

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Depression Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 795

MARGARET COONEY

Interviewed

by

Dolores Margiotta

on

May 10, 1976

MARGARET M. COONEY

Margaret M. Cooney was born on September 22, 1914, in Youngstown, Ohio, a daughter of Gerhard and Ella Reardon Hettler. She attended Rayen High School, graduating in 1932. She entered Youngstown College taking business courses as well as psychology courses.

While single she worked at Truscon Steel until her marriage in 1937 to James M. Cooney. They had two sons, James, a teacher, and Michael, who's studying medicine, and two daughters, Mary Miller and Kathleen McCabe. Mrs. Cooney has seven grandchildren and is expecting her eighth shortly.

Before beginning work at the Child and Adult Mental Health Clinic as a coordinator of volunteers, where she is still employed, Mrs. Cooney worked for fifteen years at the Mahoning County Association.

Mrs. Cooney is an active church member and also devotes much time to volunteer work. Her hobbies are golfing and swimming.

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INTERVIEWEE: MARGARET COONEY

INTERVIEWER: Dolores Margiotta

SUBJECT: living conditions, schools, unemployment, welfare,  
attitudes, working conditions, Roosevelt

DATE: May 10, 1976

M: This is an interview with Mrs. James Cooney for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, Depression Project, by Dolores Margiotta, at 29 West Boston Avenue, on May 10, 1976, at 8:00 p.m.

Mrs. Cooney, can you tell us what you remember about the Depression?

C: I guess I was one of the fortunate ones. I personally wasn't too bad off during the Depression. I happened to live with my grandmother who was raising me. My father always provided us with a very good living. He didn't live in Youngstown. We never really went without essential things. I do recall other people and close friends of mine who's fathers were laid off, who worked in the mills. Some were very worried about losing their homes and some of their homes were repossessed. This was a very trying time for many, many people and jobs were very difficult to come by. I know that I had friends who worked in department stores who were working for very small wages.

M: Do you remember the wages?

C: I don't remember if this is exactly right but it seems to me they were working for eight dollars a month and car fare. I know at one time I had gone to Youngstown College, and just so I wouldn't lose all of my skills and to get some experience, I worked for an attorney for a bus pass. I had to go clear from the north side to the south side every day and bring my lunch or pay for my lunch if I ate out because he could not afford to pay me. I did this because I thought it was better than staying at home and forgetting what I had learned in school.

I remember many things. For instance, I can remember when it was really something to get enough money for a gallon of gasoline to go anywhere. I know we used to have a particular crowd and there were about eight of us. We had a friend who lived in Hubbard and we used to go over there and party a lot. We would collect a few pennies from everybody until we had enough for a gallon of gas. We would combine it and we would drive in the car and whenever we could shut off the motor and just coast down hills, we did. This is how we would just barely make it to Hubbard and back. I also recall having some friends who would probably be called the elite of Youngstown who lived on Fifth Avenue, which at that time was probably the best part of the city of Youngstown. Going into their homes you could see that they had been very well-furnished because the furniture was of top value, but it was badly in need of repair. Rugs were beginning to show wear. Nothing was being replaced. I also had many of these friends who ordinarily would have been sent to fine girls' schools in the East and were at a later date, but they had to go to Youngstown University their first and some of them their second years. They weren't able to go away. Now their parents probably were not financially broke, but they just had no liquid cash so they could not send them. I remember a very prominent family that was so short of cash that they charged everything in McKelvey's, even their groceries. I don't know what their bills would have been at the end of the Depression, but I'm sure it was in the thousands of dollars.

M: You talked about McKelvey's having groceries. Did they at that time? Because now it is just a department store.

C: Yes, they had quite a large grocery department at one time.

I also remember that when you went out with a fellow it was nothing to go to a beer garden. In fact, this is mostly where you went on a date. Three or four couples would go to a beer garden and you never expected anyone to buy you dinner. Beer had just come back and we sort of picked the spots that were serving free meals. Some of them served spaghetti free; some of them served fish and french fries free; they had various menus. You really could have picked a spot every night in the week and gotten a free meal with a few beers. We couldn't afford much so it was nothing to sit around all evening over two or three beers and just talk. There usually was a jukebox in the beer garden and we would dance.

M: Did you go to any dances at different ballrooms? Did they have those in Youngstown at that time?

C: Oh yes, yes they did. There were quite a few mens' clubs at that time. There was the Septimo, the Round Table, the Sigma; these were very prominent. They brought big name bands to Youngstown. They usually selected a queen at all their

functions. It seems that everybody could get enough money for that one big occasion during the year. The newspapers, you know now you really have to do something spectacular to get on the Society page. At that time the hostesses for all the dances were always given a big spread. I remember one time when I went to Youngstown College being on the whole page of the rotograve section for an Easter display with two other girls with lillies and such.

M: What was the newspaper called at that time?

C: The Vindicator, but we also had . . . Well, I don't know if the Telegram was still in existence by that time or not. At one time we did have two papers. One was the Telegram and one was the Vindicator.

M: During the Depression, did most people get a home delivery newspaper? Did they buy the newspaper?

C: Yes, it seemed as if most people did. The papers were very cheap. It was inexpensive to get a newspaper. You didn't have television so most people sort of relied on the newspaper. In fact, they even had extras. Something shattering, they put on an extra paper. Boys would go around in the streets and yell, "Extra! Extra!" real loud.

M: Do you remember any of these extras or spectacular events that might have happened at that time?

C: Well, when the war was declared. I remember that. I don't know when Lindbergh flew the ocean, but I remember there was an extra then. I think that was before the Depression. Anything even in the town that was spectacular. A bank robbery or a murder or anything of this sort.

I went to St. Edward's to grade school. It didn't seem that we had too many underprivileged children in that particular school. But there were a few and as I look back now and as I grew older I do believe they were getting help from the parish. At the time we were unaware of that.

M: Did they charge you tuition at that time?

C: No, no tuition.

M: Were there any lay teachers?

C: No, they were all sisters, nuns. We had no lay teachers. Unless occasionally a nun got sick and some lay teacher might come in and finish out a year but it was not the real . . .

M: You went to Rayen also. Can you recall any events that happened during your high school days during the Depression?

C: Yes, but for the most part I don't recall. I do remember that if we were going to do something it seemed like the majority of the kids had to think about it a long time ahead and save all their pennies. Like I remember going to Lake Erie for the day. Most of the kids didn't have the money to go.

M: Now was this like a field trip that you went on? How did you get there?

C: Not in high school. This would have been with somebody's parents. Maybe a group of us would have gone and sat with somebody's parents.

We nearly all walked home for our lunch because most people who went to Rayen were within walking distance. They did have a cafeteria, but most of the people I associated with went home for lunch. I don't recall too many people eating in the school cafeteria. I don't believe the food was very expensive.

At our corner--I lived on New York Avenue--right at the corner on Kensington there was a little grocery store called Good Reduce. We did all our grocery buying there and we charged. I remember that if the butcher sent home a piece of meat with any fat on it, I was immediately sent back and he had better trim that meat and not charge for the fat. Nothing like the supermarkets today where you're charged for every piece of bone and fat. The corner grocery store had an interest in you; they knew all your family; they watched you grow up; you knew all their family; they could almost fill your order without you ordering because they became so accustomed. They also delivered. I think we used to pay our bill at the end of every month. Most people did run a bill at the corner grocery store. During the Depression, I'm sure that a lot of the neighborhood grocery stores carried people and helped to feed them. In fact, there were a few who even had to close down because they had so many bad debts that they really could never collect. This was really nobody's fault; they had overextended themselves and people just weren't working and could not pay, so they eventually had to go out of business.

After I worked for the attorney for just a bus pass for a number of months, I finally got a job with the FERA, which was the Federal Emergency Release Association. This was introduced by President Roosevelt to help the people without jobs. I can remember many of my friends, at least five or six of them, also worked there. There were people with very high degrees who also worked there. It really didn't matter what you knew or what your knowledge was. If you were just out of school, you could not get a job because jobs were just not available. I remember taking shorthand all day long from a case worker and then typing it. This was wonderful experience for me

though. We didn't get paid too much, but it was a livable wage. There were many people who were married and had families who worked there too. I was just out of school so I could keep my own money.

M: What did this organization do?

C: It just really provided jobs. They did things like . . . There was WPA that built roads. They thought of things that needed to be repaired around the city. It was really just making jobs for people. I know we had a clinic where people could get all kinds of free medical help at the FERA building. The social workers went around to all the poor sections and just tried to see what the problems were and if there was any way they could be helped. Then they would bring this information back to the FERA.

M: Were the people of that time readily willing to take help?

C: There was always a certain element, like the hardcore people who would always take something for nothing. Most people weren't because most people were oriented to work. They thought this was kind of a disgrace to have to take any kind of relief. But--in Youngstown we even had soup kitchens--if you get hungry enough and you see your children hungry, then I'm sure your pride won't stand in your way. We did have these things going on in Youngstown and I do remember them.

I suppose because of that I have a greater respect for the value of a dollar than maybe people who had not gone through a Depression. Even though I was at no time really suffering, I could see so many people who were and that left an indelible mark on me and I'm sure that I will always know the value of the dollar. My husband can tell you. I always know, almost to the penny, how much change I have in my purse.

Shopping. I met a number of my friends on Saturday afternoon because we didn't work on Saturday afternoon. We would often have lunch and we were very conservative in what we ordered and then we would go shopping. We would check for a long time to get the best bargains that we could. A very good dress at that time would be about sixteen dollars. You could buy dresses for five dollars or ten dollars and twenty dollars was quite a good line.

M: It would probably be very extravagant.

C: Your shoes were about in the same price range. I suppose five or six dollars was about as much as anybody spent for shoes. You could buy fairly good shoes at that price. People wore hats then. Hats were probably between the three and five dollar range. Not too many people went to beauty parlors but the ones who did, they were much more inexpensive than they are today.

- M: We were talking about prices of clothing. What about food? Do you remember how much--you talked about going out to dinner-- a typical dinner at that time cost, or lunch?
- C: No more than probably seventy-five cents. You could probably get a fairly good lunch for seventy-five cents, and probably a very elegant dinner for about three dollars, served in a very nice restaurant.
- M: What kind of transportation did you have as a young girl, a working girl? How did you get around to work or any other place you had to go?
- C: Mostly by bus.
- M: Now were those the busses that were similar to what we have today or were they different?
- C: To tell you the truth I don't recall. They looked like the ones we have today, but whether they were electric I don't recall.
- M: Were they the trolley cars on the wires, do you remember?
- C: I can't remember. I think they were because I remember them sort of shorting out occasionally and the trolley would come out. Yes, I think you're right. I was not a lover of riding the bus and I usually got off blocks ahead of time because I always had motion sickness. They weren't my favorite.

From FERA the Depression was still on and I did get a job at the Truscon Steel Company. This is probably when it was just beginning to pick up. I worked there until I was married. We were probably just coming out of the Depression. Many of my friends were then able to get better jobs too.

I lived with my grandmother who was an old German woman who always cooked abundantly. We had a family living next door to us and the lady was a widow and her children were grown. One of them, the boy--the only boy in the family; they had four girl--was the only one able to get employment. He would just work at any job he could get. This was their only source of income. I know whenever my grandmother cooked she always cooked twice as much and then she would always take it over and say, "We had this leftover and I hated to throw it out." I remember the woman telling me once, "Your grandmother doesn't fool me for a minute. She would never want me to feel obligated to her so I always say that nothing will go to waste at our house because we have many mouths to feed." This was a practice of hers.

- M: Do you remember the feeling of any of the people about the Depression? Did they realize that they were in a Depression at that time?

C: Well, I think that most of them did. I think especially people who had lost their jobs, men that had worked in a company for many years and owned homes or had just bought homes or who had small children, who lost their homes. I had friends whose parents lost their homes. I think that this was a very difficult situation for them. I think for the men especially they became depressed.

M: When these people lost their homes, where did they go?

C: They sometimes rented from the bank or else they moved into something smaller. The banks also couldn't sell them so they very often allowed the people to rent them because it just wasn't a buyer's market.

I did have one very close friend and her father was a businessman in Youngstown for many years and was quite well-to-do. They belonged to the country club and lived a very good life. During the Depression his business lost money and he really almost went into bankruptcy but he was able to pay off all his debtors, but in doing so he lost his business. He was up in years and could not get a job. He had to finally go into the mill and just do labor work or drive a truck or whatever. Her mother had to move into a small home and really come down in life. She used to sell children's clothing and she did this in her spare time.

M: Did she make these clothes?

C: No, no it was for a company. She was like a manufacturer's representative and she really did quite well at it and actually they were tremendous people. It never seemed to spoil their lives or any of their children's lives. They just adjusted so beautifully to it. Some of their very good friends were still always their very good friends. I can remember going to their home and their daughter who had a very meager salary was their sole support for a while, so you know they were living very meagerly. I always marvelled at what that woman could do with just a little bit of food. She made very scrumptious meals. She was able to maintain a very good home, and the children always had a sense of security, even though their father was out of work or doing very menial work you were never aware of that. There was such a feeling of love in the home and they had a lot of fine things and when you came for dinner, she always used her good china. Maybe she didn't have the top grade of meat but she was a very good cook. She always served everything so elegantly that you thought you were really having sort of a banquet. This was one of the experiences that I remember and I think that many of the people that were used to much more and lost a great deal during the Depression tried to keep up their standards by using their nice things to compensate for what they didn't have. They taught their children to be gracious and taught them a lot of social graces

and didn't allow them to really spoil their images so to speak. I think that most of us were unaware of the fact that they really were in such dire circumstances until we got a little older and realized what they must have been living on. These people that had always owned their own home had to rent and I'm sure had to scrounge to get money for rent. I know a friend of mine had to give all her money at home and then her mother just gave her a very meager allowance and packed her lunch. Things were difficult.

- M: Do you think that after the Depression came to a close that the closeness that people felt, helping one another, disappeared or did that continue for a while?
- C: I think that for a while it did continue because I think that people had become so close to each other that there was a feeling of real neighborhood closeness. I think that neighbors were much closer than they are today. For instance, I don't know my next door neighbors. I wouldn't know them if I saw them because I work everyday and they work everyday. During those times you did know your neighbors, and if someone was ill in your family . . . I can remember whenever anyone was sick my grandmother always made a big pot of soup and immediately took it over to them. I remember when my grandmother died and I first started to keep house and I knew nothing about keeping house. I remember one of the women in the neighborhood coming over and doing up all of my curtains for me at Eastertime because she said, "You really should do up your curtains for Easter." Of course as a newlywed I had never had to bother with any of these things at home. I would look at them and I did think they looked dirty but I had no idea what you would do with them? She came over and did up all my curtains for me while I was working.
- M: You talked about this closeness. During that time not too many women went to the hospital to have their babies. Were you aware of this?
- C: No, no everybody I knew went to the hospital to have their babies.
- M: In some neighborhoods the doctor came with a midwife.
- C: As far as I can remember everyone went to the hospital to have their children. I don't remember recalling any babies being born at home.
- M: You talked about funerals. Did they hold services at the home or was this at a funeral parlor?
- C: Actually they were still holding most of the services at home, at the people's homes. This was the custom. The casket was usually in the person's living room and the mourners came to call. There

was usually an abundance of food that the neighbors and friends brought in. Even at some of the Irish wakes it was quite a festive time for some of the people and I can remember that. Now I think the idea of everybody going to a funeral parlor was a little bit later. It had already begun to start, this moving towards funeral homes, probably by the Depression I would say. It was probably about half and half. Today I haven't seen anybody who has been shown in their own home for a long, long time. I would say that we have completely gotten away from that trend.

M: Do you have any closing remarks to say about the era that we were talking about now?

C: Only that I think that anybody who went through that Depression has a lot more respect for money and is much more aware of just what a dollar means. I don't think that they are about to spend it without thinking twice. They wouldn't squander their money. I also don't think that they would be as critical as some of our young people growing up today who do not have to work and who spurn the fine things that their family gave them and yet I doubt that they could go out and get them for themselves.

M: Thank you very much Mrs. Cooney.

END OF INTERVIEW