

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Warren Government Project

Deputy Health Commissioner

O. H. 229

LYLE BIDDLESTONE

Interviewed

by

James Manross

on

November 24, 1975

LYLE BIDDLESTONE

Lyle Biddlestone was born in Niles, Ohio on December 6, 1890. In 1913 he moved to Warren with his wife, Myrtle Edwards.

Discontented with his jobs as a receiving teller at the First National Bank of Youngstown, and the Niles Trust Company because inside work didn't appeal to him, he sought an outside job. In 1915 Lyle became the first motorcycle policeman in Warren. During an influenza epidemic, in 1917, he was appointed Deputy Health Commissioner for the city of Warren.

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INTERVIEWEE: LYLE BIDDLESTONE

INTERVIEWER: James Manross

SUBJECT: Deputy Health Commissioner

DATE: November 24, 1975

M: This is James Manross of the Oral History Program of Youngstown State University, on November 24, 1975. Today I am interviewing Mr. Lyle Biddlestone who is the Director of the Board of Health for the City of Warren.

Where are you and your family originally from?

B: I was born and raised in Niles, Ohio, December 6, 1890.

M: How many were in your family?

B: Two, myself and one brother who was seven years younger than me.

M: What were your school days like?

B: Well, I was no ball of fire in school.

M: What were your ambitions and desires to do in life, in school?

B: I really had nothing special in mind.

M: What did you do after you graduated from school?

B: I didn't graduate from school. I went to Hall University. I took a business course.

M: When did you first come to Warren?

B: I was married to Myrtle Edwards, and moved to Warren in 1913.

M: How were you employed when you came to Warren?

B: I was a paymaster at the Stanley Works in Niles.

M: When did you first start working for the City of Warren?

B: I was the first motorcycle policeman in the City of Warren. I began June 16, 1915.

M: What was your next job after being a policeman?

B: I was appointed Deputy Health Commissioner during the flu epidemic in 1917 and 1918.

M: Was that epidemic really serious? How serious was it? How many people did it kill?

B: It was the worst epidemic of any kind that we had in the City of Warren in my fifty-eight plus years as Deputy Health Commissioner.

M: What was a typical working day like then when you became Deputy Health Commissioner?

B: I was the whole Health Department at that particular time. I had no clerk, no nurse, and made all the investigations of scarlet fever, and smallpox, and whatever we had in the city. We were not strict about quarantine at that particular time.

M: How were you, by yourself, able to combat the flu epidemic, and defeat it finally?

B: It was a worldwide epidemic and it eventually wore itself out. There was no way that we could possibly control it.

M: Whatever prompted you in the first place to work for the City of Warren?

B: After I left the Stanley Works, I tired of the banking business. I was a receiving teller at the First National Bank of Youngstown, and then moved from there to receiving teller at the Niles Trust Company. The

inside work didn't appeal to me, that's the reason I took a job in the police department so that I could be outside more.

M: In the late 1910's and early 1920's, what was downtown Warren like then? Was it much different than it is now?

B: In 1915 downtown Warren was a busy place. One reason for that was that it was a county seat. We had a large influx of people from all over the county coming into Warren everyday.

M: When you first became Deputy Health Commissioner, was it in this building that it is now?

B: No, it was in the old city building on Mahoning Avenue, which, a few years later, after I started to work, burned down. Then we went from there to the city building on Franklin Street, from Franklin Street to a rented building on Pine Street, from Pine Street to where we are at this particular time, 391 Mahoning Avenue.

M: You were here during World War I. Were the people really unified in a unified cause to fight the excess powers in Europe?

B: The what?

M: Was there a lot of unity among the people in World War I to get together, and to fight,

B: I don't get quite just what you mean. World War I was a long way back, but as I remember it was the general concensus of opinion that it was a necessary war.

M: History depicts the "Roaring Twenties" as really roaring, and everything. Was it like this in Warren during the 1920's, or was that exaggerated?

B: I think the people my age never have forgotten what went on during Prohibition.

M: I noticed from my research of the history of Warren that a man named W. B. Kilpatrick was Mayor three different times in the City of Warren back then. He must have been pretty popular. Could you comment on him?

B: I had the pleasure of working for Mr. Kilpatrick. He is still living, very active, and one of Warren's most distinctive citizens.

M: Who were some of the better mayors of Warren that you remember, that were really good mayors?

B: I've had the pleasure of working for sixteen mayors in the city of Warren, and have been very fortunate. We've had a high class, fine group, of mayors ever since 1915.

M: How bad did the Depression hit Warren in the 1930's?

B: During the Depression Warren suffered like every other city with the finances to operate the city. I don't think we were any worse off here than most every other city in the country.

M: Did the Depression cause more epidemics, more health problems than before?

B: As I remember, the Depression did not have any bad effects on the public health in the City of Warren.

M: When did you become the top Health Commissioner in Warren? You said originally you were the Deputy Health Commissioner.

B: I'm still the Deputy Commissioner.

M: Oh, that's just a regular title?

B: The City of Warren doesn't have a full time Health Commissioner. It's only part-time.

M: It's a part-time job. I didn't know that. Did you have another job when you were Health Commissioner?

B: I suppose that you could say that I did. I was in the music business as an orchestra leader for about 35 years.

M: Didn't you also own the Buckeye on Route 422?

B: I owned the Buckeye, yes.

M: Did you play out there when you owned it?

B: Oh, yes.

M: Did you ever have any other big name orchestras out there too, or is it more of a local thing?

B: No, it was strictly local. Naturally, with my own orchestra, I couldn't have somebody else out there.

M: Basically, what type of music did you play; more waltzes, or more jazz, or what?

B: As a leader of Biddlestone's Buckeye Entertainers for 35 years, I catered strictly to an older class of people.

M: What instrument did you play?

B: Trumpet.

M: During World War II was there much rationing in Warren?

B: During the Depression everyone that received relief had to work to pay for what they got. I had the pleasure of taking over a part of the Trumbull County Home to operate Poor Relief Gardens. When the crop was harvested, a ladies group canned everything that we grew. It was given to the people on relief.

M: Were there any other epidemics, or anything like this in Warren, besides the big flu epidemic of 1917 and 1918?

B: There was smallpox in 1926. It was worldwide.

M: Were there any other since then?

B: No, but in those days we had nothing to immunize people for diptheria, whooping cough, and those things. We had a lot of diptheria. We had a hospital down at 919 Main Street in which I took all the patients from the county. The expense of it was paid by the township trustees, and, of course, nowadays we're very much surprised if we possibly have a case of diptheria, or whooping cough, or measles. Immunization has taken care of all those problems that we had before we had things to immunize children with.

M: Was taking care of diseases about the main thing that you did during all those years, because it took so much time?

B: Oh no, there were all kinds of complaints. When I first started to work, the town was full of outside

toilets. Of course, we don't have any more in the city, except in the lot that we took in which is now what they call Liberty Steel. There aren't too many houses up there anymore.

M: Do you remember a few of the other things that you did as Health Commissioner?

B: I had the restaurants to inspect that were in the city. We had no vending machines, food vending machines at that time. I had the milk plants to inspect in the farms that sent milk into the city.

M: Was milk pasturized then?

B: We were the fifth city in the State of Ohio to adopt a pasturization ordinance.

M: The outside toilets, did the people themselves have to pay for installing one indoors, or how did that work?

B: First the people paid for the cleaning of the outside toilets. We had dug grounds in the south part of the city where there were no homes around. It was all open-aired out. We had a particular place for it.

M: Can you think of any of the other big things that you did?

B: This is the hospital we operate. I've been there since 1919. This is our VD clinic, and one of our present day problems.

M: Were there any VD problems? Was that as bad as it is now?

B: Not at that particular time, because we had houses of prostitution in Warren that gave us very little VD problems.

M: Would you say that that situation was preferable then, or preferable now?

B: I don't think houses of prostitution would help the situation now because you have a different class of people. Our biggest group was 18, 19, 20, 21. It was a time for promiscuity among young people.

M: Would you say that the people up in Warren have generally changed a lot during your years as Health Commissioner?

B: There is no question about the change in the city with the different groups of people. There is a big ethnic group in the city at this particular time. At that time, around 1915, 1916, and 1917, we didn't have so many. Warren had twenty thousand, and now we have seventy thousand. It's a much bigger city with much more territory.

M: What was your favorite decade or era here in Warren, your personal favorite time in Warren? In other words, which years did you enjoy the most in Warren?

B: I'm sure that Warren, in the last two or three years, is so much better off than it has ever been before as far as public health is concerned. Our housing inspection, you can't hardly find a dilapidated house in the City of Warren today no matter how hard you try. Our contagion is no problem with our continual clinics for immunization, and VD. Our inspections of restaurants, grocery stores, schoolhouses and all those things are so much better than it ever was because we have sufficient help now to take care of everything that comes up. Our city is practically free of junk cars. We just don't have much trouble anymore. It's not like it used to be. We're able to keep things under control. The State Department of Health feels that our restaurants, and grocery stores are much above the average in the state.

M: Was getting enough money back then a big problem as far as getting things done?

B: In all the years that I've worked for the city, I've never had any trouble getting sufficient funds to operate. I think any health department that does their job like they ought to won't have any trouble with city council getting sufficient money to operate.

M: Have you as a whole been very much satisfied with your career as a city man working for the city?

B: I've loved this kind of work. I don't think that I could have ever done anything that would be any more satisfactory to me than the job as Deputy Health Commissioner.

M: Is there anything at all that you can think of that

you would have liked to change or done differently?

B: As I look back over the years there are a lot of things that I wouldn't have done, probably shouldn't have done. If I had the second chance, I might do some things different, but on the whole it's been very satisfactory.

M: How many children do you have, and what are they doing now?

B: I have two, one boy and a girl.

M: Isn't one working for the city also?

B: My son worked for the city for about 26 years as an engineer in the Water Department.

M: If you had to name one or two main accomplishments of yours as Health Commissioner, what would you say they would be?

B: I would like to take credit for the job I've done as protector of public health for people of the city.

M: Today we have been interviewing Mr. Lyle Biddlestone who has been Warren's Health Commissioner for many years. We wish you all the luck in the world Mr. Biddlestone, and we thank you for taking the time to spend with us, and God bless you. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW