YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Women in the Mills

Personal Experiences

OH 1372

CLOTILDA DeBLASIO

Interviewed

On

October 30, 1990

By

Joseph Lambert Jr

CLOTILDA DeBLASIO

Clotilda DeBlasio was born in 1917 to her parents, Vito and Irene in the Smokey

Hollow region of Youngstown, Ohio The neighborhood where she grew up was a

predominantly Italian neighborhood nestled in the shadows of Youngstown's steel mills.

She attended school at Madison and Hayes Elementary and high school at Rayen

High After graduating in 1936, she worked at various odd jobs in the area before finding

employment at the Ravenna Arsenal After a few months there her mother felt it was too

dangerous to be working at an ammunition facility

After quitting her job at the arsenal she soon found employment closer to home at Truscon Steel, which was a subsidiary of Republic Steel At this time Truscon was making parts for armored tanks. This was during the early stages of America's involvement in World War II. As the war intensified, Truscon was called on to manufacture airplane parts. Truscon required of its employees, many of these women, to take classes at the facility. Mrs. DeBlasio recalls her duties as an inspector.

She continued to work at Truscon until the war ended in 1945 Like many other women employed in defense factory jobs, Mrs DeBlasio found herself unemployed because the returning soldiers were given back the jobs they left behind when they joined the armed services

Finding employment after the war was slow and frustrating Eventually Mrs

DeBlasio found employment at the Servi-Clean Company Ironically, she only expected to spend a few days there but she wound up retiring from the company in 1981

She married her husband Alessio in 1952 and settled in her old neighborhood of Smokey Hollow In 1953, she gave birth to her daughter, Donna Today she lives in

Smokey Hollow and belongs to Our Lady of Mt Carmel in Youngstown She is a member of the St Monica Guild, Mothers of the Crucifix, Senior Citizens, and the Legion of Mary In her spare time she enjoys reading and cooking

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INTERVIEWEE Clothda Debiasio
INTERVIEWER Joseph Lambert, Jr
SUBJECT Women in the Mills
DATE October 30, 1990
L Can you tell me when and where you were born?
D I was born at 306 Emerald St, Youngstown, OH, 1917
L Can you tell me what it was like to grow up here?
D Oh, this was a nice neighborhood We were mostly Italians We would go visit one another
The doors were open We didn't have to worry about anybody breaking in Everybody helped
each other I'd go back any day to those times
L This was Smokey Hollow?
D Yeah, this is Smokey Hollow
L Do you know why they call it Smokey Hollow?
D Because we were down in the Valley and we were surrounded by the mills You had the
Truscon and then there was a valley mill here behind I don't remember the
name of it There was smoke all the time and that's how it got its name of Smokey Hollow,
because we are in a hollow like
L. What sort of things did you do for fun growing up?
D Oh when we were children we played hopscotch, jumping rope We just had clean fun when

we were together all the time Today they don't have anything like that We'd walk to school We didn't have busses, like school busses today We didn't have free-lunches either then When we went to grade school, we'd walk back and forth because we were close to the school But when we went to junior high we had to walk and take a lunch You could take a bus then It was only five cents a ticket then, 20 tickets for a dollar You take a bus to Rayen or Hayes School But the grade school, we'd come home for lunch Walk on the street car tracks because there was no room for you in those days

- L. What school did you go to?
- D I went to Madison Then I went to Hayes and then I went to Rayen
- L What was the smoke like here when the mills were running?
- D It was dirtier in those days, so you'd get soot on your window sills and your porch. It did make some dirt, but they said where there was dirt there was money. Everybody didn't mind it. Then we had to get coal furnaces in those days. That didn't help. That made smoke. You'd get all kind of smoke and soot from there too.
- L What was downtown Youngstown like?
- D Downtown Youngstown was a nice place—It had all kinds of stores on both sides of the street—Really it was one strip from East Federal to West Federal, it was one street and stores were on both sides of the street—A lot of times we'd go on Saturday night and just window shop and meet a lot of people downtown—You had no fear at all—You could walk around here at two or three o'clock in the morning and nobody would bother you—Not in this district—Nothing like today—Downtown is dead today—They took away all those stores. A lot of people moved out of here too—They all went to the suburbs—Then the University didn't help by buying this property—They knocked everything down—That's the sad part of it really—Well, like they say, you have to

go on with the times

- L Is that why there aren't too many houses down there?
- D The University bought all the homes
- L When did they start to buy all the homes down here?
- D I think Donna was about five or six years old I'd say about 25 years ago, at least My daughter's older than that I can't remember exactly I would say 25 years when they started knocking these houses down Well, the first thing that ruined it was the freeway came They took away a lot of homes first Then after the freeway was built, then Youngstown University bought the homes The state bought a lot of homes first so the freeway could go around down through our properties The people moved then So just a few of us are left here
- L Did they want to buy your house?
- D Oh yeah They wanted it In fact, my aunt was offered about, 15 years ago or more, she was offered almost \$17,000 But she didn't have the money to move We didn't have that kind of money either so we just stayed A lot of people moved They called me_______ they didn't know my aunt had passed away______ and they wanted to know if she was interested in selling I said well, she passed away and I'm the owner of the house and I don't feel like selling right now My husband passed away I said well, if I do I'll let you know So they haven't bothered me since You know in those days they were forced With the freeway they were forced, but I think a new law came that the University couldn't force you out of the house If you want to stay here, you stay here So I haven't made up my mind what I want to do Donna wants me to move out of here, but I would have to move to an apartment I hate apartments Another thing, I'm centralized here If I want to go downtown, I can go downtown If I want to take a taxi to go someplace, it doesn't cost me a fortune And when my friend goes to church it

is easy for her to pick me up If I go and stick myself somewhere else, I'll be just closed up in a house or in an apartment I don't mind staying here

L Are you glad you decided to stay here?

D Yeah, I'm glad In a way I'm glad because where would I put all the junk I have That's the whole problem The neighbors are nice They're black and they're white, but they all seem to mind their own business and they all keep watch for you too One day I had the mail in the mail box It didn't belong to me It belonged to the fellow up the street I left it in there and the next day the neighbor lady called and asked me if I was sick cause your mail is still in the box And I said that's not mine Then the fella on the other side, says he came on the porch to look at that and saw the other fellows name and knew that I must not have been home That makes me feel good At least they know if I'm dead or alive I like it down here

L Can you tell me what it was like during the depression?

D The depression Most of us were on relief during the depression. There was no compensation or anything like that for the people that didn't work. The first time we started an relief, base was a dollar and a half a week. Can you believe that? We'd go to the grocery store. Pork chops at ten cents a pound. You could buy more groceries for a dollar and a half then, than you can now with a fifty-dollar bill today. Like I said the neighbors would visit each other and eat cause there's no television and radios. They'd go visit and the ladies would crochet, one night at one house and the kids would go there. People were happy. No one was starving or anything. They gave you shoes free. They would give you clothing if you needed it. Then they had a surplus store. I don't know where my mother would go. They would give her whatever they had. Butter, cereal they would get, and canned meat. Sometimes they'd get grapefruits. We always managed to have food. We never suffered for the lack of food. My father was a

stone mason In the winter time he hardly ever worked, but if there was any job to do He used to know the ______ Down on Andrews Avenue They had a stone shop where they used to cut stone They used to always call my father to work They would pay my father with a passbook You know you couldn't get money out of the bank, so they payed my father with a passbook My father would go to the grocery store and exchange that for food People were happy Maybe because we were younger, I don't know Most of them were foreigners that had lived here They had several in this district Like I say, we were all friends

- L Were the mills very quiet during the depression?
- D The mills were quiet, yeah There were some people working at the time Not too many, but a few were working I know one lady that said the mill would give them food. We were involved with the mill, like I said my father was a stone cutter and he used to work with contractors. I guess the mill would try to help out their workers too. I know this one woman lived across the street during the depression. She moved after the depression. She said that she went down there and she was the only lady in this place. I think she said it was Sheet and Tube. There were all guys there. Her husband didn't want to go, so she went and they asked and she said we are in need of food. She said they gave her some. Try to help the people out. But, like I said, today you need to pay the rent and it isn't cheap and everything. And if the children need a tooth pulled or something, sometimes there was a school you could go to at the Board of. Education. I know my brother had a tooth pulled there. But we were happy anyway.
- L Can you recall your emotions when Pearl Harbor was attacked?
- D We were surprised, you know, that was a shock to everybody. That's when everything started booming up The fellas went to the service and the people started to go to the steel mills to work. It was sad though you know a lot of fellas were killed. That's when I went to work at the

Ravenna Arsenal I'm pretty sure yeah What year was that, 1942?

L 41

D 41 In my last year of high school they had N Y A That was the National Youth Administration, I think I used to work maybe a couple of hours after school and I'd get paid for fixing books One time I went into the principal's office and cleaned out his bookcase and they would pay me Then I couldn't get a job, so I went to work for the N Y A We were allowed, I think it was 24 hours a week So they put me to work at the Haselton House A settlement house, it was like the Christ Mission, it was a part of it We had to feed young kids, children We'd make them a lunch My girlfriend and I worked together She said to me, "why don't we cook a meal for the big shots on the NYA and invite them?" I said "OK" So we cooked the meal and they all came down to this settlement house We made them spaghetti and meatballs and a salad Then we got more money We did They put us as intermediate My girlfriend said, "see, it paid" I said "yeah it sure did" I worked there a couple years, on NYA Then we left there We went to go work at the winery We went to fill bottles of wine We worked for Ternel's Winery It was in the Erie Building Then that's when they started to get worried and started to hire people So she went to work for GM And I got the job at the Truscon through some friend of ours He was a foreman down there They used to make the things that would go on a tank, the threads Then we had to inspect for cracks I didn't mind the day turn Before then I went to work at the Arsenal, where you make ammunition I worked there about three or four months Then after that I went to the Truscon My mother didn't want me to go work at the Arsenal She was worried I might get bombed up there It was easier for me to go to the Truscon because I would depend on a ride, picking me up and taking me Oh god, that midnight shift used to kill me I used to fall asleep all the time Even at Truscon I used to fall asleep

Then after that when things _____ Were ordered to go make parts for airplanes So from the tank _____ They sent us to the aircraft school right in _____ We were supposed to stay in school and practice how to do things Then every day they'd take us upstairs and we'd have to study The girls got tired, so some got their knitting and some got their crochet Then they used to show us these aircraft movies, how to make airplanes Well, they showed us one time, two times They used to show us all the time. So every time we went upstairs I'd sit between two of the girls and tell them when the picture's over wake me up I used to fall asleep all the time So after the school, we graduated and we went on the floor I worked there quite a while I think I worked about a year or two down there Then the war was over in 1945 so they laid us off Then I stayed home and collected compensation for a while Because at that time, after my father passed away and my mother was working at the TB Sanitarium Because that's where he died and she didn't have any ways of going or coming to see him, so she took a job there She was the second cook there at the TB Hospital So I was home and I took care of the house and collected compensation Then I got a job making storm windows My girlfriend got me a job on Eastine Landsdown They used to have a storm sash place there I worked there for about a couple years Then I left there because they used to make us go home because we didn't have enough work. Then when we weren't there they let the other girls on the other side come and do our work. So my girlfriend and I said we weren't going to stay here so we went and got another job I went to work for Workingmen's Overall which is now Servi-Clean Industries, which they now merged with Penn Ohio or Unsco on the corner of Rayen and North Ave They run Thornton's Cleaners now too I got a job there and my girlfriend got a job at Kinray's She made more money, but I didn't want to go in a factory I got a job in the stockroom I worked there about two and a half years Then I got married and

I still went to work Then I quit and Donna was born Then I went back part time when Donna was about six months old My aunt was home so she took care of Donna I went part time back to work Then I knew the woman that was the office manager and a black girl worked in the office and her daughter was supposed to have a tonsil operation but she had to build her daughter up because she was a bleeder or something So Audrey called me and said "how would you like to come work in the office for a while until Evelyn gets back" I said it's O K She said it has to be steady I said it's alright, my aunt will take care of my daughter So I went to work in the office They showed me the Addressograph machines So I said to one of my friends, I hope she stays long enough so I can collect compensation Evelyn never came back so I worked there about 23 years We moved from Madison Avenue in 67, we went up to Belmont, they had a new building there and they changed the name to Servi-Clean Industries And I worked there as an Addressograph operator and then I learned how to print and I used to print for them So I worked there about 23 years Then I retired in 1981 They used to call me occasionally to go do their printing, but I stayed home after that between my aunt's health was up in the air, my brother passed away, my mother was sick, she was in a home. My sister would go in the daytime and I would go at night My mother was in about three years. Then she died. Then my aunt got sick and she died The following year, my husband died In the meantime, I wasn't doing much of anything outside taking these people that were sick and taking care of the house So when my husband passed away my other friend got me interested in helping her at the church We used to volunteer at church, which we still do We do a lot of things at church We take care of the Bible School All food, all concerning food And the different meetings they had we used to help cook and serve Then I volunteered for a couple years, twice a week, at St E's, in the gift shop Well that was about six hours every day I used to go out Tuesday and Friday The bus

would pick me up and my brother would bring me home cause there is no bus in the night I went for a driver's license after my husband passed away I flunked them two times I spent a lot of money The fellow told me what I needed was a lot of practice on the road Well, who in the world is going to teach me on the road here? My brothers were up in age, they're not going to bother with me So it's a good thing I don't drive, it would cost me a lot of money So now I just work one day, on Friday, I go there, at St E's, in the gift shop I'm busy, like I said, with the church or whatever That's about it

- L Well if we can go back What was it like working at the Arsenal?
- D Well, it was O K We used to have a chair We used to sit down Each one had a different thing like an assembly line We'd have detonators. One would do one thing, one would do another. You know, they had rules, you had to be careful really. It wasn't that bad.

 L What did you have to do there?
- D I don't know I used to have to work with the detonator I don't know what I used to do I don't remember exactly what I did It was checking the powder or putting so much powder in each detonator. Then you would pass it onto the next one. Another time I went to work at another place in Ravenna. You were all by yourself in a little cubby hole and you would have to inspect all those detonators. I worked in there for a while. But I didn't last there too long. Like I said, the midnight shift, I used to fall asleep. Then my mother, she didn't want me to work there because it was too dangerous. So that's when I got the other job.
- L How did you get to and from work at the Arsenal?
- D I don't know who gave me the ride the first time A guy that worked here on our street, he gave me a ride the first time Then you know how you go there and they interview you Well I met this woman, her name was Ann, she lived on the west side and she was driving She was

looking for riders so she said she would pick me up and take me home and we'd have to give her so much a week. She would come down here and pick me up and drop me off. But when she didn't come, I had to look for another ride. We managed to get a ride really. We used to be six in a car. Then when we worked in the steel mill we all had to wear uniforms. You know, pants and the blouse, that's what you had to wear. You couldn't go in dresses. I don't remember in the Arsenal. I think at the Arsenal we wore anything. I don't think they were so fussy there with the clothing. But at the steel mill they were. Most of the time we would stand, but then we got a job where they put the conveyer so we could sit. One would sit on one side of the conveyer and one would sit another and the parts would run down there and we would inspect them.

- L You went to Truscon in 1942?
- D Yeah, I think that's when I went in there 42 and 45 I came out of there When the war ended, 45 We were laid off Then we didn't make that much money They said if we would send them a registered letter we would get a back pay I did and I got about a \$400 back pay from Truscon
- L What were some of the first things that you had to do at Truscon?
- D They put you right on the tank as soon as you got there They teach you and show you how you have to chip the weld The thing on top of the weld And clean it and look for cracks And if you found a crack, you'd mark it with a crayon, C And if it wasn't welded right you had to put something else on it and it would be rejected You had to have your hair tied and everything We had to wear babushkas on our heads But it wasn't hard
- L Were you intimidated at all?
- D No They were really nice to us Even the fellas In fact, before I went to Servi-Clean, I got called from the employment office because we had quit Storm Stash And the unemployment

office called my girlfriend and I But she went to Kenray and she had stayed there, but they had sent me a commercial I could have had a good job there for good money It was like a cage, the place was all fenced You just sit there and you had to walk around where the guys were working and you'd have to do something with the thing They said go ahead and take it I said no because I would have to work with guys I was always backwards, I said no, I don't want to work there They said, but look at all the money you'd be making I said I don't care how much money I'd be making, I'm not going to work over there with the guys But really though, at the Truscon, the fellas I would work with, nobody ever said anything to us ever Even when I worked at Servi-Clean Working the door, all the guys would come and they never said anything They've always been nice to me really

- L Were there a lot of other women at Truscon?
- D. Yeah, there were a lot of ladies there Some girls used to weld Some put in applications for crane operators I didn't I said gosh, that's all I have to do, make something fall on somebody's head So I just stayed as an inspector on the line We didn't make that much money I don't remember how much we were making an hour I don't think I've ever had big paying jobs But anyway, I was working, that was something
- L Were you working for the income or out patriotism during the war or for both?
- D Well, for both, I guess Working there and where else? You had to work in town or something else We thought that we'd make more money in the steel mill That was a disaster though We should have gone for civil service jobs That's what we should have done We would have had jobs for life We were so stupid
- L How did you get to work at Truscon?
- D There were two other ladies that worked with me Sometimes, if we didn't have a ride, we'd

walk You know midnight through the eleven shift we would walk We weren't afraid, we'd go through the tracks Then there was a fellow down the street and a fellow up the street that worked there They were neighbors that were steady workers there We'd pay them 50 cents a week and they would take us to work But when we didn't have a ride, we'd walk Truscon wasn't that far In those days you could walk anywhere, nobody would follow you

- L You were talking about your work clothes before Did you have to wear goggles?
- D We had to wear goggles at Truscon and we had to wear safety shoes with safety toes Then we had to wear slacks and a blouse or whatever top you wanted to put on And we had to keep our hair tied and covered
- L Why did you have to keep your hair covered?
- D I don't know Maybe it was a precaution because the welders were near us and they could burn our hair or whatever That was one of the rules
- L Was it dangerous at your job?
- D No, it wasn't dangerous We had a lot of fun, especially on the aircraft
- L Why is that?
- D We'd all get together and talk There were a lot of colored girls, we'd have fun with them, but we'd work too We used to bring our own lunch We used to eat each others lunch I'll never forget one time they brought some whiskey So one of the girls kept peeling oranges so they couldn't smell the whiskey
- L Did you work a lot of overtime?
- D No, not too much overtime there But at Servi-Clean I worked a lot of overtime
- L Did you normally work five days a week, six days a week at Truscon?
- D Truscon was five days a week About 40 hours Most of my jobs were five days a week

Even at Servi-Clean, the only time we had to work over was on Saturday to make up for a holiday So today there is no more Servi-Clean They merged with Penn Ohio In fact, They all moved to Penn Ohio just last week Just the mechanics They are up there, on Belmont Avenue That's where they service their trucks

- L Did you ever have to work weekends at Truscon?
- D No, I don't think we ever worked on a Saturday We weren't that busy If we worked, we'd stay late at night I remember at the aircrafts we'd stay late at night, maybe an hour or so, but never on a weekend
- L What sorts of things did you do on the weekend for recreation?
- D Well, on a Saturday night, before I was married, my girlfriend and I would go dancing up at Cherry Grove We'd dance up there and we'd take the bus home unless we got a ride there And we'd go to a show I would also do a lot of reading too when I was home Go to the movie or that's about it Go downtown window shopping or go to Idora Park in the summertime and walk around.
- L What do you remember about Idora Park?
- D Well, we'd walk around and go on some rides Then we'd go in the dance hall or we'd look in because you had to pay to get in We'd look in there and watched other people dance Mostly we'd just walked around and bought something to eat like ice cream and sit down and talk It would be a bunch of us girls We used to go there by bus The bus would take us and pick us up to take us home Then we'd get a transfer and get a different bus to take us home Go to church, I forgot the church Mass on Sundays Then we were younger, my neighbor had a car They used to go out to Geneva and almost every Sunday they used to bring either my brother and I or my sister with them They take us out there to go bathing in Lake Erie That was when I was

about 10, 11 or 12 years old Then after I got married, Saturday and Sunday I was busy at home One a year we would go on vacation to Asbury Park in Clifton, New Jersey and we'd stay there two weeks We did that almost 25 years

L When you were working at Truscon, was your home life a little more difficult because you had to go to work and then you had to come home and probably do certain things at home?

D Not really I wasn't married then, when I worked at Truscon No because my brother and sister they are younger, but they didn't need to be watched Everybody was on their own My mother didn't really go to work She cooked for us and we ate Other times I would do a lot of things like cooking Not spaghetti or macaroni, but other things I would help bake I would make pizzas We stayed home a lot The only time I went out while I was at Truscon was when we went out dancing on Saturday nights My mom would wash and I do the ironing My mother did the house cleaning My life was pretty good though Not too bad, really Time goes by L Did you have to ration at all during the war?

D Yeah, we had our liquids rationed and our gasoline was That's why my mother took a job near where my father was because nobody would have gasoline. They would take her sometimes, but my mother had to try to get a stamp to get the gasoline for them. That's why my mother took the job out there. I think she took the bus to the end of the line and then the hospital would have a car there to pick them up and take them to the hospital. I think it was the same thing at night. They would take my mother as far as the bus. Then she would take the bus as far as the end of the line and she would come home. And your coffee was rationed. We managed to get stamps or something for meat. Mostly what was rationed was your meat, your coffee, and your gas. We had no problem. My mother always baked her own bread. When we used to go to school the other children with that soft American bread would ask if they could

have some of our bread During the depression, we'd walk to school From here to Rayen or Hayes Then we'd watch those Stouss' children come with the limousine and the chauffeur We'd say, boy aren't they lucky They have a chauffeur to take them and we have to walk You couldn't afford to go to the cafeteria In those days you brought your lunch Today the kids have school boxes and lunch boxes and they aren't even satisfied They have a bus to take them to school We used to walk, winter time and summer time I guess you didn't mind it then It was for everybody, it wasn't just for one person I used to mostly stay here with my aunt and her mother I used to sleep with my aunt's mother because her father died I used to come here and sleep with her She would always pack my lunch and then she would always give me a nickel to buy a bus ticket She would say if it was cold People would sell them at school for money My girlfriend and I would walk and buy ice cream with our nickel at lunchtime We did not mind We survived

- L When you were talking about the classes you had to take for Truscon, how long did you have to go to those classes?
- D Well, it was like a class We would stay there about two hours upstairs there I think they had the classes to show us movies and talk about how to put together. But then after, they had to wait for the contract for us to start on the planes. That contract took a lot of time, but they still made us go up there because they didn't know what to do with us. We'd practice doing different things like riveting. They used to make us make lines on the plane, whatever they had. So they had us go upstairs to kill some time, but I think it was more like killing time after. We weren't getting paid that much. We were just getting paid for being in school. We weren't on production
- L Did you have to go to these classes before work or after work?

- D It was during working hours they would take us upstairs
- L Did all the women have to go to these classes?
- D Everybody that was going to work in the aircraft That had slowed down on the tanks It was more airplane work there
- L When you worked at Truscon were you in a union?
- D Yeah, we were in a union and then while I was there they had two unions They had the AFL and the CIO So then while I was there, they voted and, if I'm not mistaken, the CIO won They had the union
- L When the war was coming to an end did you fear that you were going to lose your job?
- D No, I didn't even think about it
- L Were you expecting to lose your job?
- D Oh yeah, I knew that they were going to let us go because they didn't have use for us anymore
- L Did you want to keep your job?
- D If they would have kept us I wouldn't have minded I didn't even think of it really That's how it happened, that's all That's when I collected compensation I went to go work for Storm Sash
- L What were the celebrations like when the war ended?
- D There wasn't much I don't remember Do you know why? My father dies August 11, 1945. The same year the war ended So if there was any celebration downtown, I don't even know But they didn't make too much fuss about it My father died and two girls drowned that lived on Valley Street at Idora Park swimming pool that day The day they buried my father was the end of the war Another tragedy to take your mind off of that I don't remember them making a big

fuss about it or anything I guess everybody was so happy they didn't care one way or the other really

- L Did a lot of the returning soldiers take your positions at work?
- D I think Truscon discontinued making aircrafts after the war
- L So they did away with your job then?
- D Yes. I think they went to their regular tanks They went back to the other work they used to do before the war And I think the GF was the same way They were making airplanes and they went back to their chairs and desks, whatever they made Furniture My sister worked at the GF Everything was back to normal before you knew it
- L Did you enjoy working at Truscon?
- D Yeah I enjoyed it It was nice We were mostly all girls in that department Then when we were working on the tankers we were still girls Each department had there own bunch We worked down in S, our department was S Then they had E and others I don't know what they did down there They must have done the same thing really, I don't know
- L Is there anything else you can remember about working there at Truscon?
- D No, not really