

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Idora Park

Personal Experience

O. H. 1392

CHESTER A. AMEDIA, SR.

Interviewed

by

Scott Smith

on

November 7, 1990

CHESTER AMEDIA

Mr. Chester Amedia, Sr. was born on January 26, 1922 in the small town of Erico, Pennsylvania. Mr. Amedia is the son of Frank and Lucille Amedia. The Amedia family moved to the Youngstown, Ohio area in 1928. The family had moved to Youngstown with the life savings of Frank Amedia in hopes of starting their own business. Frank Amedia's first business was a gas station, however it did not agree with Frank and he left that business soon thereafter. Frank Amedia's next business venture was the restaurant found on the midway of Idora Park.

The Amedia's first home was on Parkview Avenue, which was near Idora Park. Next, the Amedia family moved to the Brier Hill area of Youngstown on Calvin Street. Chester Amedia attended Saint Columba's School, which has since closed. Chester Amedia attended the Rayen School from grades nine through eleven. In the summer of 1938 Mr. Amedia went to Toledo to aid a sick uncle. His uncle died that summer, leaving Chester to take over management of his gas station. Not forgetting his education, Chester attended Scott High School at night and became one of the first graduates of the school's night school program.

In the middle of 1941, Chester Amedia returned to the Youngstown area and by September 1942, he had entered the service. He completed his basic training as a private in the army then completed infantry school within six months and seven days, and achieved the rank of Second Lieutenant. He was assigned to the 88th infantry division; later transferred to pilot training in the U. S. Army Air Corps. Chester Amedia graduated as a pilot from Ellington Air Force Base in May of 1944 and was trained in

piloting C-47 transport planes. Mr. Amedia's first military assignment was in China as a member of the First Air Commando Group. Mr. Amedia flew 153 combat missions during the war. Mr. Amedia has received countless military honors including two distinguished Flying Crosses, the Presidential Unit Citation, and most recently (1986) the Chinese Government awarded Mr. Amedia the order of the flying cloud.

Upon leaving the service in 1946, Mr. Amedia entered Youngstown State University where he graduated in 1948 with a B.S. in Business Administration. At this same time, Mr. Amedia was working at a Youngstown steel mill and building his own house. In 1950, Chester Amedia began working for the Youngstown Metropolitan Housing Authority until his retirement in 1978, after rising to the position of Executive Director.

Chester and his wife, Cecilia, (whom he married in 1943) have two children, Chester Amedia Jr., who is 42, and Frank Amedia who is 38. Though Mr. Amedia is today retired he is still active in the Youngstown Community, especially in the VFW, Rotary Club R.O.A, and the Health Systems Agency of Eastern Ohio. Mr. Amedia still enjoys flying, and he has also picked up the hobby of restoring cars.

-Scott Smith

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INTERVIEWEE: CHESTER A. AMEDIA, SR.

INTERVIEWER: Scott Smith

SUBJECT: arcade, Wildcat, Heidelberg Gardens

DATE: November 7, 1990

S: This is an interview with Chester Amedia, Sr. for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Idora Park, by Scott Smith, on November 7, 1990, at approximately 1:00 p.m.

Mr. Amedia, to start the interview off, I would like to ask you some personal questions about yourself. When you were born and where you grew up.

A: I was born in Erico, Pennsylvania, which is a town that no longer exists. The coal faded out and the town became a ghost town. It was located between Grove City and east of the Harrisville area. I was born in 1922, which makes me 68 years of age. I was born in a little mining cabin. I often compare it to a lincoln log cabin. From the description by my mother and father, it was a very cold day when I was born and I often wonder how we survived with just one coal heater.

S: When did you come to the Youngstown area?

A: My folks moved into the Youngstown area in 1928. My dad had saved a considerable amount of money from his coal mining work. He was an extremely hard worker and they paid him by the ton. He saved his money and came to Youngstown to go into business. His first undertaking was a gas station which he didn't really appreciate too much so he went from that into Idora Park. At

Idora Park, he took over the huge restaurant that they used to have, which later became the penny arcade.

S: What are your memories of growing up in the Youngstown area? Did you go to school in Youngstown?

A: Oh, yes. I went to several schools. We first lived on Parkview Avenue, which was one block off of Glenwood at the corner of Parkview and another street. I don't recall the name of the other street, but Parkview was the street that led into Idora Park. Later we moved to the Brier Hill area. I became one of the Brier Hill boys, living on Calvin Street. From there, my folks moved to the Northside and I went to St. Columba's, Hayes and Rayen schools.

S: Is St. Columba's school still around?

A: No, they've closed it for many years. This was an old building at the corner of Rayen and Elm Street. It was a three story structure, all stone and it was an old, old building. They tore it down since then. It's now a parking lot.

S: So you spent all of your life then, except for six years...

A: No, in 1938 I was a junior at Rayen school. When summer vacation came, I went out to Toledo to help out a sick uncle who later died. I became the manager of a service station there, across from the DeVilbigs Plant in Toledo, Ohio. At the age of 17, I was managing a big gas station. I went to night school at Scott High School on Collingwood Avenue in Toledo and became one of the first of three graduates in their night school program while I worked days. I came back to Youngstown in mid 1941 and then went to the service in September of 1942. I was in the service first going through as a private in the infantry, then in six months and seven days, I graduated from the infantry school as a Second Lieutenant and was assigned to the 88th Infantry Division out of Camp Gruber, Oklahoma. Then one day, while we were on maneuvers in Louisiana, a runner came running up asking for Chester Amedia and he handed me a set of orders. They were from Washington, transferring me to pilot training in the U.S. Army Signal Corps Air Force.

S: Did you get all the training and everything and go through that?

A: Yes. I became a pilot. I graduated from the Ellington Field class 44-E, and I was a second lieutenant in grade. I went to transitional training for C-47's, gliders, and dropping of paratroopers. Our first as-

signment in that training speciality was at Alliance, Nebraska. From Alliance, Nebraska, we went to Georgetown, Illinois. From Georgetown to Fort Wayne, Indiana, picked up our combat gear and away we went to China. I became one of the famous First Air Commandos depicted in the comics as "Terry and the Pirates". I flew 153 combat missions. I was awarded two distinguished flying crosses, three air medals, the Presidential Unit Citation and several other medals. I was in five battle campaigns. Recently (as recent as four years ago) the Chinese government honored me with a set of Chinese pilot's wings and the order of the flying cloud medal. Which was rather unusual!

S: That's fantastic.

A: After that I came home in 1946, went through Youngstown State University in two years while I was working full time in the mill and built my own house in that same period of time. I used to average three hours of sleep a night.

S: That's incredible. Did you get back into Idora Park at all, then?

A: Well, I visited the park. My wife and I always had a favorite band we would go and see. We would double date while she was in nurse's training in 1941 and 1942, just prior to my going to the service. We used to go out to Myers Lake in Canton, Yankee Lake in Brookfield and also Idora Park for the big name bands.

S: Let's back track. With your childhood, when you said your parents ran the restaurant there...

A: Yes. I was six years old and I remember two years at Idora Park. I have to give you a little bit of the history of the park. The restaurant that my dad had was mid way in the park, almost across from the Wildcat. It later became the penny arcade. The big companies in the Youngstown area, like Youngstown Sheet & Tube and General Fireproofing, companies like that, used to have a full day for their employees and they would book the park for a particular Saturday or Sunday and my dad had the restaurant. I'll never forget. He used to have ice cream parlor chairs with a beautiful green canvas covers and tablecloths. When they'd roll up the side curtains for open air, it was just absolutely beautiful. Unfortunately the weather was very bad the whole summer. Every weekend it rained. Every weekend the crowd got smaller and my dad lost considerable money undertaking it. He didn't continue with it.

I remember one day, one of the attractions at the park was a camel. They kept this camel at night underneath

the dance hall. I remember the hay that it used to eat and this one particular Saturday afternoon, this camel driver asked me if I wanted to ride it. I rode that camel all the way up through the midway from the Idora Park Ballroom up to the restaurant. My mother said, "Who's that kid with that dirty face riding that camel?" It was me. Those are great memories.

S: Do you remember the rides?

A: Oh, yes. There were an awful lot of good rides there. The Wildcat, and of course, they had the other roller-coaster that still exists there, I think.

S: The Jackrabbit?

A: The Jackrabbit. Let me tell you a little bit of what I remember about Idora Park. Parkview Avenue led off of Glenwood, down into the park at the far end. There used to be a street car line, at that time, servicing it and later on, they came in with electrified buses. They would come in to the area there and they had a turn-a-round. That was your entry into the park because you got off to go into the park. They had a huge swimming pool when I was there in 1928. They had one of the most beautiful swimming pools you would ever want to see. It was a round circle, a semi-circle structure painted white and trimmed with blue, as I recall. It was very nice. Why they ever closed it I don't know except I suspect maybe it was sanitation purposes or polio.

S: I think they had a drowning.

A: They had a drowning or so, but I remember that swimming pool very well.

The other entry into the park was the back way where the big parking lot was, that's called Billings' gate. Billings, was Rex Billings who was one of the owners of the park with a fellow by the name of Christy Deibel. They were very good friends of my father's.

One of the characters that I remember out at that park was a guy who used to hang around our place a lot, he had a shooting gallery. You actually shot the short rifle, .22's, and the rifles were chained, so you couldn't shoot backwards and they had these ducks that would pass from right to left on a track. There were ducks and there were bells and rabbits below that and they would go from right to left and you'd get so many shots for a quarter. Muck Pennant was his name. Muck was an ex-boxer. He had big floppy ears and he was punch drunk from taking too many punches in the fighting ring. Much later on, he became the manager of the

downtown Paramount Theater. I used to belong to Esther Hamilton coffee club. We'd had coffee in the morning and Muck used to come over and Muck and Esther, with Leo McCarthy and myself and Attorney Paul Smith and Bill Morganti, we used to shoot the breeze in the wintertime about Idora Park. It was one of the favorites of Esther.

As you came into the park on the right side, there used to be a big fun house and of course, it had the blasts of air, all the surprises inside, mirrors that made you look in many different directions; short, squatty, fat like a midget, tall. As you continued down that asphalt causeway or midway, on the left side were the airplanes. This was a tower where you went up a set of steps that curled around and then there were about six airplanes on long cables. As you'd get in, they'd strap you in when it would start, it would start to work its way out. Pretty soon, it was going parallel almost to the ground at a pretty good rate of speed. The wind would blow the girls' hair and that was one of our favorites. A little bit beyond that was an up-side-down house. You'd go into it and it would get dark and the lighting effect was such that you'd swear you'd be walking sideways and pretty soon up-side-down on the ceiling. Actually the room was revolving around this floor that you were standing on.

Everybody knew about the Wildcat. Unfortunately they had a tragedy or two on that. Kids were thrown out.

S: A kid was thrown out of a car?

A: Yes. Out of a car. I remember that. It wasn't while I was there. On the Wildcat, I liked to ride in the very first car and also the last car. The last car would really flip you.

As you went further on down the midway, right by the Wildcat, they had another concession which was a sledge hammer and you would try to hit this piece of wood that was on a lever parallel to the ground with a hinge, and as you'd hit this, it would knock the ball up to the top...I had a brother-in-law that weighed 225 pounds. He was built like a professional wrestler and as strong a brute as you'd ever want to see and he'd actually break the sledge sometime and not ring the bell. I was a little skinny kid, 140 pounds. It was just before the war and I knew how to balance that thing and just hit it square without too much strength and it would go up and ring the bell and they'd give me a cigar. I made the poor guy look bad a couple of times. I felt bad about it. There used to be a midget and he had a pair of scissors and he would cut your profile on black and white paper and paste it on the white. We still

have one or two of those at home in our scrap book of my girlfriend then, who is now my wife.

The further on down you went, you saw the penny arcade on the left, it had all kinds of little contraptions in there: squeeze guns to see how much strength you had, a machine you could hold on to and it would give you a big shock of electricity.

S: Why? Why would you want a shock of electricity?

A: To see how much you could take. As the needle went clear over to the right, you were really taking it. What people didn't realize, I had a real fine expensive Lord Elgion watch and I ruined it. It was a lot of fun.

Of course they had the little cages with the crane that would pick up the candy or some cheap ornament. Then they had the movies. They were little movie machines, you'd put your eyes down on the little thing and some of them were girly movies, old fashion "Hoot" Gibson type movies and they were a nickel. Things of this nature were in the penny arcade.

As you continued on down the midway, on the left, a hill began in back of the concessions and that was where they would have picnic tables. There were various ethnic groups that would have picnics on a particular Saturday or Sunday. They'd engage the whole park. There was Italian Day and they had Slovak Day and Polish Day and Irish Day and others. Then, of course, the Vindicator used to have \$.03 kiddies day. For \$.03 a ride you got to ride all the rides that were normally \$.10 or \$.15 or \$.20. The Vindicator used to have a big day. That was a very fine day.

The carousel was then on the right, right below the Wildcat and of course, I don't have to tell you about the fine music that used to play. I used to get to ride that a lot. I knew the operator and he'd just let me jump on and we'd crawl from horse to horse or ride in the wagon and put our feet up. It's too bad we lost that because it was certainly beautiful. As you went around they had the post with a ring and as you'd go around when you were on the horse going up and down, you'd try and hook the ring. If you hooked the ring you would give it back to the operator and he gave you another free ride. That I remember well.

Across from that, down just a little bit was a place where they had a big u-shaped channel that was like a canal about a foot wide and maybe ten inches deep with water swirling through it all the time. They had these

fish that would swim around that were made out of wood with lead hooks and you would hook them. They were goldfish. With this little rod you had a big hook, if you hooked one of them, you'd get a prize. They had a lot of concessions. Different concessions where you'd throw baseballs at milk bottles made out of rubber and if you'd knock them all down in three throws you got yourself a doll for your girlfriend. Fellows would stand there and spend five, six or seven dollars to get a doll for their girlfriend.

I don't have to tell you about the monkeys. There were live monkeys in the cages in the park and you'd sit there and throw popcorn at them and peanuts.

S: I never heard that. I never knew they had live monkeys there.

A: They were very very funny and they'd act and they'd pick fleas off each other. You'd say something to them and they'd look at you and look back and you'd throw them some peanuts and they'd do some tricks. They also had artists in the park that would sketch you. I remember this one fellow with a cane and a straw hat. He drew a pretty good picture too. Towards the end of the war, they had a German beer hall that was down near the fun house, which was up near the Parkview Avenue entrance way and you could go in there and drink beer.

S: Was that the Heidelberg Gardens?

A: Yes. There were frozen custard stands. They had the best frozen custard of any place I ever had it. Peanuts, you could buy hot dogs. It was a very, very fine park. It wasn't a big park as you know what parks are today but it had a little bit of everything and I think we made a big mistake when we let that thing go like it did.

Down near the end they had the boat rides on the right hand side and of course, you went on the boats and you went through the tunnel of love and then you came out on top of a waterfall and down the slide and it would splash you at the bottom and girls would scream. It was fun.

Right behind that, only one or two seasons do I remember the duck pins. It was like a little bowling alley where they had what they called duck pins. That didn't seem to go over too good.

S: Was that where they ended up putting the putt-putt course?

A: Yes. They ended up putting in a putt-putt course.

You're right. The baseball park used to attract some good teams. Hard ball and then I remember a boxing match there. This was after the war, about 1947 or 1948. I remember seeing a fight there. A heavy weight by the name of Tiger Fox from Detroit. He was a huge black fellow, very strong, big and all scarred up. He was going to box a fellow by the name of Nello Roncie, who was a Youngstown native from the East side. Nello's brother, I forget his first name, did a lot of those statues that you see up there at Dr. Murray's. He was a sculptor. He and Dr. Murray would work on Glenwood. The fine arts building near the playhouse. This Tiger Fox and this Roncie started boxing. Two seconds later, Tiger Fox came up with a hard right uppercut and he just flattened Roncie right off for the full count.

S: What baseball teams do you remember?

A: Well, they were mostly exhibit teams like The King and His Court, who used to throw a ball blindfolded. He was a pitcher and they had a three man team that used to play a nine man team. The United Veterans Council I know booked them in there two or three times in the summertime. I don't know what has ever happened to that ball court now.

S: They still play softball games there.

A: Is that right?

S: Do you remember the minor league team that played in Youngstown? I know they had a minor league team in the late 1940's or 1950's.

A: I was never much of a baseball enthusiast. At one time, the Toledo Mudhens were scheduled to come in and I can't recall whether they did or they didn't. Of course they didn't have any big league...But that's what I can tell you about my days as a youngster and later on as an adult.

S: With the park, do you think it was a major social place in Youngstown, a major meeting place?

A: Oh, sure. I had the opportunity to make an inspection in NATO in 1969 as an officer in the United States Air Force. I was selected; one of thirteen. Part of that inspection took me into Germany and I was later the main speaker for German day at Idora in their German Day. They must have had five thousand Germans come in from all around the state of Ohio and I remember being in that Idora Dance Hall making a speech on what I saw over in Germany. The place was absolutely packed. They were actually standing outside. So you would be

right in saying that it was a major social gathering place.

S: You were talking about seeing the bands. Did they play on the weekends?

A: They used to book them in during the week too. On Wednesday nights and Saturday nights. In fact, my brother was a jitter-bugger. I don't know if you know what a jitter-bugger means but they used to have the dress of the day. You'd never wear blue jeans! The dress in that day was "zoot suits". Big wide lapels that came out this far and they had baggy knees. There were two major dance halls in the Youngstown area. One was the Elms, which was on Elm street, near Spring Street, not too far from where the Utility plant for Youngstown University is. It was right in that general area, owned by the Caveliers who also owned Idora Park later. Well, my brother Chuck had one corner that was his, nobody else danced in that corner but him and his girlfriends. He was that good. The other corner was taken over by Harry Meshel, who is now a Senator. You might ask Harry about this sometime, about his jitter bugging with Chuck Amedia in his corner and Meshel's corner. Johnny Blue, who I think is now dead, was a character from Brier Hill, he had the other corner and I don't know who had the forth corner. But nobody danced in those corners.

We had big bands like Glen Miller coming to this area. Also, Vaughn Monroe, Art Castles and Artie Shaw. The only other place where they really had any dancing once in awhile when they had a special event, was the Stambaugh Auditorium. But the Elms and Idora Park were the two busy dance halls. They were dance clubs. They were dance clubs up until the time they closed down. Couples that belonged to these dance clubs would utilize those facilities.

S: I know today the dance hall is still standing. Do you think that it's a shame that they're not using that dance hall now. Do you think it could be put to use?

A: I think it could be put to use. The last time I did any dancing there was at the bicentennial, 1976. We utilized that hall to wind up our celebration. That was a Saturday. That was the last time I was there.

S: Do you think Youngstown should have worked to try to keep Idora park open?

A: Youngstown didn't have the funding at the time. That was the city? The city didn't have the funding at that time. They had urban renewal programs with big emphasis on special funding like that was directed toward

the urban renewal projects first. The Riverbend area, followed up by the downtown urban renewal program east of the square followed up by the Northside by the University. I don't think we made a mistake because I think the university today is a result of that, good cooperation. I know it was Mayor Flask at the time. He took a very special interest in the demolition of all those units from Rayen Avenue, Lincoln Avenue, up to Custer and Scott Streets and from Fifth Avenue over to Wick.

I happen to know a little bit about that because I was the housing authority director and I played a big part in the relocation of many, many families and especially the elderly. Youngstown Metropolitan Housing Authority made much University expansion possible. Having worked with Mayor Flask and the city administration in relocating the people, which the Government required prior to doing any building anywhere. You just couldn't go in and rip a unit down. As a result of that I was responsible for building Gutknecht Tower and the elderly units on Burlington Street. Also, the "P.L. Strait Homes", the Kirwin homes, and the units on Springdale Street, "Norton Manor" for relocation purposes. Also developing the Ohio Hotel, which they now call the Amedia Plaza named in my honor.

S: With Idora Park, do you think as the area went down with the closing of the steel mills and all, do you think that had a great affect that people just didn't have the money to go to Idora Park anymore or was it that they just didn't have the interest in going to Idora Park anymore?

A: That's a good question. Actually, with the closing of the mills, an awful lot of revenue disappeared from this valley. I think one of the things which probably hurt us was the units that they built up on Lake Erie, Sea World and other attractions. They became very competitive and they spent the big bucks. I think the people that owned Idora Park just didn't have the money. Tony Cavelier, when his father passed away, he tried to survive with it and they were having a tough time because they had to have security, they had the upkeep, big insurance policies to keep up. I think also that it may have been a rainy summer.

S: Also, I think when they lost the Wildcat, which was the star attraction.

A: Yes. That Wildcat burning was one of the big attractions.

S: Also, as far as with Idora Park and the Youngstown area, do you think today, if someone wanted to reopen

the park because I know a large majority of the park is still in fairly good shape. A lot of concession stands are still up, do you think somebody could reopen the park and it could be successful?

A: I'd have to take a look at it to see. Physically I couldn't make a judgment on that without looking at it. I'd say any time anything is abandoned for a period of a year or two without heat and so forth, nature takes it toll. Buildings begin to rot and roofs leak and so forth. I think as far as the topography, you could probably go in there and bulldoze a lot of stuff and...You got the parking area, you got the dance hall, which could probably be rejuvenated. I'd be afraid to ride any of the big rides. The only big ride left there is the Jackrabbit. I imagine that's in bad shape if it hasn't been painted.

S: The wood is probably all rotted by now. Do you think the youth of today would go to Idora Park?

A: I think the youth that are developing today would probably have more interest than those that didn't participate in the early 1960's.

S: You think it would be just a different group of people now. I know that the ideas in another interview that I had was brought about that they would like to see the park even if the rides weren't reopened. To open up the picnic area, to maybe even make a little memorial for Idora Park because it was such a special place in the history of Youngstown.

A: Well, let's face it. Why another picnic area? You've got Mill Creek Park. Who's going to maintain it. We've got parks with pavilions that have never been used. Did you ever notice the one on Gypsy Lane and Logan Avenue?

S: Yes.

A: You never see anybody in it. Those were WPA projects. I'd love to have one of those in my back yard. The one in Crandall Park is used a little. For a picnic area, I think we should continue to promote Mill Creek Park.

S: Do you think they could annex that into Mill Creek Park?

A: That could be a good possibility. Then again, does the park want to achieve another liability and big expense?

S: To conclude the interview, if you'd like to talk for a couple minutes in general, your opinions or anything else you'd want to say about Idora park and how impor-

tant it was to Youngstown and when you were living as a child and growing up in the Youngstown area and when you came back.

A: Well, when you talk about Idora Park back in that period of time, it was a place to go for amusement. It was an amusement park. People in that day and age didn't take long trips with automobiles because the automobiles would break down with flat tires. To have a tire blow out from here to Pittsburgh wouldn't be uncommon in an automobile or...I think they now have got the opportunity to drive to Lake Erie and back in a day with no problems. They'll go to Sea World or other attractions. Sandy Lake. Personally I don't go to these places anymore. I've had my fill of them. I go to Sea World with my wife almost every year as part of our Easter Seal, Rotary program. I enjoy it but I'm tired at the end of the day. Today, you've got pro ball games, basketball; you've got a Stadium in downtown Pittsburgh, you've got other attractions. Then I think we all have got television which takes too much of our time.

Everything is based on economics today. It's expensive to buy even as an investment. It would be necessary....It might not be recovered for another seven or eight years. Its a gamble. You're gambling on weather, you're gambling on people, you're gambling on whether there's going to be a war. The war had its toll on that park. Though I imagine, I wasn't here during the war, but I imagine that something you should try to find out was whether the boys from Camp Reynolds that used to come in to Youngstown ever visited there.

S: I know in another interview that I had they said that the park was closed down the majority of the time, just for the conservation programs as far as for gasoline and things like that.

A: Probably. You couldn't get hamburgers because of meat rationing. They had gasoline rationing. It was quite a place in its day.

S: So in essence, do you think Youngstown lost a lot when they lost Idora Park?

A: Yes. I think they did.

S: Okay. Thank you very much.

A: You're very welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW