

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Idora Park

Personal Experience

O. H. 1399

RICHARD D. SHEVETZ

Interviewed

by

Scott Smith

on

November 28, 1990

RICHARD SHEVETZ

Mr. Richard Shevetz was born at Saint Elizabeth Hospital in Youngstown, Ohio on June 21, 1964. He is one of six children, and his parents are John and Rose Shevetz of Campbell, Ohio. Richard has lived in Campbell at his parents' home all of his life. He attended Byzantine Catholic Central Elementary School and Campbell High School, where he graduated from in 1982. He got his first job at Idora Park, the summer before his senior year in high school. Rich Shevetz worked that first summer as a part-time employee. Rich would then work the following three summers as a full-time employee in the food services industry of the park. In particular, Richard worked at the sausage stand and at the park's restaurant.

Mr. Shevetz began his studies at Youngstown State University in the Fall of 1982. While at the University, Rich became very active in the Greek system. Rich Shevetz along with his twin brother Rob, joined the Youngstown State Fraternity Tau Kappa Epsilon in the Fall of 1982. Through his membership, Rich became involved in many campus activities which he feels aided him greatly in his college experience. Mr. Shevetz graduated from Youngstown State in the Spring of 1988 with a B.A. in the Social Sciences.

Mr. Shevetz today is employed by the Youngstown Developmental Center. At his job, Rich works with teaching the mentally retarded, a field of work he finds very rewarding. Today, Rich Shevetz remains very active with his fraternity. He works with the fraternity as an Alumni Advisor, and supports the fraternity in all social and philanthropic activity. Mr. Shevetz counts

among his honors and accomplishments the following: Youngstown State Dean's List, OSCEA Labor Union Membership, Saint Michael's Civic Club, and the Slovak American Club. Richard Shevetz enjoys golf, fishing, and shooting in his free time. Rich also enjoys spending his free time at the Tau Kappa Epsilon Fraternity house with his friends.

-Scott Smith

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INTERVIEWEE: RICHARD D. SHEVETZ

INTERVIEWER: Scott Smith

SUBJECT: Heidleburg Gardens, sausage stand, softball

DATE: November 28, 1990

SS: This is an interview with Richard Shevetz, for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Idora Park, by Scott Smith, at 265 Fairgreen Avenue, on November 28, 1990, at 10:20 p.m.

Mr. Shevetz, before we start talking about Idora Park, I'd like you to tell us about your own personal history, starting with where you grew up and where you went to school.

RS: I was born here in Youngstown at St. Elizabeth Hospital. I have lived with my parents all my life. I have lived in the same dwelling since I was born. I went to elementary school at Byzantine Catholic Central. I felt that the school, itself was a good place for an elementary education background.

SS: Was that school located in Campbell?

RS: No, the school was located on the south side of Youngstown, Youngstown-Poland Road. I felt it made things a lot easier for me, education-wise dealing with high school and my academics. I believe it was a good school and gave me a good moral background. After grade school, I attended four years of public school at Campbell Memorial High School. Attitudes changed with me during high school. During grade school, I was

rowdy, my twin brother and I, we would pretty much see what kind of trouble we would get into. As we entered into Campbell, things mellowed out. I felt Campbell's asset to me was that it helped me deal with different types of people. There was a good racial mix and it taught me how to deal with other people's opinions and their upbringings and their cultures. Socially in Campbell, I was not your outgoing popular type of person. I was one of the band members, golf club, and chess team participants. I knew a few people there, but when I graduated from high school, I kind of left the scene in Campbell. It was different when I entered into the University. I started off pretty much my freshmen year like a lot of freshmen (loners, trying to get to know people). My second year, in joining the fraternity, it actually helped me become more mainstream into the university scene. In fact, the fraternity itself helped me stay in school since I was flunking out my freshmen year. It really helped me a lot to get through the university. It helped me get to know people and make decisions with what I wanted to do with my life. Now, as a post-graduate, I am currently employed and still going to school, trying to make better of myself.

SS: How many people are in your family?

RS: There are six children in my family. We're a close family. Though my twin brother and I are the youngest, we spent most of our lives living at home as the only children, since the last person that left the household was in 1974. We do have a good sibling relationship. We really don't have any conflicts with each other and we always keep in contact.

SS: Did your brothers and sisters go to the same school?

RS: My brothers and sister went to the same elementary school, except for my brother Jim. We all went to the same high school. It's funny, since there were four other people in our family in high school, we got certain reputations from the teachers before we even got there. It was kind of funny. My brothers who were there ahead of me were kind of mischievous.

SS: When you were young, what kind of things did you do socially? Did you play baseball or do things like that?

RS: Yes. My brother and I were the only boys in the neighborhood. All the girls would get into the same things as the guys. We all played baseball together and we would have some vicious football games, girls too. We had some rough girls in our neighborhood.

SS: When did you first go to Idora Park?

RS: I have only been to Idora Park once outside of working there. It was either my twelfth or thirteenth birthday. I was pretty impressed with it because I really enjoyed rollercoasters. I thought Idora had the best rollercoasters I had ever been on. I liked it because it wasn't very crowded or very modernized commercially. The only time I had been there was the best time I have ever had at an amusement park.

SS: What attractions stood out to you besides the coasters?

RS: The architecture I thought was really interesting. Since it stayed mainly in the era it was built. I kind of liked the time it was built, the old time atmosphere it had. I was also very much impressed with the ballroom. Mainly Idora, for what a little park it was, the attractions that it had were spectacular for the time it was built. In comparison to other parks, if you bring back that other park to the era when Idora Park was built, Idora was a much more spectacular park.

SS: When did you start working at Idora Park?

RS: I started working there in 1981. I was a senior in high school. A friend of mine, one of my pals I've known through grade school and high school asked me if I wanted a job there. I said, "Yes, why not." It was my first job and I was pretty excited about it. I got into the food service. I worked under Henry (Hank) Clark. It was very nice working with him. He was a very relaxed type of individual. For how much money they paid the employees there, he understood what to expect from us and from what not to.

SS: What do you mean by that?

RS: The pay range there, since it was a seasonal job, they didn't have to pay minimum wage. They would pay us \$2.50 an hour. Minimum wage was \$3.25 or \$3.35. It was a pretty much relaxed atmosphere and our employers really didn't expect too much. It was a pleasurable place to work.

SS: What kind of food service work did you do?

RS: I mainly did fast food. I worked in two places. They had a little sausage stand by the putt-putt course near the entrance near the ballroom. I started off at that sausage stand. I was seventeen years old. I was cooking sausage and pouring beers.

SS: You were seventeen and you were serving beer? Isn't there a law against that?

RS: Well, yes, but it wasn't enforced then. It was very relaxed. I think they knew it would be closing.

SS: Did you think at that time they knew they would be closing?

RS: Yes. First thing, on the accounting aspect, internal controls weren't very enforcing. There was a lot of theft among the employees.

SS: Really?

RS: Yes. A lot of the cash receipts that would come in were not recorded, therefore it was pocketed by the employees.

SS: Would you say there was a lot of that?

RS: Yes.

SS: What people were in charge of the park at that time?

RS: Henry Clark was in charge of the food service. Mr. Duffy ran the entire place. Mike Duffy was in charge of maintenance and Pat Jr. was in charge of amusements, i.e., games. I think the rides were taken care of by Mike.

SS: Your first year working at the park, do you think they worked really hard to make it a family-type atmosphere, not just in the park but for the employees also?

RS: When I first worked in the park, I don't think there was any effort to make a certain atmosphere. The time I was working there, the park was just "open". They were just going through the motions and just sort of keeping it up. It was on the tail end of the decline.

SS: What kind of things stood out to you that first year you worked there?

RS: It was only a brief period the first year I worked there. I really didn't get to know anybody. I was just temporary, filling in for a few days off. The first full year I was working there I made a lot of good friends. Actually I got introduced in this fraternity because of that park. I knew one of the little sisters that worked there before and we got to know each other quite well. There was no really serious conflicts among the workers themselves. It seemed that no one really had taken the place seriously. Among the employees, we all got along. It was such a relaxed atmosphere that we'd stay after the park was closing and just party. We'd ride a few rides or even have a

softball game under the lights when the lights were at the field. We often would go out with each other after work. Pretty much all the employees knew one another.

SS: I was talking to George Nelson and he said that you guys would play softball for hours sometimes. Was it just like everybody would go out and play or what?

RS: It was like this. We would stock up on beer, turn on the lights on the softball field and play and it would turn out to be a big party. It was a really good time. There were times when we would turn on the bumper cars, the Wildcat and the fun house and we just threw a party and did it up. Quite a few employees stayed over for that. Mainly it was the people from maintenance, rides and food service would stay after work. The kids from the games were too young to stay over.

SS: They didn't have any complaints about that?

RS: No, actually Mike Duffy and even Pat, Sr. was there with us for one of the get togethers. We'd have the owners with us.

SS: How late would you do this?

RS: The park would probably close around 9:30 or 10:00 and we'd go on until 1:00 or so.

SS: Really? And get up and go to work the next day?

RS: A lot of us did.

SS: What time did you have to be at work?

RS: It all depended. On weekdays (Thursday and Friday) we'd show up in the afternoon and it would close at night. On the weekends sometimes we would work long hours like from 9:00 a.m. until 10:00 p.m. We'd stay there the entire time.

SS: Your first full year at the park, did you work in the concessions also?

RS: Yes. I worked the food concessions.

SS: Did you work any other different places?

RS: I would go back and forth from the sausage stand by the putt-putt, and the Crazy Horse Saloon (Heidelberg Gardens). I would go back and forth depending on how crowded it was. The second year I pretty much stayed at the Heidelberg because it was after the fire and we just shut the sausage stand.

SS: Your first full year there, did you ever get a chance to work the french fry stand?

RS: No.

SS: Did you want to?

RS: No...There was a real nice lady who used to work there. We always used to B.S. I never had the chance to work that. That was a separate entity from our food service. It was owned by the park but I think it was managed by someone else outside of the park. The french fries were so good but I have heard horror stories about the grease.

SS: Like what?

RS: Like it wouldn't be changed for the whole season or something like that.

SS: That's probably why they were so good.

RS: That's probably why. It was a dirty place. I think the entire place, food-wise, was quite dirty.

SS: Did you ever do anything that would be described as...Did you ever drop a sausage on the ground and pick it up and serve it?

RS: Yes. We did things like that. I had a whole hamburger platter and my record was holding 15 hamburger platters on one arm and one fell off, we closed the door behind us and threw it back on and served it. When I worked sausage, once in a while we'd get moldy buns and we didn't have enough buns to make sandwiches so we would pick the mold off the buns and serve them. Nobody knew about it. We never said anything about it.

SS: Do you think those were the best french fries in the world?

RS: I'll tell you what. They were pretty darn good.

SS: That is one of the things when I interviewed people, one of the things they say and then they talk about the Wildcat and then they automatically go to french fries.

RS: They were that good. They were made from fresh potatoes, cut right there...

SS: They were the best french fries in the world. As far as the food services, what other foods did they serve at the park?

RS: Well, you had your basic carnival foods: cotton candy,

popcorn, caramel corn, lemon shakes. At the Heidelberg, we had fried chicken, steak sandwiches, hamburgers, hot dogs. It was pretty much all carnival. It was nothing exotic.

SS: Did you guys do good business-wise?

RS: We did our best business during picnics. Companies or organizations would throw a picnic. We would actually make a pretty good killing on it. We also did some catering services also. We would go up in the pavilion area and we would make a buffet.

SS: What was it like when various organizations came in? Were they the only ones there or...?

RS: It was opened to the rest but the majority of the crowd was from the organization.

SS: Was that a really busy day?

RS: It depended. There was the SOHIO picnic. They opened it up to people outside of it, but people within the organization, they would have their own catering. That would turn out to be a big thing. There were also special events like the Spring Thing, which was a bunch of local bands and all the teenagers would show up to kick off the summer. It was always a big deal.

SS: What were those days like? Were there a lot of girls running around and stuff?

RS: Oh, yes. It was a trip. The ballroom would be packed. The first year I worked there, there were large name, local bands playing, for example Left End and Wild Horses. Several years ago, they had the Bay City Rollers come up. I think that was in 1977.

SS: I saw K. C. and the Sunshine Band there. That should tell everybody how old I am.

RS: I remember them too. You're not much older than I am.

SS: So your second full year there, you did basically the same type of job.

RS: Yes, but it was a lot slower because it was after the fire.

SS: Your last year there, 1984, when the Wildcat burned down and they lost the Lost River, what was it like?

RS: They also lost the office and the fascination games and the skee ball. It was a pretty strong attraction in games.

SS: With the fire, was the park opened before the fire?

RS: No, it was right before the park opened. It was funny. I was listening to the news. I heard that there was this big fire on the south side of Youngstown and I heard it was Idora Park. I said to myself, "Well, it looks like I'm not going to have a summer job this year."

The day after the fire when everything calmed down, I went down there to check it out and it looked like a war zone. Wood was all over the place. Everything was all torn apart. I thought the park was not going to open this year. Not like this. I was really surprised that the park even opened that year. Seriously if it was my decision I wouldn't have opened it. It was kind of heartbreaking. That place had been there for so long and for it to just go up in smoke like that. It was kind of hard to handle. I can imagine how Pat Duffy felt.

SS: I know when people talk about the Wildcat burning down, they say it was like they lost their best friend or someone from their family.

RS: I felt the same way. I loved the Wildcat. I'm not one of the people that held their hands up during the ride, especially not on the Wildcat when you felt the car leave the track several times, but it was a thrill of all thrills for a rollercoaster. I have never been on one better than that.

SS: What did you think?

RS: I couldn't believe it happened. It just couldn't be real. It was like a death of a family member and I had to accept it. It was real hard to take.

SS: What was it like that year after they lost the Lost River, after they lost some games and after they lost the Wildcat? What was the attitude of the park then?

RS: The attitudes were pretty much the same among the employees but everybody felt like there was something missing. Towards the end of the season, we finally found out that the park was not going to reopen and there was going to be an auction. It was a sad situation.

SS: When you worked then, that summer, was business real bad?

RS: It was terrible. Well, you lost your major attraction, the Wildcat. For that, the majority of the people came

there.

SS: What kind of business did you do then? Did you do the picnic business?

RS: Yes. I did the same thing as the previous year. It was much slower then. People would just go somewhere else, I guess.

SS: Would you say that you did the same things after hours at the park?

RS: Yes. But it was not near like what we had the year before. A lot of people became apathetic. Things really slowed down.

SS: Did people that were working there try to steal things and try to get mementos for themselves that last year?

RS: Oh, yes. A lot of things like that happened. Even I was guilty of that. There were these old card machines with old movie cards and I swiped a few of those cards. Actually I think they are collectors' items. I don't even know where they are at now. I didn't take anything real spectacular. I didn't lift the tap system from the bar I was serving beer at but...Yes. There was a lot of theft going on.

SS: When they put that up for sale then, when they auctioned the pieces off, were you at the park when that happened?

RS: No. I wasn't present at the auction. I really didn't want to be there. I didn't want to see the park getting torn apart. Even now, it is kind of weird when I drive past and all I see is grass growing through the cracks of the concrete and the places I used to work burned down with the second fire.

SS: The second fire?

RS: Yes. There was a fire after Dr. Wagner bought the place.

SS: Tell me about that.

RS: Dr. Wagner wanted to make a City of God out of it. He is a reverend for the Calvary Apostle Church. Things never really got around. I think his plans fell through and all that is is dead space right now. I can't say he's bankrupt, but they can't do anything with it now the condition it is in.

SS: What did the second fire take out?

RS: The second fire took out the Heidelberg and I think some more of the Wildcat. They were right next to each other.

SS: Okay. We're going to do almost like a word association. I am going to name a ride or name an event and tell me what you think about it. We'll start out with the star of the park, the Wildcat.

RS: That was it. That was the park. I got my best thrills from that coaster.

SS: Did you ever raise your hands?

RS: No, I hung on.

SS: How about the Jackrabbit, how would you compare that with the Wildcat?

RS: The Jackrabbit was a prerequisite to the Wildcat. You had to do the Jackrabbit first. When they put the coaster on backwards, after the Wildcat burned, it was neat. It was unique, different.

SS: What was it like riding it backwards?

RS: I thought it was more exciting. You couldn't see where you were going but you felt everything. It was like riding it blind.

SS: When you guys opened the park back up at night, you said you rode some of the rides at night, did people ever try any crazy stunts when you were doing that stuff?

RS: No, not really. Every time we did that we had someone supervising from the owning family.

SS: I talked to someone who worked there during the 1950's and they used to get off the Jackrabbit and the Wildcat while it would be up top and step off on the catwalks.

RS: I wouldn't do that.

SS: That's a little too crazy for me. How about the Lost River?

RS: It was disgusting. It smelled like a public restroom. I think it was used as one. When you went through the dark tunnels....I know I did it. I was never too thrilled about that.

SS: How would you rate that as a ride?

RS: It was just there. I had been there since who knows

when. It was like one of the original attractions.

SS: Do you think it was one of the stars even still along with the Jackrabbit and the Wildcat?

RS: It was, but not towards the end.

SS: How about the fun house?

RS: There were two of them weren't there? The Wacky Shack and the Kooky Kastle. I was not too impressed. I have been in better fun houses. They were fun, especially during the parties when you were with some girl or something like that. The best fun house I've ever been in was the one at Conneaut Lake Park, the one they had before they changed it. I thought that was neat.

SS: How about the bumper cars?

RS: Bumper cars are bumper cars. Getting drunk and going on them was fun. One of our parties was on the bumper cars. I had a real good time.

SS: What about the Ferris Wheel?

RS: I was always scared to death of Ferris Wheels. I just didn't like not having anything underneath you, especially when you would rock and see the ground. Rides like that I was impressed with. The old rockets above the french fry stand. That was real neat. I just like it because, like I said, since the park was built I think. It was still a major attraction near closing. The old stainless steel polished rockets....

SS: I can close my eyes and see it right now, as crazy as that sounds. What about the picnic area up on the hill?

RS: The pavilion section. We catered a few picnics up there. We got in some trouble up there quite a few times. There was one picnic we were pouring beers, it was one of the labor unions (AFLCIO), one of the local chapters and we just had a hell of a good time with the people we were serving. Actually we were drinking with them having a good time and getting paid for it. You can't beat that. There was no exchange of money so we didn't have any worries or anything.

SS: The old fashioned cars...

RS: Where are they at now, in Hubbard somewhere?

SS: Well, I know they have the train in Hubbard. The train used to go all over the park. What games stand out to you?

RS: I was always a skee ball fan. I liked playing skee ball. What really stood out in the amusement area of the park was the wall of the penny arcade in the last year where everybody carved their names in it. That really stood out the most. I just liked reading it. I think it is in a museum somewhere, locally. I'm not sure. I heard of it somewhere. I can remember carving my name in that and everybody else doing that.

SS: All the people that worked there carved their names in it?

RS: Yes. Just as a memento.

SS: Do you think the park could have stayed in business if the Wildcat and the Tunnel of Love hadn't burned down?

RS: If the Wildcat and the rest of the park didn't burn, yes, I think it could have, if there was a revitalization of the park. A restoration. All they really were doing was keeping it together. In the later years, it wasn't a very pretty park.

SS: Lenny Cavelier said that they were talking about turning the park back into how it looked originally.

RS: That would have worked. Also, you have got to look at the area where the park is located. The whole area in itself, declined. I think it would be difficult to bring back business.

SS: Did they have trouble with people from the area?

RS: Yes. Often there was trouble. Not so much organized gangs but gangs of teenagers would cause trouble in the park.

SS: Did you try to do anything to counter that?

RS: The only thing that really could have been done was to beef up security.

SS: Did you kick them out?

RS: Yes, frequently. One time it was \$10 car load day. A lot of people that were financially stressed showed up and there turned out to be race riots, there were quite a few.

SS: Did things get real ugly?

RS: Yes. Things got real ugly especially when it got dark.

SS: What kind of things happened?

RS: Your Youngstown type of thing. You'd have a group of people, you're going to have problems. Like the city series games this year at the stadium. I was working sausage stand and these two individuals were running down the parkway and 200 people were chasing them. It wasn't pretty. I picked up my grill scraper and my steel wire brush and closed my doors.

SS: So you had racial problems then?

RS: Not among the employees, but outside, yes. It's Youngstown, there is racial tension here.

SS: Do you think that hurt the park then?

RS: I think that is what killed it. The area itself. There was no room for expansion. That really hurt the park.

SS: How would you compare Idora Park to Cedar Point?

RS: Actually I think when Idora Park was originally built and Cedar Point was originally built, I think Idora park had the advantage of being the more spectacular park. They had the big coaster, they had the big ballroom, then, that was when Youngstown was booming. Since Cedar Point pretty much had the lake, the land, they were more able to expand into as great as they are now. Compared to Geauga Lake, it was the same thing. You put the attractions from Idora Park on Geauga Lake and you would have a huge park.

SS: How would you compare it ride wise?

RS: As far as rollercoasters go, Idora Park was better until they built this new one that they call Magnum somewhat or other in comparison to Cedar Point. I rode the Gemini. It was a big thrill in the late 1970's early 1980's. It was the tallest, fastest racing coaster. But, it was no Wildcat. It was too smooth, too safe.

SS: I've heard that from other people too. How about the Jackrabbit. How do you compare that with other coasters?

RS: I'd say the Jackrabbit was a good average coaster. It is no spectacular coaster but it was good for the novice rider.

SS: Do you think with the economic situation in Youngstown, especially in the early 1980's with the steel mills closing, do you think the park could have stayed open?

Do you think it could have drawn business even though the Youngstown area at the same time was struggling?

RS: No. The competition was too great. No one was coming from outside to visit the park, mainly the people there were people from in town and the economic situation in town was not good and people with money went out to those other parks. It just put Idora into a rut they couldn't get out of.

SS: Do you think that because Idora wasn't near a major highway, that hurt it also?

RS: No not really. It wasn't hard to get to. You could just go out route 11, hit 224 down Glenwood and you're there. It wasn't that big of a deal.

SS: Do you think also, with the advent of video games and things like that, do you think there was a different type of people that were produced as a result of new technology?

RS: No. Kids always love amusement parks. It was just not the video games.

SS: Do you see the people from the park that you used to work with?

RS: I see a few that I worked with like the person that introduced me to this fraternity. I still see her once in a while.

SS: Do you guys talk about the park?

RS: Yes. That always comes up.

SS: What kind of stuff do you talk about?

RS: We'd talk about the parties after the park closed and the good times we had then. We mainly talk about the good times, we don't talk about the bad times.

SS: With Idora Park sitting there, if someone now looked at that park, do you think someone could do something with that, start it up again?

RS: I think just the ballroom. The rest of the park is gone.

SS: Do you think that in the future to open the park up as part of Mill Creek Park, try to get a couple things going on in there, try to bring back a little bit of what was in the park?

RS: No, not after the auction because everything is gone,

even the carousel which I really admired a lot.

SS: Historically, what do you think Idora Park meant to Youngstown? How significant was it?

RS: It's historical. That is mainly the significance of it. The historical background of it. For instance they used to have school picnics and steel mill picnics. Just it being part of Youngstown during its industrialization. It was opened in 1898.

SS: It saw Youngstown at at very highest point and it saw Youngstown at the very lowest point. Do you think it was socially important to Youngstown as far as a meeting place?

RS: Not in the later years.

SS: Do you think it was overrun by a bad element?

RS: No. When you had the economic decline in Youngstown, with that you really inherited that apathetic attitude among the citizens. It was like your big ballroom events didn't exist anymore.

SS: Did they still have groups come in and play?

RS: All summer, when I drove past the ballroom, it looked boarded up. I don't think it's open either.

SS: That was at one time the largest ballroom in the state of Ohio.

RS: I think it still is.

SS: That is really incredible that it is still sitting there. Overall, you think that the majority of Idora Parks importance to the Youngstown area stands with its historical background?

RS: The only think it would be is a museum. That's it. Everything is gone. You've lost the Wildcat, you've lost the carousel...

SS: You've lost the Lost River.

RS: Yes. The Lost River was one of the original rides.

SS: So was the Wildcat.

RS: The Wildcat was built in 1930-something.

SS: Yes. The air planes were one of the original rides. Is there anything else you'd like to say about the park or the people or its importance to Youngstown?

RS: The park was a very important social release for Youngstown especially among working people. That was the place to be, the ballroom. You had the big bands there. I still hear my father talking about how he used to go up to the ballroom and saw Benny Goodman or Guy Lombardo. I've seen old photographs of the place being packed full of people and everything looked beautiful and clean and everything just declined and no one cared and it just died. It was like a cancer almost like the way it went.

SS: Okay, thank you very much.

RS: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW