

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Pottery Industry

Personal Experience

O. H. 391

IRIS CAMPBELL

Interviewed

by

Tom Hess

on

December 20, 1976

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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INTERVIEWEE: IRIS CAMPBELL

INTERVIEWER: Tom Hess

SUBJECT: Cronin Pottery, Entertainment, 1936 Flood

DATE: December 20, 1976

H: This is an interview with Iris Campbell taken at her home, 116 Lee Avenue, in Weirton, West Virginia, on December 20, 1976. The interview is for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program and the interviewer is Tom Hess.

We were talking about the start of your work at the Cronin Pottery. Just go ahead and tell what you remember and then I'll ask you some questions about it.

C: I applied for work in the office because this was my training in high school, but they had no vacancy at the time. They started me in the clay shop, I guess, for about six weeks I would say. Someone has probably told you the procedure.

H: Not in that era, not in the 1930's. I have the 1970's, and the 1960's, but not the 1930's.

C: Of course, your clay is made into a certain consistency. They made their own molds, and then they would pour the clay into the molds. My job was dipping cups into the glaze. You have to learn how to handle it. Of course, I had squeezed a few of them and it left just a handful of clay. Then they go through what they call the bisque kiln. They're fired there for a certain length of time and then they are dipped into this glaze. When you dip the cup into the glaze, you have a sponge and you wipe it off. That accounts for the ring. If you ever noticed, most any cup has that smooth ring. From there, it goes into the decorating shop if they want to put decals on it. Some, of course, are left plain. It depends on what they have orders for. I guess I worked for about six weeks in the clay shop.

Then I went into the office where I did a little bit of everything, mostly payroll. I typed all of the orders that were sent down to the clay shop first and then into the packing shed. They would ship carloads at a time.

H: These were railroad cars?

C: Yes.

H: Railroad cars full of cups and saucers?

C: Yes.

H: That's a lot of chinaware, isn't it?

C: They did not make china; they made what they called a semiporcelain.

H: Can you differentiate for the laymen what the difference would be?

C: China, as I remember, must have a certain kind of clay other than what they call the semiporcelain. Of course, we know that porcelain is very expensive, even more so than china is.

H: Were they using the native clay?

C: No.

H: Even then, in that day, they had to bring in the clay for the pottery. This is a big difference between the brickyards and the pipeworks, because right there on the hillside they had a whole vein. They told me in some places that vein is eighteen feet thick and they're still mining out of it today. The Brickyard Crescent and Globe up at Newell mine out of some of the very same veins.

C: That is, evidently, a different kind of clay. It's all made into brick. This was a much finer clay that was ordered from quite a distance. Of course, they had to order the plaster for the molds. They had their own mold makers.

H: The whole factory was sort of self-contained then?

C: Yes.

H: It stood on its own. The reason I'm so curious about this one pottery is that it's separated from the rest of the potteries at Newell and East Liverpool and Chester. It's

right smack dab in the middle of all these brickyards and the pipeworks, and it was started initially by one of the same men that started two or three of the brickyards, Mr. Porter, big Jim.

C: I've heard my father speak of him.

H: He started what is now Globe, and he was involved in Crescent and so forth. He was involved in several of them, but he wanted his own pottery so he started this pottery that we're talking about.

Working in the office then, you can maybe remember things. You said that you worked payroll. In the 1930's, what kind of pay are we talking about for those girls that worked out there in the clay shed?

C: That, I don't remember. I started in the office at fifteen dollars a week.

H: Fifteen dollars a week? That's not very much.

C: Really, it went farther then than what we make now.

H: I noticed when I interviewed the people from Homer Laughlin that a high percentage of the workers, in the making of the pottery, were ladies. Was the percentage at Cronin Pottery very high of lady workers?

C: Yes. They also did a lot of hand decorating, the gold line around the edge, or any particular decoration on any piece of ware that they were making. They would spin this wheel and just hold their hand very steady. The hand didn't move, the article moved. You could just stand and watch and wonder how they could do this.

H: This was before any women's lib or anything like that. Were these ladies widows that had to work?

C: No, not really. It was mostly unmarried women.

H: Was there any rule that you can remember like if you got married . . . I can remember when I was a little boy in school, if the schoolteacher got married she was laid off.

C: No, there was no ruling like that. I was with this company for ten and a half years.

I can remember when the river overflowed--this was before the dam--and we stood out on the roof of the decorating shop and just watched the river come over the banks. It came within about two inches of coming in the clay shop. For two days I went to work in a rowboat. Do you know

where the stone steps go down over the hill?

H: Yes.

C: I would go down those stairs and they would come in a rowboat and take me to work. For two days I did that.

H: Was this an annual spring flood, or was this the big flood in 1936?

C: This wasn't in 1936, it was before that. The river did come over the bank practically every year. However, this was the closest call they had of losing everything. They thought it was about time to move out, so they took over the pottery in Minerva, Ohio. They took me out there with them. I believe that was in 1933.

H: So they weren't there when the 1936 flood came through?

C: No, because I know I was out in Minerva at the time of the 1936 flood. Several of us drove into East Liverpool where we could see.

H: Mr. Yorke worked for Crescent Company up there for over fifty years. He told me about the 1936 flood and about the damage it did and so forth. Mr. Campbell has told me that his father owned the big lumber company there in town. It was behind where the fire station is now.

C: Would that be Wade?

H: Yes. He said that they just expected the flood every spring.

C: Yes. I had an aunt that lived down over the hill and every year the water came up in their house and they would come up and stay with my parents until the water went down. Then they would go and sweep it all out, sweep the mud out. They had to paper and paint all over again. They did this every year, but this was home.

H: Was there any kind of insurance for that kind of damage then?

C: No.

H: That was part of their own responsibility?

C: I remember one year the water came up and the night it went down my uncle said, "We're not going to clean because it left an awful lot of mud. The river will come up again and take it." It did. A couple of days the water came up again and took a lot of the mud out. He

said, "Now that's it, we'll clean up."

H: He had lived along the river long enough that he knew. You said this was before the dam. You're talking about the Stratton Dam, aren't you?

C: Yes.

H: The old New Cumberland Dam was there?

C: Yes, it was there.

H: It didn't do very much in helping the flood.

We're in a very interesting time economically. In the Depression time things were really tough. Did you have steady work in the pottery?

C: I did. I was very fortunate. When they moved to Minerva they took me with them, but my father was having quite a rough time of it in New Cumberland.

H: Where did he work?

C: He worked for the WPA [Works Progress Administration] when it first started. He worked for forty cents an hour.

H: You said they moved out to Minerva because of the flood. Are there any other reasons that they moved to Minerva?

C: The pottery that was already in Minerva had been closed, I guess, for some time. Of course, there was very little work there and the town was anxious to have it reopened. I think they sold bonds.

H: They made some incentive for the company to move out there. Just like they do today, the cities go out and try to entice businesses to come to their cities. Evidently, New Cumberland didn't do too much enticing then. One after another these different works had moved away.

C: I think the river really had a lot to do with it in those days. At one time there was a foundry there, did you know this?

H: Where was it located?

C: I'm not sure. There was a glassworks and a Chelsea Pottery, and of course, all the different brickworks and clay mines. This was back in my father's generation, because he had two brothers that learned the trade in the

foundry. One of them worked in the Chelsea Pottery.

- H: Those foundry fellows, would they have come down to Weirton Steel when it started up?
- C: No. My one uncle went to California and he never came back for forty years.
- H: He went west?
- C: He went west. The other one had a very unfortunate accident. He had an arm so mangled that it had to be amputated. Of course, that ruined his working career.
- H: Where did you live in New Cumberland? Where did your family live?
- C: We were always up on Ridge Avenue.
- H: Which one of those houses up on Ridge? I thought you might have been in the Campbell house on Second Avenue.
- C: There were several families with the name Campbell, but none of them were related. There was Wade Campbell and his parents, and they were no relation. The Campbell house you're speaking of on Second Avenue, on the corner, they were no relation.
- H: In doing this office work, can you remember who some of the customers were back in those days for this pottery?
- C: Most of the orders were out of New York and Chicago, that is, the carload orders. A lot of it, I remember, were giveaway items that theaters used to draw patrons. There were people by the name of Block who were one of our first customers. We had mostly Jewish customers.
- H: Was the china made up in sets, like service for four?
- C: Just however they would order it, any size set that they carried. They would just give one item each evening.
- H: Come today and get your cup, come tomorrow and get your saucer. Is that the idea?
- C: Right. This, of course, was the time when social security came about. That started in 1935, 1936. I've been in it since day one.
- H: Can you remember what they sold this pottery for so that we can get some idea of cost?
- C: No, I don't know anything about that.

H: I didn't know whether any of the invoicing you did carried pricing on it or not.

C: I didn't do the invoicing. I just wrote up the orders that came in to be distributed throughout the factory.

H: There would have to be work orders, so many cups go to the cup shop. The relationship between management and employees has changed an awful lot over the years. How would you characterize the relationship between management and the people that worked for Cronin?

C: I was very, very fond of the Cronin brothers. I was only eighteen when I went there and they, more or less, treated me like a daughter. They were very nice to me. As far as I know, all of the employees were very fond of them. They were very nice to work for.

H: Did a good many of the folks go to Minerva?

C: They took quite a few with them.

H: About how many people worked in the pottery?

C: I wouldn't want to guess.

H: The whole foundation they showed me down there, it's a big foundation. That would cover more than an acre, wouldn't it?

C: I would say so.

H: That's the rebuilt building after the fire, right?

C: Yes.

H: Do you remember the fire?

C: I don't know where I was when we had the fire. I know I wasn't in New Cumberland. I don't even know who bought it after Cronins left.

H: Did it run as a pottery after?

C: I don't think so, no. Mat Phillips had some kind of factory, whether it was on the same premises or not, I'm not sure, or if it was down the river further. I was out in Minerva for about five of six years after that.

H: Miss Marshall tells about the first time that the factory burned when she was a little girl. She can remember looking out the window from her home there and seeing the glow in the sky and not being permitted to go see it. Evidently, the factory burned twice, the pottery,

once earlier in the 1900's and then in 1936, I think.

I've gotten some hints that the pottery made some things like figurines, cats that would be used for a doorstep, or tigers or lions or things like that. Was that in the time that you were there with the pottery?

C: No.

H: Some of the really old books that some of the folks have shown me, it looked like it had to all be hand done. Of course, you told about these people putting the gold line around the plate or cup. I suppose after you do that often enough it becomes an easy thing to do.

C: They were very good.

H: Were there some jobs that were considered men's jobs in the factory?

C: Oh yes. For instance, the mold makers, and the ones who would mix the clay, and the kiln operators, and a lot of them that worked in the decorating shop putting the decals on. Then, of course, they went to another kiln to burn this decal on.

H: In that day and age, there were several burning processes.

C: There were three.

H: How some of the ware that they make is burnt in one burn.

C: This is called ironware. It's heavier.

H: They made a distinction between hotelware and restaurant-ware and then got ware that was made for households. Did they make both kinds back then?

C: Yes, they made cups especially for hotel use. Their largest orders were these carloads that went mostly to the theaters.

H: We've talked about the river being an enemy. Some information that I'm getting is that the river was sort of an ally, too, for a long while.

C: Indeed, it was. It provided transportation; I remember the old ferry.

H: From where to where?

C: Right there at the pottery. This was the way a lot of employees, at the time, came to work. The Cronins were

from East Liverpool. Three of the brothers moved to New Cumberland, but the one that was the president, he and his wife continued to stay in East Liverpool. She had charge of the office. Usually it would be two or three o'clock in the afternoon when they would get there. Mrs. Cronin would write the letters in shorthand on the bottom of the previous letter and then she would put them on my desk and I would transcribe them the next day. Like I say, my duties were many.

H: This ferry fascinates me. Would they come down on the Ohio side to Toronto?

C: Yes. There used to be a streetcar from Toronto to East Liverpool. They would come on the streetcar to the ferry across the river that way. Then they were right at the back of the pottery.

H: Were there residents in Ohio, in Toronto, that worked in the pottery then?

C: Yes, one of the girls in the office was from Toronto.

H: I think Miss Marshall was telling me that the river was not only transportation, but it was also a boundry. There were great differences between things that happened in New Cumberland and things that happened in Toronto simply because of the river separating the two towns.

C: Many times I crossed on that ferry.

H: How was it propelled?

C: I believe it was a gasoline engine. There was a small section, and then a large platform for cars, horses or whatever you had.

H: You could just drive your car or horse right on there?

C: Yes.

H: But there has never been a bridge or anything like that in that area connecting the two towns. Up at Newell and at Chester the potteries themselves built bridges to connect their Ohio works with their West Virginia works. Smith of TS&T built the one bridge, and then the Homer Laughlin Company built the Newell Bridge that we're still using. They formed their own traction company and built the bridge and put a streetcar on it to get their workers back and forth. That's the reason I asked if there was ever a bridge.

C: No, no bridge, but the ferry was still operating there, I would say, as long as Cronins had the pottery. I have no idea when it concluded.

H: The brickyards had a lot of Polish people and, I guess you would say, Eastern European people working. Then when we went up to East Liverpool and taught pottery there, they talked about Little England. We went back in the history of East Liverpool and found out that one part of the town was called Little England. That was its official name for awhile. Was there any distinction between people working in the pottery in New Cumberland and the Cronin works? Do you remember the names that appeared on the payroll that show any ethnic backgrounds of the people?

C: No, not in any number, not a certain nationality in any number.

H: The historian is always interested whether this man would let the Polish people come down and work in his shop or not, because we have recorded a riot right over here in Steubenville when the white Protestant people came down and attacked the Catholic Irishmen that were building the railroad bridge. They went right down into their tent city and attacked them down there. They had a race riot that wasn't between two colors of people, but between two faiths. We always like to check and see if this happened, because we did find, in talking to the pottery people in East Liverpool, that for a long, long while there was prejudice there. The people were either Englishmen or Germans who worked in the pottery. In the beginning, it was all Englishmen, and then they invited the Germans to come and get involved in it.

Do you remember as a girl the packets, the showboats, and so forth on the river?

C: Yes. I was on one of the showboats. I just got to go once. We weren't living in New Cumberland at the time. I was sixteen when we moved there. We were visiting this aunt and uncle who got flooded every year and the showboat happened to be in town.

H: Where would it tie up?

C: Not where the pottery was, but up farther where the traffic light was.

H: On Station Street, they call that?

C: Yes.

H: Was there a pier or wharf or anything?

- C: There was a road and the boat could come in close enough for their little gangplank.
- H: I understand that this was a really festive occasion when the showboat came to town.
- C: Indeed, it was.
- H: What all was on the showboat?
- C: They would have a play, and in between acts, they would sell peanuts and candy. It was just like an old theater, really.
- H: Did you go on the showboat to see the play or did they bring the play on land?
- C: Oh no, you go on the boat. The old calliope would just play for hours before the show would start. I thought that was a great treat.
- H: Did they have parades of the bands from the showboats?
- C: No, I don't believe they did. No, it was usually just the music that attracted you because you could hear it all over town. Later on the graduating class had a moonlight boat instead of the prom that they have now. They would have boat rides and others could go if they cared to.
- H: Where would you go on that trip?
- C: I guess they would go as far as Steubenville and come back.
- H: Did you graduate from the high school in New Cumberland?
- C: No. When I started high school we were living in Pennsylvania. My father was a coal miner at that time, and I traveled from this little coal mining town in Pennsylvania to Mingo Junction on the train, on the Wabash. The old trestle is still across Route 2. Then I walked from the railroad station to the high school. I got a room down there with a very nice family for three years, and then we moved. That's when the miners were on strike and dad wouldn't work for a long period. He left the coal mines and went to the clay mines. We moved to Toronto. From Toronto, I went on the streetcar all the way into Mingo.
- H: You finished your high school in Mingo then?
- C: Oh yes. Then we moved from Toronto to New Cumberland. I had to ride the old train to Steubenville and then take the streetcar, but I wanted to graduate with my class. That's the reason I did not go to New Cumberland High

School.

- H: That was sort of an exceptional thing then, wasn't it, for you to do all that traveling to get to go to school?
- C: I guess we got up about six o'clock, I think, or maybe earlier than that. I believe the train left at 6:30, something like that, to go into Steubenville. Then I would have to get the streetcar from there.
- H: Parents today would worry about letting their teenage daughter ride the train and take the streetcar and so forth. Was it safe then?
- C: Indeed, it was. Of course, if I misbehaved in high school, I had to stay in the detention hall. I would miss my train home.
- H: You never did that?
- C: Oh yes, I did.
- H: Oh, you did? That's out of character for you.
- C: No. My father had an aunt that lived in Steubenville, so I went and stayed with her. This happened several times.
- H: So you say your father was a clay miner then after the coal.
- C: He was a clay miner, and my brother worked with him. They worked in the clay mines. I don't know which one it was in New Cumberland. I know they waded in water practically to their knees all the time. It was hard work.
- H: There were a lot of clay mines at one time there.
- C: Clay is much heavier than coal because it's wet. They worked hard.
- H: We were talking about the transportation on the river. The clay that came into the pottery, did it come up on barge?
- C: No, it always came by rail.
- H: Then as far as the pottery is concerned, the river didn't help it too much?
- C: No, not as far as transporting their products.
- H: They tell me, though, there was a time before the railroad came in there that everything had to go on the

river. Actually, there was a railroad before there was a highway, then the river, of course, before the railroad.

How would you characterize the working conditions in the pottery then? Besides the relationship with the owners, was it dangerous or hazardous, the machinery or dust?

C: The dust, of course was the worst. The few weeks that I worked there I would go home and my hair would just be white with dust.

H: I guess they still have that dust problem?

C: Oh yes, you always will. I don't see how they could prevent it.

H: I guess they've put some high^e fans in to try to exhaust a good bit of that dust. Then the environmental control people get on them about the dust that they just blow out into the air, too. You're wrong both ways regardless of what you try to do.

C: It was a great experience. I enjoyed it very much.

H: In New Cumberland, we talked about the showboat coming. What other kinds of entertainment were there for all of these workers there in the clay industry? I understand that the population of New Cumberland at one time was four thousand.

C: That was before my time.

H: They said in 1900 the population of New Cumberland was four thousand. It really started to decrease then at the time of the Second World War.

C: I think the foundry was closed when I first moved there, which was in 1928. The glass house, shortly after that, closed. I was never in the glass house, but I had relatives that worked there.

H: Was it any particular type of glass, or just all kinds of glass products?

C: Just all kinds, as far as I know.

H: This isn't clay though, this is sand, isn't it? We discovered that much of the coal that they used to fire the kiln was taken out of the same mines that the clay came out of. The coal was just above the clay vein. Do you know of anything else that came . . .

C: I thought that the kilns were operated with gas.

H: Maybe by that time they were. Maybe the sand for the glass company came out of the same mine.

C: I have no idea.

H: What other entertainment was there in New Cumberland? You can't have all these working people without something for them to do.

C: There was never much in New Cumberland. I think this was one reason that I was always so anxious to get away from there. They had this community house where they had their basketball games, and occasionally they would have a dance, or they would have their Halloween parties.

H: Is that the same community house that we have now?

C: Yes.

H: Did one of the potteries or somebody like that build that?

C: I have no idea.

H: I'll have to look into that and find out where that came from. Weirton had the Millsaw Community Center, and that's the steel company, isn't it?

C: Yes.

H: Maybe we had a clay company community house there in New Cumberland?

C: I know the library was endowed to Dr. Sweeney.

H: Where did you go shopping?

C: Mrs. Bertha Evans had this shop downtown where that sportswear is at the present time. It was very nice. That was the only ladies clothing store in town.

H: Was the A&S Store still a company when you lived there?

C: Yes.

H: Were there any other grocery stores besides that?

C: I believe one of the Grahams had a grocery store. Not the Graham that is located there now; it would have been a brother of their father.

H: I heard just in passing, somebody mentioned a nickelodeon or a theater?

C: Yes, they had a theater.

H: Where was that located?

C: It was in the same block that this sportswear store was. They had a theater for quite a few years. Other than that, there was very little entertainment. Most everyone went to Steubenville; they used to have many more theaters than they do now.

H: Were there excursions or something like that, or was there just a regular evening train down there?

C: There was just one in the morning and one back at night. If you missed it, you had it. You were in Steubenville for the night. It would go on into Chester. Then the next morning it would come down from Chester and go into Steubenville.

H: Where did it cross over, on the trestle that is at Steubenville now where it crosses from this side over?

C: Yes.

H: How about fairs or carnivals or anything like that, did they play any important part?

C: In those days they didn't. The Lions Club had their carnivals, but that started much later. Before that, when I was in my early twenties, it was nearly all with the church. That's about all the entertainment there was.

H: It would make the church much more a community center then?

C: Right.

H: We have five or six congregations there now. Were the same congregations there?

C: Oh yes, they always have been. They had the M. E. Church.

H: Where was it?

C: Downtown. Is it still down there?

H: Is that the building the Nazarenes are using now?

C: Yes, I believe so.

H: You had really two Methodist churches?

C: Yes. There was no Catholic church at the time.

H: That was later then?

C: Yes.

H: Out and up that valley there behind the Crescent, you had another little community they called Rocky Side or something like that.

C: I've heard my father speak of that.

H: It would probably be the part of town he told you not to go to. The reason I ask about that is because I've been told this is where all the Polish people lived and that up in that part of town they had a mission. They would be Catholic and they had a mission. I just wonder if you knew where that was.

C: No, I didn't.

H: Mr. Staley told a fascinating story about one of his first jobs. His dad was killed when he was nine years old. His dad was a miner and was killed working in the clay mine during an explosion. He was given a job at nine years of age salting clay. His first promotion when he was twelve was to teach these Polish men English so that they could understand the instructions of the bosses.

Were the church services worship services, or were there social activities?

C: There was Sunday school and church in the morning, and prayer meetings on Wednesday nights, and then the young people's meeting early on Sunday.

H: The way people lived in a community like that is very interesting to the historian. You mentioned that you went to school in Mingo, and lived in Toronto, and lived in a coal mining community in Pennsylvania. Can you think of anything that would make New Cumberland unique because of where it was and what was done there?

C: I just never liked New Cumberland, myself, for the simple reason that there was never very much to do. My parents were very strict and I liked to dance. I wasn't allowed to go to the dances or anything. I was just very glad when I was transferred to Minerva.

END OF INTERVIEW