

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Niles, Ohio Project

KKK Riot

O. H. 653

CATHERINE RITTER

Interviewed

by

Stephen Papalas

on

September 6, 1983

CATHERINE V. RITTER
(SISTER HENRIETTA)

Catherine V. Ritter was born to Henry and Bridgett Callihan Ritter in Niles, on June 26, 1905. She was raised in Niles and attended Niles city schools, graduating from Niles McKinley High School in 1923.

After graduation, Miss Ritter worked in the offices of the Erie Railroad Depot and was present when a special train carrying over 1,000 Ku Klux Klansmen came to Niles during the riot of November 1, 1924. Miss Ritter also remembers the arrival and encampment of the Ohio militia.

Miss Ritter went on to attend Sisters College in Cleveland, Ohio and she played on a professional women's basketball team from 1924-1925. In 1928, she graduated with a teaching degree from Sisters College and became a nun.

Today she is known as Sister Henrietta and she still teaches at St. Brendan's School in Youngstown, Ohio. She presently resides at St. Brendan's Convent at 145 North Glenellen Avenue, in Youngstown. She is a member of St. Brendan's Church and the N.O.T.A. for teachers. Sister Henrietta still enjoys most sports, particularly football, basketball and baseball.

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INTERVIEWEE: CATHERINE RITTER
INTERVIEWER: Stephen Papalas
SUBJECT: Youth, KKK riot, Niles McKinley, convent
DATE: September 6, 1983

P: This is an interview with Sister Henrietta at St. Brendan's Church dealing with the Ku Klux Klan riot of 1924 in Niles. The interview is for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, given September 6, 1983.

Sister Henrietta, can you tell me when you were born and where?

R: I was born in Niles, Ohio, June 26, 1905.

P: Who were your parents?

R: My parents are Henry Ritter and Bridgett Callihan.

P: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

R: I had one brother Fred and I had two sisters; one was Mary and one was Margaret.

P: Are any of them still alive today?

R: No, everyone is dead in my family.

P: Did you live all of your life in Niles up until now?

R: I lived all my life in the same house I was born in until I went to the convent.

P: Where was that at, what street?

R: At 106 Third Street, on the south side of Niles.

P: What are you earliest memories of Niles?

R: My earliest memories are when I was in high school when I played basketball. I played four years on the high school team; and then after I finished school I applied for a job and I worked on the B & O Railroads for three months. Then there was a position open in Erie and I worked in Erie for three years and then after that I went to the convent.

P: When you were in school, Niles McKinley High School, who were some of the teachers you remember, some of the students that were your friends?

R: A lot of friends that I had were those that I went to school with at St. Stephens, and we all went to the same high school. I don't think any of them are living. Frank McDermott is living. He was really injured in this Ku Klux Klan riot.

P: What was your neighborhood like?

R: We have a very homey neighborhood; it was a small town. We lived near a public school and we would play over there on the playground. We didn't have the sort of things that children have nowadays.

P: Were you there during the Depression?

R: I was there during the Depression.

P: What was it like then? Could you tell me about the make-up of the neighborhood, and did people help each other? Was there much unemployment in the neighborhood?

R: There was a lot of unemployment and everybody tried to help the people that were in need. People that had gardens and things like that and could help other people gave as much as they could possibly give.

P: How else did they help each other?

R: I think they prayed for each other. What year was the Depression?

P: It started in 1929.

R: I was teaching then, and people helped us in the place that I lived. People came; some people would make soup for us and bring us food because we had no way of obtaining food.

P: Where were you teaching at?

R: I must have been in Kent. That was my first appointment.

P: Were you a nun then?

R: I was a nun. I entered the convent on January 23, 1926.

P: And you've been with it ever since?

R: Yes, I've loved it ever since. I've taught 50 years in the first grade and now this is my eighth year in kindergarten.

P: What are your recollections of the Ku Klux Klan riot? I have already talked to you about a couple of things.

R: The Ku Klux Klan had many, many meetings around and I think this whole riot was coming up to a head through these meetings.

P: Did you ever see any of these meetings?

R: I didn't get into the full meeting, no. I knew where they were, but I couldn't get in. They were out there by Milton Dam; meetings were held way out and they were off the road. They had different words or different signals which you had to give. I can't remember them. I know I never got into one because when we got to the last place, we couldn't get in because we didn't know what to say.

P: You mean you did try to get in then?

R: We tried to get in. We didn't succeed.

P: Did you see these people with hoods on?

R: With hoods, oh yes. We had people in our neighborhood; one of the head Klansmen was in our neighborhood.

P: Is he still alive today?

R: No, he is dead. The older ones really caused a lot of disturbances in the neighborhood. Then when this thing came for the riot we knew that the riot was going to be. We had heard. It started in the morning, but now through stopping this train, we were in a religious law and they couldn't get out. The riot really ended then.

P: Tell me about the train.

R: About me being at work? I was at work; it was my Saturday to work.

P: Where was the location and who did you work for?

- R: I worked on the Erie Railroad in the freight office. I heard that the train was coming in and 26 coaches of klansmen. I notified the priests in the parish that I belonged to.
- P: Who was it, do you remember?
- R: Monsignor James McDonough; he notified Monsignor Trainor.
- P: What was his first name?
- R: I don't know. He was from St. Columbus here in Youngstown.
- P: Columbus or Columba's?
- R: Columbus.
- P: And then what happened?
- R: Who had charged the state militia.
- P: In Youngstown?
- R: Who had charge of the militia and moved to a station here. Within an hour they were in Niles.
- P: What happened then?
- R: We were in martial law. So when the train arrived . . .
- P: What time would that be, do you remember?
- R: The train arrived at 2:30. No one could get off the train.
- P: Did these klansmen all have their regalia on? Were they all dressed?
- R: We just saw the train and of couse, no one was allowed off. I didn't see anyone. The train just came into the station and then they had to pull right out. I was working and I wasn't out of the office in time to see it.
- P: How were they prevented from getting off?
- R: You're not allowed to get off under martial law. You're not even allowed to talk to people on the streets or anything under the martial law. When we would go to work in the morning we weren't allowed to stop and talk to anybody. You just had to walk to work. There were no public meetings or anything in church about it. There was nothing; we were under martial law. We were under martial law at least a week.

P: You weren't allowed to meet in church either?

R: No, nothing.

P: How about at night?

R: No, we weren't allowed to have any meetings of any kind at all.

P: Was there a curfew?

R: I'm not sure if there was a curfew, but I know we weren't allowed to be anywhere.

P: Did the soldiers gather at the railroad to make sure?

R: They trained right outside of our offices on the field, and they trained there in the morning. In the mornings they would gather there before they would take off to go around and be on duty.

P: What about the Knights of the Flaming Circle, were they there too?

R: They were more or less just stationed there in Niles. That was the group that was against the klan. I don't think anybody from out of town came to join them.

P: Were these people there along the railroad tracks also, do you remember?

R: I don't remember anything about the railroad tracks.

P: The reason I am asking you is because someone else told me he remembered running home. As he ran along the tracks he saw members of the Knights of the Flaming Circle there.

R: Well, you can see them anyplace you go. I just happened to be able to see them at night because across from our house was the public schoolyard. They had meetings and they burned a flaming circle.

P: Was that before the riot?

R: Yes, that was before the riot.

P: What did they do? How could you compare their meetings or the way they acted at those meetings to the Ku Klux Klan?

R: I think that they were more subdued.

P: The Knights?

R: The Knights of the Flaming Circle because they wanted to get rid of the Ku Klux Klan, but of course if they met with them I don't know what they did.

P: Could you hear any shouting at the Klan's meetings?

R: Oh yes.

P: What was it like?

R: It was wild; you couldn't make out anything that they were saying.

P: Were they hollering?

R: No, no, I don't think after you got into the meeting you heard much. I didn't get into one, so I don't know.

P: What were the Knights of the Flaming Circle meetings like?

R: They were very subdued.

P: Were there many of them?

R: I would say a couple hundred.

P: That many? How big were the circles that they burned?

R: It would almost be like a great, big wreath.

P: Oh, I see. This would be at Garfield School?

R: It was, the ones I saw. They may have had it at other places but I happened to live across from that school. I slept out at night on the back porch and I could see them.

P: Right out in front of the school?

R: Right over in the schoolyard.

P: They have added on to that since then, haven't they?

R: Oh yes, it's new. I don't even know the people over there that were involved with this now. I think most of them are dead.

P: How did that affect your neighborhood, with the klansmen in the neighborhood? Did it cause animosity amongst the residents?

R: I think it did, especially with Catholics.

P: Do you remember any incidents that occurred?

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R: No.

P: Just a distaste for each other.

R: Yes.

P: After the riot, did that animosity still exist?

R: Every once in a while it would flare up, you know, like it does in these other towns that you hear about in Alabama and those places that they had klansmen.

P: How did it . . .

R: It didn't cause any commotion like the riot did. That was the biggest thing.

P: How did it flare up?

R: You mean the riot?

P: No, the animosity later. How did it rear itself?

R: I think it was just the feeling of these people, knowing if you knew people that were klansmen.

P: It wasn't anything that was visible. It was more of an emotional type thing that you kept to yourself.

R: No, it wasn't the most visible thing as the riot.

P: Do you remember any of the leaders of the Flaming Circle?

R: No.

P: Did you ever hear of the Jennings?

R: Yes, I have heard of them.

P: I heard during the riot that they were more or less a center where people could get guns.

R: They were like mafia.

P: Do you know if people went here to get their guns during the riot?

R: I don't know. I know that they said some of these people that came into town for the riot, under the car seats they had more than guns; they had big knives that they stabbed people with and everything.

P: Where were you at the time during the riot? Do you remember?

In this train station all the time?

R: No, at 3:00 I went over to the priest's house because I lived at the priest house. Different people were in the church praying, but priests told me to come in and pray. I wouldn't go pray because I said I would go when it was over; there was too much excitement going on that I didn't want to miss.

P: Were there a lot of people in there praying?

R: The nuns and a lot of people that were near enough to the church. A lot of people didn't go out. You just stayed at home; you didn't want to go out in this because you could have been shot or anything.

P: Do you remember if any of the members of the Flaming Circle surrounded the church, St. Stephens Church, to protect it? Did you see anything like that?

R: No.

P: Were there any rumors that the Klan was going to try and desecrate the church, or come into the church itself?

R: The only thing I know of was that we were having a mission at St. Stephens. That was the week of prayer. A priest came in from another order and preached to the people that we couldn't have any church that night because we were under the martial law. Somebody said that one of the men of the Klan gave the priest a klansman's outfit.

P: For what reason?

R: I don't know why.

P: Was he being sarcastic?

R: Yes, I suppose that's what it was.

P: Sarcasm.

R: Yes.

P: Was he a Niles person, do you know?

R: I don't know.

P: What was the priest's reaction to that?

R: I don't know. After I got finished working at the priest house I went home to get out of the town because you didn't want to be around. You really couldn't be around because

you couldn't talk to anybody. You just had to keep moving on the streets or be going to where you were going.

P: Do you remember seeing soldiers?

R: The militia.

P: What role did the church play in any of this?

R: I don't know. The only thing I know is that we prayed that the Fiery Circle were the ones that were going to protect us I guess if anything happened.

P: Were they there at the church at all?

R: No.

P: But you had heard that they were going there?

R: Yes. It's a sad thing; they were on the street trying to protect people that they knew because they didn't belong to the klansmen.

P: Did you ever hear of someone driving around with a machine gun in the car?

R: No.

P: Did you hear of any incidents that occurred in the riot itself?

R: The only thing that I heard was about, I think, Frank being stabbed or something.

P: Frank McDermott was shot the night before.

R: I knew that, but it was so long ago that I can't remember if he was stabbed or whether he was shot or what. They said about them having these knives and that to stab you; they didn't want to shoot. Of course, there were lots of noises with the ambulances coming to get people that were shot or stabbed or anything, taking them to the hospital.

P: What about our mayor, what was your opinion of him, do you remember?

R: I don't even remember who the mayor was at that time.

P: Abacis. Do you remember anything after the riot that occurred?

R: No.

P: Did the Ku Klux Klan have any effect on you?

R: It had no effect on me. The only thing was I just stayed away from the people that I knew who might have been a klansman.

P: You never had any experiences with them?

R: No, I just stayed away from them.

P: Did you ever see any cross burnings in Niles?

R: I think maybe once. In the schoolyard the klansmen did have a meeting because one of the head guys lived at the corner of the street. I don't know what his first name is, but his family name was Gilbert. They lived right on the corner of Third Street and Main Street. There was their house and then the alley and the schoolyard.

P: Any relation to a police officer named Gilbert?

R: I don't know. I don't think his children were old enough to be participants.

P: Whatever became of Gilbert?

R: I heard he died; I don't know.

P: Did you ever hear of the Knights of Pithius? They had headquarters where the old Niles Times building is now.

R: I heard of it, but I never had anything . . .

P: They had a big cross and lights above the building.

R: I remember that.

P: Did you see that?

R: Yes.

P: What effect did that have on the community?

R: After all, if we were Catholics we stuck with the Catholics. We stuck by what we were, not going for other new things, especially when we didn't know much about them.

P: Do you think that a lot of people, especially the immigrants who just came from Europe that were Catholic, associated the cross burnings with an attack on their religion?

R: Yes.

P: Do you think that is more what it was?

R: Yes.

P: Do you think that is what the Klan meant to be?

R: I think it was, but why did they cover up their faces and didn't want to be known if anything that they were doing wasn't wrong. They still do that in other places when you see it in those magazines.

P: About two days before the riot, even the day before, there were a series of meetings among the people in the community. There were businessmen and some of the leaders of the Catholic organization and just other people who were non-Catholics that were against the Klan. They had meetings and they were trying to get the mayor not to let the Klan come in. Do you remember anything about those meetings?

R: No, and I know the mayor didn't stop them.

P: Do you ever remember at that time, when you were young in those days, Carmen DeChristofaro?

R: No.

P: He was one of the people that participated in this peace movement and he was so young.

R: I think he is in Niles now, isn't he?

P: He has passed away.

R: Yes, not too long ago though, did he?

P: Right. Why would they choose him then? Did you know him then?

R: I think that if you chose anybody you would choose somebody that is a leader and know that they're the one that is going to help you. You don't choose a lot of these other men that you know won't give you any help. I think he was a good man. I know of him; he was from Mount Carmel and I was from St. Stephens.

P: In Youngstown is there a Mount Carmel Church?

R: Yes, it is on the north side.

P: It was burned in 1923 by the Klan, did you ever hear that?

R: No. I never heard of that.

P: There was an article a couple issues ago in the Ligourian, and someone got ahold of me and told me about that also, that the Mount Carmel Church had been burned and I was supposed to see the pastor there.

R: I know him. I used to be with him in Canton.

P: So I am going to go over there and see him too. Do you remember anything else about this riot?

R: No.

P: Do you think some of the leaders in the Knights of the Flaming Circle could have been just as radical in their own way as some of the . . .

R: I suppose they could have. After all, they were standing up for what they thought was right, to protect the people that they wanted to protect.

P: Did you know of any klansmen, or hear of any klansmen who did not want this parade?

R: No.

P: In the later years after the Klan riot, how did it affect the community?

R: I wasn't there too many years after that.

P: Where did you go from there?

R: I went to the convent.

P: Tell me about yourself since then.

R: In the convent?

P: Where did you teach at?

R: I entered the convent in 1926 and in 1929 I went out to teach and taught in Kent, Ohio. Our life is different; we go where we're sent. I was sent to Kent and I was there three years; and then I went from Kent to Canton and I was there four years and then I was out of there and I went to Akron, St. Martha's. I was there ten years. I went from there to Cleveland. Wherever we were needed we were sent, and had to go. Now our life is different. Now we go where we want to go.

P: Oh, is that right? I didn't know that. Your name was

Catherine Ritter, how did you get the name and title?

R: I took a habit when I entered the convent; you have seen nuns with the habits on.

P: Yes.

R: I wore a habit until about twenty years ago. Of course, I'm really in the community. In two more years I will be here sixty years, a nun. I wore a habit many years.

P: You don't have to now?

R: When I took the habit that is when I gave up my name Catherine Ritter and I took Sister Henrietta. I wanted Sister Henry because my father's name was Henry. We had a nun by that name, so I took Henrietta, which was the feminine.

P: I see.

R: But then later on, when we took the habit off, if we wanted to go back to our other name we could go back, I had been Catherine Ritter just twenty years; I was twenty when I entered the convent. I had been Sister Henrietta for about 40 years; not 40, at least 30. I knew more people that I knew then because I had been going around to different places teaching.

P: I have one or two more questions that I want to ask you. Going back to when you were in the freight office, at what time did you find out the Klan was going to be coming in and how did you find out?

R: Ten o'clock.

P: Ten o'clock in the morning?

R: Yes.

P: How did you find out?

R: I heard somebody talking to the agent there and then I called right away as soon as I could get out to the yard office.

P: You overheard this then with a freight agent and somebody else?

R: Yes.

P: How would they know?

R: They just heard that the train was coming. We always heard when trains were coming in, especially special trains.

P: And this was a special?

R: Yes, it was nothing but klansmen.

P: Was that the freight agent?

R: The agent at the freight office. He could have heard from the passenger. The passenger station was just a little ways down. I went to the yard office.

P: Where was this train coming from?

R: I think it was coming from Cleveland; I don't think it was coming from Pittsburgh.

P: So it would be coming through Kent also, the direction of Kent, Ohio?

R: I don't know whether it went through Kent.

P: Coming from the general direction though?

R: When we went to Cleveland we never went through Kent.

P: Okay, thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW