

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Sheet and Tube Shutdown Project

Sheet and Tube Shutdown

O. H. 152

LAIRD N. ECKMAN

Interviewed

by

Philip Bracy

on

April 17, 1981

LAIRD N. ECKMAN

Laird N. Eckman was born in Michigan City, Indiana. He went to Boardman High School and attended Muskingum College graduating in 1948 with a B.S. in Chemistry. He served in the US Army from 1943 to 1946. From 1964 until 1966 he was associated with the Youngstown Area Chamber of Commerce as a staff executive. In 1966 he became Executive Director of the Regional Growth Foundation and served in that capacity until 1976, when it's offices were officially designated a department of the Chamber of Commerce. His affiliation with that ran from 1976 until 1979. At that time he assumed his present position with the Mahoning Valley Economic Development Committee.

Mr. Eckman is married and has one child. He was awarded the Ohio Commodore in 1967; Graduate of Industrial Development and Certified Industrial Developer, both in 1971.

Philip Bracy

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU Sheet & Tube Shutdown Project

INTERVIEWEE: LAIRD N. ECKMAN  
INTERVIEWER: Philip Bracy  
SUBJECT: Sheet & Tube Shutdown - Regional Growth  
Division of the Youngstown Area Chamber of  
Commerce.  
Date: April 17, 1981

B: Mr. Eckman, could you tell us a little bit about yourself, where you grew up and so forth?

E: I grew up here in the Youngstown area, a product of the Boardman School System. Right out of high school I started at Youngstown University, as it was known at that time, and later went to Muskingum College and graduated from there after World War II.

I was away for a year or two and then came back and was associated for some eight months to a year with the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Company in the chemistry laboratory. I left to do some selling for the Youngstown Mirror and Glass.

Then went, after a year or so, with an architectural firm as Business Manager, became associated with the Youngstown Area Chamber of Commerce as a staff executive. When the opening of Executive Director of what is now called the Regional Growth Foundation became available, I interviewed for that job and was selected. So, in 1966 I think it was, I became the Executive Director of what was then called the Youngstown Area Development Foundation. Originally that organization was formed back in 1945, right after the war, World War II, and known as the Youngstown Area Post War Development Association. The name had changed two or three times in the intervening years.

Not long after I became its Executive Director, we dropped the word Youngstown out of the name, because we wanted the program to reflect more nearly the program that we were selling, which is the region which is the three county area, Mahoning, Trumbull, Columbiana County. So, the name that they settled on was the Regional Growth Foundation.

That operated as a free standing organization, one man, one girl, with a board of directors. The Board of Directors, by the way, was made up of business and industry and organized labor.

Then in 1976, the organization became consolidated with the Youngstown Area Chamber of Commerce as a free-standing division with its own funds. Part of the Chamber's function in the consolidation, the Chamber provided secretarial service and the other usual amenities that landlords supply.

When the Mahoning Valley Economic Development Committee, [MVEDC], was formed in 1977, obviously it had no staff, and in late 1978 it became apparent that it was going to be staffed. The regional Growth Division's governing body, called the Policy Council, thought perhaps there shouldn't be two people or two organizations doing the same kind of economic development. So, they, in effect, allowed me to become associated with MVEDC without filling the position behind me. At that point, we didn't know how successful this, MVEDC, as a fledging organization, might be. It was felt that we ought to take advantage of the help that federal and state governments, as well as local governments, were offering to help the Mahoning Valley over the rough economic bump of the cutback in the steel industry.

B: What were the basic goals of the Regional Growth Foundation? Were you bringing industry in, for instance, or were you visiting? I guess what I'm trying to get at is your goals and how you achieved them, basically?

E: Goals and objectives, sometimes you use those words synonymously. Let me say that the goal or the ultimate objective of all of these economic development programs is the creation of jobs and the broadening of the tax base. Now, how do you do that?

That's the difference in approaches to economic development. The Regional Growth Foundation and the Regional Growth Division of the Youngstown Chamber, as it was known after it became associated with the Chamber, as

well as MVEDC, had the same goals and generally the same approaches. Helping local industry with their growth and expansion plan is the largest part of our day to day function. Helping new industry to find out more about this area and emphasizing the advantages that the Mahoning Valley has for industry not now located here is another function.

You find prospects a lot of different ways and in all cases, in an economic development organization, a good part of its job is hunting for prospects. You do that two ways. If your prospects are local firms, you sell them differently, that's all. You hunt for them differently. You make the personal call or you make the telephone call on those kinds of industries that you think ought to be thinking about or planning expansion and tell them who you are and what you're doing.

Those that are not now located here, you have to find those from the national publications, from working with state organizations that are involved and national organizations who are involved in economic development as well. You try and get leads or, in this business, we call them suspects, because you don't classify a company as a prospect until he has definitely said he's thinking about a new plant somewhere.

We get those not only, as I said, from the publications and, in Ohio, from state advertising through our participation on the Ohio Economic Development Council, but local industry, local businesses who buy from manufacturers. We encourage them to be on the lookout for shipping dates that are late, items that are back-ordered, reasons why the company may be operating at capacity, the manufacturer may be operating at capacity. So that we can contact them and say, "Are you operating at capacity? Do you need more space? Why not put a plant here in the Mahoning Valley and here's some of the advantages that you might enjoy if you had one here," that kind of thing.

B: I guess yes, I was referring to that. Also, was your focus on, let's say, allied industries to steel or were you trying to get into diversification? I know that's a kind of a beaten word right now. Was the focus to try to get, let's say, a plant with 500 workers if you could, as opposed to just adding onto the steel industry; which, I don't know if you've studied the trends or not, but there seemed to be a slacking even before the shutdown of the Youngstown took place. I guess what I'm saying, did you intentionally try to find other industries

outside of steel or were you trying to build onto what was already in place, like secondary processing plants to a steel industry or steel plant or something like that?

E: We didn't intentionally go any direction along that line. Our approach was to take the advantages we thought we had to sell and emphasize those advantages to the kind of companies that we learned were looking. For example, the toy industry; at one time Mattel Toy, which is headquartered in Hawthorne, California and has plants all over the country, was looking for a location for a new plant. We weren't sure what they were going to manufacture there, other than it was toys, dolls, some kind of a Mattel Product; but 1,500 women are what they were going to employ.

One of the things we feel, and we've always merchandised, and we hit that very hard with the large presentation to them that we made, was the fact that we have lots of women available for work in production here in the Mahoning Valley. This is back in 1969-1970 that we made that presentation.

At the time, working with the Ohio Bureau of Employment Services, we estimated conservatively that there were 20,000 women available here in the Mahoning Valley who would go to work tomorrow in a production job if they had an opportunity. Now, most employers like to interview at least five people for every one they hire. They like to have at least that broad a choice. So, we felt we had a good presentation. Well, it was a good presentation.

The company finally wound up--they were going to come to Ohio. Akron and Youngstown were the only two in Ohio that made individual presentations to them. They wound up going to New Jersey where they already had a plant and they already owned a piece of property. They built the plant on the other end of the property that they already had. So, we lost them basically on economics and it wasn't really the fault or anything detracting from the advantages of the Mahoning Valley.

But that's one of the advantages. We hit that very hard because this is the kind of thing they were very, very concerned about. If it's a metal fabricator, we emphasize very strongly the kinds of skills that are available here. If it's a company that works three turns, is a continuous operation, we emphasize that kind of thing which is here. You don't emphasize the same thing

to different people. Every presentation is individualized after you've talked to them and find out what is of concern to them.

B: Do you recall how you found out about the shutdown of the Youngstown Sheet & Tube?

E: I read it in the paper.

B: That evening?

E: Read it in the paper, sure.

B: Were you contacted by anybody after that either, let's say like, somebody from the Chamber and say, "Let's have a meeting," or did you contact anybody or did any of the local politicians call you?

E: No, we do the contacting. The Chamber, I was with the chamber at the time.

B: As far as participation in any meetings . . . ?

E: Well, we called them. We called them. As Director of the Regional Growth Division, my immediate superior is Wes Johnstone, who at that time his title was Executive Vice President of the Chamber. His title now is President of the Chamber, but he's the chief staff man at the Chamber. This happened during the day and we knew about it within minutes after the announcement. We talked and decided; we had an emergency meeting of the Chamber's Board. You might want to talk to Johnstone to get some first-hand information about how that went. We called together the Chamber Board to see which direction the Chamber ought to go with this. That was number one. The thing that the Chamber Board decided to do was to help, not take the lead. So, with that as the guide, that's the policy set by the board. Johnstone and I, we could move in behind those leaders who would surface offering some kind of suggestion. Consequently, he became involved in the Ecumenical Coalition and I became involved in the downtown, what is called the Youngstown Board of Trades concerns, the City Hall concerns, then Congressman Carney's concerns. We had a good working relationship with all of these. We had a good working relationship.

That's one of the things that Chambers of Commerce do. Those in the economic development business must have a good working relationship with the public officials in the area they plan to serve. So, in our individual con-

tacts with Carney, with then Mayor Hunter, and the other Mayors of Campbell, Struthers, and Lowellville, they knew of our concerns and we began to talk more. The next thing I knew, I think it was Congressman Carney called a meeting that was held up at Higbee's up on their second floor. Yes, they call it the auditorium.

B: Was that the October 10th meeting?

E: I don't know.

B: There were about 200 people there?

E: Could have been.

B: Okay, what are your recollections of that particular meeting?

E: Everybody who was on the platform expressed their concern about the impact of the shutdown on their particular areas. I don't remember who was on the platform. There would be records that would show that. But everybody who was up there expressed their concern and their willingness to help.

I remember the local advertising agencies, not the agencies, but what they call the ad councils--there's a retail ad council and there's a broader one that takes commercial and industrial ads too--both of them called offering to be of help, no charge. Everybody wanted to help.

The thing that impressed us, everybody associated with this, was that it welded people together. A common disaster and everybody was willing to work together to get out of it the best way we can.

B: As a result of the October 10th meeting, the following day the Vindicator listed seven persons who were supposed to "Guide the Valley comback." At that point, Mayor Hunter, Clarence Barnes, Ina Renze, and there were three positions not filled in. Did you participate in any further meetings of the so-called Youngstown Area Task Force? I mean, were you invited to any of their meetings?

E: I don't remember that, because I don't remember that name. But we worked very closely with both City Hall and the Congressman's office. Of course, the Congressman's office is right there in the Wick Building. It's

- just up three or four floors. So, we were always handy and on call. When they wanted us, we came. I don't remember that term, the Youngstown Task Force. Say those names again.
- B: Okay, Mayor Hunter was Chairman of that particular group, Jim Griffin from the United Steel Workers, Clarence Barnes from the Urban League, Mrs. Renze from the League of Women Voters, President of the League of Women Voters. At the particular time that that particular article came out, they hadn't decided on the last three individuals who would fill that slot. That's why I brought it up.
- E: All of those people ultimately wound up named to the first Board of Directors of the MVEDC by Carney. Carney was the one who incorporated the organization and named its board.
- B: Could you tell me the highlights of what stands out in your mind in the time period from, let's say, the end of 1977 through your participation in the Mahoning Valley Economic Development Committee?
- E: Shortly after the news of the plant closing became public, the national media came through, one right after the other. The TV networks, and the weekly news publications, the magazines and those kinds of things all came through and did stories of some kind on the Mahoning Valley using the word Youngstown a great deal. What it really did was give the Mahoning Valley a lot of publicity that it never could have afforded to acquire through advertising. We had a lot of calls from companies all over the country who were interested in expansion somewhere, never thought about the Youngstown area or the Mahoning Valley until they read something about the catastrophe that had taken place there.
- Of course, the news media was dramatizing the fact of how much gloom and doom there was everywhere, because that's their stock and trade. They do that with almost any kind of a situation; this one being no different. So, one of the things it did, it got us a lot of higher visibility around the country. Those companies that we'd already been talking to, when we would call them as a follow-up, "Oh yes, we read about the problems you're having out there. You're going to have plenty of skilled working people there for us if we locate our plant there, won't you?"
- "Well, it would appear that way. Tell us what you need

and we'll see what we can come up with." This is the kind of approach we made to them. We weren't trying to merchandise the gloom and the doom, but we were trying to make the best of the situation.

What we continued to do all through 1978 was to operate an Economic Development Program as best we could. Of course, in 1978 too, as I remember it, was the beginning contacts with Commuter Aircraft Corporation and its forerunner, the ICX Corporation. So we, as the Regional Growth Division of the Youngstown Chamber, continued to run an Economic Development Program and business as usual, so to speak. Maybe our merchandise was a little different or we had to adjust the information we gave out based on the new changes that had taken place, but aside from that, it was business as usual.

- B: Were you getting a lot of solid companies approaching you, because it can happen when you get an area that's going through the kind of problems that Youngstown is going through, you get, for a lack of a better term, similar to fly-by-nights, someone who wants to come in and take advantage of an economic situation, primarily because they knew that federal grants and so forth were in place. Do you feel that there were more solid contacts than there were people who were just kind of . . . ?
- E: No, about the same, about the same. I think we got both. You always get the fly-by-nights regardless of whether you're getting national publicity or not. But most of the solid companies were not above taking advantage of a situation where they thought they could get financing at a lower interest rate, for example, or they thought they could get skilled employees at something less than the market, even if it's just for a short period of time.

One of the things we never tried to do was to imply that the workmen, since they are laid off, would be willing to work for less money. We couldn't see that. Of our own knowledge, we certainly couldn't say that. Of our own knowledge, we knew that organized labor wouldn't allow that to happen, couldn't allow that to happen. The thing that we had to emphasize is the skills that are here, the dependable people. They show up for work every day. In some parts of the country, that doesn't happen. Two or three days after pay day nobody shows up or half of the work force shows up. Absenteeisms in a lot of parts of the country are horrendous, absenteeism here in the Mahoning Valley has not been. It depends on the industry in a lot of cases. But it has

- not been the biggest problem that we've faced here. People are used to working turns. They're used to going to work at 3:00 in the afternoon or used to going to work at 11:00 at night. That's something we all grow up with.
- B: Was there any point where, either when you were within the division--that you came in contact with the Ecumenical Coalition--was there any point where you needed to or they had approached you about their particular proposals that they had advanced?
- E: No. To my knowledge there was never any contact with me. I attended a couple of their open meetings. When they had open meetings, I attended two or three of those. Wes Johnstone was involved on two or three occasions. I don't remember specifically. I think he was named to one of the early groups that was putting the Coalition together. After the Coalition became finally formed, then it became a group of nothing but clergy. They wanted no other people involved but clergy. So, they did what they felt they wanted to do contacting those that they wanted to contact.
- B: What were your own personal feelings about the community-worker buyout, of what you know of the proposal for them to reopen the Campbell works?
- E: My own feelings were that if a large corporation with a lot of money behind it and borrowing power was not able to operate the plant in a profitable manner, how in the world could a group of people who had no management experience in steel be expected to do it, regardless of how much money they had.
- B: Okay, it's kind of a follow-up to this, What was your reaction to the National Steel Research Center? Did you feel that particular effort was more in line with what the facilities could be used for, if it could be salvaged for anything?
- E: Of course, National Steel Research Center, to my way of thinking, made a lot of sense. The problem seemed to be that the steel industry didn't think they needed it. There was no interest. Of course, if there's no interest by the steel industry, those are the people who are going to use it, use the results of it; if they're not interested, then it isn't worthwhile. But it surely made a great deal of sense to me and the people who put the study together, not only at Youngstown State, but at--was it Cornell or was it? It was another school.

Professor Wayne Kraft, I remember his name. He came in here a couple of times. I think it was Cornell. It was a New York State university of some kind.

But they made an excellent case for establishing a National Steel Research Center in these facilities. It would have been an excellent use for it.

B: Would you have seen that role as kind of like the Agriculture Department has, I mean I realize the different model all together, but they're like an agricultural substation where they work with different types of developing better strains of wheat and corn and all those other. Would you have seen it as that kind of thing, as an aid to the industry? It may have been more viable than . . .

E: Yes, an aid to the industry certainly, just like the Atomic Energy Commission, like the National Aeronautical and Space Administration. Precedence had already been set in a number of industries where space exploration or where exploration and research is done by government until the private sector sees the worth of these things. Then the government steps back and allows the private sector to run it.

B: How do you see the long view of the Mahoning Valley's future? Do you subscribe to the--that we will have a slow sustained growth or that the so-called doomsdayers that because of the sun belt, so-called, strategy that this area will lose out?

E: I'm not one of the gloom and doomers. I don't know if you can be in the economic development business and be a gloom and doomer. I see slow growth. I don't see anything dramatic here. The next five years is likely to be fairly flat with maybe a marginal turn up. I don't think there's going to be anymore economic blows of the size that we have sustained, both in 1977 and 1980.

Newton Falls in what, 1975 or 1974, was hit harder than anybody here when the 900 people in Rockwell's Bumper Plant--most of them lived in the Newton Falls area--all lost their jobs. The city of Newton Falls, is it a city or a village? I can't remember. I think it's a village. Well, it's less than 5,000 I think is the way you determine that.

B: That sounds right.

- E: They were really rocked on their heels, not only the city, but the school system as well.
- B: In the late 1950's in Pittsburgh, Mayor Lawrence put together a coalition of, like Mellon Bank and a number of foundations. Given the fact that we don't have that particular kind of situation in place, do you think that there is enough talent in the political and economic sectors to go through the kind of changes that Pittsburgh tried to adjust to in that time period? What they were trying to do was, like bring all the groups together and do long term planning as far as private and public sector moneys, a foundation like to stabilize neighborhoods to do the kind of urban planning, if you will, that MVEDC appears to be doing as far as bringing industry in and stabilizing what's in existence.
- E: Let me emphasize very clearly, MVEDC is not a planning agency. It makes no pretense about doing it. The regional planning body is the Eastgate Development and Transportation Agency. We implement, we run an economic development program. There's a big difference there.

Your allusion to Pittsburgh, I'm not sure that any one organization can be all things to all people in the business of development of the community from residential developments through to industrial developments. I think the planners and I'm sure that each of the cities and political subdivisions in the Pittsburgh area, as they do here, have their own planning departments. The public officials and the decision-makers of each of those decide how best to utilize the land that's in their service area, so to speak.

The same way here, our job is to inventory those industrial sites that are most likely. First of all, they have to be on the market. We don't inventory anything that isn't on the market. Planning people will look at everything that's zoned for industry and say, "Here's all this industrially zoned land." But if the owner doesn't want to sell it, it's not available, and we only keep in our files those sites or buildings that either a realtor or an owner has told us is available. And in most cases, we have it in writing.

- B: Okay, maybe I should back up a step. Well, I guess what I was trying to get at was as one component of that overall strategy. The model was that the Mayor pulled together various organizations and subdivisions and they, as a coordinating body, arrived at that. I wasn't trying to imply that you did planning, because I know you

don't do that.

E: Yes, right.

B: But I guess what I was trying to say was, do you think that there is enough talent in the various sectors to come off with some kind of plan like that? I know MVEDC has county commissioners and a number of other groups on their board. Do you see someone of the stature of Mayor Lawrence capable of pulling all the sectors together?

E: No, because Mayor Lawrence . . . The City of Pittsburgh is the biggest in that metro area. Here you have two big cities in Warren and Youngstown and not very far behind is Niles. So, you have three city entities that are of fair size. Then you have smaller cities like Struthers and Campbell, and others as well, but those are the key ones at least as far as steel was concerned.

There is no one political figure that has--I guess you have to say that the Mayor of Youngstown probably has somewhat more stature, influence, than the other mayor, simply because he's the mayor of the largest city. But the mayor and/or residents of every other community in the Valley is going to contest that. It is not as cohesive as that. I think you could say the same thing in Cuyahoga County with Cleveland. There's only one central city. There's a lot of other good sized cities, but only one Cleveland. Now here, Youngstown is not in the middle. It's at one end of the metro area, Warren is at the other end of the metro area, Niles is in between and others are spread up and down the Valley. It's just configured different.

Is there enough talent? Sure there's enough talent. What it takes is to get it directed in the same direction, get it moving in the same direction. Sometimes that's hard to do. The goals and objectives are all the same. Everybody agrees we ought to have more jobs and we ought to have a bigger tax base, but how do you do that?

B: Okay, finally, are there any facts or anything that you think is important to understand about this time period that we're talking about that I either haven't mentioned or that you would just like to bring out that you think is just very important to understand what took place during the time period?

E: One of the things we didn't talk about at all and it

took place during 1978, because in January of 1979 is when MVEDC began to get staffed; through 1978 Mahoning County acted as the agent to apply for the \$100,000.00 grant from . . .

B: The Title 9 Grant?

E: Yes, it was the Title 9 Grant if I remember correctly, to put together a program that MVEDC should address itself to. They hired Batelle Memorial Institute in Columbus to do it. When those people came, when the staff people from Batelle came here to do that work, they did a good bit of it independently, but we spent a lot of time, I personally, spent a lot of time with those staff people as they wrote those things. Operating the only economic development program here in the Valley up to that point, it was important that they understand what was going on now and how we thought it could be improved.

They took our comments and built on them, which resulted in the program that's pretty much still in existence today. The program that MVEDC, that first \$100,000.00 grant put together, is still pretty much what we're operating on today.

B: Okay, I'd like to thank you for taking time this morning.

E: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW