

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

History of Lowellville Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 732

ROBERT NIGGEL

Interviewed

by

Thomas Kirker

on

August 10, 1985

ROBERT J. NIGGEL

Bob Niggel, born June 25, 1914, in Lowellville, Ohio, and his wife Loretta live at 224 W. Wood Street, Lowellville. They have two children, Robert, age 39, and Linda, age 37. During World War II, Bob was in the Navy Seabees during the fighting in the South Pacific. He was in charge of a spare parts warehouse. Bob has held many varied civilian occupations. He was a driver for the Bessemer Hillsville Bus Company, an employee of Sharon Steel, and salesman, in Lowellville, for Prudential Insurance. He retired in 1942.

Bob enjoys his retirement by fishing and traveling, but his favorite hours are spent as "Mr. Bob," a carnival clown. Bob is a member of the AARP, Masons, Grotto, Circus Fans of America, and Lowellville Christian Church.

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

History of Lowellville Project

INTERVIEWEE: ROBERT NIGGEL

INTERVIEWER: Thomas Kirker

SUBJECT: childhood pastimes, occupations, buildings, fires,  
crime

DATE: August 10, 1985

K: This is an interview with Robert Niggel for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the history of Lowellville. This is Tom Kirker doing the interviewing at Mr. Niggel's residence on West Wood Street, Lowellville, Ohio. The date is August 10, 1985. The time is 10:00 in the morning.

What year were you born?

N: 1914.

K: Were you born in Lowellville?

N: Yes, on Watson Street.

K: It was at your parents house?

N: Yes.

K: The doctor came to the house and delivered you?

N: Right.

K: How many brothers and sisters do you have?

N: I had three brothers and one sister. Two brothers are dead now.

K: What line of work did you go into?

N: I did quite a few different things. I drove truck a lot. I sold insurance for just about ten years. I worked in the

- steel mill. I drove charter bus.
- K: Which mill?
- N: Sharon Steel, the Lowellville Works.
- K: Did you go to school in Lowellville?
- N: Yes.
- K: Lowellville High School?
- N: Lowellville High School.
- K: Did you participate in any sports?
- N: I played football.
- K: Did you know any of the guys who you played with? Do you remember them?
- N: Jonny Carlucci, but I think he played basketball. Kenny Dickson . . .
- K: Do many of them still live in Lowellville?
- N: No, there aren't too many left around here.
- K: When you were growing up, did you play a lot of ball and that around Lowellville?
- N: Quite a bit. Directly across the street from me was the ball field. Every Sunday during the summer they would have ball games. We would sit on our front porch and watch the game.
- K: You were living here on Water Street at the time?
- N: Wood Street. I was living in this house at that time, yes. I was nine months old when my dad built this house and we moved in. Then I bought this place from my mother.
- K: So you have always lived here then.
- N: Yes.
- K: What were the other types of things you did around Lowellville as a child or as a youngster?
- N: We practically lived in the woods up here in the Hollow. We used to spend a lot of our time up there, summer and winter.
- K: That is Pine Hollow?

N: Pine Hollow. Of course, the ball field . . . When I was a kid, the town was divided up into four areas. There was west Lowellville, east end, the south side, and this area. Normally we didn't go from one area to the other to play like they do today. Today the kids go all over town. There were more little cliques. We had to stay in our own area. You could get out and get into a fight awfully fast.

K: Do you remember any of the people who you played with in this area?

N: Tom Visconti, he was clear with us and Eugene Shrader. He is still living in Lowellville.

K: When you went to high school, did you stay together in your cliques pretty much?

N: No, your cliques broke up then. Of course, the town was changing by that time. We could get out. We went out all around. We had friends all over town then. Of course, when you went to high school, you made new friends.

K: What year did you graduate?

N: 1932.

K: How many classes had they had before that?

N: Do you mean how many classes of graduates?

K: Graduates from Lowellville.

N: It is hard to say. I don't know when the first class was. I think my mother graduated from Lowellville. I know she went to school here. That was a long time ago when they started graduating classes.

K: Did you guys go swimming and fishing?

N: Yes. We swam in the quarries around here and we always had a dam built in the Hollow someplace where we would swim. We fished in the quarries. Like I said across the street was the ball field. That was where all of the carnivals and circuses and medicine shows used to come. I can still remember some of the medicine shows, the carnivals and stuff.

K: What were they--the medicine shows and the carnivals--like?

N: The medicine shows were usually a one wagon deal. They would come in. They would drop the side of the wagon out and make the stage. I remember one show they had a woman--a big, fat girl--sing opera. Of course, she had a good voice, but we couldn't appreciate it then. Then they might have a magician

or a dancer or something with them. Then he would sell us patent medicines, before the show, during, and after. When that usually hit town, it would stay a week. Your carnivals and your circuses would . . . Most of your circuses would stay three or four days. Carnivals, of course, would stay a week.

K: Would they come for the July 16th festival?

N: No. When I was a kid, July 16th was a little street fair across the river over there. It wasn't like it is today. There was no commercialism. The people themselves might make a little stand in front of their house and sell pizza or ice cream or baked goods or things. July 16th was a time then for people to come back to town to visit their relatives. It was supposed to be a religious holiday. Of course, it isn't now. It is all together different now than it was then.

K: Did they do anything for the Fourth of July?

N: No, not too much. We used to have a town picnic years ago. They would go to Cascade Park for that sometimes. I think they went up to . . .

K: Conneaut?

N: Up near Lodi there was a park. I can't think of the name of it. I think they went up there one year.

When I was a kid, I used to have an aunt who lived in New Castle. We would go over to see her on the train. We would catch the train and go to New Castle. Of course, we rode the streetcar, too, later on. We went to Youngstown on the streetcar.

I remember the old rag men who came around and the umbrella men. There was a fellow who came through here. He was the same man. He came through here about twice a year. He would fix umbrellas. Of course, there wasn't very much money transacted either on a lot of those trips. He came in and fixed an umbrella just for a meal.

Of course, during the Depression you had your bums coming through here. I think our house had a mark on it because there wasn't a bum who missed our house. Dad fed everybody. Anybody who came to the door, they got something to eat. We watched them walk down the street, come down the whole length of the street, and turn into our house. When they left our house, they kept going and never stopped at anybody else's house. They knew where to stop. They were told where to get a handout.

I can remember the old ice cream man; Frank Jack was his name. We would buy 1¢ ice cream cones. He had a little, old truck that he would come around in. At one time I think he started with a horse and wagon. I can remember the old truck that he brought down. One day my dad came home and told my mother not to get anymore ice cream from the ice cream man. She wanted to know why. He said that he had been watching him make ice cream down the street and he licked the spoon after every cone. So we had to walk clear downtown to get ice cream after that. We couldn't buy it off the ice cream man.

K: Did you go down to the drugstore for ice cream?

N: No. There were a couple of ice cream . . . There was an ice cream factory. If I remember right, our drugstore at that time didn't sell ice cream. They could have, but I don't ever remember buying ice cream at the old drugstore. There was an ice cream store down there like a little confectionery.

I can remember the saloons in town. Of course, I can't remember the dig about them later on before when they said there were twenty-eight saloons and two wholesale houses in this town.

My dad was the chief of police. Saturday night Pennsylvania was dry, and they would come up on the streetcar with suitcases. They would buy what liquor they needed to take home for themselves and friends. Then they proceeded to get drunk. There were regulars who would come up there every week. They would get so drunk that they would have to take them up and load them up onto the streetcar. The motorman would know who they were, and the motorman would stop and let them off on their stop. If they got too drunk and couldn't walk and didn't know what they were doing and nobody knew them, they would take them and throw them in jail. In the morning when they were sobered up, they would turn them loose. They might make them sweep the streets, working on the streets for an hour or so. It was no big deal. If you got drunk and they threw you in jail, they turned you loose the next day unless you caused a lot of damage. Nobody ever heard of that.

K: You mentioned your father had been police chief.

N: Yes.

K: How long was he chief of police?

N: I don't know. At that time that was an elected job. I'm not sure, but I think the term of office was two years. He must have had it five or six times. He just quit one time. He went over to this blast furnace and got himself a job. He went back to the city building and turned in his badge.

He told them that he quit.

K: When he was chief, were there any big robberies or anything like that?

N: Not so many robberies. They had quite a few murders. Black Hand was pretty active. I can remember one time when he told us about . . . We lived on Watson Street and the undertaker lived right next door.

K: Cunningham's?

N: Jess Cunningham, yes, that is an uncle of the boy who is there now. They came up and got my dad in the middle of the night and they got Jess. When my dad came back in the morning, he told my mother that they had been down into this boxcar. I don't know what they were doing. These fellows were sleeping in the boxcar. Somebody went in with an ax or pick or something and chopped them, hacked them all up. I couldn't tell you how many, but there were quite a few of them in the boxcar. He said that they were all dead.

Every July 16th there would be something. The old-timers would get together. Old fuses would flare up and the first thing you knew was that there would be a fight. It was a pretty good town.

K: Were there many train accidents hitting cars or people?

N: No. There were a few. With the amount of traffic that went through this town, it is a wonder that there weren't more. Of course, the crossings are well protected. I remember there was a fellow who lived down there along the tracks. He had some company one day. What they were doing out on the track, I don't know, but a train hit that fellow. It cut him pretty bad. Usually when a train hit a fellow or hit something like that, it did a pretty good job on it.

Then we would get a few drownings once in a while in the river.

K: In the Mahoning River?

N: Yes.

K: How about in the quarries?

N: Once in a while there were kids . . . There weren't too many kids in the quarries. For the amount of swimming that was done there, there were rarely few accidents.

When I was a kid, we used to sled ride down what we called Cemetery Hill. We would go clear up to Ralph Nixon's place. That was the first farm past the Catholic cemetery. We would



start there and slide. We would end up clear down at the railroad. We came down over the hill, across Walnut Street, down through the yards, across Wood Street, down this guy's driveway, and down to the end of the streetcar tracks.

One winter there was a crack-up there. Walter Campbell had a sled runner run right through his head, and he died. That killed him. That stopped the sled riding down the hill. Nobody rode anymore on Cemetery Hill after that. Once in awhile, a few of them, if they were really brave, would come down Poland Hill. That really was treacherous over there. That was murder. We would sled ride here over by Watson-Street and places like that but not on Cemetery Hill because the traffic was getting too heavy. When I was a kid, we would sled ride there and maybe one car would go up there every fifteen, twenty minutes, half hour or so. Lots of times the people in the car knew us, and they would stop. We would get in and ride with them up the hill.

K: Is there ever a problem of getting out of Lowellville in the winter?

N: Once in a long while. We have a pretty good program here to keep for snow removal and stuff. They keep one hill on each side of the valley open. They open them first. We have very little trouble. Once in a long while up on Hubbard Road there is a lot of drifting, but they keep it clear. We are never isolated. There have only been a couple of times that I can remember. Of course, the big snow back in the 1950's, everybody was isolated then.

K: A few moments ago a train went through here. Back in the 1920's and 1930's I take it this town had a lot of noise and a lot of dirt.

N: Yes, noise and a lot of dirt. We had three railroads run through here. We still have three railroads but not the traffic. We have quite a lot of traffic now. The trains today are 200 to 300 cars. Trains then were sixty, eighty, something like that. There were the steam engines. Of course, they threw up a lot of dirt. We had the blast furnace directly across the river from us here. That was awful dirty. Of course, we got a little bit of dirt from the open-hearth. It was gone by the time we went down here. We used to have to wash our curtains about every month here and there was black soot over every place all the time.

K: Every house here would have burnt coal too?

N: Yes, we burnt coal.

K: Do you remember the people who delivered the coal?

N: Yes. When I was a kid, we bought our coal from Tom Shehy. He lived out by Villa Maria. His coal yard was across the river right at the end of the bridge. He delivered coal on a team wagon. Erskine sold coal down here. Tom was the first one that I can remember. I was just a little kid then. Schrum sold coal.

K: So there were quite a few coal dealers in this town?

N: Yes. Then there were a lot of local coalholes in themselves. There were other guys who had pick-up trucks or little trucks. They would go out to the coal mines and get their own. Then there were other trucks bringing it in from the strip mine.

K: Can you remember any of the buildings downtown like the drugstore or Kroeck's or McBride's?

N: Kroeck's store . . . That is not the garage. This was down on Water Street?

K: That hardware store?

N: It was a merchandise store. He was on Water Street and the Old Hotel, that all burnt down. Then across the street was the drugstore and a bake shop. Dan Zeurcher was married when I was a kid; he was a baker. He had a bake shop down there right next to the drugstore. Then next to that Nock's had their home, like an apartment building. Those three places went up; it burnt. That was a pretty good fire back then. Of course, Zeurcher didn't have the bake shop in there anymore. He had quit. I don't know if somebody was living in that building then or whether it was empty. There was a fellow who came into town. He had a little restaurant there for a while. He was one of those body builders. He had all of the kids in there doing exercising in the back room. The drugstore had an apartment upstairs. Luckily nobody got killed in the fire. Grace Nock lived in her place and there were people living upstairs over the drugstore. It was a complete loss; everything right down to the cellar.

K: Do you remember when the churches burned or were you too young?

N: No, I can just remember the one church down by where Kroeck's is now. I couldn't tell you a thing about it, but I just remember that.

I can remember right across the road from the Melillo saloon there was an old foundation in there. Right after World War I I think Cooper--we had a congressman named Cooper--his son brought a little tank in. It was a war bond drive. He went in and down all through this cellar digging around to show you what those little tanks could do. I can remember watching that down there. I can still see that little tank bobbing up

around through there and up through the side.

I think there used to be a livery stable there at one time. I don't remember any of the livery stables.

K: How about car dealers? There was McBride's I know.

N: There was McBride's. They were the last. There was another car dealer down just past the Melillo Saloon. Melillo Saloon was on the corner and then the car barns. That was the streetcar station. Then the freight and passenger stations were both there. Then there was a big building there. That was an automobile agency at one time. There was a fellow who worked there with the cars. Then there was a store next door, a little grocery store, a confectionery store. The people who owned that lived upstairs. Of course, he died during the flu epidemic. Quite a while after he died this fellow took a shining to this guy's widow. He wanted to marry her and she wouldn't have anything to do with him. The way the story goes, he blew the house up. He just threw a bomb in. It burnt the store; it burnt the car agency, and it burnt the streetcar station down.

K: Was that at the end of the 1920's?

N: Yes. Right in back of the old city building . . . The new city building faces Liberty Street. The old city building faced Second Street. Between the city building and the alley there was a little building there. At one time it was an office or something. I remember they blew that up one night. They threw a bomb in there. That didn't burn though. There was no fire. It just laid the walls over.

K: Did your dad have an office in the city building?

N: Yes. The jail and everything was right in the back of the city building.

K: How many men worked for him?

N: I doubt if he ever had more than two men, maybe three men, but that was about it. The police force down here consisted of three to four men. Of course, the police were hired and the chief was elected.

K: What about the fire department? Did they have a volunteer fire department?

N: Yes, they have had a volunteer fire department for years. In fact, ever since I can remember it was here. They had a little, old fire truck; I think it was a Ford. Yes, they have had a volunteer fire department I think possibly almost as long as the town has been here.

K: How about doctors? Was there a doctor?

N: Yes. There was Dr. Smith. He was on the corner of Wood Street and . . . right there by the Presbyterian church. Down below him on the next corner was Dr. Badal. They were both old-time doctors. They were here before. Dr. Erskine had an office downtown. He was actually older than the other two. In fact Dr. Erskine was more or less semi-retired even when the other two were going strong. Of course, we had other doctors. I had an uncle who was a chiropractor. he had an office in town for a long time. Dr. Allison was the dentist.

K: Did they deliver babies? Did they come to the house?

N: They did everything, yes. Very seldom you went to the hospital. Everything was handled here. They delivered the babies. Dr. Smith delivered me. If you broke your arm, they sent you to their office. They did everything.

K: Did your mother and father do most of their shopping in town?

N: Yes. Erskine's had a dry goods store down there. John Lomax had a dry goods store down there. There was a meat market across the river. We had a pretty good-sized meat market. Nick Markota was meat and groceries. Lomax had a hardware store too. Carl took that over. Then John sold his store to two nephews; one was Leslie Howard. Of course, John was president of the bank until he died.

K: When you were younger, say late teen-age years to early twenties, what were some of the things you did on a Saturday night?

N: Everybody went to town on a Saturday night, downtown. All of the farmers came in. The stores stayed open; the banks stayed open. Of course, on a Saturday night after we were old enough we traveled by ourselves. We usually showed up there sometime during the evening down there.

Before that we played in the neighborhood. When I was a kid, I had a pony. The barn was built right in the back yard there. Of course, you wouldn't be allowed to do that now, but anybody said anything then.

K: Do you remember when electricity and plumbing came into town?

N: No. This house was wired for electricity and piped for gas. I can remember our kitchen when I was a kid. It had a combination of electric and gas. I don't ever remember seeing the gas lit. Electric and gas came in before us.

I think years ago they had a power house in west Lowellville that generated their own electricity.

K: During the Depression what was it like living in Lowellville?

N: Fun.

K: Really?

N: Sure. We had a lot of fun. Nobody had any money. We always had something to eat. We would get together and go downtown or something like that. If I had 10¢ and another kid didn't, why, we would split it. The next time he might have the 10¢. We always got along great.

K: Your father was police chief then during the Depression.

N: He quit when I was just a kid there. I couldn't have been more than three or four years old at the time.

K: Did you have a garden and things like that?

N: Yes, we always had a garden. During the Depression a friend of my dad's owned a piece of land over the hill. They got together and we would go up there. We gardened that for about three or four years. We had a big garden up there.

K: When Roosevelt was president, did you listen to the radio and the "Fireside Chats"?

N: Yes. I remember listening to that.

K: Do you remember what town was like during the Second World War? Were there a lot of trains going back and forth?

N: I wasn't here. I was in the service. I can remember the troop trains going through and the trains going through with the tanks and the cannons and stuff. A lot of them had armed guards riding the train and soldiers riding the train with them.

Of course, I worked for Sharon Steel then. We didn't make any finished products. We just made the steel for them. I suppose ninety-eight percent of our work then was for the war.

This was one time the percentage of eligible people who went through the service here was very high. I don't think they ever missed a time that they didn't make the quarter. Some of them didn't make their quarters now and then, but I don't think we ever missed a time to make a quarter. We had Struthers and Campbell. I don't know if Campbell was in that. It was Struthers and Lowellville, I think. We were one of the highest percentages in the country for that.

K: What year did you come back from the service?

N: 1945.

K: Did they have a parade or anything?

N: No.

K: You just came off the train and that was . . .

N: Yes. I came in at Toledo. I got home on Thanksgiving Day.

K: Of 1946?

N: 1945. I got home early in the afternoon. No, there was no parade. Of course, when the war was right over and they would come in--not to places like this--there were celebrations, of course, but not when I came home.

K: After the war did the town pickup again? The Depression was over; the war was over.

N: Yes. There were good times for quite awhile after the war. They didn't go right into a Depression. It was good.

K: Right after the war where did you work?

N: I went back to Sharon Steel. I worked there a while and then I left there and went to Prudential Insurance.

K: You sold insurance in Lowellville?

N: For a while. I started on the north side of Youngstown. Then I had a little bit on the west side of Youngstown. Then this place down here was opened. The fellow had retired, so I came there and worked in Lowellville until I retired.

K: Do you still stay in touch with a lot of people you grew up with who are still in Lowellville?

N: Yes, usually. Of course, we don't see very much of them. We don't get around as often. Of course, the town had changed, downtown. I don't know anybody. There are a lot of new people moving in and out. Things change.

K: How has the town changed?

N: The people in the town have changed. Kids grow up, move out, and new people come in. Of course, they are probably the same kind of people who used to be here. They are just different; that's all.

K: When you were growing up, was there ever any prejudice in the Italian neighborhood? Did any of the Ku Klux Klan come into Lowellville?

N: No. I can remember down here east of Lowellville up on the hill that they used to have Klan meetings once in a while. They would come right through town to get there. I don't know where they were coming from, Youngstown, I suppose. There was just a big parade of cars. We didn't get any of that down here. They came through town and went up. They burnt their cross, had their meeting, and then they went home. They never stopped in town. It was nothing like that here.

There wasn't too much prejudice here about the Italians or anything. Almost everybody here, their parents or grandparents or somebody, came from the old country. There weren't any purebred Puritans. Of course, they didn't intermarry. I can remember the first Italian wedding. They didn't intermarry, but they did socialize together.

K: Was there a lot of Black Hand activity?

N: Yes, when I was a kid. This was more or less of a headquarters or a layover place. They didn't do a lot of bad stuff here. Of course, you would get a shooting every once in a while or a knifing or something. We had a couple of big shots of the Black Hand living here in town. Of course, we think they were. It is something you never know. Not all of the Italians were Black Hands either. There were very few of them. A lot of people thought that if you were Italian you were a Black Hand. That wasn't true.

K: Is there anything that you want to add? We have covered a lot of different topics.

N: Not that I know of.

K: Thank you for the interview.

N: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW