

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Niles, Ohio

Personal Experience

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ROSE DEJUTE

Interviewed

by

Beth Kantor

on

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K This is an interview with Rose DeJute for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Niles, Ohio, by Beth Kantor, on December 12, 1983

Could you tell me when and where you were born?

D. I was born in Niles on December 14, 1914, at home, I imagine

K What did your father do for a living?

D. My father, his four brothers, and his father, formed a contracting company to build roads. They built most of the brick roads in Niles, Warren, and Youngstown. My father died in 1922, two years after the firm got started. My uncles and my grandfather continued until my grandfather died in 1932. My father was a contractor

K Did your mother have any kind of outside work?

D No. She just raised the four of us. I had two brothers, and I have one sister; so there were four of us.

K What was school like, the first grades?

D I went to St. Steven's School. My first grade teacher is still living. Her name is Sister Clarisse, and she is at Villa Maria right now, retired. I loved her dearly. I think she was a big influence on my life. I think one of the biggest disappointments, because of my father's death, was the fact that I could not go to the Villa Maria High School.

When my father died, he no longer had a big interest in the company. We were taken care of, of course, but there just was no possibility for me to go to a private girl's school. I enjoyed St. Steven's very much. In fact, in 1968, my first grade class had our fiftieth anniversary for St. Steven's, and we had sister Clarisse as a guest. One of the high points of that reunion was the fact that one of the girls in that class married when she got out of high school and went to Arizona, I believe, and she had never been home to visit her parents. She came home for that reunion. I think that going to St. Steven's was a very fine experience.

I went from there to Niles McKinley. I do not remember very much of my four years there. I took a commercial course because I wanted to be a secretary. I was active in the chorus and in the drama club. I was in the junior play and in the senior play, but that is about all I remember about McKinley.

We were in the heart of the Depression right then, and it was pretty rough. I remember that I was about the only one who went to the prom in a car. I know that I was the only girl to receive a corsage. Those might not be important things right now to the students, but at that time they were, because there was very little money. My mother made my dress, and I went to the junior and senior prom with the same boy, which was

something, too

I was not sports minded. I hated gym, and I tried to think of an excuse every week to get out of it. I never could swim; I never wanted to. I made many friends at McKinley who are still my friends now. Of course, we went to the school that is Edison right now. Niles McKinley as we know it now, was not even in existence at that time. So it was a very small school and there were very small classes. I was not an honor's student. I think I was about twenty-sixth on the list. I probably could have done better, but I did not. My sister was salutatorian of her class, and Betty went on to college and teaches in Niles. I think there were 156 in our class, so maybe that was not too bad.

K I do not think so. What was downtown Niles like during your high school years?

D Much changed. All the activity was here on Main Street and around the section which we called the doughnut, which is around State Street. If you have seen any of the old pictures of Niles where the new city complex is now, those were all shops. In fact, I took dancing lessons on the second floor of one of those old buildings. That was where Mrs. Smith's Dancing School was. In fact, she came back to Niles, and she died, I think, about eight years ago. I was able to pick up my acquaintance with her, too, when she came back here.

This building was built the year I got out of St. Steven's, and Mrs. Johnson and Mr. McQueen were two of the first tenants in this building. This agency has been in this building since it was built.

I remember there was a drugstore. There was a pool room. I remember that during the World Series, for instance, the pool room would put up a big scoreboard on the outside. People would stand out on Main Street to hear the results of the games. I remember that.

When I was in high school, I was not permitted to come to town like most of the kids. I lived only three blocks from McKinley. I lived in this neighborhood, but I had to be home. As I said, my grandfather lived with us until he died, and my mother was very strict with us. There were no school buses; we walked to school. Of course, I walked to McKinley, too, but I do not know too much about what happened here in town after we got out of school. I remember, once in a while, I would be able to come to town with some of the girls. Law's Market was on Park Avenue, now about where the rec room is. It was a big grocery store, and we would go there after school to get a dill pickle. That was the standard practice every night, and only once in a while could I go along.

I remember when I worked at Metal Products, I would always walk through Central Park. Central Park is long gone. There was a bandstand and there was the old administration building still standing there. When I walked up to Erie Street in the day, I cut through Robbins Avenue Extension, which is no longer there now, but coming home, I had to deliver the mail at the post office. So I would have to come around the long way, through Central Park, up past the newsstand. The newsstand was not where it is now. It was on Park Avenue, and I was an avid magazine reader. I got the New York Times every week, and I would stop there to pick up my paper and my magazine, then I would

go on to the post office. There was no daily pick up of mail at that time. Of course, our mail was delivered in the morning by the parcel post truck, but I delivered the mail, so I came through town every day. Amarelli's Barber Shop was across the street. He just retired. Calvin's was always there. Across the street was the Antler Hotel.

I am very much in favor of what we did to the downtown because I was here and I saw what went on. For instance, Pritchard's Clothing store was a very fine establishment, but you cannot stay in business if people do not come in to buy your product. The merchants had to move out to the strip to survive. Many of the buildings were not occupied by the owners, and if you have a tenant who cannot survive in your building and he moves away, what do you do with the empty building? Like Woolworth's, for instance. I know for a fact that the only time Woolworth's was busy was the three days the retired people came to town to cash their checks. There was a lunch counter. We here in the bank would maybe go down for a sandwich or a cup of coffee, but what do you do with a lunch counter the rest of the day or during the week, when no one is there to buy your food? If they do not come in to buy what you have for sale?

It was convenient, I thought. It was good to come downtown. There was a Hoffman's, a wonderful department store. You could get anything you wanted in Hoffman's. They would have moved away if they had not had the fire that burned them down. We needed the parking space. You cannot find a parking space here anywhere during the day. People will say, "We cannot come to town because there is not any place to shop." They want to pull up in front of a building and just walk right in. Fifty people cannot park in the spot in front of the building. I think it was a wonderful thing that they did.

I tried an experiment. There was the Chowder Pot down here, the restaurant, which was Arden's Furniture store. A man was in the office a couple of years ago. He was complaining of the fact that everybody had moved away. He wanted to know where you could go now to get a cup of coffee. I told him to go down to the Chowder Pot. He wanted to know what that was. I told him that it was remodeled and that it was now the Chowder Pot on Main Street. He did not know anything about it. I said, "Didn't you see it when you drove down Main Street?" He said, "I do not look around when I am driving." But he had not even cared enough to walk around. This is what is happening to Niles. They complain but they do not do anything about it. They are complaining about the fact that the Antler Hotel was torn down. They liked the landmark. Three times, I think, women have tried to open a tearoom over there, but no one would go in. Only transients would rent the rooms. So I tell people who complain to me, "Well, how many times did you go into the Antler Hotel?" They will say, "I was never in there, but I like to look at it." This is pretty stupid reasoning, is it not?

- K. Yes, definitely.
- D. When you come into Niles from the Ridge, and you see our beautiful street lights and the buildings that are here now, it is beautiful. But now too many people will admit it, they say it should have been left, they say it should have been restored like Chagrin Falls. We

never did have the type of building that they have in Chagrin Falls or Hudson. We did not have that sort of thing. Then they mention Mesopotamia. Well, we did not have the green in the middle of downtown. People who came to Niles to settle in Niles were mill workers, they were immigrants. They did not know anything about laying out a city. To restore a town and to restore buildings, you have to have people who are interested.

You would be surprised how little interest there was in this bicentennial there was in Niles. I worked on the White House Ladies gowns. I was Ida McKinley. We had a meeting of 400 ladies one day; we had no response because, in the beginning, we wanted every lady to pay for her own gown. When we finally went out and got sponsors, we got some interest created, but we did not have enough. So we had to pay for the rest of the gowns when we had our showings. But women are saying to me now, "I would have been a White House Lady, but I was not asked." This is sour grapes, because they were asked, but it was even the council who was not in favor. After that it was a success, they said that they had misunderstood. A friend of mine called me after the first performance and apologized. He said, "I apologize, Rose, for the way I acted, the way I felt. I thought you were just a bunch of old ladies going to put on a style show." This is what is going on. I am hoping that this will not happen for our sesquicentennial.

We published the Niles history during the bicentennial. We ordered, though, exactly the number of copies that we had orders for, because we got a very poor response from our advertising for the application that was in the paper. Now everybody wants a copy of the book, it is not available. I am the one who gets the calls "Why aren't there any available copies?" They call the library and the library refers them to me. I have to explain that we would have had 10,000 copies, if they had been ordered.

K During the Depression, you had a job and then you did not have a job, right?

D Oh, yes. I worked at Metal Products. All during, I worked there. I got very little money. I think I was paid weekly. I started out at eighty dollars a month, and I remember there were sixteen employees. It was not the building that it is now. It is up on Erie Street. There were sixteen employees. By the way, it is the only company in Niles that has never lost a day's work. They have never had a strike, they have never lost a day's work. I do not know if they are unionized now, but they were not at that time. As I said, there were sixteen men, and they were a shearing company; that means that they got scrap metal from the different mills, and they sheared it to size for jobbers. There was this big, long wooden building on Mahoning Avenue, and then we had a small house, Stucco House, that was our office on Erie Street, right across from Shevenes Metal. I used to plant the flowers because I had very little to do. There were two partners, Mr. Franco and Mr. Worton, and me and the cleaning lady who came in once a week. If I did not go home for my lunch, we prepared our lunches there. Some of the girls from across the street would come over. I was paid weekly, as I said, and we got a Christmas bonus. I remember the first year we got a ham and the second year I got a five dollar check, which I thought was really big money. I used to go

shopping in Youngstown every Saturday I would meet the bus at the corner and go shopping. I remember I could practically buy a whole outfit for five dollars

Then it gradually got better I had worked myself up to a really good salary, but as I said, I was engaged I broke my engagement I had to find another job Mr Johnson had heard that I was looking, and I had known him, of course, all of my life He was our insurance man So I went from steel to insurance, which was a big jump, but Mr. Johnson, just like Mr. Franko, taught me the business. I had to learn insurance from the bottom up. He got me a solicitor's license, and then I got an agent's license I was an agent even before I bought the agency, and I was more or less like his manager The last six years of his life he was semi-retired When he knew he was going to die, he told me to put his agency and his house up for sale Well, I decided that whoever got the agency would not want me with it, and that I could do it myself So, I bought the agency before he died. I never changed the name out of respect for him. So I have never been without a job

K How did Niles suffer during the Depression?

D It was pretty bad. Yes, and there were no relief agencies There was nothing to fall back on We had WPA (Works Progress Administration). In fact, WPA ruined my uncles' business because they had to hire WPA labor. My uncles were workaholics, like my father was They took care of their own equipment; they set out their own land terms Of course when they started, they used wagons and horses, but when they were real successful, they had mechanized equipment like steam shovels and tractors and things like that But when they had to use WPA labor, that just finished them, because when five o'clock came, the men would drop the shovels and just run and not put any equipment away. They had to get the jobs through the government, and it was never the same after that We, as a family, were not involved with the family business, though We got a monthly income from it until my grandfather died

In Niles, the mills closed I cannot really tell you too much about the Depression because we were not affected We were not rich, but we were not poor We were not destitute We owned our own home, I was working, my sister was in college My brother, Anthony, got a job. Michael was born four months after my father died, so he grew up after the Depression I was not affected I know that there were soup kitchens, because Michael used to go with some of our neighbors and stand in line just because he wanted to go with these boys There was the Red Cross. People needed food. It was called the Community Fund at that time; they needed clothes, but I really was not affected.

K Could you tell me a little bit about the style of clothing and how it changed?

D Yes.

K From your school years to the 1940's

D Well, I can still wear some of my school clothes because they have not changed that much. Clothes go in cycles. The hems change. Now I have pictures of my mother and my aunts, when my mother was first married, and they wore the voluminous clothes and the big hats. I have her wedding pictures. She dressed us beautifully. I know that when I was in St. Steven's, we did not wear uniforms, but we did have clothes. I had my first communion picture, and the dress was no different from they wear now--the full skirts, the big bows, hair ribbons. When I was in high school, I have since been told that nobody had as many clothes as I did. Now, I never thought too much about it. As I said, my mother made my clothes and my sister's. I can remember what I wore for the play. One dress was long with a cape collar, a full skirt, that very much is in vogue right now. I had another dress that had three tiers. It was mid-calf, three tiers that were pleated. That is very much in vogue right now. I had a very special dress that was navy blue, pleated down the front and back, and I know I wore a starched collar and cuffs, which I had to starch myself. And I wore a polka dot bow with that. Well, now everybody is wearing those bows.

K Right. Where did your mother get the material to make the clothes?

D She would buy it. Most of her material came from Hoffman's. She had a charge at Livingston's. Most of her clothes came from Livingston's. I am still wearing a Hudson Seal cape that she had. She had a Hudson Seal cape with a grey squirrel collar. I had it made into a stole. My father, before he died, bought her a full-length Hudson Seal coat, which is very much like the coats they are wearing now. That had a black fox fur -- no different than they are wearing now. I still wear muffs which I wore then. The year my father died, he bought me a raccoon muff. All I did was have the tail removed. I have never stopped wearing muffs. Every twenty-five years they come back into style, but in the winter I wear them all of the time.

Hats were very fancy. I still have several hats that I wore thirty years ago. Pill boxes, but we wore ours square, not like Jackie Kennedy wore hers. She wore hers at the back of her head. My prom dresses were floor length. My junior prom dress, I remember, was three rows of burgundy ruffles, and I had to sit in the rumble seat of this car that I went in. You can imagine what that looked like. My senior prom dress was pink. And it was basic: full skirt, long sleeves. I had the first pair of high boots in Niles. In fact, the man at Leopold's had ordered them for me. I wanted a pair of black, shiny boots. You can get them in all colors now. I had a black raincoat, and I wanted to wear those boots with them.

As I said, I got all of the fashion magazines, and I ordered things from them. I was the first one in Niles to wear babushka. It was a very cold winter, and I belonged to our church organization. A little old lady in Niles had been to visit my mother and she brought her a cashmere head scarf because all immigrants came over with their scarves. The night that I wanted to go to this meeting, it was a very cold night, and I tied this cashmere scarf around my head. It had never been done. Of course, the little old ladies in town were wearing them at that time, but none of the young people wore them.

Babushkas then became very popular. All you need to do is start something, and then someone will follow.

I always liked to wear something that was outstanding. I was the first one with knickers, and I still wear knickers. They are very popular right now. I had a pair that was on the cover of Mademoiselle, and I wore them until they wore out. Clothes have not changed too much.

K: Clothes have not changed. Was Niles prosperous right after the war?

D: Oh, yes. Niles went through a very good period, just like Youngstown and Warren did because of the mills. We had the arsenal, everybody worked at the arsenal. Everybody was working, even housewives. I think that is what started the revolution. Women got out to work and they knew what it was to have a paycheck. We were very active with the Red Cross, we worked at hospitals. Of course, that was without pay. But, yes, I would say Niles was very prosperous. My brother was a machinist. He had very fine paying jobs. Everybody was, as far as I know, prosperous. They got spoiled. There were the auto industries.

K: Yes. You had mentioned that you were the first one to go to prom in a car.

D: We did not even have a car. Yes, I do not remember how many cars there were, but nobody drove to school, for instance. My date's friend had a small car with a rumble seat, and my date and I were invited to go with him. When they came to pick me up, we had to sit in the rumble seat. I imagine there were probably one or two others there. I do not remember. I know we drove to Milton Dam to dance after the prom. But no one had flowers. My date was John Holloway, and sent me a wrist corsage. Then the next year, of course, some of the other boys did. I know that I started a trend, because now, that is the first thing they think about.

K: When did Niles start falling downhill?

D: I do not pay too much attention to things like that. I do not really know. It was probably in the last ten years.

K: Do you see a reason behind that?

D: Sure, all of those steel closings. I think the unions were partly responsible. You cannot milk a company dry with fringe benefits and leave it with nothing to put back into the company. You have to modernize your buildings. The valley was not able to do that. You have to have money to expand. Of course, taxes helped. The workers just were too greedy. I think they still are. I see a big change here in my own agency, the way policy holders feel about everything. They want all of the advantages, but they do not like the disadvantages. They want the privileges that an insurance policy can give them, but they

do not want to pay the premium. They shop around

You would lose a good, valued customer, and a friend, if he can save five dollars. He goes somewhere he does not get any service. I think this happened with stores. You see how people rush to an opening where they can get free things. They go where they can save; they do not have any loyalty to one grocer. I have seen every independent grocer in Niles fold up. I have had the insurance on most of them.

Mr. Smith, on Cherry Street, for instance, would ask me to stop up and pick up the premium. I would like to go because I liked to visit with him. He would cry the blues to me. He would say that the customers in his neighborhood who were running a bill with him would not pay their bill, but they would go to Sparkle or A & P or Value King and buy groceries where they could save five or ten cents, pay cash, and then let him wait. To me, this is not loyalty, and I think you owe loyalty to someone who has been your best friend. He would not hold out.

The same was with the Cozoni's and the man who was on South Main Street, I cannot think of his name right now, but he is dead. Mr. Trimber, who is dead now, too, was our neighbor grocer. Customers would come in as a convenience, but they would go to the supermarkets to save money, where they had to pay cash. I think this is true of all businesses, but I really do not know what caused it. I think the steel industry moving out had a lot to do with the closing down of the specialty companies, but if we diversify and bring back industries, I think we will come back. You can only reach the bottom and then you cannot go any deeper. You have to start coming back.

K So you believe there is a chance for Niles

D Oh, absolutely. There always has been. That is history. If you are a follower of history, you know that everybody goes through a bad period. You just have to wait it out. You have to live your life that way, too. People give up right now.

Another thing is young people who get married and want everything right now. They say, "I am not interested in what happens twenty years from now. I want what I want right now." They are not willing to work with it. I am sure Niles will come back. It is not such a bad place to live in. I think it is the greatest.

K Can you tell me a little bit about Hoffman's burning down?

D Yes, I watched it. When I worked for Mr. Johnson, we were in the room across the hall. You could see Hoffman's. It was in the afternoon. I do not remember now how the fire started. I do not think anybody knows, but there was a woman trapped upstairs and she was killed by the fire. I had been in there just a couple of days before. They were going to move. They were going to go out of business, and they had the only existing trolley. The clerk would write out your sales slip and put in this little box and send it on the trolley up to the office. That was always fascinating.

That was the beginning of the end of Main Street because women who came downtown would go into Hoffman's. One side was for women, and the other side was

for men. The upstairs was bedding and clothes and things like window shades. It was a department store. I know that my mother and I bought all of our material there. I was always over there looking for patterns or yarn. My brother bought clothes. Betty's husband used to work there at Christmas time. I knew Mr. Griffin, who was in charge of the men's department. I knew all of the clerks. There is one still living. I think her last name was Williams. She was on the women's side. I knew the two women who worked in the office. In fact, Julia Greshum sold me a trunk filled with old clothes that belonged to her grandmother, and they are part of our Historical Society's dresses, and I wore one during the bicentennial. They all came from Julia's family. I was very much involved. We had the insurance on that store.

Getting back to products, another interesting thing was, when that old building burned down -- the wooden building -- I was working for George Johnson. The first year I came to work for him that building burned down, and we had all the insurance. I remained a friend of Mr. Franco's until he died. There was a close relationship between the Johnson's and the Franco's, and we always had their insurance. We had a lot of insurance on the fleet up until Mr. Franco retired. But we had the insurance on Hoffman's. That was a very sad day. We watched the firemen put out the fire from our windows on that side. We were on the fifth floor. We were higher than the Hoffman's building.

The other stores were affected also. The Ideal Market was right next to it on one side and Isaly Dairy was on this side, and I think they had water and smoke damage. But it never reopened because it was just gutted.

- K A lot of people who I have talked to have mentioned the great tragedy in losing the lady. Was that the first time something like that had happened?
- D. The only time, I believe.
- K The only time?
- D Yes.
- K I just wondered because it keeps coming up.
- D Yes, it was an accident, of course. The family did not sue or anything, but it was a tragedy because she had been a valued customer and she was from an old Niles family. Everybody in Niles knew her. I think she was with her sister, wasn't she? I do not remember the particulars. I thought that three ladies went in that day. The Niles Daily Times would have the full story, but I know that she died in the fire, probably from the smoke.
- K Smoke, yes.

- D In most cases you die of the smoke inhalation, you just do not burn to death
- K What changes has Niles gone through? I think we touched on just about everything except for the 1980's. You have mentioned how people want everything now and they are not willing to work for it
- D Do you mean wait for it?
- K To wait for it, yes
- D I do not know. I think there was a bigger interest in Niles history during the 1980's, and there is going to be a great deal more next year. No, I do not think the attitude of the younger ones has changed too much. You will notice even when there is an appointment in the city building, the ones who do not win sue. There is this thing about, if you do not get what you want, you are going to sue someone. It seems to me that they do not want to try to get something on their own. If they cannot have somebody get what they want for them, and then they do not get it, it is somebody else's fault. Like it is the government's fault right now, it is Mr. Reagan's fault because nothing is happening the way they want it. It is a selfish view. If Mr. Reagan was to please everybody individually, think of the tremendous job he would have. How can you, in any administration, please everybody? You have to do what is the best for the majority if you are in some kind of an executive position. I think there is too much criticism about everything, there is too much misunderstanding. Most people do not bother to find out the facts. Even if they know the facts, they will not believe it. I do not think the situation is getting any better. I truly do not.
- K Do you think your younger years in high school were a lot simpler than life is now? Do you think the requirements upon life were simpler?
- D Oh, yes, absolutely. Many of my friends do not agree with me because they say that maybe because I did not have too many problems, I felt that life was simpler. But I do know that we did not have the peer pressure that you have now. The young are always fighting against the establishment. Then, if they get a responsible job and they are part of the establishment, their attitudes change. I do not think that we were rebellious. Maybe it was because I did not know anybody who was rebelling. I really do not think I am qualified to give you a true answer about that.
- I have said many times that I would not be eighteen again for a million dollars. I have had many people disagree with that because they say that they would truly like to start over. I have talked to too many young people who are trying to get a job, and I see no future for them. A lot of men who have lost their jobs at forty-five and fifty, I see no future for them, either. So I think it is hard.
- I know there are a lot of unhappy people. A lot of my friends, friends of friends, who have had to retire but would have had twenty more years of productivity, who were

forced out, are unhappy. We are living longer. Of course, that is another problem. It is harder and harder now, for the ones who are working, to understand social security because they have to pay so much. I have been in social security since it started, and I know how those sixteen men felt about it. They hated it. Nobody was going to take any money out of their pay, but I am sure many of those men are living now on the checks that they are getting, which would not be very big, of course, because they made very little money. There are many people right now who would have nothing if it were not for social security, and nothing is going to happen to it. It will always be there. I think that there are just too many problems that we did not have back then.

K They were not at the time.

D No, that is true. I think they will be surrounded. I think one hundred years from now there will be problems, and these will seem like peanuts. But I think I had a very good life. I would not want to go back, but I think I lived, and many of my friends agree with me. We lived and have lived in the very best period of history. In the past twenty years, more has happened in the world than happened for centuries.

End of Interview