

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Idora Park

Personal Experience

O H 1466

THERESA ISABELLA

Interviewed

by

Scott Smith

on

November 12, 1991

## THERESA ISABELLA

Born in 1920, Theresa Isabella is the daughter of Vito and Maria Priore from Italy. She grew up on Evanston Avenue, on the westside of Youngstown. She attended Saint Brendan's parochial school for grades one through eight, then attended Chaney High School until her graduation in 1940. She spent a great deal of her youth in Youngstown's Mill Creek Park and Idora Park since both were very close to her house.

Her two brothers and sister are still alive today. Theresa Priore met Louis Isabella at Chaney High School. Louis entered in the army after high school and Theresa got a job working at the downtown Strauss Department Store where she worked in various offices. Upon his discharge from the army, Lou and Theresa married and settled down to raise a family. Lou became a Certified Public Accountant and Theresa became a housewife. The two have three children: Frank, Louis Jr., and Maria.

S This is an interview with Theresa Isabella for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Idora Park, by Scott Smith, on November 12, 1991, at Mrs Isabella's home in Youngstown, at 12 48 p m

Before we start discussing Idora Park or anything about the park and your memories of it, I would like to talk just about you, where you grew up and anything like that

I I was born and raised on the West side, on 27 North Evanston Avenue, in 1920 I went to St Brendon's Parochial School, and I graduated Chaney High School in 1940 We used to go down to Mill Creek Park a lot At that time, the winters used to be worse than they are now, and the lake would freeze, Lake Glacier, and we would go ice skating

S. Yeah?

I And we used to go to Volney Rogers a lot and play baseball and tennis, and we went swimming at Bort's pool We used to go to a free swim in the morning -- we could not go in the afternoon and stay all afternoon up there

S Did you grow up, basically, in an ethnic community?

I No, we were a mixed neighborhood of Slovak people I am Italian, myself My mother and father were both born in Italy My dad came here first, and he got a job in a steel mill in Pittsburgh Then he got transferred here in the Ohio Works, which then turned out to be US Steel We had Slovak people, we had Irish people

S Did most everybody work at the mills that lived in your neighborhood?

I In our neighborhood, mostly in the mills

S. Mostly in the mills? Did anybody else in your family, any other kids?

I Well, I had two brothers and they both worked at Ward Baking Company I have a sister, her name is Pauline, and she graduated Chaney, too She worked at Ward's They had a thrifty store there that sold day-old bread She used to work there. In 1941 then, I met my husband They had an indoor ice skating rink on West Federal Street We used to go ice skating there and that is where I met my husband Then he went to the service in 1946, then we got married I moved to Briar Hill, and that was an all Italian neighborhood We lived there 37 years, until we moved here ten years ago

S You said you have a sister and two brothers?

I Yes

S Were they older or younger?

I Older I am 71 and I am the baby

S You are the baby of the family?

I My brother lives in California, and he just turned 80 last week My sister lives up here on Coronado and she is 72 My other brother is 77

S Are you a very close family?

I Yeah, very close

S About your mother and father now, was there a lot of Italian spoken in the household?

I Oh, yeah, but my mother could read the paper and she could write She went to school in Italy, but my father did not

S He did not

I No, he did not go to school They would talk Italian and we would answer them in American Then when I moved in with my mother-in-law, she did not know hardly any English at all and I had to pick up my Italian, what little bit that I knew, to converse with her

S One of my best friends who lives in Girard, I was in his wedding, and everybody spoke Italian At his rehearsal dinner, a bunch of his family flew up from Italy, and instead of going someplace to eat, everybody cooked It was, I think, the best meal still I have ever had in my life

I Well, when my husband and I got married, my mother-in-law and a lot of the neighbors, they cooked for our wedding They had a delicious meal, too

S With having a lot of mix in your community where you grew up -- you said you had some Slovaks and some Irish and everything -- were you able to find out a lot about other cultures and see what they did and were able to eat their food and everything? Did everybody play together, and did everybody get along and share things?

I We got along real good in our neighborhood The girls played and the boys, we

all played together. We were sort of tomboys, all of us girls. We used to play hockey on roller skates out in the middle of the street. Well, before there were a lot of cars, and you could play out in the street. Well, you cannot do that now. We used to play all those games -- "Run Sheep, Run" and Buck, Buck, How Many Finger's Up."

S I do not know either of the games.

I That, one person would lean up against the telephone pole and then everybody would try to get on his back, something like that. I have forgotten now myself.

S What type of things also did you do? What other kinds of games or anything did you play when you were growing up in Youngstown?

I That is about all I remember. We played baseball down at Volney Rogers. Then I got into bowling. We started down at the Champion. It was downtown, right next door to the Palace, by the Palace Theater down there. But now that is all torn down.

S What was bowling like? Did the people have to set the pins at the time?

I Not when I did. They had the automatic pin-setters when I started.

S What was downtown Youngstown like when you were growing up in Youngstown?

I Well, I can remember the Central store. When you paid -- they had a trolley -- you put it in this little basket, put your receipt and your money, and then it would travel on this trolley all through, almost all through the store.

S Oh, really?

I Until it got up into the office where they made your change.

S They would send it back down?

I They would send it back down, yeah. Did anybody ever tell you about that?

S No, I never knew that. So it would like go through the whole store?

I Yeah, and it ran on a track.

S I never knew that one.

I Yeah, the Central Store. You ask your father-in-law, I mean your father, but

maybe he will not remember that We had Strouss's and McKelvey's and Lerner's. At that time, Strouss's and McKelvy's were our big stores, big department stores They had the Italian stores downtown, like Rulli Brothers, and I think there was another one I forget what that name was Our parents used to do a lot of their grocery shopping downtown at these stores

S Were there a lot of things that would attract the kids? Were there theaters or places to play games and stuff, like arcades or anything?

I Not that I remember, downtown They had the theaters, they had a lot of theaters They had the Warner Brothers, the Paramount, the State and the Palace. I think that is all there was Naturally, there was the Burlesque, but that was not for kids

S Yeah It was probably a lot different than it is today, though

I Yeah, a lot of places moved out I think when they started paying the bills at the banks and the banks moved out of downtown and built these shopping malls, that is what ruined downtown That is my estimation. A lot of people quit going to town It was more convenient for them to pay the electric bill and gas bill right at their neighborhood banks

S Now everyone lives out in Boardman and Poland and Canfield, and nobody wants to live in the city. Do you ever go downtown, now?

I No I do not even go to town anymore

S I remember when I was little, because we used to catch the bus and go downtown to go shopping, and go to Strouss's

I Well, when we were younger, they had the streetcars You could buy a fifty cent pass on Sundays We used to cheat One person would get on -- we would go to the show every Sunday afternoon downtown, you know, the kids -- so we would pass the pass One person would get on the bus and pass the pass out the window Then we would wait downtown They would catch the next streetcar that was going by, and w would all meet downtown Or else, we would save our money for fare when we did not have a pass We used to walk down, then we had money for fare to ride back. When we would walk home, we would stop at the big Isaly dairy store on Mahoning Avenue and buy an ice cream cone, and walk the rest of the way home

S Now what was the economic situation like in this area when you grew up?

I Well, we went through the Depression, you know, but I had my brother who worked at Ward Baking Company, and he kept our family going where we did not

have to go on welfare of anything like that. But for us, for my family, we were not hit that hard, as hard as some people were. My father used to work maybe one day a week during the Depression at US Steel. But when you are you like that, you do not think about things like that.

S I think I grew up in the recession, or whatever it was, and I did not notice it being anything really different. You know, you get by.

I I can remember that, on Christmas, we did not get as many toys and things as we would normally get.

S Do you think it was a closer community?

I I think so. I noticed the difference from this neighborhood and the old neighborhood that I lived in. They were mostly all Italians. They probably came from the same little community in Italy, and they were very close down there. Then, when we came here, well, people were nice; but, you know, they wanted to be left alone, and you respect that.

S. I like to think that this is a very close neighborhood.

I This street, yeah. It is.

S. It seems like everybody knows each other.

I If you talk to other people, they do not even know their neighbors, but here we try to help each other if we can. I like it here.

S Was that what it was like when you grew up, considering things were really tight and it was during the Depression? Did the people of your neighborhood look out for each other? Did they take care of each other and help each other out when things might have been, let us say, tight for this family and to this family?

I I do not remember that because everybody was in the same boat, you know what I mean?

S Yeah.

I I do not remember that.

S What was school like?

I School?

S What was it like, in junior high, when you were younger, and in the high school at

Chaney? What would you do before you got to high school? What kinds of things did you do in school?

I Well, we went to school, and we had the nuns there. They were real, real strict with us. We did not change classes or anything, we stayed in one room. We had just one nun for all our subjects. I was a lot different than when we went to high school to change -- you know, every subject then you changed classes. It was a little hard to get used to that. But I took the commercial courses shorthand, typing. We enjoyed the football game, going to the football games. Then, I think East and Chaney were rivals in football. That is all I can remember.

S Was Chaney any good in football?

I Yeah. Very good.

S Really?

I Yeah. Well, we had Frank Sinkovich. I do not know if you remember him. He went to Georgia, then he became one of the Heisman trophy winners.

S Yeah, he won a Heisman trophy. How different was it going from a Catholic school to Chaney? Was there a big difference, discipline-wise?

I Oh, yeah. We had all nuns. I think we had one lay teacher in eight grades, so they were all nuns. They were strict, but still, we had a good time.

S I sort of got egged on to ask you that question.

I Who told you that? My husband?

S So, do you have a lot of good memories of Chaney now?

I Oh, yeah.

S Upon graduating high school, what did you do?

I Well, it was hard to find a job, so I used to work part-time where my sister worked, down at the thrifty store. I went to work at Strouss's Restaurant one day. When I came home, my head was this big. I just could not take it. I do not think I ever went back for my pay.

S What did you not like?

I The commotion and the noise, especially around lunch time -- that is when I worked. They started me out on the lunches, and the store would get so



crowded. Just the commotion of putting in your orders and making sure to wait on all the people, I did not like it. I never went back. Then, I worked at an Isaly store right up here on Benita and Ohio. It is not there now.

S: It is not there anymore. I know what you are talking about.

I: Benita Drug used to be down below, but that is not there now, either. But I worked there for about two or three years. When the war broke out, then I went to work at Niles Steel Products in Niles.

S: What did you do?

I: They made barrels, steel drums. I worked on the line there and when they needed someone to go in the painting booth, I used to paint the inside of the barrels and go around on a roller. From there, then, I got married, and I never worked after that.

S: How did you meet your husband?

I: I met at this indoor ice skating rink.

S: Oh, that is right.

I: My girlfriend, who lived next door to me, her and I used to go almost every night, or every other night. We used to go roller skating, and Lou used to come with his friends. From going so often, the people just got to know each other. Then after roller skating, we would go out to get something to eat. From then on, Lou and I got together.

S: Did you get married after the war or before the war?

I: After the war, when he came home. He came home in December, I forget what year now. 1944. Then in 1945, we got married. May 4. What? [talking to her husband]

S: In 1945.

I: In 1945. Oh, in 1946. [They were married in 1946, according to her husband] Well, you made a mistake then.

S: Did you wait for him? You knew that was the guy for you?

I: Yeah, I waited for him.

S: What was it like during the war?

I Well, I worked. It was lonesome. I went out with my girlfriends. I knew that when he came back that we were going to get married. But, it was lonesome.

S After you got married, were you just a housewife?

I Yeah.

S What did your husband do?

I Well, he worked down at US Steel, and then he started college. He went full time working at the mill and went to college. It took him seven years, but he graduated with a degree in accounting. He worked a little more. Well, when he graduated, he had to make a decision. Then he started to work for the I R S. So, that is where he worked, then. He is retired now. We still have a few little accounts he does.

S How long were you married when you had your first child?

I I was married six years before I had my first. Then it seemed like every five years. It was not planned that way, but that is the way it came.

S That is the way it worked out.

I It worked out. Every five years, I had another one.

S Now, did your kids grow up in Briar Hill, or did they grow up on Brookline?

I They grew up on Briar Hill.

S And that continued to be a strong Italian community throughout?

I Well, then they built the projects in the back of us. What the heck is the name of them? I forget the project. I do not know how to say this, but the neighborhood started changing. Then a lot of the white people were moving out.

S Yeah.

I The neighborhood changed. So we were sort of forced to move out of there.

S Yeah.

I Because we lived in my mother-in-law's house. It was a nice, well-built house. Then they built Saint Anthony's school and my first child, Frank -- the school was not ready when he started first grade, so I sent him to Saint Cashmere. Then when Saint Anthony's was ready, then he went back. He went to the second

grade. Then when Louie started to go to first grade, the school was so crowded that my husband felt that Louie needed more attention. And he was not going to get it with forty-some kids in a class.

S Yeah

I So he sent him to Todd School, which was right in back of us. So, he went to Todd School. Then he went one year to Hays, and he did not like it there. So for the eighth grade, he went to Saint Anthony's. From there then, all my children graduated from Ursuline High School.

S Ursuline. The fighting Irish.

I Yeah, the fighting Irish.

S Now we will start with Idora Park. When you were young, do you have memories of Idora Park, when you were young and when you were growing up?

I Do not forget, I am 71 years old, and a lot of things slip my mind. But I remember going there with my parents. We would get company from New Jersey, and that was one of the big spots we would take my cousins. They had a picnic area where we would bring our picnic basket and stay all day and go swimming.

S In the big pool that they had?

I Yeah, they had a big pool there.

S Do you remember when they had the bird cages or the monkey cages or things like that? I am not sure exactly which time frame that they had them, but I just know that they had bird cages and monkey cages down there.

I I do not remember that.

S Really? Do you remember the rides?

I Rides. I never liked the Wildcat.

S Why not?

I I do not know. I never liked them big steep hills. But I liked the Jack Rabbit. It had the little bumps.

S It was the Dipsy Doo Doo or the Dipsy Dipsy or something like that, the original name. It was built in 1910?

I I could not tell you that either I know it was old The Whip I used to like the Whip

S Which was the Whip?

I They had these cars, and they would go around in a circle You would get around so far and it would whip you

S Whip you around?

I It would whip you around, and then you would go slow Then all of a sudden you would whip around again They had the airplane rides The train, Lou just told me, somebody bought it It is on Youngstown-Hubbard Road

S Oh, McKenzie Square, or whatever it is

I Oh, McKenzie Square?

S Somebody bought it when half the Wildcat burned down They sold the stuff, because the carousel is in a warehouse in New York City

I It is in a warehouse? They did not put it up? I thought maybe one of the parks or something bought it in New Jersey

S The company that bought it went out of business

I Oh

S That carousel is probably worth a million dollars.

I. It probably is

S That thing is seventy years old, a lot older than that now

I But, I remember we used to walk to Idora Park, through the park, from Mahoning Avenue I do not know if you know where Livingston is It is on Mahoning Avenue, one street above Steel Street

S Okay, I know where that is at

I Yeah Well, your father knows the Polar Bear was right on the corner

S So you guys just walked?

I We would walk We would get a bunch of us together, the kids in the

neighborhood, and we would walk to Idora Park

S Did you go there a lot during the summer, or once in a while?

I Well, I would not say a lot. Maybe once every two months, or something like that

S Then you would go with all your friends and make a day of it?

I Yeah, make a day of it. Every Sunday was somebody's day, you know what I mean? Like US Steel would have their day, and maybe Sheet and Tube would have their day

S Every week somebody had a different day that was specifically for their employees

I But other people could go, too. The park was not closed just for them

S Did they ever have ethnic days, like Italian days?

I Yeah, they had Italian days.

S Did you go to stuff like that, like a lot of people?

I Yeah

S With the park also, now, as you got older and went to high school, did you continue to go to the park?

I Well, I was not a dancer, so I did not go

S Yeah, because they had the bands and everything?

I Yeah. But my sister, two or three times a week, they would put a floor down in the dance hall, and they would go roller skating there. That is where she went. She would go roller skating. But I was not a dancer, so we never went to the dances

S They had a lot of big bands come in, did they not?

I Yeah, a lot of big bands came there

S I know. This other interview last week said the same thing. He would go a lot of times just to listen to the bands. He would stand around and listen to the bands

I Yes

S So, you did not go a lot to Idora Park when you were in high school?

I No, I did not

S Let me flip this over here, real quick [tape stops]

I It used to be, when we had our festivals down at Saint Anthony's on Saint Anthony's Day, him and another lady Mrs Chicotelli, they worked in the french fries

S The guy told me that Idora Park, maybe once a year, they would change their french fries -- the grease He said they would think nothing about having the grease from the year before and using it the next year It gave it that special flavor, I guess When you were working during the war, do you have any remembrance of the park then, like when you were working and anything ever going on

I No I never bothered to go to the park

S They had, I think, a lot of reduced hours and everything, too, because of the war and everything Conservation Did you ever take your kids to the park?

I Oh, yeah. When the first one was old enough, Frankie, we used to take him The kids would ride that train I remember riding that train with them And going on the carousel with them

S Did they have the pool and all that kind of stuff then?

I Yeah

S They still had the pool, so you could take your kids swimming and everything?

I Yeah

S. Do you remember ever going in the fun house?

I Oh yeah, I remember going in the fun house and those mirrors that they had It was funny to see yourself You would be so big and fat and short. Things would jump out at you

S Yes What is it when you would hold the railings and it would give you a little shock and a big tube would roll?

I A little shock and then where the air would blow up through the floor

S Did you ever go on the Lost River, where you went in the tunnel on the boat with the big waves and everything?

I Yeah, what do they call that? The Rapids We went on that

S The Rapids So what did your kids think of the park?

I They enjoyed it They liked the Wildcat.

S Yes Did they go on that a lot?

I They would stand in line, and when they had these special days, if you went early, then you would not have to stand in line too long But they would stand in line just to ride the Wildcat

S The Wildcat It was supposed to be one of the ten best roller coasters in the United States Did you ever go on the rides and stuff when you had the kids? Did you ever have to go on the rides with your kids, so they did not have to go on by themselves?

I Yeah, sometimes

S Did you still go on the Whip?

I: The Whip? Yeah, I used to like the Whip I did not care for stuff that turned around too much, you know It would upset my stomach Jack Rabbit, we used to take them on the Jack Rabbit I do not know what else

S. Now, I am trying to think Do your children have children?

I Frank lives in Florida He has two boys, they are eight and ten now

S They have probably gone to Disneyland

I They go to Disneyland a lot In fact, last month they went to the Universal Studio that is there This weekend they went to Markel Island. Their friend owns a condominium They went there for the weekend with them They do a lot of things there The kids are into baseball

S It is a lot different, but still it is a lot the same because kids are still playing baseball and stuff

I Yeah, Little League

S Have you been to Disneyland or to Disney World?

I I have been to Disneyland.

S How did you like that?

I Well, we took Maria one year, when we were in Florida visiting my son. We went up for a weekend. I liked it; I enjoyed it a lot. We went in this one place called the Tiki House, and there was all birds in there—animated birds, wooden birds. But they made sounds. That intrigued me. The Monsano, they had a thing there that was nice. You would get in a car and you would be going real slow. But actually, the way the cameras or whatever they were, seemed like you were going down a big hill and going real fast and everything was coming towards you. But I enjoyed Disney, and the kids did, too.

S Nothing like Idora Park, though.

I No, nothing like it.

S Very high tech. Do you think a place like Idora Park could stay in business today? Do you think they would have a lot of usefulness today?

I Well, I think it would. Our young children now, what do they have to do? There is nothing for them to do here.

S Yeah, go to the mall and hang out.

I Hang out. There is really nothing for them to do.

S There is not a whole lot. That is one of the things that came up in one of my interviews, that a lot of these people growing up in Youngstown will never ride a roller coaster because if you want to go to Disney, it is going to cost hundreds of dollars. If you want to go to Cedar Point, it is going to cost at least a hundred dollars to go to Cedar Point. I know I do not have that kind of money to go to Cedar Point for the weekend.

I Not even now, to go to a movie. If you go out on a date to go to a movie.

S I got cable TV. I will make them dinner.

I But everything is so sky-high that it is hard for these young people.

S Do you think that Idora Park was important, growing up, as a meeting place for the city? Was it a good place to get together?



- I I think so To go out in a family, make a day and have someplace to meet and get together -- families get together
- S A family entertainment type of thing
- I Yeah, that is what I think
- S Yeah, you are right A lot of that is missing today, too
- I It sure is
- S Do you think that Idora Park could stay in business, though?
- I I do not know Youngstown has changed a lot
- S Yeah
- I To me, I think TV has ruined a lot of family get togethers Do you know what I mean? I think that a lot of people would rather stay home and watch television than go visiting They are not family-oriented, like in our day They wonder what we used to do. Well, we used to read a lot
- S Yeah People do not read anymore
- I No Now you have got TV and the kids have all these tech games I do not know, it is different
- S I think one of the things that I saw at the public library down by the university is now you can get books on audio cassettes You do not even have to read a book You can, like when you are driving in your car, put it in your tape player, and you can listen to the book.
- I That is why a lot of our young people cannot read.
- S Cannot read and write and do math and everything else I think the calculator ruined a lot of stuff I am part of the calculator generation where if you had a math class, you took your calculator and did everything with the calculator And I know by tutoring kids at the university, some kids cannot write -- I mean, kids in college -- past the fourth or fifth grade level It is just really sad Do you remember when the Wildcat burned down?
- I Yeah, I remember.
- S What did you think when you heard about that?

- I. In fact, I think I was in Florida at that time. When Maria called and told me, I was sort of sad. To think that a landmark like that would burn down.
- S. Yes. It was just something with so many memories for everybody.
- I. Yes, for everybody. Right.
- S. I know that is how I felt. It was like, "Wow."
- I. That is the way I felt. I remember we were in Florida at that time. Maria called and I could not get over it. I figured, "Well, there goes the park."
- S. Yes, because Idora Park could not stay open without the Wildcat. I guess, also, because they did so many company picnics that, when the press was showing the helicopter pictures of the Wildcat burning, all their business went down. Everybody's like, "Hey, you do not have the Wildcat anymore?" That is why it closed. A lot of people just went to ride the Wildcat over and over again.
- I. And stand in line and wait. You have to have a lot of patience. You have to really like something to do that.
- S. But if you go to Cedar point, I do not think it is weird for some of the rides to wait an hour.
- I. Yes, we have gone a couple times to Cedar Point. The kids go, but I went with them a couple times. It was too much waiting around for me.
- S. Yes. Do you think part of what made Idora Park unique for Youngstown was just the design of the park? You could not live in Youngstown for ten years and come back, and Idora Park would look the same. It would have had the same rides, and it would have been the same place. That is another thing that made it so unique.
- I. Yeah.
- S. The gold fish pond.
- I. Yeah.
- S. The gold fish pond and everything else. Do you think it would be wise for this city to look into reopening, or try to rebuild Idora Park, or is it just too much money?
- I. I do not know.

S It would be a lot of money

I. It sure would.

S A roller coaster costs millions of dollars. But do you think they could even make us of what is there? There are still buildings, and the Jack Rabbit is still there

I. I have not been there since it closed. It is probably deteriorated. They would have to build it all up. I do not know. The way Youngstown is today, with all these crimes and everything, I really do not think it would work

S. No. It is kind of sad.

I It is sad. A few people have to ruin it.

S Did you ever go back to the park when they would use the ballroom. Do they have house shows or garden shows?

I Oh, I went to a card party there

S. In the ballroom?

I Yes, Businesswomen's Organization, or whatever.

S. Yes

I Well we had a card party there. It seemed weird to go in, to just go right there, you know.

S Go straight in

I. Not go anywhere else. Just go right into the ballroom.

S Okay. Well, do you have anything else you would like to say?

I I do not remember that much

S You talked for almost 55 minutes

I Oh, I am almost talked out

S. Thank you

End of Interview