

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Shenango Valley, Depression

Personal Experience

O. H. 1073

BEATRICE L. GERA

Interviewed

by

Marilyn Lees

on

July 29, 1982

Beatrice Gera

Beatrice Gera was born on December 23, 1912, at Windburg, Pennsylvania, the daughter of Richard and Hulda Horner. Her father was a self-employed carpenter and moved to Meadville to find better employment during the Depression. Beatrice graduated from Meadville High School in 1932 and married Bill Snodgrass shortly after.

Bill found work in the Shenango Valley at Sharon Steel in the cold roll department and moved with Beatrice to Sharon in 1932. These first few years of married life were hard on Beatrice and her husband since he only worked a few days a week. However, with the help of her parents, who gave them assistance, Beatrice was able to have a nice five room apartment. Even though times were bad economically, Beatrice recalled how the simplest things made people happy. One of her fondest memories was family picnics at Buhl Park. Beatrice got a job in 1937 in a drug store but had to quit shortly afterwards due to her first pregnancy.

Beatrice and Bill had two children; Sandy, born in 1937, and Billy, born in 1942. Beatrice and her husband were divorced in 1955 and she remarried in 1960 to Sam Gera. At the present time, Beatrice stays busy with church activities and needlework.

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Shenango Valley, Depression

INTERVIEWEE: BEATRICE GERA

INTERVIEWER: Marilyn Lees

SUBJECT: Shenango Valley, Depression

DATE: July 29, 1982

L: This is an interview with Beatrice Gera for Youngstown State University on the Shenango Valley during the Depression, by Marilyn Lees at Masury, Ohio, July 29, 1982 at 6:30 p.m.

Okay, first of all, when were you born, what year, and where?

G: I was born in Windburg, Pennsylvania on December 23, 1912.

L: What were your parents' names?

G: Richard and Hulda Horner.

L: What nationality were they?

G: Dutch, Holland Dutch.

L: Did they immigrate here, or did their ancestors?

G: Their ancestors.

L: How many children were in your family?

G: Just a brother and myself.

L: Was he older or younger than you?

G: Older.

L: Older? By how many years?

G: Three and a half. Okay. What did your father do for a living?

G: He was a carpenter.

L: Did your mother work at all?

G: No. Only sewing, she did sewing for other people.

L: Did she, during the Depression, did she take in more work at this time?

G: Sewing, and I think she did some washings for other people at that time, too.

L: How was your father's work as a carpenter?

G: We left Windburg to live in Meadville when the Depression came because he got more work in Meadville. So that's why we left.

L: What were some of your duties as a child?

G: How young?

L: Just, let's say, as a teenager.

G: Well as a teenager, when I was a freshman I worked after school in a drugstore every night and Saturdays and Sundays. Then when times got a little bad and they laid me off there, I worked in a dry cleaning place during school.

L: What kinds of games did you play as a child?

G: Oh, baseball, hide and go seek.

L: Did the girls play with the boys?

G: Yes, we all played together.

L: Did you have any pets or animals at home?

G: Oh, yes, we always had a dog.

L: Did your family have any other animals like chickens?

G: My mother raised chickens.

L: For the eggs and for the meat?

G: Yes.

L: Where did you go to school at?

G: Well, I went to grade school in Windsor, and then I started high school in Meadville.

L: What year did you graduate?

G: 1932.

L: Okay, what subjects did you have in school?

G: English, and algebra, history, and...

L: What were some of the school activities at this time?

G: We used to play basketball.

L: The girls?

G: Yes, just in gym class. They didn't have a team. Not in Meadville, they did in Windburg, but when I came to Meadville they didn't have a team.

L: Did they have a band, chorus, plays, things like that?

G: Yes.

L: What did you do after graduation?

G: I got married the same year.

L: In 1932. Did you meet your husband in Meadville?

G: Yes, but then I moved to Sharon and I've lived here ever since.

L: Since 1932?

G: Yes.

L: Where did young people go on dates at this time? What did they do for fun?

G: Dances mostly and picture shows.

L: How much were the shows at this time?

G: Oh, I think only about 50¢ during the Depression, if they were that. I think it was around 50¢. Dances too, were only about 50¢ or \$1.

- L: As a newlywed, where did you live?
- G: On West State Street, in an upstairs apartment.
- L: How much did you pay for rent?
- G: \$15 for a beautiful five-room apartment, with hard wood floors. It was real nice for \$15.
- L: Where did your husband work at?
- G: Sharon Steel.
- L: Sharon Steel? Can you remember how many days he worked?
- G: When we first got married it was only about two or three days a week, and then he got only two days for a while.
- L: What did he do at the Sharon Steel?
- G: He was a cold roller.
- L: Okay, can you remember how much he would make on an average of a weekly basis, monthly basis?
- G: Oh, I can't remember that.
- L: Okay. Where did you go grocery shopping and shopping in general?
- G: We didn't have a car so we shopped down at Dane's, down at the bottom of the hill. I used to walk down there for my groceries.
- L: Can you remember what the store looked like, what was in it?
- G: Oh, yes. It was just a small family store. It wasn't a big store, but they had everything there.
- L: Did they have fresh meats?
- G: No. I used to go for my fresh meats over to Messersmith's, about two stores up the street, and I got my meats there.
- L: Did they usually have any kind of groceries that you would want? Were there any shortages or anything?
- G: During the war you mean?
- L: Well, just mainly during the 1930's.

G: Well there were shortages in everything there. People just didn't have hardly anything to eat. They just did with what they had or what they canned.

L: Did you have a garden yourself?

G: Yes.

L: And did you can?

G: Yes, we canned everything.

L: What was your normal day like?

G: Before I had children, or after I had children?

L: Before.

G: Before, I did a lot of crafts. I did a lot of embroidery, and made quilts, and chrocheted after I had my housework done, my washing and my ironing and things like that. I got in swimming down at St. John's and I used to go down there every day at about noon and I'd swim until four o'clock and I took my senior lifesaving.

L: Did it cost you anything to swim back then?

G: No, not then.

L: It was free?

G: It was free then, yes. We worked for the Capesterline, he was there and he gave us the senior lifesaving, and then we worked for him afterwards, helping other kids do it.

L: I see. Did you work at all during this time?

G: I started to work at Hyde's, but I only worked at Hyde's for six weeks, I think.

L: What was Hyde's?

G: A drugstore.

L: A drugstore?

G: Same as the drugstore, Rexall store, just like I worked in in Meadville.

L: How many hours did you work a week?

G: Well, I started working forty hours a week, but I took work for about six weeks, and I got pregnant and real sick so I had to quit.

L: I see. What year was this?

G: 1937.

L: What were your holidays like?

G: Oh, we always had real nice holidays. Not much money, but we always had the things that meant a lot to us. One present was all we ever got at holidays, that was it. We always had a Christmas tree, and we were always with our families. My brother and his wife, and me and my husband were always with my mother and father.

L: What was the mood of the people like during the Depression?

G: They were happy people, I think. Sometimes I think they were more happy than they are now with the abundance that they have now, the money and material things. They had just an awful lot to do then without any money. They'd go to each others homes and play cards or just visit. It just seemed to be more peaceful then.

L: Getting back to your apartment, was it furnished, or did you have to finish it yourselves?

G: No, we had to furnish. That was fun.

L: What kind of appliances did you have?

G: I had a washer. I had to wash in the kitchen and carry the clothes up and down the stairs because it was on the second floor. I had a sweeper I think. My furniture and most of those things I bought from my mother and father because they refurnished their home and they gave me all their old things. I started with their older things, which was nice to do.

L: Were you on a budget at this time, where you put so much back for food, so much money for bills, things like that?

G: For gas, and for electric, everything. I had to be on a budget, I had to.

L: What was the reaction of the people towards F.D.R.'s (Franklin Roosevelt) New Deal. When he was elected, how

did the people respond, can you remember, around here, to his election?

G: Around here they really liked what he was doing. A lot of people got jobs on the roads. What was the name of that?

L: P.W.A. (Public Workers Administration)?

G: Yes. A lot of people worked on that that didn't have any jobs. The times seemed to pick up a little bit, so they liked him.

L: Do you remember his fireside chats?

G: Oh yes. Everybody would remember those who heard them, I think.

L: Did you have a radio?

G: Yes we did have a radio.

L: How did people help one another out at this time?

G: They helped each other out on almost everything. If your neighbor didn't have anything, you shared it with him, with what you had. Things were so hard to get at that time that they just shared an awful lot in those times, more than they do now.

L: Do you think that the neighborhood was more safe?

G: Oh yes. Than now? Oh yes. We used to go to bed and we didn't lock our doors or anything then.

L: Did you feel safe to walk the streets?

G: Oh, yes. I'd walk the streets many times after dark and didn't think anything of it.

L: How did the churches help people out at this time, at all, can you remember?

G: The churches had a pretty rough time, too, but I think they helped as many as they could. They've always been like that, the churches have. But, they had a rough time too.

L: Did you know any people that were unemployed at this time?

G: Almost everybody was unemployed. If they did have a job it was maybe one or two days a week.

L: For the most part everybody was in the lot?

G: There were an awful lot of people in this valley out of work.

L: What did people do with large families then, since there weren't food stamps and things like that that we have today?

G: Mrs. Buhl was very good to people like that. Mrs. Buhl was wonderful. She used to start children to school who didn't have any money, and she used to buy them a coat and a dress and a pair of shoes, just everything to start school. I knew of children who had boils and they needed oranges, and things that they weren't getting, and she would see that they got those things. Mrs. Buhl was one who God sent to us.

L: What kind of changes did the Shenango Valley go through at this time?

G: Well, there were a lot of men standing around in the street. You never went downtown alone, it was like it is now. There were just lines of men who didn't know what to do during the day, so they just stood along the streets. That was one change. Of course, another change was that everybody was about alike, nobody had any jobs.

L: Was West State Street paved?

G: Yes.

L: It was paved? What other forms of transportation did you have?

G: The bus.

L: You had the bus?

G: Yes, but not on West State Street. You could never get it up there, you had to walk.

L: Downtown?

G: Yes, but it wasn't real far.

L: Did they have a streetcar?

G: Yes, they did. One on Earthen Avenue to Sharon Steel and all the way to Sharpsville and back.

L: Are there any other personalities that you remember at this time, like either government, or in the entertainment field? Any ones that stand out in your mind?

G: Mrs. Roosevelt stood out in my mind. She was a grand lady. She had a lot to offer.

L: Where did you first come in contact with her?

G: Well I didn't come in contact with her, just on the radio.

L: On the radio? She used to speak on the radio?

G: Yes. Her children speak a lot about her, and there were a lot of things written about her, that she was just a sweet person, a good person.

L: Did you get a newspaper? Was there a newspaper here in town?

G: Yes. If you could afford it you got one.

L: Do you remember how much it was then?

G: Oh my goodness, at that time! I think maybe 5¢.

L: Looking back, would you consider these the good old days?

G: In a lot of ways, yes. Like the children now don't know what to do with themselves. We were never at a loss of anything to do. We always had things to do. We had sports, played tennis a lot, swam a lot.

L: Where did you play tennis at?

G: In Windburg, mostly. After I came to Meadville, why I worked and went to school, and I didn't have very much time. But I played in Windburg a lot. Then, after we came to Sharon, I played up at the Buhl farm, too.

L: Were there tennis courts at Buhl Park then?

G: Yes, I think there was only one then. You had to wait your turn.

L: Did they allow you to swim in the lake? You could swim in Buhl Lake?

G: Yes, I think in 1932...No, I guess they didn't have the pool yet, but they did swim in the lake. I remember that.

L: Were there a lot of picnics up there?

- G: Oh, yes. Then there was. You could go up there and picnic in there. Every Sunday it was packed up there because people went there a lot because it was nice on Sunday. You met a lot of your friends up there, because people did that just to do something different.
- L: How would you get up there?
- G: Usually we all went in one car and split the gas.
- L: Did you make any trips out of the valley during the Depression?
- G: To my home in Meadville, but of course my father used to come and get us a lot to go up there. He was pretty fortunate, he had more work than my husband had.
- L: He remained a carpenter?
- G: Yes, a contractor. He became a contractor in Meadville and did all his own work. He did all right.
- L: He had a car of his own.
- G: Yes.
- L: Do you remember what kind of car?
- G: Yes, it was a Hudson. They don't have those anymore.
- L: How do you think you might have benefitted living through this time?
- G: I think there are a lot of ways that you benefitted. The people had more feelings for each other, I think. You were more concerned about other people. It wasn't a world where you were the only person to take care of. You always could see something else to help somebody out. It was just a completely different world. I think people benefitted a lot from it.
- L: How did you learn how to stretch money?
- G: That came naturally. You just had to stretch it. You just had to do it, there was no other way. You got so much money and you had to get enough food that you could stretch through that. So if you couldn't stretch it, why you just made things like baloney stew. A piece of baloney would last you for a long, long time because you would have baloney stew for so long that you didn't even like the looks of it anymore.

L: What was in baloney stew?

G: Potatoes, and onions, and what you got out of the garden or what you had in the house.

L: Plus the baloney?

G: Plus the baloney. You put it all together and boiled it.

L: Was that about the cheapest meat?

G: Well hamburger was about three pounds for \$1 then. So we ate a lot of hamburger when we had money to buy it. A dollar was hard to get then. So, we didn't have too much hamburger, but when we could get it we did.

L: What else did you have? During the summer you could depend on your vegetables from the garden, but in the wintertime what did you do?

G: In the wintertime you baked your own bread, and you baked everything. You didn't go to the store and buy cookies or anything like that because you stretch your sugar far at Christmas time so you could bake more cookies for Christmas. You learn to stretch things much farther than they went now.

L: What about the clothing stores at this time? They would be in downtown Sharon, how many were there?

G: There were quite a few clothing stores down here. There was Penny's downtown, and there was Montgomery Ward's, and Strouss's, and there was always a sports store there, and a leather store, and a men's clothing store. Cohen's, I think has been there ever since I can remember. Some of the shops and wares have been there. They were there as long as I can think back, they were there.

L: What did you do for clothes, did you make some?

G: My mother made a lot of my clothes. She made everything, the only thing I had was what she made. Sometimes you couldn't even afford to have them made, so you'd get a black dress for good, and you'd put different collars and cuffs on it.

L: That would be all right. What about shoes?

G: Shoes? Well, in the winter, of course we had to have a good pair of shoes, but we tried to stretch those too.

L: What did you do when a member of your family got sick? Was there a doctor that would come around?

G: Oh yes. Even in 1937 when I had my children, you went to the hospital to have your children.

L: Sharon General was the hospital?

G: Yes. The doctor came to the house if you needed him at that time.

L: Could you buy things on credit, like furniture, things at the grocery store?

G: Oh yes, for furniture, you had to buy it on credit. There was no other way.

L: Where did you buy your furniture at?

G: The first thing we ever bought was a living room set. I think we got the whole thing we got the whole living room set for \$69, There was a davenport, and a chair, and a table and an occasional chair, and lamps. There was just everything that you needed for \$69, and we paid that by, I think \$5 a week, if you could afford it, or you paid \$2 a week on it. That's how we got it.

L: Did you have credit at the grocery store?

G: Yes, some of them. We tried not to have credit at the grocery stores, because that's too hard to get caught up on, a whole bag of groceries. We tried not to have too much. Once in a while, maybe a few dollars, but very seldom.

L: Do you remember any bum's? I guess they had an Erie Gang that rode on the railroad. Do you remember those people?

G: Yes, I do.

L: What did they look like?

G: Oh my, they were real bad. They were even sick, they would drink alcohol out of the stores, just plain alcohol.

L: Like whole grain alcohol?

G: Yes, oh, they would drink prescriptions, just anything. Oh, they were awful looking.

L: These men were just unemployed, and they rode the railroad? Did anybody take them in, did they have special places for these people to stay?

G: I think that the only persons that would probably take them in probably would be the Salvation Army.

L: There was a Salvation Army then, in town?

G: I think there was a Salvation Army in town. They were just so far gone. I think people would have helped them more if they could have gotten any place with them. They were just too far gone that you couldn't. They stole to buy alcohol.

L: I'll ask you this question because you did have Sandy in 1937 Do you think mothers today have it easier than you had it?

G: Oh my, yes. Oh, there's a lot of difference. Mothers, in my day, had to wash clothes, and they rinsed them from one tub to another, and they hung them all out on the line, they didn't have dryers. Oh, there are just so many things that are easier now. Instead of sweeping with the brooms, your rugs, and getting the place all dusty, they have vacuum cleaners, now. They have all kinds of real fast things like their ovens that make things fast for them.

L: Do you think it was easier to raise kids at this time?

G: Yes. I don't think you had to worry so much about kids then, as you do now, because there weren't so many things that they could get into, but not anything like now. So many of the young kids now in school drink and get on drugs, and stuff like that. You didn't have so much of that when my kids were growing up.

L: When did you move from your first apartment?

G: Let's see. Billy was 4 years old; I was married in 1932, and I had Billy when I was 28 years old. I was nineteen when I got married, that's the year we moved over.

L: That would be about 1942. Where did you move?

G: Over at New Castle Avenue, six-room house over there.

L: You bought a house?

G: Yes.

- L: When did you own your first car, was it after the Depression?
- G: Oh, we never did have a car in my first marriage, we never did have a car. Sam and I had a car and I learned to drive.
- L: How much was your grocery bill on a weekly basis during the depression?
- G: Oh my goodness, on a weekly basis? I would say about \$5 or \$7 a week.
- L: Can you remember any of your utility bills? You had electricity.
- G: They would be around \$3 or \$4. There wasn't anything like there is now, it was all real low.
- L: Did you have a telephone?
- G: Not until after the Depression was over, but we had one then.
- L: Are there any events that stand out in your mind? Like the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and things like that?
- G: Yes, my dad lost all his money at that time. That was something to remember. It was such a time in your life where you didn't know what was going to happen.
- L: Were people just frightened?
- G: Oh, yes. Everybody. Mostly because all your money was gone. You saved all your life. The banks just crashed and you didn't know what you were going to do.
- L: Your father did lose his money?
- G: He lost money. He did get some of it back, not all of it, but he got some of it back in the years that came, when the banks opened up and started again.
- L: Can you remember any other events that stand out in your mind?
- G: Well, the war started around that time, and I didn't know what was going to happen at that time.
- L: Do you remember the election of Roosevelt, the first time he was elected?
- G: Oh yes. That was a big election. I remember all four of them, he'd win all of them.

L: Did he stay popular in this area?

G: Yes, very popular in this area. He stayed that way. He was really held up like a king, because the Depression got over after he took office, so naturally he was the hero.

L: Did they have, like today, billboards, and things like that during the election time, promoting Roosevelt?

G: Some, not as many as they have now, but they had some.

L: Any other things you'd like to add that you can remember?

G: Well, except that the people got a lot more exercise then. I think they were healthier that they are now.

L: Better food?

G: Yes, better food.

L: Not all this sugary stuff. Okay, thank you very much.

G: Oh, you're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW