

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Westlake Terrace Project

Housing

O. H. 474

VINCENT DORIA

Interviewed

by

Elisa Calabrese

on

November 21, 1985

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INTERVIEWEE: VINCENT DORIA

INTERVIEWER: Elisa Calabrese

SUBJECT: Youngstown in the 1930's, low income housing

DATE: November 21, 1985

C: This is an interview with Vince Doria for the Youngstown State University Westlake Terrace Oral History Project, by Elisa Calabrese, on November 21, 1985, at 555 Catalina Avenue at approximately 3:00 p.m.

Just to get started, Mr. Doria, I'd like to know a little bit about yourself, your origin, your family background?

D: I'm a descendent of Italian immigrant parents who located in the United States in the early 1900's. I come from a family of eight boys, and this of course was work all the way through. I graduated from Rayen High School in 1934 in the middle of the Depression. There was a lot of unemployment after that time, but I finally got enrolled at Kent State in 1936. I worked in the summer doing almost anything. I worked in the steel plants in 1937. In 1939 I think the steel plants were down so I worked the summer of 1939 for a roofing sheet mill. I went back to school in 1940 and in 1941 I was drafted. I was still a student, but I hadn't completed my education. I didn't have twelve hours of school so I was drafted in 1941. After five years of service I was discharged in 1945. I finished my schooling at Kent State in 1946. I went to work for the United States Labor Department with the Department of Employment Services in 1945. I worked there for about twenty years and worked for the Department of Welfare for ten years through 1979. I retired in 1979 at the age of 62 and I've been here six years with the Windsor House Incorporated as sort of a

consultant on Medicaid and Medicare on nursing home admissions. I'm married of course, and have a son and a daughter.

C: What do you remember about Youngstown in the 1930's?

D: We're talking about the Depression and there was a lot of unemployment. There were thousands of people working on government projects and thousands of people on some sort of public assistance. This was the working class. Most of them had large gardens and they worked at any possible opportunity they had. There wasn't any money around. As a matter of fact, they paid some employees of the city with script; they just gave them paper money which was exchanged at the stores. It was quite different than the public assistance programs we enjoy now. Sometimes they would issue clothing in the 1930's. Those were the really tough times. The steel mills were flat down and I didn't get hired until 1937. Work started to turn again in 1935 and in 1937 things were really going. With Roosevelt's administration I was able to get a job in the summers of 1937 and 1938. We came out of it slowly. There is no comparison with the recession or depression we have today. With the Depression in the 1930's everyone was affected by it. In 1929, some of the financiers jumped out of their windows; this hasn't happened in the last ten years here when there have been some bad times. It is not as bad as those times when people lost practically everything. My dad had money in the bank and he only got 10¢ on the dollar. That hasn't happened in recent times; these are some of the differences. I peddled newspapers most of the time during the Depression. I sold papers on Sundays, things like that. There were eight boys in the family. We had a large garden, but if anybody had any money it went to dad to pay for groceries. There was hand-me-down clothing in those days too. Fortunately we got over that. Most of us were educated and had pretty fair jobs. Six of us were in the service in the family. Fortunately we all got back. Five of us were overseas in combat areas. You look back and wonder how you lived through it, but as you can see times were tough. I stayed in the Army Reserve for twenty-eight years. I got to be Lieutenant Colonel in the Army in the Reserves.

C: What was a typical day like at work?

D: I was working for a firm known as Roofing Sheet Metal. They had a crew of about ten people on roofs; those were slate roofs. It is a lot different than the shingle asbestos roofs of today. The housing project was black slate and the sizes were 11 X 24 or 12 X 24 slate. There were four roofers and four helpers. The roofers were Eryl Gidon, my brother Charles,

Mr. Don Macklee, and Philip Oakey. There were four helpers that assisted them. First we would set up a ladder-scaffold, which was two ladders and then a plank scaffold. We would carry the slate up the ladder onto the scaffold to start the first few layers of the roof. Once they got onto the roof we would carry it by ladder and take it from one scaffold to another scaffold. It was all manual labor. The most surprising part of it is that we received 85¢ an hour as a helper, which was good money. In those days the mills were paying 37½¢ an hour. We received 85¢ an hour, but we had to pay \$1 a day to the union. We were not members of the union, but this was to receive a permit to work with the union roofers. The roofers received \$1.37½; these were slate roofers who were skilled men. They knew how to cut slate, apply slate, how to keep a straight course and complete it. We would have to carry about twelve or fifteen slate on our shoulders up to one layer of scaffolding. The next layer would bring it up as they progressed to the top. We would cut slate for the start course and we would cut slate for the ridges. That is the only skilled work we did. We had to know how to cut slate in half. You started at 8:00 and you worked till 4:00 or 5:00. You appreciated it because for many of us it was an opportunity to get a job. Things were still a little difficult as far as the economy was concerned. It was a beautiful project, a nice, new, red-faced brick. It was one of the nicest looking projects in the valley at that time. If you take a look at it now it still looks pretty nice and the slate is intact. This black slate was mine slate. That slate could last hundreds of years. It is forty-five years now and none of the slate is cracked or rotting.

- C: You mentioned you had to give \$5 or \$6 a week to the union. Did you work six days out of the week then?
- D: No, I worked five. It was very seldom we got six days. By the end of Friday we were pretty tired from picking up the slate. I was young then, and I didn't mind it. If we got the roofers pretty well stocked on a couple of scaffolds we could get in there and nail ourselves as long as we followed the line. They would start a course and strike a straight line. As long as you kept that line they allowed you to nail. Actually, it was illegal because we weren't roofers. The owner had you do this because he wanted the job done. It was a large company; at that time it was Roofing Sheet Metal, part of Choffin. They changed the name now to Reliance Sources of Metal Work. They don't do roofing anymore, just a lot of fabrication work. It is a large company, but they're out of the roofing business. They were one of the largest roofing applicators at the time. That was a tremendous job; they got several million dollars or something.

C: Do you remember some of the important contractors or engineers, architects, labor leaders involved in this?

D: I would have to guess who the general contractor was; I'm not certain. There were so many different contractors there.

C: Do you remember anything that stands out in your mind while you worked there that summer, any certain type of happening or event that took place?

D: The only thing that attracted my attention was the fact that it progressed so well. In other words, you would finish a building and another building was always ready; the roof was on and we just had to go up and lay paper on this, rolls of black paper. They had to get that done before the weather got bad. It was surprising that there were no work stoppages for one thing. There was a lot of cooperation. There were no issues as I can remember. You can probably attribute that to the fact that things were just picking up then in the construction field and even in the steel industry. Their jobs were pretty scarce and I considered myself fortunate to find a job that summer. I worked from June to September.

C: How did you happen to get that job?

D: Basically through my brother. My brother was a master roofer, journeyman roofer. He was allowed to bring in his own help. Since I helped him on other jobs previous to that, summers before, I knew what it was all about and what was necessary. I lived close; I could almost walk to work. I lived in Briar Hill on Federal Street. We had a lot of fun with the other helpers though. The only roofer around from the group I named would be my brother Charles. It was clean work, but it was hot work.

C: You only worked on that one project? You didn't travel to another project?

D: No, we stayed there because of the immensity of it. When I left there in September I think it continued on until the fall when they completed the job. The work close to the completion of the last home I worked on was close to the end of the line.

There was never any breakdown in terms of supplies; there was always slate around there. They would stack the slate near each house. The trucks would unload there and you would just go to work. Each apartment was about a fifteen,

sixteen, twenty family apartment. I think it was a great accomplishment at that time. We needed proper housing for low income people.

C: Were there any other major projects going on in Youngstown at that time?

D: I don't think there were any other construction projects other than new homes going up. One thing that shocked everyone was that Poland was invaded. That was the biggest news at that time. There was some indication that something was coming up internationally in terms of a war. Poland was taken over and there was the expansion of Nazism in that part of the world. I think that was in September of 1939. The move was made by Hitler to take over satellite countries.

C: You mentioned you were hired by this company to work, were there government workers there, WPA, that type?

D: No, these were all private employers and private companies. There was no government subsidized crew like WPA; that was practically gone by that time. Actually we had WPA in Briar Hill in the stone quarry. There is a stone quarry in Briar Hill between Belmont Avenue and lower Briar Hill. They mined stones, sandstone. They made curbing out of it. That was one of the largest projects that I was aware of during the Depression. There is a quarry above Tod School. They hired these skilled people to cut stone for curbing. It took a lot of labor to move the stone around. I think that was completed about 1939.

C: Since you worked there do you remember what apartments were built first, on which roads?

D: It goes right along Federal Street. We worked north or northeast from there.

C: You got paid in cash rather than script?

D: I got paid in cash or check, no script because it was a private firm.

C: Who were the materials supplied by?

D: Slate had to come out of Pennsylvania somewhere. It came in by truck or rail and was dumped alongside each road.

C: How many hours did you work?

D: Eight hours a day.

C: Did you have any breaks?

- D: You could stop to drink water, go to the bathroom, and you had a half hour lunch break.
- C: When you had your lunch break did you brown bag it or did you go to nearby . . .
- D: There were no restaurants in those days around there. There was no place to get coffee unless you had a thermos bottle.
- C: There was nothing like a corner store?
- D: There were no stores in that area. There might have been stores on Federal Street, but we never took the time for that. I think I brought a thermos bottle and had coffee or a cold drink in it. We had buckets of water with a dipper. We had a water boy around there.
- C: Were there ever any accidents that occurred?
- D: Not in our particular operations.
- I enjoyed the work. As a matter of fact, I did a lot of it part-time for my brother even after I came home from the war and while I was in school. He was noted as being a slate expert or slate specialist to replace slate after storms and things. He was also a tile setter, tile roofer with the Spanish tile.
- C: Where would one go to learn this trade?
- D: You learned it with another journeyman. You spend four or five years with him to learn how to nail to keep a line straight and cut your slate properly. When you get into valleys you have to cut slate to fit into valleys. When you get to the ridge on the roof those are a different size slate. Your hammer had an edge where you could cut.
- C: Did any bosses, city officials, architects, any type of dignitaries visit Westlake while you were working there?
- D: I have to say there were a lot of inspectors around, government inspectors. The owners would come around and oversee that the job was done properly.
- C: How often were the inspectors there?
- D: I guess all the time, but they weren't watching us that often.

I think it was a very successful project. They had concrete floors. There was steel and concrete, not very much lumber in the building except the wooden roofs. Everything else was brick, mortar, and concrete. That is why they're still standing up and haven't rotted through. Even the porches are concrete, brick, and steel.

- C: Working at Westlake you said you learned a lot.
- D: I learned to cooperate and appreciate the fact that people had to work pretty hard to earn a living and earn some income.
- C: I know that after these were built and families started to move in there was segregation between whites and blacks, was there any of that when you were working?
- D: I didn't notice any of it, although our crew was entirely white.
- C: Would you like to add anything else?
- D: The appreciation I get is that I ride by there and show my family the work I've done.
- C: You said that Youngstown during this time period was coming back?
- D: Yes, there was activity.
- C: How did Westlake affect Youngstown in 1939? What did it do for the community?
- D: It gave them a sense of satisfaction to begin with. Something was being done for low income people. We tried to eliminate the slum areas and provide more suitable living quarters.
- C: Is there anything else you would like to add?
- D: I think I've said enough.
- C: It was the very first federally funded project in the United States.
- D: That's good to be a part of it.
- C: Thank you very much.
- D: Another thing good was that it was centrally located. People could walk to town or walk to the steel plants or things like that.
- C: Do you remember what was there before Westlake was built?
- D: Slum houses and they just leveled them off.
- C: A lot of people mention a baseball field that was around that area.

D: Maybe to the left of it. There was a large baseball field and they had football and the circus in there. Wright Field is where the circus used to be. Ringling Brothers would march from the railroad stop right to there.

C: Thank you very much.

D: I appreciate having been a part of it.

END OF INTERVIEW