness of people within neighborhoods was better in those days than it is today. You knew your

neighbor. Today, you're living in an area where you don't even know the neighbor. Today, if a disaster hits a neighborhood, sometimes you don't even go to the assistance of your fellow man. In those days, everybody knew everybody. Everybody was willing to help. A mother got sick and she couldn't take care of the kids, the family next door came in and took care of the kids, made soup. A good example is somebody would get married in the neighborhood and they would start two or three weeks ahead of time preparing for the wedding. The wedding would go for two or three days. Today, no, they get a caterer and they go to a hall and that's it.

Smoky Hollow is a place where everybody was close to one another, close to the fact that they didn't envy each other because maybe somebody had a phone, or somebody's husband was working maybe two days a week during the Depression and somebody wasn't working.

As I mentioned previously, I was married in 1943; we had a son who is presently around thirty-one years old. He is married and we have two grandchildren which we are very proud of. He's employed out at General Motors in the accounting department.

I myself have been rather fortunate that I got my employment with the city in 1954 as a clerk within the tax office. Step by step, I worked my way through where presently I am the tax commissioner of the city of Youngstown and have been that for the last four years. I enjoy my work. My work brings me in contact with many prominent people, the average man, the man that works in the mills, a lot of good taxpayers. We have our problems within the office; that is part of the day's work.

I'm associated with many veteran organizations and take an interest in civic enterprises. I'm right now a member of the Architectural Barrier-Free Committee. We're going to be having a Wheelchair Awareness Day in City Hall where we're going to get all the public officials and put them in a wheelchair, and let them see what obstacles they can meet rolling around, especially where there are some curbs. I was associated with the Dom Rosselli Five Hundredth Victory Testimonial Dinner. Presently, we are striving to change the attitudes and the thinking of the officials from Youngstown State University insofar as a stadium is concerned. They've come out with plans to build a stadium up at Fifth Avenue in that complex area. We from the Hollow feel as though . . . We're 100% in favor of a stadium but we differ with them insofar as the site is concerned. We have a committee formed--I'm rather active in this committee-- and within the next week or two, we'll be going to try to persuade them that the stadium should be in Smoky Hollow.

Summing up Smoky Hollow and my days in the Hollow. I would say that, if memories are such as I have, every young fellow

or every person should live in a neighborhood that would bring back memories and give them an incentive in life looking back on their younger days as to what they actually want to be in life. Looking back, I think, speaking as an individual, the Hollow were the informative years of my living to the point where I admired the people that I associated myself with. I mixed with other types of people today, but my heart is still with the people of Smoky Hollow. Whenever we gather, the Smoky Hollow convention, a wedding, or the funeral home, your thought always go back to the Hollow. The Hollow is a place in this immediate area that is significant to the fact that there are a lot of areas in Youngstown, but they don't have the closeness, and the cooperation, and the friendliness of the people that were born and raised in the Hollow. Brier Hill is another area but is not similar to the Hollow. They have a larger area which is called Brier Hill. Those are the only two areas within this greater city of ours that have any similarity. Again, I love Smoky Hollow, and I'm sure everybody that has ever been there has the same feeling. Thank you for the interview.

M: Thank you very much, Mr. Conti.

END OF INTERVIEW