

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU Idora Park Project

Work Experience

O. H. 838

WALTER MENNING

Interviewed

by

Rob Toti

on

November 3, 1986

WALTER MENNING

Walter A. Menning began working at Idora Park during the Depression in the mid 1930's. He had no previous experience as an age-weight guesser, but he was willing to learn. Mr. Menning developed his unique skill in a very short time by studying the contestants bone structure and weight distribution. Soon, he became a top-notch age-weight guesser at Idora Park.

Mr. Menning worked for seven days a week for around ten seasons at Idora. He was handy with tools, so he also got involved with many types of repair work for the park when he was not busy working in the Midway. In the mid 1940's, Mr. Menning left Idora in order to take a job at Sharon Steel. Currently, he is retired and lives at his home in Youngstown.

Rob Toti

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INTERVIEWEE: WALTER MENNING

INTERVIEWER: Rob Toti

SUBJECT: work experience, early days of Idora

DATE: November 3, 1986

T: This is an interview with Walter Menning for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Idora Park, by Rob Toti, at 122 Harvard Street, on November 3, 1986, at 7:15 p.m.

Maybe you could tell us something about your childhood, just a little bit of background.

M: We are talking about Idora Park now?

T: Right.

M: When I started out there the reason for Idora Park being there in the first place . . . It was out in the country and they had the park, it followed a streetcar line. It gave people a chance to get their families in and they would all go out to the park. They would go to the merry-go-round or get an ice cream cone or popcorn or whatever they wanted. When you got into the park, the streetcar would go way into the park and go around a loop and be heading back to town again. So, that was the reason for the park in the first place. Now Idora Park is in the middle of the town. So if you want to go to a park, you have to go up on the lake or somewhere far away because that was the idea of the park anyhow.

T: So it was more or less like a retreat? It was to get away from the city.

M: Yes, it was to get out of town.

T: What was your first encounter with Idora Park, do you remember? Were you young?

M: Oh, yes. Well, that was in the Depression. These big guys were having a hell of a time getting a job in W. Pa leaning on shovels and stuff. I said, "Well, what am I going to do?" So I went to the park and talked to old Duffy and he looked at me and said, "What the hell can you do anyhow?" He jumped up on the counter at the shooting gallery and I put my hand on the counter and sat up beside him. So he said, "Come on out and we will see if you can do something." I was green. My God, I was green. I was afraid to open my mouth and afraid that if I didn't open it, I wouldn't have a job. So I opened my damned mouth.

T: So basically a lot of people were just hungry, so they were looking for jobs, right?

M: Yes. That is the way it started. Then we worked on the fish pond. Remember the old fish pond?

T: Yes.

M: The fish pond was right next to the old theater but that has changed a lot since then.

T: This is around, what, 1936 or so?

M: Oh, yes, early. Early. So that would give you a background. We had a pretty good organization. If there were any trouble, why there was no trouble at all because everybody was right there backing up whoever was in trouble. There was very little trouble anyway.

T: So basically you would say that just looking for a job made you decide to become an age-weight guesser. Had you had any background in that at all?

M: No, I was as green as they come, scared to open my mouth and scared not to.

T: I think everybody is like that to a certain extent.

M: Yes, to start with.

T: So what was a typical day like for you?

M: Well, now we had special days, kiddie's days and stuff like that. You would get out there at maybe 8:00 in the morning and you would work until 10:00, 11:00, or 12:00 at night. You had to be there early because the

kids would be early. The front of the stand wasn't wood or anything, it was canvas. You know, anybody with a knife could zip through and get in there and help themselves. I don't know what they would help themselves for, it wasn't worth anything. But still and all, you had to be there to protect the stuff. Then we would have these excursions from Pittsburgh, J & L, and then we would have the big Sheet and Tube picnic on Labor Day and all of these things. In those days, they raffled off cars. A brand new Chevy would be about \$700.

T: Oh, my.

M: Yes. So that gives you an idea, see, how long ago this thing was. Now \$700 wouldn't even put a down payment on a car.

T: It wouldn't even put that much gas in the car. So you worked. . . Like say how many days would you work, forty hours a week, or was that before the eight hour work shift?

M: We worked seven days a week for as many hours as was necessary.

T: From sun up until you closed?

M: Well, I would help them check out and sometimes be there at 3:00 in the morning. Then we would go downtown and have a steak or something, go home and get a couple hours of sleep, and then back out to the park again.

T: That was from spring until fall?

M: Yes, that was from the time they opened until after Labor Day. Go ahead, any question you want to shoot.

T: So you would do other odd jobs too besides weight and age guessing then?

M: Well, I had a little mechanical ability. I would help fix up something that broke down. A lot of mechanical in the . . . They would have these dog races, games, and stuff where you put a ball through the hoop and every time it went through the thing, your dog would take a better place (advance). So, there were things that had to be checked out every once in a while. Some guys would say, "Hey, I spent a whole dime here. I want my money back." I went to fix it and gave them another race. So we would get back there and fix something that had to be fixed. We had a lot of fun.

T: Are there any special events that stand out in your

mind, would you say? Anything unusual or a very typical circumstance that happened over and over again or like you discussed a lot of out of towners coming in.

M: Pat Duffy was the manager of concessions and his son, Pat, was the manager when the park burnt down. Little Pat was a little smaller than me at that time. They had one of those Mickey Mouse deals out at the ballpark. They had prizes for the best Pluto and the best this and that. So young Pat came down with a little dog about so long and a wash line about fifty feet long and that was Pluto. So he took the little dog over and he won a prize. Stuff like that, you know, you remember. Of course, another nice thing there was we had the big bands, they would all come.

T: In the ballroom?

M: In the ballroom. Those guys weren't just good musicians, they were good baseball players too. Every time we had a new band, why we had to get our team up and play with those guys. You would be afraid, you know, playing with those guys. Their fingers, if something happened to them. They didn't care, boy they were rough. They were good ball players though.

T: Did you have like a weekly game or just an informal type of thing?

M: Well, whenever a new band would come in or whenever they wanted to play, why we would get somebody and get out in the ballpark and play. It was good fun. They were nice guys too, all of them. You could get along with them, no trouble.

T: How did the crowds react to your work? Did you have large crowds or was it stragglers coming by that you had to try to grab their attention?

M: Different days were different. When I was guessing weight, I remember one day in particular. It was one of those hot days in the summer and you wouldn't want to even look at anybody else for fear that they would scowl back at you. I finally got somebody to have their weight guessed and I was lucky I guessed it. Now, this was for \$.10, you know. That was way back there and \$.10 bought you all kinds of things. Somebody said, "Come here you little bugger and see if you can guess my weight." I started keeping track of it. They got more and more abusive as I kept on winning. Finally, I wrote up the number twenty-seven and I missed. So, they all disappeared. The whole crowd disappeared, "He is not trying."

T: After one loss they thought that you didn't try?

M: One loss and I wasn't trying. Until that time I was a no good so and so, sob, or whatever you want to call it. That was a good fun game.

T: Did you work right in the Midway?

M: Yes, that was right between the office and the ball-room. They had a big tree there and they had the scale there. When I would set up we would fix it up so that I didn't have to put pennies in it. When I did not work they would weigh themselves with the penny scales. We had a lot of fun there.

T: Could you explain a little bit more exactly how you guessed the age and the weight, I mean did you write it down?

M: No.

T: How did it work? First of all they paid \$.10, right?

M: Yes, that is number one. That is the big one, first you get that.

T: Get the dime.

M: Then you see how tall they are and see their bone build and grab a hold of their arm or their leg and get an idea. Then you guess, that is all there is to it, within three pounds.

T: Three pounds either way.

M: So if you missed by more than three pounds, why they got a little box of candy or a swagger stick and that is all there was to it.

T: What types of gifts did you give away?

M: Swagger sticks or a little box of candy.

T: If they won, they got a little box of candy?

M: Yes, either one. A swagger stick or a box of candy.

T: So, either way, would you say the park was making money?

M: Oh, yes. They weren't out there losing money, that is for sure.

T: Would you have any idea how much a box of candy would have cost, the size that you gave away?

M: We were operating for \$.10, so it couldn't be much . . . Well, it wouldn't even be \$.10, it would have to be less.

T: So, either way they were making money?

M: Then, a lot of times these people would send their kids up. Well, you hate to beat a kid so, generally, you would miss and then give them something. If you decided that they were trying to cheat on you, you would guess a kid. Say, "Okay, old man, come on. You want to see if you can beat me." Let him know that you knew what was going on. We never had any trouble with people though, never.

T: Did you ever like try and rig it? I mean, would you have someone from the audience come out just to try and get people interested?

M: No.

T: Did you have any problems . . . Today if you go to a fair or something, you have the people and they are like calling out to you. They are almost begging you to come over.

M: You try to get them in. Hell, I have had drunks work beside me for hours. They weren't doing any damage and the people were having fun. I let him help me with the guessing, didn't hurt anything.

T: Almost like a little side show.

M: Yes, it was part of the business. Now, I could have gotten nasty right away and called the police and had him taken out, but that is no good for business or anything else. I said, "Okay, if you are going to help me, help me."

T: Did you have any quotas? Like would you get in trouble if say you were losing too frequently or anything like that?

M: No. No, there was never any question about that. They knew you were doing your best. One day you would do real well and the next day it just wasn't working and that is it. They were all in the business long enough to know how things swing. We had a good bunch of guys too. They were out there doing the best that they could.

T: What do you remember about the rides? Do you remember any major attractions opening up during the years that you were there?

M: The old Wildcat, now. I would get a break and go up to the Heidelberg, take my lunch there, and get a cup of coffee or something. Then on the way back we would have to stop at the Wildcat and get a ride or two. Of course, we never paid for that. You know, right after lunch the Wildcat is no place to go, but we enjoyed it. I would help our mechanics every once in a while. We had a fellow on the airplane swings and he was our regular mechanic. I would get in there and help him a lot. It was good.

T: Took up a lot of your time, I would imagine.

M: Well, the summertime wasn't yours, it was theirs.

T: Would they call you in to work extra days, extra hours or would you just more or less be there?

M: No, you would be there. The only thing you had to know was what time they were going to open up. If they had a special kiddie's day or an excursion coming in, you knew you had to be there early.

T: Tell me a little bit about the excursions or I guess there were some very big get togethers by different banks.

M: Oh, J & L from Pittsburgh would come in.

T: Bus loads or would they still use the trolley cars?

M: They would have train loads coming in then trolley cars and buses would bring them out to the park. They would just keep on pouring in for hours. The same thing at the end of the day. They would start leaving early and the kids would be hanging around and dragging, you know. They had a lot of fun.

T: Did that ever cause a problem with, say the kiddie days? I mean, kids causing problems.

M: Well, any time you have a bunch of kids like that, you are going to have a couple getting out of line, nothing serious.

T: So, you said you worked there for around ten years?

M: Yes, around ten.

T: From 1936 to 1946, approximately?

M: No, about 1932 to 1942. Somewhere thereabouts.

T: Do you recall any changes made in the park during your years there?

M: Oh, yes. They were always adding something. They had the swimming pool there and then that wasn't good enough. So they had to dig the well a little deeper to get to salt water and then they would have salt water. Stuff like that just for publicity to get people going. Then, Christ, they would have a little . . . Maybe a train, a miniature train or something else coming in. Well, they did have it for a long time, I guess, the little cars and then Kiddie Land and all of that stuff.

T: Those were all added on during your years there?

M: Oh, yes.

T: Do you remember any of the problems that they had related to the pool because I have learned that there were some race riots that almost erupted?

M: Well, I don't comment on that. I don't know that much about it.

T: Did it cause any commotion among the employees?

M: I remember one time I was in there swimming and on my way out I walked on to something sharp and then I put the other foot down and that was sharp. So I scooped up two or three handfuls of pop bottles and got somebody else to clean it out and then I had to get my feet fixed up. If it had been somebody else, they would have probably got sued until they were blind. But me, I work there.

T: Right. The employees couldn't really do anything about it.

M: Well, they could. You know any time, even when it says, "At your own risk," they still have to be insured.

T: Right.

M: So they are a little bit protective, protecting themselves. Any time you get on a ride and if you walk on the Midway and you step in a hole there, why you can sue them like they do in the city. You drive your car and hit a pothole and you are ready to shoot somebody.

T: Do you remember any incidents like that that happened? Anything that you became aware of, major lawsuits or just anything?

M: No, no. Old Max Rindin, I think he is about the only one of the original guys that could probably tell you all about that. Because he was superintendent of the

park for a long, long time and his boys worked in the food concessions and stuff. So I think Max is still around in pretty fair shape.

T: Yes, he is living on South Avenue I believe.

M: He ought to be up in the eighties or thereabouts anyhow. So he is no spring chicken.

T: Did you notice any decline in the park because during the 1930's it was pretty much an elite park?

M: It was a good park. Of course, like you say, when they started having trouble they put a fence around it, started charging to get in.

T: There was no admission when you first started working there?

M: No, no.

T: What did they do, they charged for each ride that you got on or how was that organized?

M: You got in a streetcar to get in there in the first place. Then you were on your own. Then you could buy tickets, a whole string of tickets or you could pay individually on the ride whenever you went in. Or you could go up to the stand and buy a box of popcorn and stuff like that. You never went to the park without popcorn anyhow.

T: So then there was no straight admission fee like you see in all the amusement parks today?

M: No, now it is different. It costs you what, \$12 or \$14 for it.

T: Quite a bit, just to get in the door.

M: Just to get in there and then you start spending money.

T: Would you say it was mostly family oriented or would kids be dropped off?

M: No, that was family.

T: So the whole gang went out?

M: Yes, they would have their picnic tables and stuff around there, took their basket and put it on there and dinnertime everybody got around . . . See mom and pop and you asked for another \$1 or \$2. You know, "I am going to need some more money. Let's go." They had the penny arcade there where you spent a fortune there

just shooting away pennies.

T: Looking back, was there anything that you would like to have changed about your job? Anything that distracted you?

M: No.

T: So you would say they were enjoyable years?

M: I was young enough to have a lot of fun and do whatever I had to do, never made that much difference. No, I . . . Times were tough there. I went to Youngstown College for a year and then they said, "Hey, boy, nobody is working. You better get off your duff and get out there and do your share." Yes, they would have sent me, but they couldn't afford it. They didn't have to tell me. I knew so I got out and started working.

T: That sounds like a lot of people who were growing up during that time period, they just didn't have any other choice. Okay, getting back to the other employees, how were lunches set up or break time or was there even a break? Did you have a time clock? What was the basic regiment like?

M: You would have an extra man. If you were in the fish pond he would come around at a certain time and you could take a break, have your lunch, and whatever. Then when you got back, why he would go to another place and another place. There was no set time. Of course, as young as we were, we were always hungry anyhow. It didn't make any difference. That is the way that worked.

T: Would you more or less just eat whatever was available on the Midway or was there like a cafeteria set up for employees?

M: Oh, you could take your lunch. I used to take my lunch there and then go up to the Heidelberg for a cup of coffee.

T: What was the Heidelberg, like a coffee shop?

M: Well, it was a beer garden. It had a dance floor and show place. You never were at there? The Heidelberg was quite a place.

T: It wasn't part of the park?

M: Oh, yes, it was right in the park. Then they had the skating rink there. Remember the skating rink?

T: Yes.

M: Then right next to that they had the cars where you bumped everybody. Going up across there you would have the kiddie rides and over a little bit more you would have the Kiddie Land, all the different rides. Then coming in you would have the airplane swings and underneath the airplane swings they had all those stands for pop or whatever. They had the candy cotton there and anything you wanted. Of course, the popcorn stand had the apples too then. They dipped the apples and of course that is the way kids got their shirts all messed up.

T: Have you kept in contact with any of the other employees?

M: Well, there aren't too many of them around. You know, this is about fifty years ago almost. Well, it is forty-six years since I worked out there. We keep in contact as much as possible.

T: Here are some pictures.

M: There is the merry-go-round and this is the Wildcat burnt down.

T: Wow, this is after the fire.

M: Way down here was the water ride that started the whole thing.

T: That had a number of names though, the Lost River.

M: Yes, well that is the one that the guy was working in there and a spark got caught.

T: What were your feelings when you found out that the park had burned down?

M: I think everybody was sick.

T: What made you decide to come down, for nostalgia's sake or just to see what happened, come down and take a look at the disaster?

M: When you have something like that . . . Now this is through the water ride looking up toward the Wildcat and the merry-go-round. See, all along there there were all kinds of concession stands here and there. There was a popcorn stand, there was a shooting gallery, skee ball.

T: The Turtle was nearby too, right? It would have been down a little bit further I think. Remember the Turtle ride and those circular type rides?

M: See, the park office was about where that car is. This is the other side of the Midway, it didn't burn, much. It got singed. Now this is from the merry-go-round looking down to the Wildcat and the stuff that was burned up. Look at that, isn't that terrible.

T: It's a shame.

M: Yes, these were all of the concessions. Of course, they didn't close down. They rebuilt as much as they could but all of that was wasted. A lot of people that could have had a lot of fun working there, you know. See, there is a good picture, your merry-go-round and your . . . The fire department did a hell of a job saving the merry-go-round.

T: From what I understand they had a real problem with the water hoses. There weren't that many fire extinguishers around and they really had to stretch things out.

M: Yes, I guess they . . . Well, I wasn't out there for the . . . I waited until the worst part was over. They had enough guys there in the way, you know that were just curiosity seekers.

T: Yes, that can cause a real problem.

M: Yes, now here is the old airplane swings ride. I don't know what they called them at that time.

T: They had a number of different names.

M: Yes. See, now these were all places that the park office . . . Well, the park office had the records to take care of that. But then they had all of these concession stands.

T: Now that is a couple of days afterwards, everything had been cleared away?

M: Oh, yes. There is a big difference there between then. See, now this is at the other end of the park. They had the restrooms under here. I don't know this looks pretty clear compared to the rest of it.

T: Was it true that somebody actually lived underneath the Wildcat in the summertime?

M: Oh, yes, they had their homes at the rides.

T: People actually stayed overnight?

M: Yes.

T: Was it more or less a security measure?

M: No, no. The guy that worked there. They came in from Cincinnati or wherever it was and then they would be there for the summer.

T: That's really amazing when you think about it.

M: Yes, it is.

T: Because nothing like that would happen today.

M: Here are some pictures that you might be interested in. I can give you the date of the fire too.

T: April 27, 1984.

M: Here is young Pat. He is an old man now from when I first saw him.

T: He was just a little kid.

M: Yes, he wasn't as tall as I am now.

T: He probably more or less had his own way around the park.

M: Oh, yes. Dr. Richard Murry . . .

T: He was a lifeguard at the park, is that true?

M: No, his grandfather was Charlie Deibel and Charlie Deibel was the owner of the park for a long time. Deibel used to have the big market . . . What's there now where they had all the fruit and vegetables and stuff?

T: The Peyatt Street Market or which market are you talking about?

M: No, no. One of those little companies is right next to him. A machine shop or something on Rayen Avenue. Where Rayen Avenue runs into Federal Street, about two blocks and then you had this place where they had all these . . . I used to go down there with mother and me, get baskets of tomatoes and all kinds of stuff. We came home on the streetcar. See this, it says the show will go on here.

T: Unfortunately it didn't.

M: Well, it did.

T: For a little while.

M: You have got to give them credit.

T: They tried.

M: They sold that doggone thing.

T: What do you think of that? Was that a good idea?

M: They could have kept it here for Youngstown.

T: I think they should have too. I think if they could have had a couple of big businessmen in the valley just fork over a little bit of money.

M: They didn't get that much money out of it anyhow.

T: I think it was around \$350,000, somewhere around there. Oh, \$385,000, there it is.

M: So it is still working somewhere but it could have been working here too. Old Henry Hufford used to spend time painting the merry-go-round, all the horses and stuff. He did a good job on it too.

T: There is a lot of pride in that.

M: Oh, sure.

T: That is the one thing I think everybody realized, there was a lot of pride all over the park it seemed.

M: When you stop to think about it, there wasn't that much in the park that really burnt down. It was that little section, but it was an important, little section. The big ride, you know where the money was.

T: The Wildcat brought people from all over.

M: Yes.

T: So you say you were a roller coaster fan, not after lunch?

M: Oh, yes, especially after lunch, on the way down you know . . . Now this ride was right across from the park office there.

T: Did you have a chance to go to the auction?

M: I wasn't interested in buying any part of it. I imagine if I had gone there they would have tried to buy me.

T: Getting back to Dr. Murry, he never worked at the park?

M: No.

T: Because I was informed that he was a lifeguard for a time.

M: I don't know, he might have been but I don't remember him being there. I know his grandfather was the owner of the park. Well, if you have anything else that I could help you with I would be glad to.

T: How about the theater, what do you remember about the theater?

M: That was before my time.

T: That was in the 1920's?

M: Every once in a while they would put on a show. Desmond, I think her name was.

T: Norma Desmond.

M: Yes, and they put on a show and stuff but mainly, that was almost before my time. They would have boys going in there with popcorn and pop soda. That was rickety, old place with seats on the side of the hill and then the stage down below.

T: It was like an amphitheater?

M: Well, it was closed. We had to pay to get in.

T: But it was open air?

M: Yes, it was open air.

T: What made you decide to leave Idora, just decided to move on?

M: Well, they wanted somebody working in the steel mills, so I went to the steel mill. It was that simple. It took a war to get me working. I never worked a day in my life even in the steel mill, don't tell anybody. When I wanted to retire they said, "You can't retire." I said, "Why can't I retire?" He said, "You can't retire from a pension." I said, "Leave it to me. I will figure a way out."

T: What was your relationship like with the Duffy's? Were they good people, easy to get along with, how would you describe them?

M: They were alright. I wouldn't be with anybody that long if I couldn't get with them.

T: Ten years is a long time.

M: Have a little kid on your neck half the time. It was fun, I enjoyed it.

T: Is there anything else that we didn't cover that you might think would be important, any other memorable experiences?

M: No, not necessarily. A lot of the kids that worked out at the park got married and stayed married too, forty-five, fifty years. Not bad at all.

T: A lot of relationships started out at the park, would you say?

M: Well, the guys that worked there. Of course, working in the park if you had a half a day off or something you would have to go to Pittsburgh or Akron or somewhere and go to another park and see how they operate.

T: Did they take buses or anything or did they just jump in a car?

M: Jump in a car and go with the whole . . . Well, the whole gang cars, you know we would go there and have a lot of fun.

T: How would the other parks compare to Idora, would you say?

M: Some had what we didn't and we had what some didn't. You compare size of the park and different things. You can't compare Idora Park to Disneyland or something like that because there is such a big, big difference. Pittsburgh was a lot bigger than ours but it was a good little park. Akron and different places . . . Of course, on the way home or out we would have to stop and eat and then they would have these slot machines and stuff and you would gamble a little bit.

T: Just have a good time.

M: Just good fun. Well, I am afraid you didn't get too much here but maybe somewhere along the line you will.

T: Sure I did. It is interesting just letting you reminisce.

M: Starting from the streetcar line is where the park started.

T: That was, I guess right around the turn of the century.

M: I guess the streetcar people wanted people on their

thing so they had to buy a park there to get them back there.

T: Do you remember when they closed the streetcar?

M: By that time I had my own car. We used to have a lot of fun. We would get that last streetcar, when I started, that last streetcar into town. Then you would get downtown and they would hold all the Mozier and Mahoning Avenue and all those lines until we all got on our bus and then they would blow the whistle, away we would go. That was good fun. It was always a lot of fun on the streetcars anyhow because you get a bunch of wild kids from the park anyhow that work there, letting off steam. We had a lot of fun. People who were riding, they had as much fun as we did. It was good.

T: Alright then I think I will stop the tape.

M: Yes, that's good.

END OF INTERVIEW