

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Westlake Terrace

Personal Experience

O H 941

RAY WORMER

Interviewed

by

Joseph Drobney

on

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D This is an interview with Ray Womer for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Westlake Terrace, by Joe Drobney, on October 28, 1985, at 637 Hyatt Avenue, in Campbell, Ohio, at approximately 3 00 pm.

Mr Womer, just to get started could you tell me a little bit about your early life, for example, where and when you were born, a little bit about your parents, how many brothers and sisters you have?

W I was born in Sharpsville, Pennsylvania I had one brother I had a half brother and a half sister

D: About what year were you born?

W. 1918.

D About how long did you live in Sharpsville?

W I imagine after I was born we probably left there when I was five years old

D You do not have too many memories of living in Sharpsville?

W Not too many, no

D After you moved from Sharpsville where did you go next?

W My dad went on a farm

D Do you remember where?

W Yes, it was over in Pennsylvania around Titusville

D Your father was a farmer then?

W Yes, originally He was born and raised on a farm

D In the 1920's then you lived on a farm out by Titusville, Pennsylvania?

W Yes, we lived up there for probably about six years I suppose.

D Until about 1929 or 1930. In other words you were probably about ten or eleven years old

W Around there Then we came to Youngstown We lived on Madison

Avenue My dad got a job down at Youngstown Sheet and Tube as a threader.

D. You were probably about ten or eleven when you moved?

W Yes, I went to Madison School That is McGuffey Road now. We lived where the bridge is there just on this side of the bridge

D You said you were about nine or ten when you moved to Youngstown?

W. Yes.

D You said your father got a job down at Youngstown Sheet and Tube?

W Yes

D Do you remember when he was out on the farm? What do you think to him was the main attraction of moving to Youngstown? Did he figure a mill job would be better pay?

W My mother hated the farm She had no desire to live on a farm

D Was there any particular reason?

W She just did not like it, she wanted to live in town. She did not want to live out in the country

D So in about 1929 or 1930 you moved to Madison Avenue.

W 1017 Madison Avenue.

D. That is the part of Madison here on the East Side?

W If you go up Albert Street, make a left That was where we lived

D. When you got to Youngstown, what do you remember as far as Youngstown when you first moved here? Had that been the first time you ever had been to Youngstown?

W No, I had been here before. We had a lot of relations here. My mother's cousin had a store down on Madison Avenue. She had another cousin who was a policeman here, George Herberts.

- D In Youngstown?
- W Yes One worked for the post office We had a lot of friends in Youngstown
- D: Even growing up in Sharpsville or Titusville, you had many trips over to Youngstown?
- W Yes, even while we were there we came here
- D As a very young boy having moved over to the city of Youngstown, how would you compare what downtown Youngstown was in the 1920's and 1930's with today?
- W No comparison. It was hustle and bustle We used to walk downtown. We walked up Madison to Wick and down Wick, down the hill, and went across the railroad tracks to the square There were just all kinds of shows and stage shows
- D Did you ever ride the trolley?
- W Oh, yes, I rode that My grandmother lived in an old ladies' home up on Mahoning Avenue on the other side of the bridge there I used to take the streetcar up there
- D You mentioned about the shows and the hustle and bustle Was there a particular day like a Saturday or a weekend?
- W Saturdays, yes
- D That was the day to go to town?
- W Yes, go down there and do your shopping, groceries, go to Ole's Market
- D Which market was that?
- W Ole's.
- D Was this a farm produce?
- W They sold bread, they sold vegetables, pastry, meats
- D Can you remember any places like particular theaters or places you went

downtown for recreation? Can you remember some of the names of them? Did you ever go to the Palace or the Park?

W I went to the Palace There used to be one there on the square

D The Warner or the Park?

W All of those were down there There used to be a lot of them

D The Strand?

W. The Strand, I think it was They used to have stage shows.

D Where was the old Strand at anyway? By this time you are about ten or eleven. Do you remember the different schools you went to during the 1930's when you moved to Youngstown right up until you graduated?

W. We went back to Pennsylvania My dad lost his job there. He got laid off

D How long had he worked at the plant before he got laid off?

W Maybe a year, a year and a half It was not much more than that He could not find work, so we went back to Pennsylvania

D By now we are into the Depression?

W Yes, you are telling me There was no work anyplace Through some friends of ours my dad got a job with an oil company down in Pioneer, Pennsylvania

D Is that down by Pittsburgh?

W That is south of Titusville

D Where did the family live while he was working?

W On the Success Oil Company land.

D They had homes or put you up on the land

W They had homes, there yes When you went to work there, you lived in their homes. They had about three of them They were big huge places We lived in a two family home.

- D The company pretty much took care of you as far as the lodging?
- W That was a good job at that time You had your housing. I think my dad got \$100 a month at that time, and that was big money
- D. Big money in the Depression How about you? You were going then back through elementary school
- W I was going to school in a one room schoolhouse
- D You mentioned you remember your father losing his job Can you remember some other memories of the Depression, for example, people standing in food lines?
- W Yes. We never did because we always found some way of getting food A lot of times we did not pay our rent There were times we just did not pay rent We ate alright because my dad knew all of these farmers My brother and I Would go out there and work in the fields We would get eggs, we would get potatoes, vegetables
- D So you always could eat?
- W Sometimes when they slaughtered, they would give you some meat It was not the best of the meat, but they would give you some meat There were other kids around the neighborhood who would go with me when I went out to work We would work for all this stuff, and we would bring it home My mother would cook that stuff up and she would feed that whole neighborhood
- D This was when you lived over in Pennsylvania
- W Yes
- D. You mentioned you originally lived in Pioneer when you father was working for the oil company?
- W Yes
- D Then you moved into Titusville?
- W. We went back into Titusville My dad got a job, and he got laid off out there

- D: Were you in high school?
- W: I was not in high school. I started eighth grade when we went back. I went to Washington High School.
- D: Did your father get another job?
- W: He was working for the WPA, (Works Progress Administration) or something like that during that time.
- D: He got a WPA government job?
- W: Yes.
- D: Do you remember what he did?
- W: Road work, put streets in, curbing.
- D: Up around Titusville?
- W: Yes.
- D: Do remember if he had to go someplace to get the job?
- W: Yes. We were on welfare. At that time you did not get welfare unless you worked if there were jobs available. If there were no jobs, they would give you welfare. As soon as WPA started if you got a notice that they needed you, you went to work. There were no if's, and's, or but's about it.
- D: While your father was working for the WPA, the government still gave you money for groceries and things like that?
- W: No, when you went to work for WPA, that was it. You got what you made which was not very much, but it was enough to a few groceries and pay your rent anyhow.
- D: At that time did it seem like the other kids' fathers, in other words a lot of the men in that area, were on WPA?
- W: Everybody, sure.
- D: The WPA kind of became a big employer.

- W. If you had a job, you were a big shot, if you were in one of the mills like the Iron or Cyclops Steel or something like that. You were a big shot if you had a job in there
- D Your father worked for the WPA in the mid 1930's there around Titusville By this time into the mid 1930's you mentioned you were in Washington High School in Titusville
- W Yes, and then I went to Coalstock High School for one year.
- D: About what year did you graduate there?
- W I did not graduate I had one year in high school, that is all I had, ninth grade. About 1935 was my last year in school I was about 16
- D You left to take a job
- W I did not have a job; I wanted to get one. It was around that time we decided to come back this way again
- D. Back to Youngstown?
- W To Sharpsville There was a new plant I do not know the name of it They made couplings like they did at the Sheet and Tube. My dad got a job there
- D When you lived back in Sharpsville?
- W Yes I do not know if the plant is still there or not I do not think so At that time, as I remember it, it did not act like it was too prosperous.
- D During the Depression it seems like the family was moving around to try to find the jobs
- W That is what we were doing.
- D Did you get the feeling that this would happen to a lot of other people as far as having to move?
- W I think so
- D Did you know some people?

- W I knew some who lived off the government if they could get something
There were a lot of them I would not say there were just a few, there
were a lot of them They had their roots there, and they did not want to
move It would seem like we were moving all the time just to find work
My father worked for a streetcar in Sharon
- D Tell me a little bit. Was that the streetcar that ran around Sharon or from
Sharon to Sharpsville?
- W He worked them all He went from Sharon to Sharpsville, he went from
Sharon to Farrell, all of those He even ran Sharon to Youngstown I can
remember coming over sitting along side of him in that streetcar coming
over here We used to come down Andrews Avenue down around
through that big wall down there to Front Street, Boardman Street
- D Yes, downtown
- W We would pull in there, and they had like a depot there.
- D. This was a regular route then The streetcar ran between over there in
the Shenango Valley over here into Youngstown?
- W Yes
- D How much would it cost to ride from Sharon to Youngstown? Do you
remember how much people had to pay?
- W It was not very much It was about \$.35 or \$.36, something like that
- D. At this time during the 1930's was Youngstown such a center that a heck
of a lot of people were everyday or so riding over on the trolley?
- W It was busy all the time The cars were always full
- D. About how long did your father work for that streetcar company?
- W I could not tell you I know he was working for the streetcar company
before I was born
- D This was back in the 1920's mainly?
- W Yes. All I know is that my mother said he held that job longer than any of
them

- D Moving back past 1935, after you moved from Titusville you mentioned you had gone as far as the ninth grade You moved back to Sharpsville
- W. My mother died in 1937 Then my dad came back here to Youngstown, and he went to work for some oil company He was kind of a handyman It was the Pure Oil Company where he went to work
- D Do you remember what he did by any chance?
- W. He was the handy man He would go out and get pumps at gas stations and paint, things like that
- D. By now it is 1938 and you are back in Youngstown?
- W I was not back I stayed with my brother
- D You stayed in Titusville
- W I stayed with him probably for about a year Then I got a job with the WPA over in Titusville
- D Was the WPA your first kind of real permanent job?
- W Yes
- D About how long did you work with the WPA?
- W Not too long, probably a year, a year and a half
- D It seems like it was hard work though
- W It was hard work I was a strong boy
- D After that year or year and a half with the WPA we are probably around 1938, 1939?
- W Probably about 1939.
- D After you worked for the WPA then what happened?
- W I came back here and I went to work in a gas station
- D Back in Youngstown?

W Yes. I got married in 1940

D Where were you living and how many people were you living with?

W I was living with my cousin. We were living at the same place on Madison Avenue. That was where I got married.

D. You were working in a gas station.

W: Yes.

D When you got back to Youngstown in 1940, were jobs still pretty tough to get?

W Yes, that was all I could get. I worked at that gas station. Then I left the gas station. Dad went back over to Pennsylvania to work on a farm, and we had come back over here to live with him, both my wife and I.

D Again you worked for a short time in a gas station over here, got married, then moved back to Pennsylvania.

W Yes, I went to work on a farm. We lasted one month there, that is all. I was driving a tractor. Then I went down to Titusville. My brother got me a job in Cyclops Steel. I worked about 18 months there.

D By now we are almost into the war.

W Yes, we are in the war when I came back here.

D Were you working for Cyclops into 1942 or so?

W I worked there until probably 1942. I left, and I came back here and went to work for Republic Steel.

D By now it is into the war. It is about 1942. By this time it is easier to get a job in Youngstown?

W Oh, yes, sure. You could go anywhere and get a job. I worked there I guess until about 1943. I did not work too long there.

D During the war where did you live?

W I lived up on Hayes Avenue.

- D Was this in a house or in an apartment?
- W. It was an apartment in a house
- D So you and your wife were living in an apartment during the war on Hayes Avenue Were the big mills during the war looking for people? Were they advertising for people?
- W There were big ads in the paper They would maybe put a whole page ad in there or half a page ad for people They were really looking for people.
- D Was this skills or anybody?
- W Anybody They just wanted people.
- D What did you do in that time you worked at Republic Steel?
- W I was an inspector on an 84 inch pipe
- D Was that pipe mainly used for war materials?
- W I worked in a pipe mill
- D Do you know if those plates went on tanks?
- W Yes, there was a lot of armor plate made down there.
- D They must have shipped a lot of it out on big railroad cars
- W Yes, well, you had lots of railroads around here You had P & LE (Pittsburgh & Lake Eire); you had B & O (Baltimore & Ohio); you had New York Central, you had Pennsylvania You had a lot of railroad that went through there
- D While you were working for Republic Steel, was this five or six days a week, eight hours a day?
- W: I worked six days. That was about all they wanted you to work I never worked anything over eight hours.
- D But you got all the work you wanted?
- W I would work six days a week as long as I wanted to work

- D Do you remember what you made as an inspector?
- W Probably \$ 80 an hour
- D This time is Republic Steel unionized?
- W Yes, it had started about four or five years before I got there They started getting into the union pretty good.
- D From what you could remember, were there any problems between the union or management during the war while you were working at Republic Steel?
- W During the war I cannot recall any serious problems, no
- D Can you tell me a little bit about Youngstown during the war, for example, was it difficult to get certain things? I know you probably had a ration card.
- W You could not get gas You got ration cards You could only get so much sugar
- D Did you get a card each week or each month? How did that work?
- W I think you got cards each week for gasoline You would get a sticker, and they would give you so many stamps
- D Did you drive a car?
- W I did not, my dad did.
- D How did you get to work?
- W I rode the bus to work My dad came back He went to work at Republic He worked down there as an oiler on an engine. Then he went to work on the railroad. This was during the war He finally retired from the railroad
- D You worked then altogether for about a year at Republic while you and your wife were living on Hayes. By now we are at 1943 right in the middle of the war
- W: I got in a little argument there I did not know anything about the unions at that time All I know was that I had a card I never went to the meetings

or anything like that. When I went there to get my last pay, they told me that I could not get a job at a plant, like steel or anything like that has anything to do with making stuff for the war for six months

D After you got fired from Republic that was what they told you?

W After I quit I did not get fired I decided that I would take that chance I went to work for United Parcel driving a truck.

D UPS (United Parcel Service)?

W I worked there until I got my six months in. I went to Mackenzie Muffler, I worked there until I went into the service.

D You worked at UPS and then at Mackenzie Muffler Was this like a garage?

W Originally they made mufflers for cars. During the war they made tanks, gas tanks, hangers, and things like that for airplanes I was inspector up there too

D When you were at Republic, did you notice if they hired a lot of women there during the war?

W I do not know of them They had women They did not have them on jobs they could not do like cranes They made inspectors out of them

D: How about their pay? Was it equal?

W The same thing, sure

D: After Republic and after a few short jobs at UPS and the muffler company then you got drafted.

W Yes, I got drafted. I went to Fort Hood

D Fort Hood, Texas?

W. I went there for basics

D When you went off to the service, your wife was then living on Hayes Avenue and kept living there?

- W Yes
- D What did the government do? Did they send her money or did they send money home?
- W They sent her some She got a job as a waitress After my basic training I was to go overseas I was in the 10th Mountain Infantry
- D When the war ended, you came back to the United States, so by the time you got out of the service it was about 1945, 1946
- W End of 1945.
- D Then you came back to Youngstown?
- W Yes
- D All this time your wife had been living on Hayes Avenue?
- W All this time, yes She lived on Hayes, she lived with her sister, she lived with my cousin She was all over.
- D Just out of curiosity, do you remember what you made while you were in the army for about a month?
- W I started out at \$21 a month. They took insurance out of that I ended up with about \$11 a month
- D When you got discharged and you came back to Youngstown, how long did you live at Hayes? Was it up until the time you moved into Westlake?
- W No She was living with my cousin when I came back. I went back to work for Mackenzie Muffler That was the job I had when I left. That was the job I had to go back to.
- D Did they kind of guarantee you that job? Did they hold that job for you?
- W: They did not guarantee me anything When I went back there, they gave me what they wanted to give me I worked on night turn loading mufflers on a truck. I never got a job like I had I was supposed to get it back, but I never did I quit that Then I went to work for U S. Steel
- D This was about 1946, 1947

W 1946 It was January 3, 1946

D At the time did it seem like there were a lot of veterans getting hired back?

W Oh, yes, they were all coming back That was a turmoil there.

D When you came back after you worked at Mackenzie Muffler, was it kind of easy in that year or two after World War II to get a job in the big mills, the big factories?

W It was not easy The kids were coming back from the war, and they were going back on these jobs. It was not easy to get a job

D. Did they give you any kind of preference because you were a veteran at U S Steel? Did they pick you over somebody else?

W I do not think so They might have, but I do not think so They asked you if you were a veteran or something like that, but I do not think it was anything like that. I do not believe there was.

D. What did you start out as far as U S Steel?

W Laborer

D About what did a laborer get paid back then?

W About \$ 85 an hour, maybe not even that much I worked laboring. Then I got a job as a clerk I got \$1 09

D. At U.S Steel?

W Yes I stayed there That was where I retired from

D When you came back, where did you and your wife live just before moving into Westlake in 1947?

W We lived with her sister on Henry Street. We applied for the apartments at Westlake.

D Tell me about that How did you find out about Westlake project? What exactly did you have to do as far as getting in, getting an apartment?

W You had to go and make out an application.

D Down at the office?

W Yes At that time we had two children It depended upon how many children you had, how much money you were making You could only make so much. I do not remember how much it was, but you could only make so much. They asked questions, I mean a lot of questions

D For example?

W Where you lived, what you did, what kind of work you knew I did not know much of anything yet. All I knew a bunch of was steel, and I did not know too much of that at that time We got a telephone call saying that we were approved

D When they were asking you some of these questions, did you ever have to do anything like show a marriage license?

W You had to show a marriage license.

D A pay stub, anything like that?

W There was something I do not know I think they checked through the office down at the mill to see how much you were making. I think that was the way it was.

D This was in 1947 You had to show a marriage license when you were down there. They checked into your background

W I am pretty sure of that They checked you, yes

D Did you ever come across single people who had moved in? Could you be single and move in?

W I do not think so I do not remember of anybody being single who lived out there

D Did it seem like that was a general requirement of showing a marriage license?

W Do not get me wrong. I am not even sure we showed the marriage license, but it seems to me that was the general feeling there.

D You got the word about moving into Westlake That was apartment 595

on Griffith Street

W Yes, it was 830 Griffith Street, apartment 595

D When you moved in, what was in the apartment?

W A refrigerator and a stove

D So you had to bring your own furniture with you?

W Yes I went up to Robins Furniture store on Market Street, and I bought three rooms of furniture for a couple of hundred dollars.

D That was a three room apartment you were moving into?

W No, it was a four room

D And you had two children?

W: We had two children No, we had three children.

D You had three children at the time then? What was your initial impressions of Westlake? Had you been down there? When you went down to the office, did you look around and see how the units were kept up?

W We did not look at anything

D You never got a tour of a unit.

W No

D Did you know anybody who had lived down there?

W I did not.

D How did you get word of that Westlake was like?

W: In the papers and through friends and people who you knew

D What did they say about it? Was the impression good?

W Everybody said the same thing They said that it was a good place to live

- D Before you moved into Westlake in 1947 had you ever been down in that general Federal Street, Griffith Street area?
- W I did not know where it was
- D You do not remember what it was before it was a housing project
- W No. It was nice compared to what it is now
- D When you moved in 1947, you considered it to be a good place to live It was the nicest place you owned.
- W Yes, and those apartments were nice.
- D Tell me a little bit about that Did they have certain rules and regulations you had to follow? Tell me about them
- W Yes, you just could not go in there and tear the place up If you broke something, you paid for it
- D. How about the grass?
- W We did not have to take care of the grass They did that. They did all of the maintenance work
- D Were there ever any inspections of you or your neighbors?
- W They would come around and check to see how you were keeping the place up, sure
- D Was your apartment ever checked?
- W Sure it was
- D Was this once a year, once a month?
- W: I do not know how often Their maintenance people would come in and look the place over every now and then, sure
- D When you went down to the office in 1947 and first moved in, you were given a booklet or told specifically that you were going to have to keep your apartment clean.

- W You were told that you had to take care of the place and that you just could not go in there and let it fall apart
- D At this time do you remember about what you paid a month for rent, \$18 maybe \$20?
- W It probably was between \$20 and \$30
- D I think a quarter of your monthly income, does that sound right?
- W. I do not know, I do not remember that, but I know it was not much for the apartment It was a nice apartment
- D Would you characterize most of the people who lived around you as younger married couples or younger married couples with children?
- W Married people with children about our age
- D. Would you say your whole block was with a lot of younger people like you with children?
- W There were some older, and there were some younger.
- D How about veterans? You mentioned you had been a veteran
- W There were a lot of veterans I think you got an apartment if you were a veteran
- D You say you think that You are not really sure
- W I am not sure It seems to me that you got an apartment if you were a veteran
- D How about as far as dealing with the office? The time you lived there which was between 1947 and 1951 and 1952 in those three or four years there. When things got broken or when things needed down, how was the office? How was the YMHA (Youngstown Metropolitan Housing Authority) as far as getting things done?
- W. I never had any problems. You would go down there if you had to have something done I never had any problems with them
- D How about as far as maintenance? You mentioned they cut the grass.

Did they shovel the snow and things like that?

W I do not recall. If they shoveled snow, I do not know. I think I shoveled the snow.

D You are under the general impression though that they kept up on people. Did you ever know anybody who maybe got thrown out of the apartment for not keeping up their apartment or being a troublemaker?

W I do not. I did not know anybody, but there had been people.

D Oh, you heard about it.

W Yes.

D What were some of the things that could get you thrown out in 1947, 1948, 1949? What were some of the things that you were not supposed to do that could get you thrown out of those apartments?

W Not keeping them up, not taking care of them. Your responsibility was to take care of them.

D How about as far as your living situation? You mentioned most of the people you knew seemed that they were married. Did it seem that it would be very difficult for people maybe to be living in those apartments without the people that they were supposed to be married to? Did they keep up on things like that?

W I do not think you could get into those apartments.

D They were always keeping up on who was living there.

W They knew who was living there, right? Mrs. Napp was running the place down there, and she had a pretty firm hand on the whole project.

D You mentioned you had three small children. Were any of them old enough to attend Covington School while you were living in the project?

W Yes.

D That would have been fairly convenient because Covington School was nearby.

W Right across, caddy-corner

D That is where all the kids from the projects went

W I guess they all went there unless they went to a Catholic School.

D How about businesses in around there, food stores, things like that up around Griffith or down around Federal?

W On Federal there were some stores You did not have any big stores like they had up here You had to go across town We had to walk into town

D You did not have a car at this time

W No, I did not have a car. I could not afford a car We used to have a wagon We would pull a wagon or a sled up to Belmont at a store there

D How about some smaller food stores like around Madison Avenue there?

W. We had some, but you always would go where you could buy food the cheapest

D Yes, that is true

W Even if you walked.

D Getting back again to the project did you ever make use of the Hagstrume Community Theater?

W No, I never did

D How about as far as recreation? What would the little kids do? Did they have a playground set up?

W: Not so much, they had some

D You lived at Westlake until about 1951, 1952

W: I guess it was around there.

D You moved then to . . .

W: Rockview.

- D Rockview Avenue?
- W Yes
- D What was the main reason you moved out of the Westlake housing?
- W I was making too much money. I started to make too much money
- D How did they go about this? Did they tell you directly from the office? Did they give you a certain amount of days to get out?
- W They gave us 30 days or 60 days or something like that You got a notice that they wanted you to come down because they wanted to talk to you I went down It was in October They told me that I was making too much money then They told me that they did not like to see me go but that I had to.
- D There was no choice?
- W No
- D Did you know other people that the same thing happened to?
- W The same thing happened to everybody who I knew.
- D By this time in 1951, 1952 just at the time you were leaving did it still seem to you that the rules were being enforced? Did it still seem to you that the grounds and the apartments were being kept up well?
- W Very well.
- D How about the people? Did it still seem that the main rule was only married couples from what you could see?
- W As far as I know that was all.
- D You generally as far as you were concerned would say that Westlake was as good a place to live when you left it as when you had first moved in.
- W Yes, I would say so, yes
- D Would you pretty much say that the people who lived around you were like you in the fact that they had moved in to what was probably the first

permanent house for them and then after a few years they improved their salary to the point where they could go out and get their own house?

W: That is true

D Nobody seemed to be living there for a long period of time.

W: No, I do not think so unless they just could not make the money

D You really did not see in your face or five years any real change in the way Westlake was being run It was still a good place to live

W They were pretty strict

D The whole time you were there?

W Yes, and I think for quite a while after I left there Then I do not know what happened

D: Thank you very much for the interview

End of Interview