

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

History of Lowellville Project

Native of Lowellville

O. H. 614

STEVE CONTI

Interviewed

by

Tom Kirker

on

July 16, 1985

STEVE J. CONTI

Steve Conti, born April 11, 1912, lives at 810 West Wood Street, Lowellville, Ohio. A native of Lowellville, Steve has seen many changes in town. Like most Lowellville residents Steve graduated from Lowellville High School and went to work in the mill. For thirty-nine years Steve worked at Youngstown Sheet & Tube, retiring in 1969.

Since his retirement Steve has become involved in community affairs, having won the Governor's Award and title of "Lowellville Man of the Year." For a brief time in the 1930's Steve was one of the youngest city councilmen elected. He also was alternate delegate to the Republican National Convention in Cleveland, Ohio, when Al Landon was nominated to run for president against F. D. Roosevelt.

Always being interested in his Italian heritage caused Steve to write a brief history of Italian immigrants on Lowellville's south side. He and his wife Jennie were married July 22, 1939 and have three children: Jackie, age 44, Richard, age 39, and Debbie, age 28.

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INTERVIEWEE: STEVE CONTI

INTERVIEWER: Tom Kirker

SUBJECT: Italian immigrants, Black Hand, Ku Klux Klan,
pastimes, mills, quarries

DATE: July 16, 1985

K: This is an interview with Steve Conti for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Lowellville, by Tom Kirker, on July 16, 1985, at 11:45 a.m.

My first question is when and where were you born?

C: I was born in Lowellville in 1912.

K: You were the son of immigrants?

C: Yes. My parents were Ralph and Madeline Conti. My father came to Lowellville in 1894. When my father came to Lowellville he was working on the railroad. In those days they called the Italian immigrants WAPS. In 1895 they [workers] told him to get in the hand car and they took him to New Castle and then put him in a boxcar and took him to Pittsburgh. They took him to the post office and told him to put up his right hand. He put up his right hand and they said, "You're an American citizen now." They took him across the street and gave him a box lunch. Then they told him, "Now go across the street and vote for McKinley." My dad was a citizen in 1896 and voted Republican for McKinley all in one day. Then he came back to Lowellville; that is how long my father has been in Lowellville.

K: You said your father voted for McKinley. Was that the first and last time he ever voted Republican?

C: No, my dad brought us up to vote for the character not the party. He voted Democrat and Republican. When Franklin Roosevelt came in--Lowellville was a Republican town even though we had all ethnic groups here--he brought everybody

over to Democrat. Italian people, they respected the people that helped them and gave them work; they believed in that because that is how they were brought up.

K: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

C: There were nine boys and one girl in my family. During the flu of 1914-1916 my dad lost four children. As a matter of fact, I had to go to school with garlic around my neck so I wouldn't get the flu.

K: Where did you go to school at that time?

C: Lowellville Grade School, and then I graduated from Lowellville High School. Then I went to Youngstown State one year.

K: What year was that?

C: Back in 1932 when Jones was the boss of Youngstown College.

K: When you were growing up what were the types of things that you did as a boy? What did you do for your activities in Lowellville?

C: The only activity we had in Lowellville was to go swimming in a dirty river or we played marbles; we didn't have anything else in a small town. As a matter of fact, when I was a kid those were the Ku Klux Klan days. When I was a kid the Ku Klux Klan used to burn a cross right where I'm living now. We didn't have access to anything; the only thing we had access to was to make things ourselves to play with, like hopscotch or roller skates. We couldn't do anything else with ten kids in the family.

K: At that time were you pretty well segregated? I noticed driving around Lowellville today there is still a lot of Italian population on the south side of the river.

C: The south side was all the steel mill workers and the center of town were all the so-called Americans. The outskirts, that is where the immigrants moved. You have to realize that in Lowellville we had the Sharon Steel Hoop Company there at one time, a blast furnace which employed hundreds of people. In 1958 we lost about 1500 people in this town when Sharon Steel moved the blast furnace. The Ohio Edison power plant was on the east end of town. That is where all the immigrants came into this town to work. The Irish people controlled this town at one time. We kid that when we went to school we were told to sit on one side of the room because we were foreigners. When I hit high school we never had a Catholic teacher teach school in Lowellville. The first Catholic teacher was Fanny Ventresco; her brother runs the Tel Star restaurant in Youngstown. She was the first Catholic girl to teach in Lowellville.

K: Did they teach you English in school?

C: Yes.

K: Had your parents mastered English by then?

C: My father and mother mastered it very well. When I went to school they sent me back home, my brother and I, because we couldn't speak English. Then my mother and father said, "We have to learn to speak English to get along in this world." My dad was more or less a philosopher.

K: What was his occupation?

C: When my dad first came here he worked on the railroad. Then he went in the truck gardening business. In the wintertime he went out and dug coal. Most of his life was spent in gardening.

K: What types of food did he raise?

C: Greenhouse and others.

K: Did you get involved in that business?

C: We all helped in that. The Italian people were all proud people; they always wanted to get their kids to learn a trade. I was a bricklayer by trade. My oldest brother was a plumber; that's how Conti Plumbing started in Lowellville; it is here yet. I had another brother my dad made learn the electrical trade. One is a painter; one is a carpenter. He made all six boys that were living follow a trade, and it worked out very well. I have a brother now who has a big welding machine shop in Fort Clinton. My dad's theory paid off.

K: When did most of the Italian immigrants come to Lowellville?

C: Most of them came from 1896 on. The first Italian arrived and settled in Lowellville between 1882 and 1902. The others arrived later from 1902 to 1924. Your biggest bulk came in from 1902 on; that is when the steel mills started. That blast furnace poured steel for the Civil War, Spanish-American War, First World War, the Second World War, and the Korean War. At that time is when they built the canal here and the railroad was being built then.

K: Were most Italian workers steel workers?

C: Most of the Italian workers were in the steel mills and railroad, and they worked in the quarries, the Erskine quarry and carbon quarry.

K: The quarry work, was there a bond with the quarry workers in

Hillsville?

C: Yes. The quarries were all in Hillsville, Hilltown, and Carbon, and then you had one quarry on the north side of Lowellville called the Erskine quarry.

K: Did you ever work in that or know anybody that did?

C: I had a lot of friends that worked in that. It was hard work, all ten or twelve hour work. There was plenty of work in those days for everybody.

K: How did that change during the Depression? Being of Italian descent do you think the Depression was harder on you?

C: No. The Depression was easier on the Italian people because they all had an art in making gardens. My dad was in the truck gardening business and all this property from here to three-quarters of a mile up the road he let other people use for gardening. The only people that made the garden would be the Italians or Slavs. Those people had food to give away.

K: Was there a strong tie? Did the Italian community stick together?

C: Yes, very much so. Here in Lowellville, up until 1931 right after the Depression, we didn't have any elected officials in Lowellville. As a matter of fact, I was one of the first ones to be elected on council; I was twenty-one years old then. That was back in 1932. That is when the Italian people started moving into power. They had their kids graduating from school. They went to school and to college. They started educating their parents. It started revolving really fast then.

K: Has it pretty much broken up, or is it still together here in Lowellville?

C: No, in Lowellville they don't like it to be said that we're Italian; they like it to be said that we are of Italian descent. The school levy was lost here a few years ago because the superintendent said, "If I get all the Italian votes in Lowellville I know we can pass the levy." That didn't go over very well. I went over and told him, "My kids are American. I was born here; I'm an American. I am Italian descent." They are proud of their heritage, but they want to be Italian descent; they are Americans. The people are close-knit in this town. We took a licking when we lost all that population in Lowellville. They are proud of their schools, and they just want to keep their kids together. They are proud people in this town. The majority of them are of Italian descent.

K: When you were a city councilman what were some of the things going on in the 1920's?

C: I served on council under three different mayors. In the early 1930's we still had outhouses. We worked hard and got the WPA to help us and so forth. We used to buy electricity from Ohio Edison and retail it to the people, but we got rid of that because they were curtailing too much expense. All these fringe benefits were starting to come in and it was costing too much to keep that up. Overall our crime rate was very low in this town. You would never think that at one time the Ku Klux Klan controlled this town, but they did at one time. We had to break it away little by little.

K: How did that occur?

C: They used to burn the crosses down here. If you walked down the street you had to move off of the sidewalk for some of these people. The only way we licked that was by having our system changed in the school; we elected young kids in office.

K: Were the Ku Klux Klan people from Lowellville or did they come down from Youngstown?

C: We had some from Lowellville. At one time they had a list; they had to declare themselves if they belonged to the Ku Klux Klan. I was fortunate enough to get a book and I just about knew everybody who belonged to it in town.

K: Aside from the changes in getting rid of the Ku Klux Klan and the improvements of economic status of people of Italian descent, how has the town changed physically? What buildings do you remember that are now gone? What churches have burned down?

C: We lost quite a bit here. When they moved the Sharon Steel Hoop and the blast furnace we lost close to 1500 people. We lost many business establishments. In the old days this town was full of bootleggers. The bootleggers were the foreigners. Before prohibition came in we had all kinds of business in this town; we used to have a lumberyard, three gasoline stations. We lost five grocery stores. We lost all of that stuff because everybody was moving out. As a matter of fact, I was instrumental in burning down, all told, twenty-one homes and three business establishments. We just razed them down, set them on fire, and got rid of them.

K: This was in the late 1950's?

C: From 1956 on. What Youngstown and the other communities are going through now we went through in Lowellville. In order to cope with what was going on here we held meetings in the cellar of my house. We asked who was out of work, who lost their job. We started a program, and believe it or not in two

years time we had practically everybody back to work. We did not get any help from the unions, the federal government, the church coalition, or any other organizations. Lowellville is now more or less a residential town. Our biggest industry is the Falcon Foundry. They had trouble in Youngstown and came to Lowellville. Conti Plumbing and Heating is big. Rex Machine moved in also. We put that building up for them free of charge just to get another industry in down there. That turned out to be a big outfit down there.

K: What attracted your parents here in the first place?

C: My parents were brought here when my father was looking for work on the railroad?

K: Did he know somebody here?

C: He was working in Pittsburgh and at that time Andy Carnegie and John D. Rockefeller and Mellon controlled this country, let's face it. They were building railroads here and starting steel mills here and they would bring these people up to work in camps. My dad came to Lowellville and found a group of his own people here from Naples, Italy so he parked his suitcase here and went back to Italy and met my mother and told her he was a big shot here and had a big business. She married him and came here and lived in a one room apartment.

K: When was this?

C: Around 1898.

K: Where was his first house originally?

C: On the south side.

K: What do you remember about growing up in that house? How was your Christmas time?

C: I can remember that my Christmas time was always beautiful. We went out and cut our own Christmas tree. Then we made popcorn balls and stuff like that. My dad went out and bought three Montgomery War Savage Shotguns and we went out and shot our own ducks and turkeys and quail. My mother made a lot of stuff in the outside oven. All we had on our tree was popcorn balls and oranges that they sold. We would wrap the oranges in colored paper and we made ornaments out of those. We had outhouses in those days and the toilet paper was bought out of the Sear Roebuck catalog. On holidays my mother would save all that fancy paper from the fruit in case you got company, and that was what you used. The holidays were nice because you didn't have anything else to look forward to.

In Lowellville we had a celebration of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, which is a patron saint. They have a celebration every year; this is the 93rd year. Years ago they had a celebration on a boat in the river. They would shoot fireworks from the boat. It was a big thing. At that time with the steel mills the river was dirty, but we used to use it for canoes and everything. We swam there too.

K: You mentioned the holidays were of major importance. Was the Catholic church a pillar in your life?

C: Yes. Lowellville has four churches now, but the Catholic church is the largest one.

K: After mass on Sunday was it a special time? Did you have a big dinner or something like that?

C: Yes, that was the biggest day of the week. If the priest saw you being mischievous in church he would call you right out, and you got it when you went home. We respected priests more than anybody else in the community.

K: Did you have church youth organizations where you got together and played softball or football?

C: Yes. We had Boy Scouts too.

K: What are some of the things that you remember about riding the trains and streetcars?

C: I could get on a streetcar in Lowellville and go over to New Castle and get a transfer and go to Ellwood City. For 10¢ to 15¢ you could go to East Liverpool, Sharon, or Ellwood City.

The trains, we had four running here. One train went just to the quarries; they called it Hill Run. The railroads played a great part; that was our transportation too. Everybody used to hop trains. That is how people got their coal during the Depression. You would jump on the boxcars at the lower end of town and you would pile your coal up on the boxcar and when you got to a certain place you kicked your coal off and jumped off. We had four lines coming through Lowellville.

K: Did you ever take the train on a long trip?

C: Yes. You could go to Cleveland at that time. Our biggest treat was getting \$2. You would pay \$1 to ride the train to Cleveland and back, 50¢ to get in the ballgame, and 50¢ to buy a lunch.

K: Was this when you were working as a gardener?

- C: Yes. I was a gardener for a while, and then when I got out of high school I went to Youngstown State for a while. Then the Sheet & Tube gave me a job because I was the present councilman in Lowellville and they wanted to expand down to Pennsylvania. They wanted property rights so they gave me a job to keep my mouth shut. It turned out that I became a bricklayer. I was in supervision for twenty-three years.
- K: What years were those that you worked there?
- C: I started in 1933 and in 1969 I fell out. I caught an infection in my knee and I've been laid up since. I've been on crutches since 1969.
- K: Did you work during the Depression or were you laid off at the time?
- C: During the Depression we walked the streets and we rolled our cigarettes. That was about all you could do. Then I got a job handling relief for Poland Township. I ran for township clerk and was then defeated and then they gave me a job handling relief.
- K: Were there a lot of hobos at that time, a lot bums riding the railroad?
- C: Yes. Railroad cars would go by and you could see dozens and dozens of hobos on them.
- K: What about the Second World War, do you remember the troop trains going through town?
- C: Yes, troop trains were the biggest thing there was at that time. At that time I was 4F because I was supervision in the mason department and they needed construction people. They, in turn, had me work on draft board No. 10. I think the railroad kept all the troops going in this country. It's hard to visualize how many troop trains came through town on this B & O. One time I saw a whole train come through this town of all Italian prisoners.
- K: What are some customs, like wearing garlic around your neck and things like that?
- C: I remember the days where if you had the flu or different illnesses they used to put signs on the house. They would hire a policeman for a day or so and he would walk up and down the street and make sure that nobody went in and out of those houses. Ethnic people don't have the same facilities as other people; we had outside johns (toilets).
- K: Who did you rely on for a doctor?

- C: Here in Lowellville we had an old Syrian doctor, Dr. Babal. He took care of more ethnic people than anybody else. They had many doctors from 1920 on. I have an interesting story. Wherever you had large homes many owners had boarders. The boarders would sew pockets on their underwear and that is where they kept their money for safekeeping. The boarders would pay the landlord to either buy the food and she would cook the food for them, or else she would charge them so much a day. One case was Mrs. Leeson, she had a two-story building and thirty some boarders. She had to cook breakfast for the people that went to work at daytime, feed the people that came in at supper time, and then she had to feed the people that went out to work at 3:00, make their lunches, and then do that at 11:00 again coming and going. They spent all their time feeding people and making lunches.
- K: Where was that boarding house at?
- C: On the south side of Lowellville.
- K: Who were some of the interesting people you remember when you were growing up?
- C: Clingan Jackson, a Vindicator reporter, was from Lowellville. I served on council with him. He goes back a long way. L. Fenton was tied in with West Point. Varley family had a lot of teachers and politicians and they all came from Lowellville. R. K. Delisio, he was a leader in this town. He used to be secretary of the Republican party.
- K: Was the Black Hand present in Lowellville?
- C: Yes. They were on the outskirts of Lowellville, in Hilltown and so forth. We had a small outfit here, but the headquarters were up in the hill. In the old bootlegging days we had quite a few people murdered right in this town. We had a home down here at one time that Al Capone came down to visit. I remember that Lillian Gish, who was a movie star at the time, had a boyfriend that was in the Black Hand. That more or less brought in the Ku Klux Klan at that time too.
- K: Were the Ku Klux Klan and the Black Hand going at it in those days?
- C: Yes. It was radical in those days between the two sides.
- In the middle 1930's I used to be able to read and talk Italian good. I used to teach these people that came over here that never had papers. I used to give them lessons to become a citizen. I had classes. I did that through the Roosevelt administration.
- To show you how prejudice things were, back in 1927 I was going

into high school and I wanted football. I went to school with a petition telling them that we wanted football in Lowellville school. They got ahold of the police; they had an old hupmobile (car) and they came up and took my dad down to school and my dad kicked my rear end and sent me home. They called me a Bolshevik because I circulated petitions to get football in Lowellville. We got football. After that I explained to my dad and then my dad backed me up on it. In 1927 we got football and we had our first team in 1928.

K: Is there anything that I didn't cover that you would like to add?

C: With the closing of the Sharon Steel Hoop Corporation Steel Plant and the Sharon Steel Hoop Blast Furnace in the 1958 and 1959 era and the elimination of smoke, dust, and acids in the air the surrounding area has developed into a beautiful wooded area with numerous wild game and exotic flowers and plants.

In Lowellville we have a very beautiful and treacherous hollow called Pine Hollow. It makes Nelson Ledges look sick. If you know of any nature lovers that would like to explore this Hollow ($\frac{1}{4}$ of a mile) please call this number and I will explain the details 53-66003.

END OF INTERVIEW