

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Westlake Terrace Project

Personal Experience

O.H. 871

DONALD C. COLVIN

Interviewed

by

Elisa Calabrese

on

December 2, 1985

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: DONALD C. COLVIN

INTERVIEWER: Elisa Calabrese

SUBJECT: Westlake Terrace, low income housing, segregation
in Westlake, qualifications and living conditions,
changes from the 1950s until today

DATE: December 2, 1985

EC: This is an interview with Mr. Donald Colvin for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Westlake Terrace project, by Elisa Calabrese, on December 2, 1985, at Youngstown State University.

Just to get started Mr. Colvin, can you tell me a little bit about yourself?

CD: I am 33 years old, a currently unemployed student here at YSU (Youngstown State University). I'm married and have five children. I am a lifelong resident of Youngstown.

EC: Where did you attend school for grade school?

DC: Covington Elementary, Hayes Junior High School, and Rayen High School.

EC: You were a resident of Westlake.

DC: Yes.

EC: From what years?

DC: From 1956 until 1973, 1974.

EC: What events during the 50's, 60's, and 70's happened at Westlake that stuck in your mind? Was there anything in particular? Was there any type of change at Westlake, a change made in qualifications to enter or just things in the atmosphere in general?

DC: In reference to what type of things went on?

EC: Yes.

DC: I can recall they used to come to your house and check to see if you were keeping it clean and those types of things. I can't remember exactly how often, but I think it was once a month. In comparison to now when I got passed, everyone had an assigned time to clean the laundry room. Everybody took turns; everybody shared in the responsibility of trying to keep the place up, cutting the grass, picking up paper. You had to do your own grass around your own apartment. It was your responsibility to do that so that it would look fine. Possibly, there was some sort of a fine or a possibility of an eviction notice if you didn't keep it up like you were supposed to. Of course, the main thing is in our responsibility--I don't know that they still have that type of responsibility along with the maintenance staff that they have--we would also do it as children. I can recall cutting grass for the neighbors and picking up paper. We did it almost every week. We rotated, so we had to do it or pay a fine.

EC: What was it like living in Westlake?

DC: In the early years it was very quiet. I recall this being a very happy time in my life, being a young child and becoming a teenager. We were a very close-knit family, not just our family, but the neighbors became a part of the extended family. What you didn't have and your neighbor had, it was yours. "What's yours is mine, and what's mine is yours." That was the atmosphere. So we really felt close. When people moved out of the neighborhood, we really felt a sense of loss. As we got older it became a little harder. It was tougher living in what was called the "court." Each section had a court, and that court was your family even if you moved to another section. In my particular case, I lived in three separate courts.

One of the major things that happened at Westlake that I can remember is when they put the freeway in. That was interesting because everybody said that it couldn't be done. People were living in the complex. I remember one particular building was twice as long as some of the other buildings.

They were wondering how they were going to get them across the street. Now, that is where Chase Pool is. They moved all of those buildings, and I lived in the area that they had to move them to across the street. Everybody was wondering how in the world they were going to do this. They did it. They cut the building in half. I recall one, but there may have been more. They took it across the street and put the freeway in.

EC: Do you remember what apartment you lived in?

DC: The first one was 172. That was when we lived on Madison Avenue, which is the Madison Avenue Expressway now. We lived in apartment 245, and that was on Wirt Street, 39 Wirt Street. And we lived at apartment 505, which was on Griffith Street, not too far from the Golden Gate Supermarket. It was commonly termed the unemployment corner of that area. When they moved those buildings, I went up to see them. That was something.

EC: Do you remember what year that was?

DC: I would imagine it was the early 1960s. It would have to be.

EC: When you lived at Westlake, were there shopping centers in the area close by, maybe some stores or little grocery shops?

DC: There was a grocery store. I think the name was Mr. Collins; he was the gentleman who worked there on Griffith Street. It was a real small store. You'd get penny candy in those days, so if you had a nickel, you could eat candy almost all week. Then there was a store right across the street from Covington School called Mussy's. Of course, there was the Golden Gate Supermarket down on Griffith Street, and J.D.'s Supermarket on Madison there, not too far from the university.

As far as malls, they didn't exist like you know them today, but Atlantic Mills was "the" place. I think it's Trumbull Supply or something like that now. I would take a long walk up Griffith Street to Atlantic Mills. That was the big thing, going to Atlantic Mills and shopping for your school clothes. You didn't travel out to Liberty Plaza at that time.

EC: How were the neighborhoods within the Westlake area? Were they segregated at first?

DC: Segregated by design, I would have to say possibly, but not necessarily to my recollection. It wasn't very mixed up in the early years when I lived there. White people that I can remember were in different courts. As time went on maybe one or two were here or there. In the 18 years, I can't recall too many. I know in the early years that it wasn't all black, but in the area that I stayed in, it was pretty much all black.

EC: Were there any problems during the 60's with racial tensions?

DC: As far as within the complex itself?

EC: Yes.

DC: Not real, real bad. It was mostly from the outside during that time. I recall one time in the 60's when I was playing basketball off of Wirt Street. I think they had the curfew on and they were rioting pretty bad at that time. My mother called me over to the apartment, and she said, "What's going on over there?" I said, "What do you mean?" I looked back, and somebody had set something on fire. The playground was full of smoke. Playing, I wasn't aware of it just like you can't see the trees through the forest until you step away from it. I remember two white guys running away.

Boys coming through the neighborhood and naturally bothering people and people fighting, no. I don't recall that.

EC: You mentioned you were playing basketball. Did you use the Hagstrum House facilities?

DC: Yes, the Settlement. It was commonly called the Settlement. At that particular time I played right in the courts. Some courts were fortunate enough to have basketball hoops, but very few. In fact, the court that I lived in as a growing child--in the first court I was young, four years old--we had a basketball board, but there was no hoop. There was never a hoop. So, I was a teenager when I actually played with a net. The court above us had a rim. So we shot up against where the rim was supposed to be. That's how you got points, you threw it against that. We did use the Settlement House, the Hagstrum House. We had crafts, and they showed movies. I think they were a nickel or something like that. They had skating and a lot of fun things for the kids. It was a really good out for us.

One thing that I remember, in 1961, I was 9 years old. I was reading the paper about Vietnam. It stands out today. I was thinking about it the other day. I ran across the street. I went to the store or something. I was coming back, and I was reading about this war with Vietnam. I stopped one of the kids who was a little older, and I said, "Oh, I won't have to worry about that. That's nine years. I'll be 18 in nine years." Nine years later, the war was still going on. I reflected back to that when I became 18. Supposedly, they were taking lottery numbers up to 53 or 52 or something like that, and mine was 63. So, I remember that because when I got the paper in the mail, I automatically thought back to that day when I was nine years old when I said, "Oh, that will be over." And, it stood out vividly. It was still going on.

EC: Something like that would make a big impression on you.

DC: It came back instantly after I received the papers, but I didn't have to go. A lot of guys did; a lot of my friends did. Some of them didn't make it back, some relatives didn't make it back, so that was a tough time.

EC: How old were you when your family moved into Westlake?

DC: I was four years old.

EC: Do you recall anything about hearing your family mention moving into Westlake, if they told you that you were going to move into Westlake? What did you know about Westlake Terrace before, if you can remember?

DC: I remember them saying we were moving to Westlake. I remember the truck ride over. The thing that I remember was that they had these posts of chains throughout. They divided the courts. I remember the grass, too. The grass was green. You see dirt and rocks now. It was really nice, I thought, at that time, as a child. Considering the amount of kids that were there. . . . There were a lot of kids. I thought, "Everybody has kids," not knowing why. There were a lot of kids. It seemed to me that as the children grew older, that was when a lot of the problems began, home turmoil or society. . . . As those children grew up, they became more hostile, a lot of them. There were fights.

I can recall one incident when I stayed on Wirt Street. A gang from over by the university, they climbed over. There was fighting. Actually, I was inside looking out. [Laughter]

When we got a little older, it got a little tougher. When we did move to Wirt Street, the Golden Gate at that time was called. . . . The last thing you wanted to do was to go to the store at night. It seemed to me that somewhere in between the very early 1960s toward the end before we got to the 1970s, something happened. We used to have peace and quiet and you could leave your doors open and go out late at night. That was the last thing that I wanted to do; I would hope my mother wouldn't send me to the store at night, not up there.

As I got older, it was a lot easier. I can recall being afraid, not just of the dark, but because we heard of different things happening. There was another incident in regards to Westlake that stands out even in my adult life. There was a girl who was killed. She was sexually assaulted and murdered.

EC: Right within the. . . .

DC: Right. In fact, she lived on Madison Avenue right here. They showed her picture in the paper; she was a really pretty girl. That influence on kids really scared us. That was really tough on the kids. I was a little older. I recall that they picked this drunk up, like the town drunk. Everybody said, "No, he couldn't have done it." As it turned out, I guess they didn't have enough evidence to convict him.

Then there was a guy who we all called a peeping tom. He hung around the neighborhood. You sort of knew him, but you didn't know him. You would see him and then you wouldn't. As kids and young teenagers we would say, "Is that him?" Then, he disappeared.

EC: Do you remember what the process was for your family to receive an apartment? Did they have to fill out an application? Were they interviewed?

DC: Right, they filled out an application. My mother was called. At that time, Mr. Lottier was in charge. He was very helpful. He worked at the YMCA (Youngstown Men's Christian Association). He was somewhat of a father figure for a lot of us. We would go in and talk to him. I can recall working, and rent skyrocketed. I can't remember the exact figures on the rent. It probably wasn't that much, but it jumped. I was quite upset about it. I worked there, too. That was my first summer job. I worked with the staff. In those days they did not take anything out of the job they were doing as they are attempting to do now. They really seemed to be on top of it. If you needed something repaired, they were there. You had your monthly or weekly inspections because the little critters were tough in those days. They would almost steal your food from you. Rats--during that period they were no problem. Now, I understand they are a pretty good concern in the lower half. That is another problem now as I understand it. It seemed to me that they tried to put the younger people together. By younger people I mean younger mothers as opposed to some of the older women. Again, "older" at that time would be in their 30's. Even now as they grew older, the section from Madison down wasn't totally for older people, but the lower end was mostly for the older people. Away from the kids, I guess.

EC: What were your first impressions? From where you lived before, did you think, "Oh, this is a nice place."

DC: Yes, I would say that the early years in Westlake for me were, "I'm glad I'm here. This is a really nice place." It was clean, very, very clean, and very warm. Those apartments were hot! [Laughter] They don't make heat like they used to.

EC: You had the steam heat?

DC: Yes. You could turn it off. At night you could hear it rattle. It would whistle for days and kick off heat like you wouldn't believe. It was almost unbearable at night.

EC: You mentioned about the rent and how it skyrocketed. Do you remember how it was collected? Did you have to go down to the Housing Authority and pay, or did they come to you?

DC: No, you went to the office right next to what is now the Rescue Mission. Then, it was the old YMCA. You would take it there. If you needed this and that, you would take down the rent money there, and then, there was a building right off of Madison where all of the maintenance people stayed. If you needed any type of grass seeding, shade repair, or you came to get your paper poker if it was your turn to pick up paper, lawn mower, grass cutter--no power, you pushed that baby--you picked it up there and then took it back. Yes, any type of maintenance that you needed for your apartment, you would just go there. You would take it back there after you were done.

EC: Do you know how the rules were enforced? You said there was an inspection. How were they enforced? Was there a manager that headed each individual court?

CD: In the early days, it didn't seem to me. . . . Supposedly, you were notified. But as a young person, it seemed to me always to be just in the wind that they were inspecting, that they were coming. Listening to the older people talk, it seemed that they would pop in unannounced. That end of it was sort of negative, but not in the sense that you minded it, because you wanted to keep the place up. Remembering back, it seemed to be more of a harassment type of thing. Again, not being old enough in the beginning to understand someone living with someone else other than their husband in the household and that type of thing, I guess that's what they would call us for, checking for shoes and men's clothing and that type of thing. It became apparent that they were feeling out the people, the parents. They'd say it was an invasion of privacy. They would come in whenever they were ready. Now, I guess you have to announce yourself. I guess the caseworkers and such don't even go to the houses anymore. They just call. At that time, they did come. Even if you weren't there, they would do the same thing. There was a general concern by the majority of the people that I lived around for the upkeep of the place.

EC: Do you remember anyone who was asked to leave because of the rules that were broken?

DC: I can recall a few instances where clothing, furniture, and that like were set out on the street. I guess they apparently did enforce that whatever it was, whether it was the

cleanliness factor or what. I do know that several times it was enforced while I was there. The furniture was set out on the street.

EC: Do you remember any of the people that you lived by, their names? You said that you lived at three different apartments. Do you still keep in contact?

DC: Oh, yes.

EC: Were they long lasting friendships?

DC: Oh, definitely. The very first court where I lived, that group of people were the ones who could call me Donny and get away with it; they were like relatives. Other than that, I was "Donald." A lot of them have kids now. Believe it or not, some of them have gone back there. They had since moved and now live back in Westlake. I went to school with a lot of them. I see quite a few of them quite often. Some of them moved out of town again. I guess now they have an annual baseball game at Evans Field where the older guys play the new generation guys. I have participated in the games and have watched them a couple of times. They seem to enjoy themselves while they are playing.

EC: What are your impressions of Westlake while you lived there, between the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s? If you could sum it up in three to five minutes, what would you tell me about your impressions of Westlake?

DC: I enjoyed the course of the time I was there. [Laughter]

EC: Maybe show some comparison.

DC: I'm sure today there is a lot of unity and developed friendships. At that time it was a very, very, very close family atmosphere. Once in a while, you would get a feud going between families or something, but not too often. I recall I had said one time during the course of my growing up at Westlake after things got tough--by tough I mean the area became a little hard--that if I could become a multimillionaire, that I would buy Westlake and fix it like it should be. There are a lot of things that need to be done and should be done by the people. Some areas of Westlake are just existing and others are kept quite well.

I have a lot of fond memories of Westlake, most of them to do with the people from Westlake. The management at Westlake, Mr. Lottier in particular was very instrumental in encouraging myself and other young men to try to do better in our education and try to be the best people we can be. When I left Westlake, I didn't want to leave. When I moved out, my

mom was still there. It wasn't that I just didn't want to leave her. I didn't want to leave Westlake. I told my girlfriend, who is my wife now, that we were going to move back. I wanted to go back and raise my family at Westlake because of the love and togetherness that seemed to be there for me and my mom.

I went back to Westlake one particular evening. Of course I was working, and the guys were saying, "You got a new car. How'd you get it? How are you doing?" For no reason at all, they took the gentleman I was talking to, pulled out a gun, and shot him. It was then that I realized that it had really changed. I didn't feel quite as comfortable. I would go back from time to time and just walk from the top down to the bottom. Even though a lot was going on, I wasn't afraid. I went back a few years later, which would have been in the 1980s, and I was afraid. The younger teenagers and adults were harder. Again, it was probably because of their circumstances. I was actually afraid, and I was hurt. I have since gone back in the last year or two not really afraid, just sort of mad that it has deteriorated to the state that it has. Some areas are as if no one cares. It's as though Westlake is just there. Westlake typifies to me now the state of Youngstown, maybe Youngstown in particular for black people. It is very, very depressing. There is no way now that we would go back like I said after we were married. Now I say and have said differently about it, that I don't care what happens, but that would be the last place I would raise my kids. It is not totally the people's fault. It is just a tough, tough atmosphere. It's a totally different place. I still have a lot of friends, a lot of relatives, and those people within it have become used to it. It has become their way of life, ducking bullets and fighting. It wasn't all peaches and cream when I was there. We hit the pop trucks and that and did milder things like kicking over the garbage cans, but as far as doing people physical harm, it was going on, but you tried to avoid that or those people who were into that. There were a lot of positive and good things. Hagstrum House, at that time it was a very, very good place. It was a very influential place for the young people. Today, Westlake is a tough, tough, place. Just the smell, it just stinks. Regardless of what it has become, I would be offended if I was there. That is the way I feel. Even when it was making a change, there were some good sections and there were some bad sections. It was like a cancer and it just spread. Now it has almost taken over the whole complex, the entire community. It is really, really bad. They have a lot of work to do. I don't know if it would take clearing everybody out and starting from scratch, just burning the whole place down, or if they could even begin to--and I have seen where they have tried to--remodel and redo some things. They were doing some things when I was there, restoring storm doors and those types

of things. I know they are old now and are not being kept up. I hate to say it, but they are beyond help. You can hope that someday, somehow there will be some drastic changes made. Maybe, just maybe they will add some jobs, too. That atmosphere tends to create a feeling of depression, of uselessness. In the midst of that, I have seen some tremendous people. There have been people who have come out and excel in spite of it all. Those people are survivors and really did things that a lot of us couldn't do. I give them applause for just being able to make it. Nobody has the right to take someone else's things away. Given what they had to go on, they've done a lot.

Again, that's bringing society into it, and that's a little community in place by itself. There's Youngstown, and within the city of Youngstown, there's a city called Westlake. The other people, the rich, didn't understand. Those were people who were fortunate enough to buy a house or rent a house.

The ultimate goal of our parents, as we grew older, we realized it was to get out of here. They were trying to make things good for us, but as we got older we realized they were trying to get out. Some people lived and died right there, in what is now nothing. It's a sad set of circumstances.

EC: Do you want to add anything else?

DC: No. It's been a while since I've thought about it. When you are young, kids see that as a home. Some of them now are a lot tougher kids than we were, but they have to be. Now there are some problems with drugs and alcohol with the kids. Twenty years ago it was a lot different than it is now. Twenty years before that, it was a whole lot different. It was making a change when we got there. We saw it go from high spots to not so high spots, and then to what it is like today. It's really turned around. It is night and day from the time I was there until now. You can't just point to what can be done there, I don't think. Instead of being a motivational thing for people to get out. . . . A lot of people have tried to get out. They get out and there is no place to go; there's no help.

EC: Thank you very much.

DC: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW