

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Hewitt Niles Safety Director

Personal Experience

O H 891

LEE HEWITT

Interviewed

by

Stephen Papalas

on

December 14, 1983

P· This is an interview with Mr Lee Hewitt for the Youngstown State Oral History Program, on the Hewitt Niles Safety Director in the middle to later twenties, by Stephen Papalas, on December 14, 1983, at 36 Franklin Avenue, in Niles

Could you tell a little bit about your father's origin? Where did he come from? What nationality was he? Could you tell me a little bit about your mom?

H We can trace my father to the Alsace-Lorain origin between France and Germany He was of Dutch ancestry As far as I know, his father was a farmer who lived across from the Jake A Vilmer Farm on Newton Falls-Niles Road in Newton Township They worked the farm for Jake A Vilmer The thing that I remember the most was he said that his mother did a lot of baking shows and they would have a dozen pies down in the pantry ready to be eaten Another comment that came to my mind was the corn field that was just a mile long He said that you could just make one trip down and back, and it was a day's work in the corn field

He must have gotten his education in Newton Township, but he did teach for a period of two years in a small, one-room schoolhouse, which is at the corner across from the present greenhouse right now There is a filling station on the other corner

P Where is that at?

H There used to be a one-room schoolhouse west of Lordstown, and he taught school there for two years The first year, he walked to his home The next year, he bought a horse and buggy, and he drove. He graduated from Warren Normal School In those days, the fellow that he looked up to was William Jennings Bryant. I remembered it One time, he went to Youngstown, and it was an all-day trip to drive to Youngstown He made quite an affair of it

P Do you mean that he got to see William Jennings Bryant?

H Yes, evidently

P In Youngstown?

H Yes He evidently went out and married Mom, and he went out to the Ridge He worked there for a short period of time

P. Doing what?

H There was a plant at the Ridge that he worked for When he came to the Niles Forge and Manufacturing company on Grant Street, there were two brothers that owned that place A F. and C T Swinney. At one time, the one would be in charge of the place, and the next time, the other would be in charge of it You never knew who you were working for I remember A F. Swinney very distinctly Dr Seth was in his office today in his old home up

there

P Forge Manufacturing was the name of it?

H Yes, Niles Forge and Manufacturing Dad worked there until the years of the Depression When it got to the point where he was not making enough money to keep the household going, he had to quit He finally got this job with W O Williams, I believe He was the County Treasurer His job in those days was to go out and help people in collecting the taxes for the county His job was to give them a plan on how they could pay and catch up on them He worked that way until W O Williams was elected out of office as a Republican

There was a Democrat in He was a Staunch Democrat all of his life until the period of time that he started a splitting his votes up all of the time from that time on Back in the years when he first moved into this town, it was Republican There were not too many Democrats in it Of course, since then, it has all changed

P How was he related to Harvey Kistler?

H My grandmother was a Kistler. They were cousins There were about five brothers in the Kistler family In fact, they are home-setters on Warren-Salem Road today out on Route 45

P Do you remember Harvey yourself?

H I remember Harvey

P What kind of guy was he?

H I cannot tell you too much about the Kistler family or Harvey He was just a forty-second cousin of mine I do not remember too much, but I do remember of him He worked at the roundhouse out there It was a signal tower out on the Pennsylvania Railroad Then, he started this insurance business on the side Before he died, Karl Kistler inherited from him

P What inspired Harvey Kistler to run for Mayor?

H I could not say that

P Did your father have much to do with Harvey's election campaign?

H He probably worked for him. As far as that is concerned, such as how hard, I do not know I think that their budgets were not very much, and I do not think they spent too much on their election campaign

P Harvey Burgess, who was the Prosecutor at that time, was a very, very staunch law and order person He was strict and conservative He saw things either black or white There was no

gray You were either right or wrong He prosecuted people accordingly It seems that there were other people like that in office at that time, unlike today, when people do not seem to be decisive Would you point to your father as a decisive, strict law and order politician?

H Yes, I would say that Dad was. I do know that he used to go out during the days of prohibition and pick some fellows up, such as policemen, right off of the street. They used to go out on raids. I do believe that Dad carried an ax with him when he went out on those raids I do not think that they were operating for a short period of time after they left They did get evidence if they did go downtown and picked up the boys right up off of the streets

I understand that their policy down at the city building was five-hundred dollars for the first offense, one-thousand dollars for the second offense, and the third offense was a jail sentence It is my belief today that this is the way the city building got the money for the building, the old city building

P Did you ever hear of a man named Birrell?

H He was an Attorney Prosecutor, was he not?

P Yes He carried an ax also.

H I cannot tell you too much about him. I was not into politics I was just trying to make a living for myself

P Your dad was the first Safety Director to go on these raids personally Before that, it never occurred Your dad was the first Safety Director to got out on these raids by himself and direct them Why? Did he ever talk about that?

H Not in his family life No If Dad was out on a raid or something like that, he might forget about it the next time. He did not talk about that at all

P. In his later years, did he ever mention the quality of policemen at that time?

H No

P The reason that I am asking is he demanded the policeman at that time to tow the line He weeded out a few of them and had them fired because they would come to work drunk and were caught sleeping at night This was all documented in the newspapers I was wondering if he ever mentioned that

H Not in home life

P Before your dad became the safety director for Mayor Kistler, what other kinds of experiences did he have in politics, other than being with the county treasurer for awhile?

Did he ever run for an office on his own?

H: Dad ran for office in about 1908, as I remember it. Whether it was the Mayor or not, I am not quite sure. It must have been the Mayor. He was a staunch Democrat. He would not think about splitting the ticket for anything. That was the only experience in politics. I remember Dad sitting up until two or three o'clock in the morning to get the returns in on how the country was going and who was getting in. We always sat up and listened to it.

P: On the radio?

H: Yes, on the radio in those days.

P: Who did he run against in 1908? Was it Nailer?

H: Nailer sounds familiar. Like I said, it was a Republican town.

P: How did your dad take that defeat?

H: I was too young to know. I could not tell you. He was just a young person, too. After all, he was not that old.

P: What are your earliest recollections that you have of your father? What kind of person was he? How was he as a father? How did he raise his children?

H: My dad was an easy-going fellow. He very seldom raised his voice. My earliest recollections that come to me were when I wanted to learn how to drive. He was always on the road for the Niles Forge. He had travels through Youngstown, Akron, and Cleveland, and once in a while, I would go with him. It was a big deal for me to sit beside him and drive the thing. That was the old Model T Ford.

P: What did he do? How do you remember him on those long rides? Did he talk to you about the business? What kind of things did you talk about?

H: I do not know.

P: What were his points of interest in life?

H: He was always active in the First Presbyterian Church. He was on the Board of Trustees, and he was treasurer of the church for years and years as an elder. Church was his one big thing in his life.

He and my mother used to like to eat. They would often go to this place over at Stow. It was the first smorgesboard that I know of around here. They used to love to go over there and eat. So did I. My mother was a good cook. She just kept on and on.

P Was he interested in family history?

H My dad traced our branch of the family back to 1812. A fellow by the name of Reverend Henry Hewitt came in and was the Pastor of Coitsville and North Jackson. In other words, he went from one parsonage to another. He went back to the year of 1812. This man was evidently a preacher at that time. He made a family tree of it. My dad spent hours and hours on this family tree. He started out with one fellow, and the first thing that you knew was that he had seven or eight. He started out with a blue-print page of thirty-six inches, and before he was done, he had two of them going at once. It is hard to say.

P That was interesting.

H My mother was a large lady. There were things that Mother could not do in her later years. She did love to go on a trip any time that she could go with Dad.

P Like where?

H In his travels.

P: On business?

H On business, yes. Like I said, he was the fellow that figured how much steel went into a building. He would come back and figure out how much tonnage there was and how much it was going to cost to fabricate it. That was the way that the Niles Forge Company handled it. One time, he went as far as Boston. I know that he went down to Chattanooga, too. I know that he was there one time because we had a card from him. I doubt that he got work from these far away places. He did go that far for the work. He knew that the big contracts at the time were in Youngstown and Cleveland. The name that comes to my mind all of the time is Shutrump. He was a contractor in those days.

P What can you tell me about the bombing of your Dad's home? First of all, where was the house at?

H The house was at 913 South Street.

P That was bombed?

H Yes. That house, at one time, was just a five-room house. As our family got bigger, Dad put three rooms on it. It was an eight-room house. It had a big L-shaped porch. It was our habit during the hot days in the summer of sleeping out there. We had a cot out there. On this particular night of the bombing, which went off at about twenty minutes to two, my sister, Ruth, was sleeping down on this cot in the corner. The bomb was set off at one of the brick tiers. The force of the explosion, instead of going in, went the opposite way. It broke

windows in houses one-hundred yards away. My sister, Ruth, after the bomb had gone off, was lifted into the house. We all rushed downstairs. The main thing that they thought of in those days was to turn the gas off in case there was a gas leak, so that there would not be another explosion. Every window in our house, except for one, was broken. We all walked around in our bare feet and never got cut.

P Did the porch cave in? Is that why you had to pull her out?

H The porch floor fell down. She had to be lifted into the house. My mother was very hysterical. It was a big event in my life. I knocked off work for a day. I did not have to go to work.

P Do you think that this was a result of the bootlegging experiences that your father was on the raids as the investigator said, at that time, and the newspaper?

H I think that it was a good warning to my father, definitely. I think that it served its purpose because my mother was afraid to stay by herself after that for the rest of the time that we lived in Niles.

P Did your dad stay in office?

H No. With the pressures from my mother, he got out before Kistler was voted out of office.

P. What did your dad say about it in later years? Anything?

H About what?

P About this explosion? Did your dad ever talk about it in later years?

H No, just the fact that he had an idea of what caused it, but he could not put the finger on anybody.

P Did he have bitter feelings about it later?

H. No. That just goes along with the job, I suppose. They got what they wanted. He did quit the office.

P What was the reaction of the community to this? Did the people talk about it?

H. Well, this is not something that happened five years ago. What I remember is something about that it was just nothing.

P Do you remember the exact date?

H No

P Where were you in the house when that happened?

H I was sleeping up in the bedroom upstairs. I had just come in I was out until 12 25 a m In those days, we would go out to Krager's, Medley's, or some place like that for a sandwich It was quite late when I came in I do not know if the bomb was in place then I often wondered that

P What did your dad do after he and Kistler left office?

H In 1928, if it even happened about then, it was getting close to the Depression, and things were not working Work was hard to get. A few years later on, dad eventually had to quit because he could not provide enough support for the family.

P What did he quit during the Depression?

N The Niles Forge They just were not building anything He did scout around My father went up to his uncles to dig potatoes, so we would have potatoes that year He dug potatoes for a period of time. If he dug so many, he got one or two or whatever you want to call it I know that he went up there, too I do not know how many years that he worked for Williams, but he got the job It was only a two-year term, and he did work very long

P Did he work for Williams during the Depression?

H The Depression was on the upswing It was on the upswing, then

P He went to the treasurer's office after Kistler left office

H Yes

P What happened after the treasurer's job washed out?

H He went out and worked for Hetts, R R Hetts. They were demolishers They would buy a plant, tear it down, and sell the lumber, brick, and steel, and so forth Dad worked for Hetts until he died It was about eighteen years When he started the store downtown, Dad went down and ran the store He never had experience operating a store

P What store was that?

H The place that has the name up there on South Main Street in back of the old Erie Depot The name is still up there as constructors Right below it is the name Leemat That was me and my partner You can sight that out, of course Hetz Constructors is still up on the top



of it. It is Mulio Brothers, now. It is a produce company. It is where the Western Reserve used to be.

P: When did your dad die?

H: 1955

P: Do you remember the date?

H: It was in August.

P: How did he die?

H: He was really sick. It must have been cancer. He had an operation. He had it early in March. It was something that you could not control. I had taken him up to the hospital a couple of times. One time, they took four quarts of blood out of his lungs, and the next time, they took five. He was married to his second wife, at the time. I guess that the third time, we did not get him in on time, and he drowned in his own blood and the fluid in his lungs.

P: How old was your dad when he died?

H: He was seventy-seven years old when he died.

P: Was he born in 1878 in Newton Township? What do you remember about the Depression yourself?

H: I always had a job. The pay was not so much. It was rough to feed a family of five on what some of the people were receiving. I always had a job, and personally, I worked as high as seventy-five dollars a week. Sometimes, I would leave at seven-thirty in the morning and get home at midnight. I would go back out the next morning at eight-thirty for thirty-cents an hour. That went on for two or three years. You gradually got a little bit more. In those days, the more money that you got, the better off you were. It was just a rough go.

P: How did people around you live? What neighborhood did you live in?

H: Charlie Mathias was working for one of the lumber companies. Tom Wilson was the assistant or paymaster of Republic Steel. The people around there were very well taken care of, I would say.

P: How large of a segment of the community was out of work? They had soup lines then. There was one in Niles.

H: I never paid any attention to that because I never went down to get anything like that. I did

not pay any attention to that.

P Did you ever learn how many people had been affected by the Depression? Could you tell what proportion of the community was affected?

H I have nothing on that. It was fifty years ago.

P When you were young, what were your earliest recollections of Niles?

H The earliest that I can remember was that Krieger's was the gathering spot with the crowd that I ran around with.

P How do you spell that?

H K-R-I-E-G-E-R-S. The crowd that I ran around with would gather there. The strangest thing to say was that I worked for fifty-cents a day when I was twelve years old. I carried water down at the Niles Forge. I saved every cent of it. As I got older, I would draw out five dollars every two weeks, and that was my spending money. Krieger's got the major portion of it in those days.

P Where was Krieger's?

H Right about where the bay is. It was somewhere in that area right now.

P What was it?

H A poolhall. That is where we used to gather, even when I got out of school.

P What did it look like inside?

H You could get a drink or a cigar up front. In the back, they had six or eight pool tables. They would be going full blast at certain times of the day. The further back in the poolroom you went, the worse the tables got.

P How is that?

H They did not keep those up. They just kept the ones up front. Everybody wanted the front tables. After we got out of school, it was a gathering place for us. We would get four fellows, Red Haus, Dewey Bradley, Jimmy Miller, Joe Hutchings, or Johnny Davis. We would just go out. We used to go out in the car and maybe have a sing fest. We would go out and sing. None of us drank. I was working at the mill, at the time. Normally, if it were my car, I would buy the gas and do a lot of the treating for the boys. We were playing semi-pro football, at that time. There was a bunch of us

from the hill top Some of the footballs that we were playing with were the fellows that we ran around with

P What position did you play?

H Half-back or end

P Did Carmen DiChristoferro play?

H No, Carmen was a booster of the Republic Mill and their softball team He was usually there when Eddie Swartz was going on through He was a good booster, Swartz I played softball when the Stevens Mill was there We were the city champs for four years out of five years in their industrial league. They had three leagues They had a Class A League, Industrial League, and a Church League You could play in two, but you could not play on three If you were playing two nights a week, your nights were taken up This is just a good way to spend your evenings in those days You would go out there at five-thirty or six o'clock and finish up at eight o'clock It was a good way to spend an evening We played a lot of softball In fact, Niles probably had as much softball played in those days than anybody in the state Bill Wellen was the softball director, at that time

P What years were these, when you played softball?

H 1932 to 1945

P The Depression years?

H Oh, yes

P Is this when you went to Krieger's Pool Hall and the guys hung out together with the song fests and so forth?

H This was at the height of the money making, until about 1928, when you were making good money 1928 and 1929 was when it started on a downgrade So we were playing football at that time We just gathered there

P. What was Main Street like?

H It was full There was not any open space. I can assure you that I do not think there was not an empty space until Huffman's fire From that time on, Main Street just gradually deteriorated Every place was busy Woolworth's Ten-Cent Store took up quite a bit of it

P What did you do in high school? What was it like there?

H I took the commercial course, which was the easy one to get through with. I was just a C student. I was not a brilliant student. I was just a C student. I took commercial and got through as fast as I could. I had no expectation of going to college. In the latter years, we had Bill Davis as our coach. He wanted some of us fellows to go up to Hiram. We did not want to go up to Hiram because it would be the end of the world. None of us wanted to go to Hiram College. There is no doubt that we could have played scholastic football.

P In the late 1930's, do you remember the Republic Steel Strike, when the airplanes had to come and drop food into the plant?

H Sure.

P What can you remember about that?

H The fellow that I can remember the most is the guy who was my partner at Leemek Hardware Store who had charged us for flying the food in.

P Who was that?

H The fellow was my partner in the Leemek Hardware Store. He was originally from Massillon. His job was to get the food into the plant. We travelled to Boston for one year. I would say, "What steel strikes? What steel strikes?" They did not even know that it was happening around our area. To us, it was very important. They did not even know that it was in other parts of the country.

P What were the causes of the strikes? Can you remember?

H No.

P What was Max's last name?

H McHenry.

P Does he have any relatives in Niles today?

H No.

P What did McHenry say about it?

H He did not dwell on it too much. If you were in there and did not get out, that was about the story.

P What was that? Were they afraid to come out?

H There was somebody outside waiting for you.

P Is that right?

H It is just like the one up in Ashtabula

P Was it Makenzie?

H It was McHenry

P What was his first name?

H Marvin

P How did he get to be in charge of the plane drips?

H He was a salvage expert for the Republic Steel He just made it, I suppose They just gave him the job.

P Did he ever talk to you about the contracts that he had to make with the pilots and so forth? Did he go into detail about it?

H I was glad to get over it, and I never asked him anything about it

P: You were not at the plant, were you?

H No

P How many people were standing outside of the gates waiting? How many strikers were there?

H. I could not say that. I was working. I was at the Barrel Works in those days. I was working steady.

P I thought that maybe you drove by or something?

H No

P Carmen DiChristoferro was one of these people in that plant What do you remember about him as a young man?

H To me, Carmen was a sports enthusiast If you wanted any support for sports, Carmen was there He would give you all the support that you wanted In fact, Republic used to have

those days. It was always good to beat Bobby Wick. He was the pitcher in those days. You could beat him with one or two hits. He was walking around, and we would bat him one or two hits. Frankie Gerina was the same in those days. They are just probably names to you, but to me, they were two of the top pitchers in those days, like Ralph Crawford.

P In later years, how did DiChristoferio evolve as a leader in the community? Did you keep track of him much?

H. As a man, I liked Carmen. I think that he was a lot of the town of Niles. He was very unbiased in his opinions. I think that you could get Carmen to see your way, and I think that he went that way. I thought that Carmen was a really a good fellow.

P Is there anything else that you would want to record in this interview dealing with the history of Niles, this area here, some of the topics that we covered, or anything about your dad?

H To me, my father was just an ordinary fellow. I have never asked him for too much of an opinion. I knew what I wanted to do. I do not think that Father ever gave it to me. I just took the run of the line.

P By the way, was he a big guy? He looked like he was a tall person.

H No, I am bigger than he was. One time, he might have weighed one hundred and ninety pounds. I think that when Dad died, he was down to one hundred and sixty-five pounds. He had a little bit of a stomach, but not too much.

P How tall was he?

H I would say that Dad was about five feet and ten inches.

P Was there anything in particular about the way he dressed? For example, Karl Kistler remembered that his uncle had a penchant for wearing a bow tie and his glasses on his nose. A lot of people had recollections or specific characteristics of their relatives. Was there anything about your father? Was there a way in which he walked or talked?

H No. He was just an ordinary fellow.

P I appreciate the interview.

H Like I said, I never figured that there was an interview made on Pop to maybe go down into history. He was just a normal father.

P Thank you.

End of Interview