

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Idora Park Project

Patron Experience

O. H. 830

KATHLEEN CIOFFI

Interviewed

by

Robert Toti

on

November 7, 1986

KATHLEEN CIOFFI

Kathleen was born on the East side of Youngstown on April 23, 1943, the daughter of John and Catherine Cicchi. As a child she began to visit Idora Park on a regular basis during the summer. During this time she attended Pepsi Day and Schwebel's Day on many occasions. As she got older, Kathleen went to the record hops and dances that took place on weekends at the Idora Park Ballroom.

She went to Ursuline High and graduated from East High School in 1961. Then, Kathleen attended Youngstown State University and received a B. S. in education in 1966. During that same year she was married to John Cioffi. Mr. and Mrs. Cioffi have three children named Kelli, Jenni, and Gianna. Mrs. Cioffi is employed at the Youngstown Christian School and she attends Highway Tabernacle Church.

Rob Toti

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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YSU IDORA PARK PROJECT

INTERVIEWEE: KATHLEEN CIOFFI
INTERVIEWER: Rob Toti
SUBJECT: Record hops, Wildcat, special days
DATE: November 7, 1986

T: This is an interview with Kathy Cioffi for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Idora Park, by Rob Toti, at the Youngstown Christian School, on November 7, 1986, at 2:00 p.m.

First of all, can you tell me a little bit about your childhood?

C: Well, I was born and raised in Youngstown, on the East side of Youngstown. I came from a moderately-sized family. I have a brother and two other sisters. We lived in a big neighborhood, there were lots and lots of children in our neighborhood.

T: What street was it?

C: Rigby Street.

T: Rigby Street, what side of town is that?

C: East side.

T: You were born when?

C: 1943.

T: When do you first remember going to Idora Park?

C: I remember going to Idora Park when I was a very young child, probably preschool. Our neighbor lady would take all of us, sometimes my aunt would. I was probably around four or five years old.

T: That would be around 1948?

C: 1948 or 1949.

T: How often did you go to the park?

C: Twice a year, to be sure. As a very young child, we would go on Pepsi Cola Day and on Schwebel's Day.

T: What kind of affiliation did you have with those two organizations or was that just a day for you to go?

C: Well, it would always be advertised in advance. In fact, they would have skywriting. Do you know what skywriting is? They would have skywriting as one of their types of advertisement. It would say something like, "Don't forget Pepsi Cola Day, Idora Park," on such and such a day. Real exciting.

T: For how long would the skywriting be visible?

C: Do you mean once they started writing until . . .

T: How did they do that, just like the day before?

C: You would see it for, maybe, one or two days in advance.

T: How long would you stay there for these Pepsi Days and Schwebel's Days?

C: All day. It took two buses to get there. The lady who would take us had a family of seven children and there were four of us. My mother would watch her baby and our baby, because we had a younger sister who was seven years younger than myself. This neighbor lady, whose children were real good friends of ours- we all had our best friend in that family, my brother, sister, and I- we would all go to Idora Park with her and we would stay all day.

T: So, you got to the park by bus?

C: Two buses.

T: How were the buses set up?

C: We would take a bus from the corner of Garland Avenue

and Rigby Street to downtown, and then we would have to catch another bus downtown out to Idora Park.

T: Were the buses owned by the park?

C: No, they were municipal buses.

T: Municipal buses, organized for that purpose then?

C: Yes.

T: It was an all day experience. What was a typical day like at the park?

C: It was exciting. It was really exciting. Somehow, we had the impression that you had to save, like Pepsi caps or Schwebel's bread wrappers, but they never collected them. At the time, you didn't have to pay admission to get into the park. You just came to the park and if it were just an ordinary day, you would pay for each ride or buy so many tickets per ride, but on Pepsi Day you could ride anything. Oh, it was exciting!

T: So, it was free then?

C: Yes, it was free.

T: How did the park make money then?

C: On special days like Pepsi and Schwebel's Days? I suppose they made money on the games and the food.

T: What did your parents think of letting you roam the park by yourself for the day?

C: We didn't roam the park by ourselves, but you can imagine in those days, things were a lot different. We didn't worry about being abducted or molested or becoming a missing child, that was unheard of, not that it didn't happen but we never worried about things like that. Our parents certainly didn't. We were well cared for and supervised but they didn't think anything of it. They knew that it was a special time for us in the summer.

T: Did you have like an older brother that was looking out for you or anything like that because you were only five years old at the time, maybe?

C: Well, I am talking about when we first started going to the park. This trend continued, actually, up until the time the park closed. We never missed going to the park, although Pepsi and Schwebel's Day, now that is a thing of the far past. No, the one lady would watch

all of us. She would kind of keep an eye on all of us and we wouldn't go off somewhere unattended. We always had one or two little kids with us.

T: Did you use the pavilions for, say, like a picnic lunch or did you just basically eat from the concession stands?

C: No, I can't remember having a picnic there. I remember going there one time for a picnic. In fact, the Italians used to . . . Each, how should I say. Do you know how there are different provinces in Italy?

T: Yes.

C: People say, "What kind of an Italian are you?" Well, these different provinces would rent the park for a day and they would have their picnic there. I remember going with friends in the neighborhood on a Sunday afternoon to the park for an Italian Day.

T: Are you Italian?

C: Yes.

T: What part of Italy did you come from?

C: My father was from the province of Marche.

T: What part of Italy is that?

C: It is northern Italy along the Adriatic Sea.

T: Getting back to a typical kiddie's day at the park, what time would the bus end up leaving for home?

C: We would generally come home around dinnertime. In fact, we were always home, had to be home by supper-time. That was about 5:00 or 5:30.

T: What were your favorite things to do while you were at the park?

C: Ride the rides, of course. I never played the games because we never had that much money to play extra things. My favorite rides were the roller coasters. I liked the Jack Rabbit and the Wildcat, those were my favorites.

T: How much money would you be given for a typical day at the park?

C: Well, I suppose as a little kid, nothing. Maybe the escort, the lady who would take us, maybe our mother would give her something. In fact, I am sure she would

because the bus fare and what not, she would pay for it. When we got to be older, we would take maybe \$1 but no more than \$2 with us.

T: What do you mean by older? What age group?

C: Like ten, eleven, or twelve years old.

T: You said that the Wildcat and the Jack Rabbit were your favorite rides, what other rides do you remember?

C: I remember all of the rides. I remember that I never enjoyed the ones that went round and round and I hated the ferris wheel because, invariably, it would stop with me way up on the top and it would just make me sick. You know, the ferris wheel used to be down by the ballroom back in those days.

T: Then they moved it to the other side of the park?

C: Yes.

T: Now, you already told me that you didn't bring a picnic lunch, you ate food from the concession stand. Are there any memorable events that occurred at Idora Park that stand out in your mind?

C: There are a lot of events that happened at Idora Park. I chipped a permanent tooth there.

T: How old were you?

C: Well, let's see, I must have been about, I would say, nine years old. How did it happen? It happened in the fun house in that wheel, you know. What would you call that thing? Where you got in and you had to walk this way as the thing was spinning around. I fell in there and chipped my tooth. My mother was kind of upset about that because it was a permanent tooth.

T: Did you contact any of the park officials about that?

C: I think we went down to the first aid station because my lip was bleeding, but other than that, no.

T: You didn't go home right after that?

C: Heavens no. No, we lived too far from the park to go home. We just stayed.

T: What do you remember about the crowds that came out to the park?

C: The crowds were enormous. There were always enormous crowds. The Midway was always packed with people. On

special days, you could wait in lines, it seemed like forever to a child.

T: Were the crowds young or mostly families or just a mixture, how would you describe the crowds?

C: Over the years, I think, the crowds changed. In the beginning, like when I first started going to the park, we would go on family days and so it would be families. I don't ever recall being in the park at night as a little kid, but when we got to be teenagers they had record hops there on the weekend in the summertime. We would go to the record hop every weekend. Of course, in the evening it would be mostly singles and young people.

T: Could you further explain the record hops, please?

C: Oh, yes. Record hops were a big thing in the 1950's. In fact, there were record hops in a lot of places. Schools would have them but if a school had them, they were more than likely called a sock hop. The record hops were a big night out and they were a weekend, regular activity.

In the wintertime we would go to the Elm's Ballroom up on the north side of Youngstown, very close to campus. In the summertime, as soon as spring would come, Idora Park would open and they would have the record hops there.

I believe that the record hops at Idora Park were so successful that the Elm's Ballroom wouldn't have them in the summertime because all the young people went to the park. I can remember going to Idora for one of my proms. It was probably one of the Y-teen proms affiliated with school. I can remember all of us being all dressed up in formals and going on the Wildcat.

T: This was in the spring?

C: Yes.

T: What high school did you attend?

C: East High School.

T: Did you also have a formal at East High School or did they just cancel that?

C: Well, we had our formals at different places, our senior prom was at Stambaugh Auditorium. We had one of our dances at Idora Park's Ballroom.

T: Do you remember any of the songs that they played

during that time period?

C: All of the songs that you hear on "Happy Days", a lot of those kinds of songs. I graduated in 1961, so I was in high school there toward the latter 1950's.

T: Getting back to the record hops at the park, was the music played by a local deejay?

C: Sometimes they would have disc jockeys and sometimes they would have different bands. Now, they were very exclusive about what bands they would have at record hops. Del Sinchak was a real popular band at the time, and another one I remember was Nick Barrill. He was an older fellow and that orchestra, they were older band members. Del Sinchak was a younger band and they would play a lot of the record hops, in addition to having a disc jockey there.

T: Were these local bands?

C: Yes.

T: Did the music take place in the ballroom or was it outside?

C: In the ballroom.

T: You said the dress was formal?

C: Well, not for the record hops. For the record hops, the dress was very casual. I only went to one formal there where everybody wore tuxedos and formal gowns, but the record hops were very informal. We used to look forward to that, it was so much fun.

T: How did you go to the park?

C: For the record hops, usually a parent would take us. We were like fifteen, none of us were driving cars yet, and usually a parent would take us to the park and pick us up afterwards.

T: So, was it actually a date or did you go with your friends?

C: Oh, no, I would go with a bunch of girls. Always with a bunch of girls. In fact, I don't ever remember going to a record hop at Idora Park with a date, except for the formal.

T: Did you go to any of the ballroom experiences after high school?

C: No, I can't remember ever doing that after high school.

In fact, I know that there were a lot of events there, for example, they would have a lot of different bands come throughout the year. There would be St. Patrick's Day dances there, but I never did go to any of those after high school.

T: Did you continue to ride the rides after high school?

C: Yes, I did, and the older I got, the more impressed I was with the Wildcat. There was nothing like it. I remember, let's see, in the 1970's Six Flags Over Georgia was supposed to be one of the best amusement parks in the world. They had a roller coaster there called the Great American Scream Machine. We waited in line, probably, for a half an hour before we got on it and I was so grossly disappointed because it was nothing compared to the Wildcat.

T: What do you think made the Wildcat so special?

C: Probably, the way it was built. I don't know enough about the technicalities of the building that went into that. All of the roller coasters that I have ever ridden in different places, nothing ever seemed to compare to it.

T: Do you think it had anything to do with just the fact that you weren't sure if you were going to make it through the ride? I mean, I didn't go on the roller coaster until, say, the mid 1970's, but comparing it to Geauga Lake and Cedar Point, those rides seem so much more modern and this ride seemed so old. You weren't sure if the ride was going to actually make it, let alone yourself. Does that make any sense to you?

C: Yes, although, you see, to me the Wildcat wasn't old. I never realized how old it was until I got older. I felt like the Wildcat was growing up with me.

T: You did continue to go to the park regularly in your twenties and thirties?

C: Well, we moved away after we were married. My husband and I moved away to Georgia and we started our family there. We didn't move back to Youngstown until 1970 and by then we had two very young children. We started taking them to the park when they were about two and three years old. They are real close in age. So, probably through the latter 1960's I didn't attend the park at all, but as soon as we moved back to Youngstown, probably around 1972 we started going back to the park.

T: What were those times like for you?

- C: It was nice because the children enjoyed it. Now it was different, I was taking my children. We always went on the weekend that the Canfield Fair was in progress because I would become disenchanted with the crowds. I didn't want, because my children were so little, my children to . . . I didn't want to lose track of them in a crowd. So, we would purposely arrange with other friends of ours to take our children along with theirs to Idora Park. Several of our families would go and we would practically have the park to ourselves.
- T: Did you notice a difference in the crowds then?
- C: Oh, yes. Actually as time went on, we saw the crowds dwindle more and more.
- T: Why do you think this happened?
- C: I don't really know. I suppose the more sophisticated parks like Geauga Lake and Cedar Point had more of an appeal. When young people in my classes would say, "Oh, lets go to Geauga Lake for a field trip," or "Lets go to Cedar Point." I would always say, "Well, why don't we go to Idora Park?" They always felt that Idora Park wasn't that big of a thrill and yet I couldn't understand why. If it was the rides, I think Idora Park had a taste of everything. If it was the size, well of course, a place like Cedar Point or Geauga Lake would just swallow up Idora Park ten times. So, I think that that had an effect on the crowds.
- T: Why do you think that your schoolchildren felt this way? First of all, what grade do you teach?
- C: I teach high school now. I am talking about junior high and high school. Why do I think they felt that way? I guess, most of them grew up in Youngstown and the Youngstown vicinity and Idora Park just wasn't the thrilling amusement park that it was when I was a child.
- T: Would you say that it lost it's magic?
- C: I think so. It really makes me sad to say that.
- T: When did you stop going to the park regularly?
- C: We stopped going to the park when the park closed down.
- T: That is the fire here that just took . . . that you are discussing?
- C: Right. In fact, the remains of the Wildcat were still there. The park was closing, it was Labor Day weekend

and, of course, the Canfield Fair was going on and we live in the Canfield Fair area. We told our children, "Well, this is probably it for Idora Park. Would you like to go?" By then they were teenagers and we had a little daughter, preschool, and my older children felt real badly because their little sister wouldn't be growing up with Idora Park. We went as a family with several other families to Idora Park for the last time.

- T: What was your reaction to the fire?
- C: I was horrified. The day that the fire took place, I was teaching school here at Youngstown Christian School and I saw this smoke from the windows of my classroom. I couldn't imagine what was going on and then one of the juniors came in and said, "Would you believe Idora Park is on fire?" I said, "Is that what all of this smoke is?" He said, "Yes." I said, "Well, what part of the park is on fire?" He told me it was the Wildcat. That was really a sad day.
- T: Did you have a chance to go and look at what was left of the Wildcat?
- C: Only the last summer that it was open, when we took our family for the last time.
- T: I mean after the fire was out, did you go down to the park?
- C: No, I only saw the pictures that were very graphically displayed in the newspaper.
- T: Yes, that is really a shame. Is there anything else that you think is important that we might have overlooked?
- C: No, I can't think of anything.
- T: Alright then that's all.