

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Life in the 1930's and 1940's

Personal Experience

O. H. 1278

ELLEN G. TESTA

Interviewed

by

Richard R. Testa

on

July 10, 1989

ELLEN G. TESTA

Mrs. Testa was born April 19, 1925 in Youngstown, Ohio. Her parents were Joseph and Mary Mantini who came to Youngstown from Italy in the early 1900's. Mrs. Testa is the youngest of three children. Her brothers Sam and Michael also reside in Youngstown.

Mrs. Testa attended Haselton Elementary School, Lincoln Junior High and East High School, graduating in 1943. On February 14, 1944, she married Henry Testa who was in the service at the time, and moved to Camp Hahn, Lumpoc, California. In March of 1944, Sergeant Testa was unexpectedly sent overseas and Mrs. Testa returned to her parent's home in Youngstown. In December of 1944 their son Richard was born.

Sergeant Testa returned to Youngstown from the war in October 1945. He and Mrs. Testa lived with her parents until 1960, when they bought their present home at 1332 Detroit Avenue.

In 1953, Mrs. Testa began attending the old Choffin Vocational School and was a member of their first graduating class of L.P.N.s. She worked at St. Elizabeth Hospital for thirty years until her retirement in 1983.

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Life in the 1930's and 1940's

INTERVIEWEE: ELLEN G. TESTA

INTERVIEWER: Richard R. Testa

SUBJECT: Depression; school; family; World War II

DATE: July 10, 1989

RT: This is an interview with Ellen G. Testa, for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Life in the 1930's and 1940's, by Richard R. Testa, at 1332 Detroit Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio, on July 10, 1989, at 12:10 p.m.

RT: Mrs. Testa, where were your parents born?

ET: In Italy.

RT: Where about?

ET: My mother was born in Naples and my dad was born in Abruzzi, right on the Adriatic Sea.

RT: Do you know when?

ET: My mom was born July 29 and my father was born November 21.

RT: What years?

ET: My father was born in 1888, and my mother was born in 1896.

RT: Okay, we'll come back to that. When were you born?

ET: I was born April 19, 1925.

RT: When did your parents come to the United States?

ET: My mother was twenty-one and my dad was about the same age, about twenty-one.

RT: How did they happen to come to Youngstown?

ET: My father came with a friend of his, I don't know how that happened. His friend thought it was a better opportunity with the steel mills. My mother was sent here by her brother, Mr. Angelo Bozzacco.

RT: When were they married?

ET: They were married about a year after my mother got here. My mother came several years after my father. She was about eight years younger than my dad. She came quite a bit after my dad.

RT: Do you know anything about your grandparents?

ET: Not too much. They were both in Italy and I never met them.

RT: Where did you go to school?

ET: I started at Haselton School for grade school, and then from Haselton... Haselton only went to the sixth grade. Then from the sixth to the eighth grade I went to Lincoln and then I graduated from East High School.

RT: Where was Haselton school located?

ET: At the corner of Cherry and Center Street. It's not there anymore.

RT: When was it torn down?

ET: It was torn down a good fifteen or twenty years ago.

RT: How would you describe the school?

ET: It wasn't very modern, but it was nice and we had a lot of friendly kids. We were all about the same class, very poor.

RT: The inside of the school, what was that like?

ET: The inside just consisted of two floors. The first, second and I think maybe the third grades were on the first floor and then upstairs was the principal's office and the higher classes. All I remember is that we had blackboards and chairs and at that time, the principal was Ms. Perkins.

RT: A woman principal?

ET: Yes.

RT: That's interesting. How old was she, do you have any idea?

ET: No. I would say she wasn't real young. I would say she must have been in her fifties.

RT: What were some of the subjects you studied?

ET: I remember studying reading, writing, arithmetic, history. Those were about the basic things at that time. You didn't have a lot of the history. You didn't have a lot of the subjects as you do today. You didn't have computers and videos and all this stuff. That was just basic. You just got your basic learning then.

RT: What did you do for entertainment, I mean as far as... What did kids do back then?

ET: We used to have a Haselton Settlement House there, right at the corner of Wilson Avenue and Blaine. We used to go there. We had a couple of counselors. The head of the place was Mr. Heard, and they taught us how to embroider. We used to have little plays, how to tap dance. They used to have outdoor swings and sandboxes. We used to spend most of our Saturdays down there when we were children. Otherwise when you were at home, we didn't have a lot of things. Like I said, we were quite poor at that time. We used to sit around, play tag, play kick the can, which is a funny game. We used to play baseball. I lived near Oakland Field and we used to play baseball. In fact we had a baseball team from the Haselton Settlement House that we used to play different teams. We used to have quite a lot of good times. We used to go elderberry picking and right where the Lincoln Knolls is now, that was all farm area. We used to go apple picking and elderberry picking. Then around noon, we'd put our bathing suits on under our dresses before we left in the morning, and by afternoon, go down to Lincoln Park. They had a pool down there and we spent our afternoon in the pool down there in the water and come home. That was about it.

You didn't have a lot of toys. You made your own toys. Like in the winter, we would always get curtain rods and make skis for under our shoes and go down the hill. We made our own scooters from a box, just an ordinary box, you got a box and put rollerskate wheels on it and went down the hill. We were the most versatile kids you ever found out there. You found more things to do because you didn't have anything else. You either made

your own toys or you didn't have toys. We really had a lot of fun. I had my two brothers and myself. Like I said, in the winter, we made our own skis with curtain rods. My mother used to holler a lot about those curtain rods and such. But we used to get them and go down the hill.

RT: Where did you used to live? You mentioned that you lived near Oakland field.

ET: On Gladstone. The house is still there.

RT: How old is the house?

ET: The house has got to be... It was already there... I was born in that house so it's got to be over seventy years old.

RT: Were your brothers born there too?

ET: No, both of my brothers were born at 41 N. Blaine.

RT: Is that house still there?

ET: Yes.

RT: So your brothers are older than you are?

ET: Yes. They are both older than I am.

RT: How would you describe your neighborhood?

ET: Our neighborhood at that time was very, very nice. We had quite a few children around there like I said before, we were all from quite poor families, we were just coming out of Depression in 1925. We all came from fairly poor families. I remember having maybe one dress. And when I'd come home from school at night, my mother would let me take that good dress off and wash it and iron it so I could wear it the next morning. In the evening when I'd come home from school, we had one good pair of shoes, we'd have to take those off and put them back on the next day. We had tennis shoes for around the house. Sometimes if we didn't have good shoes, we wore our tennis shoes to school. The same was with the rest of the neighborhood. Nobody in that area really was too well off. But we were a very friendly bunch. I remember having just wonderful friendships with those girls and I still see them. We still get along very well. It was really wonderful, even though we didn't have anything, we had wonderful childhood. I remember at Christmas time, nobody got anything. Our big thing for Christmas was if we got oranges in the house because we never had oranges the rest of the year. Nobody had oranges. In the summer-

time, if you came outside with an apple, my goodness, everybody around you wanted a bite.

RT: Somebody wanted the core?

ET: Yes, we used to call from across the street, "I have the core." It was funny because when you think of it today, you just can't believe those things went on. But we were really happy with what we had. We shared everything we had as little children. My mother used to make bread and we'd wet that bread and put sugar on it and we thought we had cake. Like I said, we didn't have much, but what we had, we shared with the other children. We played together, we used to play baseball together and at night, we'd play tag. Then later on, we had a little movie house down on Wilson Avenue and it cost us a nickel to get in and maybe if we could bribe my father to give us another nickel, we would buy popcorn. We used to really sit around all day Sunday morning, hoping that pop would let us go to the show. It took us all morning until noon because then the series, they used to have series from week to week and we would stand around all morning hoping he would give us a little money to go to that show. We would stay there from maybe noon until 5:00 or 6:00. We'd see that double feature twice. The whole neighborhood would go, all the little kids would go. Everybody that got money would go and we would really have a good time. We walked everywhere we went. We walked from our house, all the way down to Wilson Avenue and Pearl. That was quite a ways. We used to walk to town, we walked everywhere we went.

Because during the time we were on welfare, grandpa, in order to let us have any cake or anything, Wonder Bread was on Mahoning Avenue. He used to walk from our house with the little red wagon he had, to Wonder Bread which was miles away, I don't even how we used to do it. They used to sell those little Hostess cupcakes at that time. You could get two packages which was four Hostess cupcakes for \$.01. So he would walk all the way up there with the wagon and fill the wagon with bread and Hostess cupcakes and everything else and he'd walk all the way back home in the summer heat and the dead of winter, so that we would have cake and bread.

Another thing I do want to say about my dad: what a versatile man he was. He would buy leather for our shoes and he would repair our shoes. Anything that had to be done in the house, I never remember, even until the day he died, I never remember him calling somebody to fix his house. He could plaster, he could paint, he could fix the electricity, he could do anything, plumbing, heating, everything that had to be done in that house was done by him, because at that time, he just

couldn't afford to call anyone. I remember my mother making me dresses out of those sacks from flour. She would buy two flour sacks and sometimes they came in prints and she could make me a dress. Otherwise, she'd get those flour sacks and make sheets for the beds. Everything in the house was used. You never threw away anything. Everything that was bought, was used.

They used to buy the live chicken. The only thing that was thrown away on that chicken was the feathers. She used to take and really clean that chicken, the feet and the neck and the head were cleaned and she made soup with them. The inside, we used to have chitlens, she used to soak them overnight with saltwater, they used to come out clean as ever and she would cook them with onions and eggs. We would have like scrambled eggs with them. Then the rest of the chicken she'd roast. We ate a lot of beans in our times, we ate a lot of polante.

RT: What is polante?

ET: Cornmeal mush. She would put in on a board and spread it out and put sauce over it and we would have that. It isn't like today, if your mother made something she'd put it there and say, "Well, that's all there is tonight." That's all there was. You soon got hungry and you went in and ate it. Another thing, the first of Spring when you're dandelions first start coming out, my father and mother had dandelions and we had dandelions in every variety, we fried them, we made them with beans, we made them in Wedding soup and everything else. We never went to sleep hungry. You can't say you had a big feast or anything, but you really ate. Whatever was put on the table, that's what you had to eat because there wasn't anything else to be had.

I remember my mother going to the soup line right across the street from Haselton School. When we would be coming out of school at noon, I remember my mother being at the soup line and she used to get bread and soup, bring it home, we'd eat that and be very happy with it. We really grew up to eat everything. I think that children that were born in that era were really taught to make everything useful. Today, if you don't like what your mother puts on the table, you get something else. At that time, there was nothing to be had, there was nothing else to be put on the table. You either ate what she put on the table or you didn't eat. So you learned to eat everything.

RT: Did your father work at all during the Depression?

ET: My father got a job later on with the WPA. He worked out of the Vienna Airport. He helped put in some of the runways and at that time, he didn't have a car. Nobody had a car. My father never learned how to drive a car. So one of the fellows in the neighborhood had a car and he used to give him I think a couple of dollars a week to bring him up there because that gentleman worked up there too, and I think they started off, if I'm not mistaken, I think they started off with \$5 a day or something like that. We thought we were rich people at \$5 a day. That was big time, which was very good. I also remember then when he got a job down at Republic Steel, we thought, how wonderful that he could have a job down at Republic Steel and things were really going to look up, which they did, during the war.

During the war, I had my two brothers and of course, my husband went to World War II and it was quite sad in our house at that time because all three of them were overseas in Germany. I'll never forget the one time they had a strike right at Christmas and you were just born, you were born on the 11th of December and this happened, say, right at Christmas time, which was about fourteen days later. My father was stuck in the mill, he never came home that Christmas eve. Your dad was over in Germany and my two brothers were over in Germany, and I remember my mother had made everything, we were going to try and have Christmas eve and Christmas day, we were going to try to be happy about it anyway because we at least had a little baby in the house, then they called the strike and grandpa was stuck in the mill. Well there we were, two ladies, with this little two week old baby at home, nobody there, and we just bawled all night, we never did eat. My father didn't even come home for Christmas. He was stuck in the mill for about four days. When he did come home, we had our Christmas about four days later.

It was very sad. During the war it was a very sad when they invaded France on D-Day. We hadn't heard from my two brothers and my husband for almost about three weeks. Of course when we heard the news over the radio that they had invaded France and we had three boys over there, needless to say we were all very upset, wondering what could have possibly happened. So we didn't hear from them for about a good month or so. Finally, we got letters that they were all safe and everything had gone alright and that everything seemed like it was going to be alright. It was quite hard at that time, too. Nobody was home, the boys were all away, we were all worried whether they were going to come back home and my son was just a little baby. When his father came home, he was ten months old.

RT: I was ten months old.

ET: You were ten months old and your father had never seen you.

RT: I was born in December of 1944.

ET: Yes, December of 1944.

RT: So this was D-Day you were talking about?

ET: Yes. The war was over and your father came home in October, you were ten months old. My two brothers came home safe and sound. Nobody was hurt, and things looked a little better. We lived with Grandpa and grandma for seventeen years after that. I started to go to school after that. I went to Practical Nurse's school. I had graduated from East but I wanted to further my education. Your father started to work at the Youngstown Sheet & Tube and I started to go back to school. I took up practical nursing.

RT: What year?

ET: In 1953 and I graduated and I worked at St. Elizabeth's hospital for thirty years. After about seventeen years that we lived with grandma, you were sixteen years old, we decided to buy the house here on Detroit Avenue and from then on, things looked much brighter. We didn't have as hard a time because of course during the time that your father was in the Army, he only sent \$65 a month home. At that time, even though he was a staff sergeant, he only sent \$65 a month and you couldn't very well live by yourself. So that when he came home, we didn't have anything and we started from scratch all over again. We had gotten married quite young. I had graduated high school and I was only eighteen. Your father was twenty-one and he was in the Army.

RT: This was in 1944?

ET: Yes. In 1944. Of course I had gone to live with him in California for a little while while he was in the Army but then he got shipped overseas so I had to come home and I stayed with my mother and I found out that I was going to have a baby so I just lived there. When your father came home, we didn't have anything so we decided we'd better stay with her until we got a little bit of something or got our feet on the ground and after that, that's when I decided to go back to school. Your father started working down at Sheet & Tube and then in 1960 we had this house built on Detroit Avenue and we came here and you were sixteen at the time. I still worked at the hospital for quite a while until 1983 and your father and I both retired in 1983. He,

from the Youngstown Sheet & Tube, and I retired from St. Elizabeth's Hospital after thirty years there.

RT: Let's go back to the Depression, World War II. What did your mother and dad do for entertainment?

ET: That was the era when you went to visit your neighbors a lot. They used to go to their one friend up the street, their maid of honor and best man. He used to know how to play an accordion. It was a little button box he had. He used to get this little button box and play it and we used to dance around in the house and play cards, just plain talk. They all had very large gardens. This was a very good hobby of theirs. They used to have large gardens of tomatoes and peppers and corn and everything you could think of. You name it, they had it. Endive, radishes. Everything you could think of they had in those gardens. This was their big thing during the summer. In the summer, everybody in the whole neighborhood had a big garden. So that was their big hobby in the summer. In the evening, he would bring out that button box. My mother knew how to play a guitar. She would play that guitar and sing to her heart's content. We were just the happiest bunch. Her brother who used to live about five streets away from us, had a Jewish Harp. He could play the Jewish Harp, my mother played the guitar and this friend of theirs that had the button box, and they used to get together and sing all those Italian songs and we would sit there and sing with them.

My mother's brother was also a very good story teller. Half the time, he would scare me out of my wits with some of those ghost stories from Italy. They were funny, when you think of it today. That was another thing they did. They just sat and told stories.

My father never left Youngstown from the time I could remember until his death. I don't think he had ever left. My mother did, but not my father. That was about all their entertainment consisted of. They never went to a show, they never went to a dance. They were very close. At that time, what happened to your neighbor, happened to you. You were always there. If they got sick, the women would help each other. When one would have a baby the other one would bring the soup and they helped her wash the clothes and take care of the other children. That was a big thing. Today, you have a baby, you go to the hospital and when you come home, you do everything yourself, but at that time they were very close. The women all knew each other. You knew everyone on your street from the first house to the last, and you knew them for blocks over, because you needed each other, you have to depend on each other for everything that went on. You knew everyone because

you walked everywhere you went. We used to walk from Gladstone all the way to East High School, which was quite a few miles in the winter and in the summer.

I remember my mother telling me to put my boots on and I didn't like to wear boots so I used to go from the back door, go to the front, put my boots under the opening under the front porch and go to school, come home, stop there and put those boots on and go in the house in the dead of winter. The one day, she saw those boots under that porch and she took them and brought them in the house and by the time I came home from school, the boots weren't there to put them back on. I went in the house and she said to me, "Where are your boots?" I said, "Gee, I don't know, I must have left them at school." She says, "Funny, I found them under the porch." I'll never forget it. Boy, I wore my boots after that. She beat the tar out of me.

We never did anything really bad, but we used to do some of the most mischievous things. Like I said, in the summer, all of the girls, we all came from fairly large families at that time. We wanted to go outside and play on summer days and my mother would say, "You have to do this and you have to do that." We used to sneak away, run down Lincoln Park, we already had our bathing suits under our dresses and just have a good time. Well, by the time I would drag myself home at night about 5:00, there she was, she was aggravated by this time. I had been gone from maybe 8:00 in the morning, until 5:00 at night. She was waiting. She was so angry at me, she used to just really scold me and sometimes tap me and I remember saying, "Gee, I only get one licking a day, everyday though." The next morning I used to do the same thing. All the girls did the same thing. It got to be a joke because we used to tell each other, "Well, I guess we'll go home and get our lickings now."

RT: So you knew what was coming but you didn't really care.

ET: We knew what was coming but we didn't really care because we had had a good time all day, we would go swimming, go apple picking, we'd bring home those berries. Our mothers would make either elderberry jelly or whatever kind of berries we could find. Another thing, they used to can everything under the sun. I remember having grape jelly and elderberry jelly and tomatoes. Every tomato that came out of that garden was canned. They used to put peppers and peaches and pears and plums, there was everything. When canning season came around, my mother had so many bottles to be canned, that you used to get sick and tired. I think that's why I don't like peach pie. I

just got peaches until they were coming out of my ears. I tell you she canned so many peaches, she expected us to help peel them and get them ready to can them. Well we were just too small. Our minds weren't on that. But of course, what else could they do, that was the only way to get these things. The same thing with tomatoes. Tomatoes-- if you didn't have enough in the garden, you'd buy them by the bushel-full. I remember her canning hundreds of bottles of tomatoes for the whole year.

RT: You used them all?

ET: Well, we used to have spaghetti maybe twice a week. So you would have two bottles of sauce that would be used. Plus, she may have put sauce on the pizza and she would have sauce in your pasta and beans or if you had the cornmeal mush... The Italians used a lot of sauce.

RT: The cornmeal?

ET: Yes. The cornmeal.

RT: How about boarder? Didn't grandma boarder at one time?

ET: Yes. My mother when we were younger, my mother had nine boarders. In order to have these nine boarders, my mother only had three bedrooms. Her bedroom was downstairs. Then she had two bedrooms upstairs. So we had an old leather couch that opened up into a bed. So we used to sleep in the livingroom, my brothers and I with the screen between us, they'd open up that couch and that's where we would sleep. Then she would have four boarders in one room and five in the other, upstairs. It was terrible, because imagine all the work that must have taken.

She used to cook for them, wash, iron, do everything. When we had a holiday, my goodness our house looked like a three ringed circus. Not only were the boarders there but they had all of their friends coming over and my mother and dad worked like horses. I can really say my father was a worker. He worked as hard as my mother. He used to wash dishes, help my mother make beds, he used to do everything for her. I remember my mother would be washing those clothes and my dad would be hanging them outside, lines and lines of clothing. He used to do everything. I never remember my mother washing walls, but my father washed walls. He helped her do everything. If there was cleaning of windows or washing curtains or anything, I think that's the only way they could have kept those nine boarders going, because he really helped. I remember sometimes around the holidays, it seemed like there was a never-ending amount of dishes in that house to do with nine boarders

and sometimes they'd bring a friend or two over. You would think if you had all these boarders, they would give you a lot of money. At that time, even though she washed, ironed, cooked, cleaned and did everything for them, the most she got was \$7 a month. Now that I think of it, my goodness, you wouldn't do that for \$7 an hour.

RT: She had nine men boarding?

ET: Nine men boarders there. She cooked, cleaned, washed their clothes, did everything-- everything that a wife would do. All their maintenance, kept that house clean for them and my mother kept that house really clean and I am telling you when I think the most she ever got from those people was \$7 a month, you wonder. You wonder how or why anybody would do all that work for that amount? At that time, \$7 was a lot of money. This was after the Depression. This was a little later, I would say this was in 1935, well maybe it wasn't quite that late, because I was a little younger. I was about seven when this was going on. From seven to about thirteen or so.

RT: So this was six years?

ET: Yes.

RT: Wow, six years.

ET: Yes she had boarders all that time. Then, at that time, everybody in that area had boarders. They had a lot of men that had come from Italy to work in Youngstown. Not only Italy, there was some Slovaks and different ethnic groups there that all had boarders in order to make a living because the mill was paying \$20 for the whole week, that isn't much money. You made \$5 a day. Well, that was a big deal. They really had to keep those boarders in order to make a living. When I think of the guff they used to have to take from some of them, it was pathetic. I'll tell you, she should have gone out and did housecleaning instead of cleaning for those men.

RT: What kind of jobs were available for her? What could she have done?

ET: At that time, I know now, that a lot of women used to go to some of the other homes and do housekeeping. At that time, women weren't hired too much. When I think of it now, women weren't hired for a lot of jobs. Even cleaning buildings, maybe a few women got a few of those jobs, but most of the women used to go and take in washing, they used to take in sewing and things like that, but other than that, a lot of jobs were not

available. You've got to realize that you didn't have your fast food places that you could go and get a job. All of your McDonalds and all these fast foods came much later. What could a women do? She used to have to go out and take washing or she could take sewing or ironing or day work like go in and clean a house. Some of them used to bake bread. They used to bake bread and sell bread. That was it. There wasn't too many jobs that you could do. Even if you wanted to work, there just wasn't any work to be had. The men-- about the only jobs they could do at that time was go in the mill because you didn't have as many office workers, because there weren't any computers, there wasn't any of that business. You could have named all the doctors that were in Youngstown. You knew them all. You could name all the attorneys in Youngstown. Today you have pages and pages of them in the phone book.

RT: Do you know anybody who made money during the Depression?

ET: Not that I know of. Maybe I was in a community that nobody made money. I don't remember of anybody during my childhood that was what you could call well to do.

RT: I know a lot of people, they bought up property.

ET: Yes, but not where we were because we came from a much poorer class that really were not well off.

RT: Well, thank you very much for the interview.

ET: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW