

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Ethnic Groups - Youngstown, Ohio

Personal Experience

O.H 1181

JOHN HERRLICH

Interviewed

by

Molly McNamara

on

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M This is an interview with John Herrlich for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Ethnic Groups of Youngstown, by Molly McNamara, at the Diocese in Youngstown, on August 18, 1988, at 10 00 a m

Mr Herrlich, can you give me some background on your family? Your parents? Where they came from?

H Yes, my grandfather came from Germany around 1850 He tells us that it took him one hundred days in the water on the sail boat, and he landed in New York He came to Youngstown because there were jobs here, and he got acquainted At that time, you know that the Civil War was here, so he thought that he had to go to the war At that time, you could buy yourself out So, he got a substitute and paid him about \$100.00 The war ended, and my father did have to go either

Then, the work that they did was coal mining. He dug coal out on South Avenue on the corner of Midlothian and South Avenue where the church is That is where they had a big coal mine for the miners They always tell us that they had meals down there They never saw the day light. They never brought them up, and they worked six days a week or longer They also had a narrow gate railroad From there, they took the coal down to Poland Avenue

My father was also born in Europe, and he came to the United States in the 1890's He was a brick layer in the steel mills, and he worked as a superintendent He got hurt over at the library and nearly died from the injury But, they built a city hospital on the South Side

The wall that I just passed this morning is the one that he built At that time, brick layers were making \$1 50 a day or \$9 00 a week during a six day week He paved the court office Of course, eggs were \$ 12 a dozen or something like that, and bread was \$ 5 a loaf They could live, but he was not satisfied with that He wanted to build his own home

So, he went out to people that he knew on Sunday morning and asked if he could borrow \$900 00, so he could put up a house. My mother said, "You know he is going out there, and they are not going to give him money." He went out and talked to them, and he came back with a \$900.00 check. So, he built his own house on South Avenue

M Now, is that where you grew up?

H Yes, that is where I grew up

M Okay

H Then, another incident that my mother told me is about the old courthouse that is down on the corner of Wick Avenue and Commerce Street on the East Side. They had a hanger there, at one time My mother was taken down by her father, which would be my grandfather, to see this hanger. Today, I know that she always told me that she did not

think that this man was building on anything but circumstantial evidence. That was way back then. Of course, the courthouse has gone down.

We go back to relations that lived in Lowellville. So, when my father got married, they took a boat on this canal right down on Market Street to Lowellville on their honeymoon. Also, the first mass in Lowellville was said in the relations of ours, which are named Grimms. My father died and my mother had to raise us, but we did not go on welfare. We worked. I went to work. In fact, all of us did.

M How many children were in your family?

H Four of us. My sister was only three weeks old when my dad died. My mother had to act as father and mother, so we all had to go to work.

M Yes, so what did you do? What kind of work did you do?

H Well, I worked in a grocery store. My other brother worked in an umbrella place selling umbrellas and delivering them. My oldest brother worked at the Vindicator. He worked at the Vindicator until a few years before he died. That is general.

M You were telling me a little bit about the flu epidemic. What you remembered about it. Describe that for me.

H Yes, they had a flu epidemic in 1918, and, at that time, I was working at the grocery store after school hours. We left our doors open and all of our windows open because we just did not want to have to close. We also notified the people not to get too close to us when they were buying groceries.

It washed out families. People died in the family. I remember one family who had five or six in the family, and all of them died. South High School was open as a hospital, and they had volunteer nurses and so forth. I know a lady that was a nurse, and she gave her job up to help these people in this epidemic. But, we survived that epidemic.

M Now, you were not in the war, World War I?

H No.

M Do you remember much about it?

H Yes, I remember the war. I was too young for any other war, and I was too old for that one. I was just in between. Yes, I remember the war. I know a little bit about the war.

M What about the Depression? What do you remember about the Depression?

H Well, I was working for a mattress specter during the Depression. Then, when the Depression started, I could see it coming.

M Really?

H For the fact that we were over produced. I was in the mattress specter, and people had mattresses all over the furniture stores. They had it stocked of mattresses. I would tell management, "Gee, I do not know why we are making mattresses when they are not selling?"

M Right.

H We were over produced and everything. It just seemed that over a weekend, it was a crash. Everything went down. Everybody says stop buying, and we had this 1929.

M 1929?

H Yes, the 1929 crash. People were laid off. We had no business, and we had to rid of inventory because the inventories were too heavy. I took a cut immediately, and everybody else did. We had to go down and have our lunch at noon. I can still remember that for \$.20, you could get a sandwich, cup of coffee, and maybe a small piece of pie. Things were so cheap.

M Yes.

H I was even going to school, at the time. Night school. I would stop in and have my evening meal. I would have a full course meal for \$ .50 and then, go to school.

M Yes.

H Yes, it hit. Although my family did not suffer as much as the other ones, there was still a lot of suffering.

M So, you were still working, and you did not lose your job or anything?

H I did not lose my job. We were cut and cut and cut, and everybody else was, too. Of course, things were cheaper, too.

M Yes. Do you remember prohibition at all? What this area was like?

H. I do not remember too much about prohibition.

M You were probably too young.

H. Yes, I did not remember too much about that

M Where were you living at during the Depression?

H During the Depression, we lived on South Avenue

M Do you still live there?

H Yes, we were living there on South Avenue We built a house then out in Boardman

M What was your neighborhood like on South Avenue? Were there a lot of immigrants there?

H We had an ethnic group Our neighbors were Slovak. The neighbors on the other side that were German, and they would come over sometimes. Across the street, we had Italians We had Hungarians, and I still run across some of those people that lived across the street from us. We had Polish people We had Jewish people. I worked for a Jewish man, and he was a gentleman We had all nationalities.

M How did you all get along, though?

H Fine We had no problem. We had charge accounts, and I always had to laugh at the register because of our last name We would go by numbers rather than going by names We would say, "Here comes Mrs 131 down the street " Instead of saying Mrs Casey, you would say 131 Everybody was friendly to each other

M. In the early years, say like the 1920 though the 1930, what did Youngstown look like? Describe to me a little bit about downtown Youngstown and everyday life?

H Well, it was lively Up until ten or fifteen years ago, we would go downtown on Saturday night or Sunday and have a good time You could walk the streets, and you were not afraid You had stores open We had restaurants downtown. Way back, we had an opera house, too

M Really?

H. Yes, where the Mahoning Bank is now on the corner, we had an opera house. They brought in a lot of these shows That was way back.

M What year was that?

H 1900's I guess

M Really?

H Yes, and I marked that down Let's see Oh, yes, we had an opera house We also had a grocer named Joe Jowels I do not know if you remember that name

M No

H Joe Jowels had a store downtown, and everybody knew Joe Jowels He would buy his merchandise like olives and hogs head He had great big barrels, not just an ordinary one It was so big that children could not even get up there and look at it. They were so big The hogs had pickles He would sell bread twelve loafs for a \$1 00 or something like this, you know. He did make some good pancakes. People were just lining up every morning for breakfast and having those pancakes Joe Jowels was the mayor of Youngstown, and it was the first cash register, I guess, that was ever put into City Hall They put a cash register there, and everybody rang their money Then, he resigned When he resigned, he wanted to go back, again, but then, he could not go back as the mayor

We had the stores that were lively We had stores like Bee Mackmanas The ladies liked to go and buy there. We also had Hartzels Father Leonard's grandfather had Leonard, Shurden, and Cane He would sell all of the communion dresses to the churches in town, and they would always buy at Leonard, Shurden, and Cane We also had McKelvies We had Bert's Ice Cream on Phelp's Street, and they sold the good suckers They had a cup full all of the time of suckers

We also had hotels galore in town They were up where the Salvation Army headquarters is now on Mahoning Avenue Across the street was the Fritz Hotel I do not think that people even remember that. There was a Fritz Hotel We had the Albany Hotel right down near where the East Ohio Gas office is now. We had the Todd Hotel, which was on the corner of Market Street Then, we had a Saylow Hotel, which was across the street from Bert's Ice Cream.

M You had a lot

H Yes, so we had a lot of hotels. Oh, yes, we had a race track out in Boardman The Southern Park Race Track My brother was the water boy there when they were building that We had the Southern Railroad, too We had a passenger service there where you could ride from Youngstown out to Midlothian Boulevard in seven minutes

M Wow

H You know click-idy-click-idy-click to go out It took seven minutes to go downtown It always surprised me that we had companies in town and around the area like the Ohio Leather Company in Girard Why would they have leather in Girard when the raw material is so far out west?

M Good question

H But, they made the leather and everything else in Girard, but they closed that We had a company on Logan Avenue called the Block Gas Mantles that made these gas mantles. People probably remember that

M Oh, I do not know

H They made the mantles for the gas lights

M: I see

H Of course, they went out of business, you know. We had the suburban cars You could go to Sharon, to Leetonia, and to East Liverpool You could even go out west At one time, you could take a suburban and probably go to California

M What were these like railroads cars?

H Yes, big suburban street cars.

M Oh

H: Well, the line going south is still there yet, going through Boardman and down through the river, which is the Southern Railroad But, the suburban that we used to take used go to Sharon, to Leetonia, and to Columbiana You could take these suburbans, but today we do not have it

Campbell is the city of churches I think that we have more churches here In Campbell, we have a lot of churches, you know, but all this is, is a city of churches All around there is a city of churches I was on the Chamber of Commerce, the Capital, and Krogen's Committee I enjoyed that because it was in the line of the county and so forth

M What year was this?

H Well, Gerland was living about fifteen or twenty years ago, but he talked about the canal the same as Trafficant. Mr Gerland also talked about how much business would be brought here if we had the canal. We would cement from this area We could use steel, sand, and gravel from this area. Look at all of the hours for man-power that we could use in this area. But, at that time, the railroads fought it because of the fact that it would take business away from that

M Sure

H Now, we do not have railroads here, and we do not have a canal So, Trafficant is still

talking about it

M Yes

H You could have boats coming and going in all five lakes. They would be coming down through here, going to the Mississippi, and going out to bring a lot of business.

M What about the 1940's? Do you remember much about World War II? Do you remember how it affected this area?

H We were very, very busy.

M Where were you working, then?

H I was working at the mattress company, plus I started up at the Y B M. It brought a lot of business to town. When the war started, questions were not asked. All that you had to do was sign the contract and produce cost plus. Some of the contractors had this cost plus, so they made money. They made use of that because the government needed it, and the nation needed it to stop in a hurry. We produced it. Yes, we were very busy during the war at that time. I do not know more much about it except that they were busy.

M Do you remember Pearl Harbor? Do you remember the day?

H Yes, I can remember that and that a couple of them were killed on the boat. I knew a kid from South Avenue who was on the boat that was blown up. It was a sad day, and I was fearful of what was going to happen. We had to do what we had to do, and then, we dropped the bomb and finished them. That was terrible.

M Do you remember the celebrations in town itself after the war was over?

H Yes, people rejoiced over it except the ones who lost their sons. I do not think that they could rejoice too much about it. I do remember the horns blowing, and everybody else was so happy that the war was over.

M Where were you living through the 1940's and 1950's? Were you still living on South Avenue?

H Yes, when I got married, we moved on the East Side. That was over there. Then, we built a house in Boardman, and we moved out there in 1950.

M So, you said that you lived on the East Side?

H Yes

M Was the neighborhood much different than from where you grew up?

H Well, from the East Side of Youngstown, it was a little different than that We had ethnic groups there, too, and they were nice They were all from different places, and we had no problem at all

M Even with the language barriers and everything like that? It was never a problem?

H Never a problem We had no problems

M So, then, you moved out to Boardman after that?

H We moved out to Boardman, and it was altogether different

M Right. Where was your wife from?

H Well, she was from Australia, but she was born in Europe

M. Oh, was she?

H She was just a little girl when they came over here

M From Germany?

H From Australia

M Oh.

H There is generally a migration route They migrated around, so they were all Germans See, they lived on the East side

M So, how would you say then, Youngstown has changed from say the 1920's or the 1930's from what you remember as a child until today? I know that there are a lot of changes

H. Well, I think that the cities themselves have gone to pot because of the fact that we go to the malls and the plazas that we have built outside of the city That has probably hurt the cities themselves. I do not know how we can get them back As for Youngstown itself, we spent a lot of money trying to make a beautiful downtown, but I think that somehow or another, it held the business back I think that we still ought to have two way traffic points I think then, maybe people could come downtown to buy again.  
At one time, we had planned that we would have a two way going east and west, We would have it submerged down, so that the traffic would flow evenly It never

progressed. I do not know whether on a count of maybe it would flood, would be unsafe, or the security and so forth. It would not help.

On the capital improvement, we were talking about having 224 go through Canfield and having that wider, but the people did not want it. So, we have it on the drawing board to use Western Reserve Road as a 224 going all of the way to Pennsylvania land. That is still under construction, and I do not know if it will ever materialize. I know that capital improvements who came in had considered that. It would bring business away from there, but I think that the plazas and the malls have taken people away from town.

M I have heard more than one person say that to me.

H They are taking people away from town. They have no reason to come downtown. Although, we had some beautiful stores.

M But now, that is all gone.

H It is all gone. There is nothing down there except business.

M I should have asked you this before, but it just popped into my head. Do you remember when you were growing up living without electricity? What was that like?

H Yes. Okay, we had gas mantles, which I told were made by the Block glass Mantles. We lived on South Avenue, and we did not have electricity. We begged our mother, but, at that time, my father was gone. "To get electricity," she said, "we do not know whether we can afford it." Then, she said, "Okay." So, we got a contractor to put it in, and I can still see him working. That was one of the happiest times of my life, when we would see electricity and bulbs hanging down instead of the gas mantles. Gas mantles would break if you just gave them a jar.

M I am not sure what those gas mantles are?

H Well, they are cloth with a little, round end, and you put it over on the gas pipe. Then, you would light it and turn the gas on. When it is new, it is not fragile, but after it is lit, this little thing is fragile. If you would jar it, it would break. Then, you would have to put a new one in. Today, they still use these gas mantles on lamp posts. I went across the street in Boardman, and that is all that is left. They never shut it down. It is a little gas mantle. I go by some of these places and see it.

M So, did everybody start getting electricity at the same time?

H Everybody started to get electricity, you know. If they lived a distance from the line, they would have to pay to get the line to their house. If anybody would tap into this line, they

would have to pay back, so you would get your money back

M I see.

H I think that they still do that, yet So, we had electricity, and the next happiest thing is getting a car

M I was going to ask you how you got used to get around

H Well, I walked I went to school at St Joseph's, and I had roller skates

M. Did you?

H I used roller skates, and I would buy the wheels by the dozen because everywhere was up hill Going down hill is fine, but coming up hill is harder Then, we had the Williamson Avenue street car It would come up from downtown here and go on Williamson Avenue Then, of course, the fare was only a nickel For school, you would get six bits for \$ 30, or something like that So, we would only use that on rainy days

M. Oh, I see

H Because we could not afford it all of the time. Then, we started to tease my mother by saying, "We want a car We want a car." So, we bought an open car, an open Ford Toy car That was way back If it rained, you would have to put the curtains up, but we used it We drove it all the way down to Blair, Ohio and down to Pittsburgh with this thing Then, we went up to Ashtabula

M Was that sort of a novelty, then?

H Oh, that was heaven

M Really

H That was heaven with all of us in the car.

M What year was this around? What time?

H In 1920, 1921, or 1922

M Oh, it was before most people had cars, then?

H Yes, way back when they had the Model "T" Ford Then, we bought a Dodge, which was another thing that was really good. We also bought a Sedan, at that time That was the

only one. It cost \$900.00, and that was a lot of money

M Yes, I cannot even imagine that

H The other car was \$600.00, and then, we got into a better car. That was when you look back and say, "\$600.00?"

M For a brand new car?

H Well, I had a car of my own. I was working at the mattress company, and I needed a repair job. I went down to the Edison Company on Boardman Street, and he said, "What do you want to get it repaired for when you can buy a car for a good price?" So, I drove back with a new car for \$700.00

M. That is funny

H They charge a \$100.00 to repair the old one, and if you put that against a new car, you could drive a new car home. These are the things that they could look back at, and they say, "Wow. Why run around in an old car?"

M So, you have seen a lot of major changes then through the years?

H Yes, I have. Some of the changes I did see coming when I worked at the mattress company in 1920's. We manufactured cotton mattresses, and just then, they were coming out with that interspring mattress. My company said that they were not going to manufacture any springs because it would not last. They would not be manufacturing them very long because they would not hold up. So, we were losing business because furniture stores were buying interspring mattresses. So, the management at our branch said, "Well, we cannot go by our headquarters ideas. We are going to buy interspring units."

We bought a crate of interspring units. We opened them up, and we had our first interspring mattress. I looked at it, and I did not like it. We tore it apart, and we made another one. I said, "That is it." So, we were in the interspring mattress business. Then, we were not making studio couches, if you know what those are. We were saying, "Well, we do not have to make them because other people are making them. If you want business, then, you have to get into that kind of line. So, we bought a couple units. We put those together, and it went well.

We manufactured studio couches, so we had another line to go on. I often wondered about companies like a little company in Niles that manufactured silk pipes. If they had visualized ten years ahead, they would not have been out of business. Silk pipes went out of business. People did not buy them. They have four sides when you are in business to visualize what you are going to do.

M It sounds as if you were very business minded. You saw it, and you wanted to achieve it.

H Yes, when we worked, the management would get together. We would say, "Now, what is our project for next year?" We would think, "Well, what do we need?" This is what you would try to strive to do instead of just sitting still and saying, "Well, we will use what we have today." That will not work because it is a moving world, and you have to know that it is going to do next year. We always had something planned, such as new trucks, new conveyors, new yard, or anything needed in order to make money.

M Right.

H You just cannot sit still. We had another thing, too, I think. We had four truck lines coming into town, and today, we have none. We have one railroad going through. I hated to see them dig up the railroad underneath Wick Avenue. Maybe someday, we will need that, but since it is gone, I think that we should dwell on the remaining railroad. Make it so it is possible that we can get passed. We could have gotten out of Youngstown years ago. It is only an hour to Pittsburgh and an hour to Cleveland. We cannot even go by railroad today. We are isolated, and I think that it is wrong.

M Yes, I see what you mean.

H I think that it is wrong. I think that we should clean up the railroad, so we can work on it. I think that it has been in the paper where I am reading, and they are talking about that. They were talking about an express train from Columbus to Ashtabula. I think that is in the right direction. I think that it should be extended through from Cincinnati to Buffalo or from Pittsburgh all the way up. I do not think that we can all go on planes. I think that we have to stay on the ground. Some people just do not like planes. I think that if a freight is knocked down by planes, your freight is gone. They cannot always want a freight. As a matter of fact the freights are put on the trains. You know that they put those on, and they come to another place and take them off.

M You would like to see all of that come back, then?

H I would like to see what we have left, and I think that it would be pretty good business.

M What about the steel mills themselves? I am sure that you remember when they were just blooming, or coming on alive as an industry?

H Well, as I mentioned to you before with the canal, it would have helped us, but the railroads bought it. Even Sharon did not want to be let out, so we would have to have a portion of the canal going up there. Today, we have no railroads. I do not know if the steel mills were here. Another thing, too. Why were the steel mills here? Probably on the count of labor?

M Well, there were a lot of natural resources in this area, too You know like the coal that you mentioned about your grandfather

H Yes, we had coal here, but if we had the canal, we could bring our raw materials down cheaper than having them on the railroad Iron ore can come from there and ore from up in Quebec, but I think that with a one way track, we need small industries, now and good ones

M Yes.

H We need that railroad fixed up Ungaro is working on the city parks. They have cleaned up by the B & O Railroad, and I think that it is a good idea. I think that they could clean up the Mahoning River I understand now that we have carp down there St Vincent DePaul, our manager, is feeding wild duck on one river. Every morning, they are looking for them You know I think that maybe we are on the right track

M Yes

H I would like to see Youngstown get back to where it was somehow, and make Youngstown a place where you could go down and walk around again I still think that we should make it a better place.

M Okay, is there anything else that you would like to talk about that I have not mentioned?

H No

End of Interview