

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Great Depression Project

Shenango Valley During The Depression

O. H. 227

PAUL LEES

Interviewed

by

Marilyn Lees

on

July 24, 1982

Paul F. Lees

Paul Frederick Lees was born November 29, 1920, in Sharon, Pennsylvania, the son of Fred and Florence Lees. He lived all his life in the Shenango Valley and attended Brookfield Schools graduating in 1938. He worked a few years at Sharon Steel and then enlisted in the Army in 1941. His service in the Army was spent working at various detention camps in the United States.

Paul married Lela Marion Lees in 1945 and they had two children, Gary, born in 1948, and Marilyn, born in 1953. Paul and his family have lived in Brookfield, Ohio all of their lives.

During the Depression, Paul was attending school and remembered the hardships of growing up at this time. He had a paper route at this time to help the family out. His father, Fred, while not working at National Castings tried to find odd jobs around the Valley whenever he could to help support his wife and three children. Paul's older brother, John, enlisted in the CCC program and was sent to Toledo at this time. Paul recalled that one of the most valuable lessons he learned at this time was how to stretch money.

When Paul was discharged from the Army he was able to find employment at Sharon Steel where at the present time he is still working. He is an avid sports fan and enjoys reading and traveling.

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INTERVIEWEE: PAUL LEES

INTERVIEWER: Marilyn Lees

SUBJECT: Works Program Administration, Civilian Conservation
Corps, Coal Furnace, F.D. Roosevelt, Discipline
Methods in School

DATE: July 24, 1982

M: This is an interview with Paul Lees for the Youngstown State University on the Shenango Valley during the Depression by Marilyn Lees at Masury, Ohio, July 24, 1982, at 3:00 p.m.

First of all, how long have you lived in the Shenango Valley?

P: 61 years.

M: 61 years, when were you born?

P: 1920.

M: What date?

P: November 29.

M: November 29, 1920. What nationality are you?

P: English and Irish.

M: What do you remember about your parents and family, like what are their names, your brothers, sisters, and so on?

P: My father's name is Fred and my mother's name is Florence, and I had two sisters and one brother.

M: Can you give me a little information about your parent's background?

- P: My father was born in England. He came over here when he was small, to Reynoldsville, Pennsylvania. My mother's family lived there for generations, so he married her in Reynoldsville, Pennsylvania. When the coal mines played out, they moved to Sharon in 1912.
- M: Then you were born, you had an older brother who was born December 11, 1913.
- P: An older sister.
- M: Okay, an older sister. When were they born?
- P: My brother was born in 1913, and my oldest sister was born in 1915. She only lived a couple of years when she died of scarlet fever.
- M: You were born in 1920?
- P: 1920. Then my sister which was a year older than me, she was born in 1919.
- M: Can you remember what some of your duties were as a child at this time?
- P: Yes, about the same! Cut the grass, work in the garden, go out and get the coal, and cut wood.
- M: Did your parent's own their home at this time?
- P: When I was born they were renting it but then they bought a house.
- M: How big was the house you lived in?
- P: Where I was born?
- M: Yes.
- P: It had four bedrooms, about seven rooms I guess.
- M: What was your neighborhood like, your closest neighbors and so on? Like how far away would they have been?
- P: When we first moved out here, where I was born, the closest neighbors were probably 200 feet away. There was a dirt road; it would get pretty bad in the winter time. Most people had coal stoves and their kitchen was in coal heat. The coal would be delivered by either horses, wagon, or else, after awhile, they got it hauled in trucks. Sometimes they would have a hard time getting up the road.
- M: Whose duty was it to keep the furnace going?

- P: It was my father's most of the time. Because he used a coal furnace, they had to bank it at night and start it up in the morning. Us kids had to bring in the coal buckets.
- M: What else did you do as childhood duties around the house? Did you have a garden?
- P: A big garden.
- M: What kind of things did you grow in the garden?
- P: Just about everything, potatoes, corn; mostly vegetables.
- M: Did your mother can?
- P: Yes, she canned.
- M: Did you have any fruit trees?
- P: Yes, we had fruit trees.
- M: What about animals?
- P: One time we had rabbits. My father always had chickens. That was another job, feeding the chickens.
- M: Did you have any pets?
- P: I had one. We always had a dog.
- M: What kind of things did you do for enjoyment as a kid?
- P: Went swimming.
- M: Where did you use to go swimming?
- P: Yankee Run.
- M: Yankee Creek?
- P: Yes.
- M: What else, did you fish?
- P: Yes, down in Yankee Creek.
- M: What else would you do?
- P: Went fishing and swimming.
- M: Fishing and swimming in the summer, what about in the winter?
- P: Sled riding and ice skating.

- M: This street today is pretty well settled. There are houses on both sides of the street. What did it look like during the late 20's early 30's?
- P: Like I said, it was a dirt road up until WPA days. They black topped it and haven't done anything to it since!
- M: Do you remember when it was paved?
- P: I would say about 1934.
- M: What was everybody's reaction to this, were they glad?
- P: Yes, because it provided a lot of jobs to people at this time--WPA(Works Program Administration).
- M: Did anybody complain about them paving the roads?
- P: Not that I know of. They didn't want street lights though. They said they didn't need them. They had an obsession with street lights.
- M: I see. They didn't want to pay the taxes?
- P: They didn't want to pay for the street lights!
- M: Where did you go to grade school?
- P: To Addison School.
- M: Did you walk to school?
- P: Yes.
- M: How far was that?
- P: It was a mile.
- M: What was your grade school like?
- P: It had eight grades.
- M: In one building?
- P: Yes, in one building. It had one class for slow learners. Most kids didn't go to school after eighth grade. They quit school.
- M: Why?
- P: Well, sometimes their family needed them for work.
- M: Did your family ever talk about you quitting school?
- P: No.

M: Never? Then when you went on to high school, how far away was this school, nine through twelve?

P: High school was in Brookfield.

M: Was it in Brookfield Center?

P: Brookfield Center.

M: How far away was that?

P: About three miles.

M: How did you get there?

P: By a bus.

M: Where did the bus pick you up at?

P: Down on Brookfield Avenue.

M: That was a short distance and everybody took the bus up to the school. Can you remember any of your school activities during the Depression?

P: They had a few sports, but they had a hard time with uniforms. We had class plays and they had programs just like we do today.

M: Did you have a band?

P: Part-time--one year we would have a band, the next year they wouldn't. It depended on how much money they could take in for the schools.

M: Did they have a hard time keeping teachers?

P: No.

M: How big was the school? On average, how big were your classes?

P: Grade school classes, there were probably 20 or 30 in a class.

M: Did it change when you went to high school, was it any larger?

P: Yes, they were larger in high school.

M: Can you remember any of your favorite teachers?

P: In grade school?

M: At any time.

- P: Yes, Mrs. Moore.
- M: What did she teach?
- P: She taught the third grade and the seventh grade.
- M: What did you like about her?
- P: She was fair with everyone; she taught everybody the same thing.
- M: What was discipline like?
- P: Well it was pretty strict. Most of the teachers were a lot stricter than I believe they are today.
- M: What happened, for instance, if you didn't do your homework or you did act up in school?
- P: In grade school they would give you a paddle, and sometimes even in high school, or else they would give you extra work to do and sometimes you had to stay after school to do your work.
- M: What were some of the subjects you took in high school?
- P: I took Algebra, Latin, English Literature and history. They had what they called a college entrance course.
- M: Did they have separate courses for people interested in going to college, and for those people who just wanted to get through high school?
- P: Yes.
- M: What were the days like under the New Deal or FDR? Do you remember any certain personalities, even FDR himself? What do you remember about him?
- P: He used to come on the radio and give us talks.
- M: Did your family own a radio?
- P: Not until late in the thirties.
- M: Did you go the the neighbors sometimes to listen?
- P: Yes, the first radio I remember the neighbors had and only one person could listen at a time.
- M: Were there earphones?
- P: They had earphones, we had to put them on and listen. Down at the Sharon Herald, the newspaper office, they had a board up there and they put the news on it--whatever happened

during the day.

M: Were there newspapers around at this time?

P: Yes, I used to carry them.

M: Oh, you used to be a newspaper carrier.

P: Yes.

M: How old were you?

P: About fourteen or fifteen.

M: How much did you get paid?

P: I think a penny a paper.

M: What did you do with your money?

P: We would go to shows sometimes on Saturday.

M: Where was the show at?

P: Down in Sharon at the Gable Theater.

M: The Gable? How much did it cost?

P: Five or ten cents. We would get a hot dog for ten cents.

M: Getting back to FDR, what kind of things do you remember about him? You mentioned his fireside chats. What else do you remember about him?

P: I don't know. It seemed to me like most people were interested in what he had to say.

M: In other words, if people knew that he was going to be on, did they plan to be at home to listen to him?

P: Yes.

M: Were most people that you knew happy when he was elected?

P: I think so, most people were out of work and when he was elected at least things started moving. People started getting jobs.

M: Do you think the mood of the people changed in this area?

P: I think it did.

M: Before Roosevelt, what was the mood?

- P: Depressed. They didn't think there was any hope.
- M: Why do you think it changed after Roosevelt was elected?
- P: Well, I think he gave the people hope!
- M: By doing what?
- P: That there was a future!
- M: Your own father, during the Depression, what kind of jobs did he have?
- P: He worked at National Malleable. He worked, maybe, two or three days a week; sometimes two or three days in two weeks! He would try to find jobs outside of the mill. He would go and work for a farmer for a day. The farmer would give him potatoes or whatever for his pay.
- M: How would he hear about these jobs?
- P: Through other people. A lot of people were doing the same thing. My brother, my older brother, worked at a water company. A few times he would help pay the water bill. He would put a days work in at the water company and that would go toward the water bill, or your gas bill. He would do whatever he had to do.
- M: So, your brother was out of school during the Depression?
- P: Yes, he graduated in 1932. Then he went to CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps). He sent home--I don't know how much--whatever they made at the time. You had to send it to your family.
- M: You had to?
- P: Oh yes, what ever they would give you a month you would send so much to your family and you could keep some.
- M: Where was he at?
- P: He was in Toledo, Ohio.
- M: Do you know what he did?
- P: Yes, he was working on the Maumee River. They were building banks out of stone and putting up rock walls. First he went to Fort Knox, Kentucky to work.
- M: Did he seem to be happy doing this kind of work?
- P: Yes, he liked it.
- M: What other kinds of jobs did your father do?

P: That's about all he did!

M: Do you remember what people did that were unemployed?

P: Were they on welfare or what?

M: Was there welfare?

P: There was a little welfare . . . you mean during Roosevelt's time? You could work on the roads and they would give you so much money to buy food.

M: Was there a lot of crime by people that didn't have anything?

P: I don't think there was anymore than today, probably less.

M: Do you think the neighborhood was safer?

P: I think so.

M: Did you lock your doors at night?

P: Yes.

M: You did? How did people help one another out then?

P: Well, the fact that they weren't working steady, the neighbors saw you ding something or if someone would ask for help-- they weren't doing anything anyways so they would be glad to come over and help and do something just to put in the time.

M: Did people help each other build houses and things like that, putting gardens together?

P: Yes.

M: Did the neighborhood people share things?

P: Some did and some didn't.

M: What church did you go to?

P: The Methodist Church.

M: The First Methodist in Sharon?

P: Yes. We walked to church.

M: You walked to church. Did you go every Sunday?

P: Every Sunday night and day.

M: Night and day? Did the church help people out at all?

P: They didn't have much they could do. They tried in some cases to help.

- M: Were there any church activities that you family did together?
- P: Yes. The big occasion was the Sunday school picnic at Buhl Park. That was a big thing for everybody.
- M: How often did that happen?
- P: Every summer.
- M: Would all the families go there for the day?
- P: Yes, they would all go. They would have pie eating contests, sack races, swim in the lake.
- M: How was the church supported at this time, just by the people's money?
- P: Just by the people's money.
- M: Was there ever a time when the minister wasn't paid a salary?
- P: Yes, one time we had to give what ever the people could like food and a little bit for the place where he lived.
- M: He did this on his own?
- P: Yes, he did this on his own!
- M: Any events that stand out in your mind as major, or significant during the Depression, any big thing that you remember?
- P: Such as?
- M: Like in 1929 when the Stock Market crashed, or any personalities. Who were the idols at this time?
- P: The only one I remember was Al Smith who was running for president against Hoover. There were a lot of Catholic people around here who said Al Smith should be elected and the Protestant people were always against him because he was Catholic.
- M: What political party does your father belong to?
- P: He was a Democrat.
- M: He was a Democrat. Did he vote for Roosevelt?
- P: He voted for Roosevelt.
- M: Did he seem to think that Roosevelt was doing a good job?

P: Yes he did.

M: Do you view these days now as the "good old days"?

P: These days . . . ?

M: No, back during the Depression. Now do you view them as being the "good old days" and do you have fond memories for the most part, despite the hardships?

P: You may think they were the "good old days" but they weren't to good either.

M: Why not? What were some of the negative things at this time that might of held you or your family back from progressing?

P: You had to work more to survive! You weren't working for luxury, you were working to survive!

M: What was considered a luxury then?

P: Going to get ice cream, having watermelon; eating was a luxury. Another thing was taking a trip some place by train or street car.

M: There were street cars in Sharon?

P: Yes.

M: You didn't ride in those very often?

P: Yes, we rode them?

M: You rode them?

P: Yes, sometimes we went to Youngstown or New Castle, to visit somebody or something like that.

M: Did you ever make visits up to your father's birthplace up in Reynoldsville, Pennsylvania?

P: Yes.

M: Did you go there to see your mother's relatives and so on?

P: Yes.

M: How often would you go?

P: That was a big trip, we would go maybe every couple of years. We never had a car. We always had to go with friends of ours.

- M: Your mother and father didn't ever own a car?
- P: No! In summertime we always had to worry about the car over heating or the brakes getting hot and in the winter time you were trying to keep warm. We would bundle all up and put some hot bricks in the back seat to keep our feet warm.
- M: What were holidays like, especially Christmas?
- P: We went to church. They often had a treat for the kids.
- M: Did you have a tree?
- P: Yes, we would go out and cut one down.
- M: What were some of the special treats you would have at this time?
- P: Christmas?
- M: Yes.
- P: An orange and an apple and maybe some popcorn, and we would probably get one toy. If they could afford it, we would also get some kind of clothing.
- M: Did people complain a lot at this time about how bad things were, children your age or older adults, would you hear them complaining about the things that they didn't have?
- P: Yes.
- M: Who did they usually blame it on?
- P: Usually they would blame it on the politicians.
- M: Can you think of any things you would like to add? What kind of changes did the Shenango Valley go through at this time? How did it change?
- P: In the thirties?
- M: Yes.
- P: WPA fixed a lot of roads, and they built a dam on the river, a lot of curbing and athletic facilities for Sharon High School.
- M: Did you ever think of volunteering for these work programs yourself?
- P: I was in school. WPA was for people out of work and sixteen year olds.

M: How do you think you might have benefitted having lived through that time?

P: I learned the value of the dollar.

M: Do you think that it helped you to be more thrifty today?

P: Yes, for sure!

END OF INTERVIEW