

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Jackson Milton School Project

High School Experiences

O. H. 711

JOHN ACRI

Interviewed

by

John Gulgas

on

April 22, 1985

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: JOHN ACRI

INTERVIEWER: John Gulgas

SUBJECT: rural high school, high school activities,
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G: This is an interview with John Acri for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Jackson Milton School Project, by John Gulgas on April 22, 1985 at 8:00 p.m.

For the record, who was your favorite teacher and why?

A: One was a teacher and an educator, Mr. Kepner. He moved to North Jackson and became our neighbor when I was in the third grade. During World War II Mr. Kepner filled in as a bus driver, fixed the pump, taught classes, was the superintendent, was the principal. Everyone who I can remember was treated on an equal basis. We had discipline; a paddle would be used if it was needed. He would walk into study hall, snap his finger, and say, "People!" It was like the Lord putting his hand out and the water was calm. I have seen him reprimand teachers for poor judgment in what they had done in attempts to put a student in a bad light.

Another person in the district who was a fantastic teacher was the custodian, Burt Lingsmith. The difference in time and history, I am afraid if Burt would come back tonight many people would be unhappy, because by the time they had the building clean enough to satisfy Burt, it should be about next September or October. He was a dedicated man, home-spun philosophy set down in the old boiler room in the original part of the school. After he had done all of his duties he still found time to constantly read without having a period set aside to read. If it was winter, and snowing, and bad--Burt was also a neighbor. I lived next to the Federated Church, so everybody went by to go to school--I could get up in the morning at seven o'clock and look out the upstairs window and could tell what time Burt

had gone up to school in the winter. If his tracks were almost totally covered I knew he went up at about three o'clock in the morning. This was for one wage, not time and a half or overtime. His concern was to keep the building the best he could with what he had to work with.

Those types of things stick out in my mind. You never heard from Mr. Kepner or Burt, "Somebody owes me." It is what I can do to make it better for someone else. There were other teachers who were very good, don't misunderstand me, but those two gentlemen taught to me dedication.

I started as a broom jockey in the fifth grade. I worked with Burt, and of course Mr. Kepner was the superintendent. If you were sent in to dust a room or whatever it was, being a kid we knew shortcuts. Burt, being custodian, he knew shortcuts and he was there waiting for you to cut. He would say, "I wanted it done to the best you could do it and I don't think you've done it that way." He took pride in what his job was.

G: You've got a list of extracurriculars after your name. I am going to ask you one of your favorites and tell me what that favorite was and what it asked of you in regards to time, work.

A: There were two things. I think my two favorite would have been band, rifle club, and the minstrel. Band was for four years. I think the minstrel was total enjoyment; that was for three years. With the minstrel I was fortunate enough in the beginning year to be picked as an end man. That was the time the Jolson movies were being made; this was the late 1940's. Jolson was very popular. We had one young man who stood in front of a mirror and pantomimed every one of Jolson's tunes. I was a black face and somebody gave me a pair of rubber ears so I was bag ears. I was very fortunate that in my first year, which would have been as a sophomore, I made a niche, and all the other end men made a niche. We all worked together for two or three years as end men. The first year it was one or two nights at the high school in what is now the cafeteria. The second year it was done one night at the Milton Building, two nights at the Jackson Building. The third or fourth year it was again at the Milton Building, the Jackson Building. Then, of course, Austintown had a minstrel every year. One of their end men came out and caught us and in our fourth year we were invited to go in part of the minstrel at Austintown. It was evenings of work, evenings of horsing around all mixed together. How times have changed. One night the board of education was meeting in what is now the grade school principal's office; that was the superintendent's office at the high school. The intercom in the gym had to be tied to the intercom in the office to get it to work for the PA system in the gym. We were rehearsing jokes and the board was there, and one joke was about newspaper in the bottom of

a bird cage. What did you find on it? The retort was, "Grit." Immediately, down the steps came board members and one Mr. Kepner. We were told that joke would not be in the program. So it was not in the program the first night; it was not in the program the second night, but being typical kids it was in the third night. We all stood there, put our hands on our knees, looked out at the audience which we couldn't see because of the footlights, and said, "If you caught it right board members, if you didn't your mind is in the wrong place."

G: Very good.

A: Rifle club, during the time I was in the beginning years, was being trained with one thing, your country in mind. World War II was on. Uncle Sam sent cases of ammunition in. I can remember Saturday mornings firing ammunition until we could hardly hold weapons anymore. We found somebody had made a mistake and we found a surplus of ammunition. We had to dispense the ammunition to send the brass back or the quota would be cut for the next time. We fired, and fired, and fired, and fired so we could continue the situation.

Up until I was a freshman in high school, though, I worked as a broom jockey. Then from my four years in high school I worked at a lumberyard.

G: Let's take a look at the social functions. Let's talk about some of the dances or activities. Do any of those stand out in your mind? I know I have heard a little bit about the May Dance, was that your favorite?

A: The May Dance was the only dance that was financially a success. The community was never a dancing community. Other dances were tried. We even had a swing band made up of members of the high school band. We played simply for the sheer enjoyment of it. At that time there were more boy-girl relationships than what I see in kids today. It was more on the basis that it was meant to be, not the heavy breathing and scenes that we see on t.v. today. Percentagewise we had fewer pregnancies, so forth and so on in those days. We appeared to have more respect for ourselves and for the opposite sex. We knew what they were, don't misunderstand me, but there was more respect shown for one another. Dancewise that was not the big situation. Many of us spent Friday and Saturday nights, and some spent Sunday and Wednesday nights at the old skating rink at Lake Milton. New Years Eve, naturally, was spent there. That seemed to be the substitute for school function dances per se. The junior class, the senior class a couple of times during the school year would have a skating party. The occasional skaters and their families would go. The rest of the time it was the diehards who had their own shoe skates. We washed our shoestrings every Friday and we polished our skates. Another

thing at that time, appearance was not to see how shabby you could look, but to see how sharp the creases could be in your trousers, how wild the tie was that you could come up with. It was the fact that neatness was in, raunchiness was out. Dances were never a big success, but we enjoyed the May Dance. Skating, with the group that I associated with, was the thing.

G: Tell us about your nickname?

A: Little Shaver. My father was a barber. Due to the fact that he had a barbershop in downtown North Jackson the nickname was given to me of Little Shaver. This afternoon I was in the school talking to a couple of teachers and something was said about discrimination, minorities. I always smile when I hear about the persecuted. I was born in the front bedroom of the house that I lived in in North Jackson. My father married my mother in 1929. He was an Italian; he was Roman Catholic. I was an altar boy at St. James until I was nineteen years old. St. James in the early days was a Slovak parish. I was a Roman Catholic Italian on one side and Pennsylvania Dutch on the other. I am always amused when I hear about . . . Little Shaver was something of the fact that I was supposedly going to be a barber, which never transpired.

G: I would like for you to relate to me now, for the record, about the incident we talked about where the minstrels made their appearance at what is now the pizza place on Wedgewood.

A: Durrell's. I never had a curfew when I was growing up. The only thing I was told was, "Just get in trouble once." When I was growing up you had to be twenty-one before you were an adult. Even after you graduated from high school you still had some supervision, supposedly, from your parents. Due to the fact that we never got in trouble, we had an awful lot of fun. We did some things that never hurt anybody, never caused any trouble, but they were our torment. The minstrel was usually held around Halloween time. This night the minstrel was over we decided that since we had one more night--that was on a Friday night--that on Saturday night we wouldn't take our black faces off, but we would go out. We did and visited some friends in Austintown where we frequented quite a bit. Then we went to Durrell's. By this time it was about 1:30, 2:00 in the morning. We always went there and we always took our dates, but this night it was just the four end men all in black faces. We walked in and sat down at a booth. The waitress came, staring at us with black faces. Of course, I had rubber ears on. They stared and we didn't talk but just pointed at the menu. We ordered. Everybody in our group always wanted vinegar on our French fries. The waitress went back, which incidentally was the wife of the owner, Durrell, and he kept peering out from around the edge

of the kitchen and looking at us. We didn't bother anybody. Finally our food was brought and put down on the table and we realized there was no vinegar. We promised that we weren't going to speak in there, so one of us got up and went to the rack where the ketchup, salts, peppers, and vinegar and mustard was kept and picked up the vinegar bottle and came back to the table. Just then out of the kitchen comes Durrell with a meat cleaver, comes over to us, and says, "Damn you, don't ever do that to me again." We sat there and we had a good laugh.

G: What was lunch time like?

A: Lunch time was relaxed. There were a few that had to smoke. They had to go outside or sneak because if they got caught with them that was detention. Cigarettes were removed from them. What is now the wood shop was the original cafeteria. We ate in the hallway and part ate in the cafeteria. After lunch tables were taken down, Ping-Pong tables were put up, and we had Ping-Pong tournaments. That was about what it was. Many went home for lunch that lived in the community. In the beginning I went home, however my mother died when I was a junior in high school, of cancer, and after that point I didn't go home but stayed in school and ate.

G: If you could have made any changes to make it better what would they have been?

A: That is very difficult question because in many ways I personally feel that my school days and high school days were much more pleasant than what I have seen from my four children. The environment that I went to school with was much nicer; we had a cleaner facility. The people around you were cleaner in thought; I don't know about thought, but in word indeed. It probably would have made it better if we would have had a wider variety of courses to choose from; that would have been the only way. Many times I feel that what our four children have had for educational purposes is, in total package, environment, dedication or personnel that they have been involved, students around them and so forth, that we were head and shoulders happier than what they have been. In our own senior class, Robert Onstott and Joann Harshman, they married, high school sweethearts. They are still married, over thirty years. Rodney Lutes, Sally Daugherty, Mr. and Mrs. for over thirty years. My wife Joan, whose name was Anderson, and myself, over thirty years. Three couples in one class who were dedicated and continue to be. This, in itself, is an accomplishment. Unfortunately we have two other couples who we were very close with, one couple is in Florida and the other couple is in Marlboro. Here again, high school sweethearts, and we have all married and continue to be married. The other two couples, they have children, married and divorced; it is a sign of the times.

It is an entirely different situation. We had prayer in school. Once a week priests and all the ministers came in and you had one period a week for religion of your choice. Mr. Kepner would go down through the halls checking the rooms, study halls. If he would see you trying to get out because you really didn't want to go, he would say, "Your parents want you there, get there." Every day was begun with reading of the Bible, the "Our Father" or "The Lord's Prayer", whichever will be. As a Roman Catholic at the time I never felt resentment to the fact that we were paying respect to God. We did not have dope. Occasionally there was a drinking situation, but nothing like we have. I find it amazing in this day and age that schools look to how to care for their problem of drugs. Not too long ago at an Eagle presentation I was required to give the speech, the address. I asked this question, "What does Kruschew, Teddy Kennedy, Weicker, Mussolini, Hitler, Tojo, many Jewish rabbis, many Catholic priests, and many Protestant ministers have in common? It is very simple, none of them want God in school." The deterioration of morality within the school system started when He was removed forcibly from school.

G: I call them outgoing senior activities, are any of them memorable to you, whether it was the prom or graduation or senior skip day?

A: We didn't have senior skip day. We had a system when I was in school which was very nice. In those days we were rewarded for producing and we were condemned for mediocrity. In today's society we reward for mediocrity and we penalize achievement.

The things I remember most was one day a nice storm came and we couldn't have school because there wasn't enough power to generate the huge blower in the old, hot air system. The roads were such that we could not get out. The snow drifts were deep. We organized a bobsled ride behind a team of horses, almost froze to death, but we had a good time. I think we had eight kids in one DeSoto coupe.

We had a trip to Washington, D.C., which I think was the highlight for the seniors. Other classes had gone on school buses and then things had changed in recent years; we had to charter a Greyhound. All the small schools in the area chartered buses and took their seniors to Washington. Our driver had been there many times and we had an enjoyable five days. We left on Sunday and the class returned on Friday. I left the group in Harrisburg because my father was there, and we continued the vacation for a few days with him. It was the last time the entire class was together. We had a very nice time. We got to see the monuments and in five days it was a leisurely type of thing. That was about what I considered the highlight of the seniors.

- G: There were several events that occurred during your high school years, and actually even pre-high school, the war and so forth. What was your reaction to the Truman-Dewey election of 1948? Does that strike a chord with you?
- A: Everyone was totally surprised that Truman had won. It had been brought out by one of my classmates at that time-- how could this country elect a defunct artillery officer and a bankrupt tie salesman? I think that was the first time I ever heard of the Peter Principle. My father having the barbershop I spent time in the shop. That was the first time I heard of the Peter Principle. After the election somebody said, "That was the height of the Peter Principle. The man had been elected to the highest level of his inability." Everyone in this area was quite surprised that he had won.
- G: What about the steel strike in 1952? That was probably after you graduated.
- A: It was a year after. This area was pro union at that time and many people in North Jackson worked in the steel industry. Of course, they were certain that this had to be to better things, make things much better for them. I think the sentiment at that time was just a situation of accept the fact that this is the way it is--you make steel, you strike.
- G: The Korean War?
- A: From the Korean War I think of one, young man named Chepke and one, young man named Joe Murdich and one, young man, Dave Wilson. Joe Murdich was a ward of the court, tall, lanky, thin, overworked, an abused young man who went to school with us probably until ninth grade or so when he finally turned eighteen and left and joined the army. He had been raised by some of the "Christians" in the community who had abused him. Joe was a friend of everybody's, ridiculed by the teachers. I think there was more of teachers picking somebody out in the class in those days and harassing them verbally because of not having studies done and so forth. Joe had to work on farms before he came to school. I don't know what kind of student he would have been if he would have had the environment. Joe was killed the first day that they came down across the 38th parallel. It is funny the things you remember.

I can remember the Wilson boy was at a basketball game. It would have been the old gym, which is now the cafeteria. He was standing in the hallway in the old part of the school, which was very small in those days. He was in uniform and he was enthusiastic. He was on his way. Everyone was talking to him and he was the celebrity of the night. He had been another young man who played football. His grades

would never be ranked among the highest. He was a very nice, young man. Shortly thereafter he was killed.

Of course, we received word later on about the Chepke boy being killed at Heartbreak Ridge. That is what I remember about the Korean War.

Then, of course, I was married. When I was in basic training the war had wound down and the cadre that I had to train, the war wasn't quite over yet, but all the cadre I had were all veterans of Korea.

G: How did you come to photograph a five star general?

A: I was fortunate, photography is the only thing I've done since I left high school. I went to college, majored in business, studied photography, started at McKelvey's. Due to some things that happened there I was able to stay in photography and was sent to Panama where I was photographer with Army Criminal Investigation. In the cold weather, and things haven't changed, congressmen, generals, admirals, always look for warm climates when they are assigned to Washington, D.C. He was getting to be a short-timer; he was Chief of Staff, General Taylor. He decided that winter was coming, the weather was bad in Washington, so he came to Panama for an inspection tour. I was assigned to criminal investigation, but anytime V.I.P.'s showed up the captain at the photo lab always wanted as many people as he could get to make sure he got the proper angle. He would always ask me if I would go and help his staff. Being a draftee and not an RA I was never impressed by rank. I always got myself in the way of these "celebrities" and made certain that I got close-ups of them. Simply that is what it was. There were two Wilsons who were Secretary of the Army or Defense, the same thing with them; I photographed them. Of course, at the same time it was no big deal. I photographed somebody named Terry Moore, who was married to a Panamanian doctor at that time; others knew her as Terry Moore of the movie star fame of that period.

G: Let's end on a light note. Do you remember any other practical jokes that either you played or were played on you?

A: Jokes were so much a part of what we did. I think about the one year in the minstrel where it was always customary that every end man had a solo, plus the fact that you had a series of jokes with the interlocutor. This one night the interlocutor and I had finished a verbal dual and I went into my song, which until I sang it I had never heard it before, never knew how popular it was from the old days. Later on it even came back by some guy named Perry Como. It was a song called "Nobody". Remember, I wore these ears. The entire

cast had gotten together and the chorus and I would tell my woes that nobody liked me and nobody this and whatever the words were. The part came I was singing, "And when I come home at night, who hands to me a blessed kiss." The response was to be, "Nobody." The entire chorus, so they claim unrehearsed, screamed out my girlfriend's name, Joan Anderson. Of course, my beautiful wife decided at that point that she was so embarrassed that she stood up. So I guess that was the time I was nailed the best. In a small community everybody knew we dated; everybody knew we had dated for quite some time. It brought a good chuckle that night.

G: Thank you.

A: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW