

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Depression Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 796

JAMES COONEY

Interviewed

by

Dolores Margiotta

on

May 10, 1976

JAMES M. COONEY

James M. Cooney, a lifelong resident of Youngstown, Ohio, was born on October 10, 1910. A son of John and Nellie Gaffney Cooney, he graduated from Rayen High School in 1931. He attended Youngstown College for two years, taking courses in accounting.

In 1933 he began work as manager for the Genessee Distributing Company and continued working there for the next sixteen years. He later became a self-employed beer distributor.

On October 16, 1937, he married Margaret Hettler. They had four children: James, who is now Dean of Boys at Cardinal Mooney High School, Mary Gay Miller, Michael, who is interning in Columbus, and Kathleen McGabe. Mr. Cooney is also the proud grandfather of seven grandchildren.

Mr. Cooney also worked as a salesman for United Paper Company and the Metal Codes Company, until he became employed by the city of Youngstown as a financial clerk in 1969 where he is still employed.

Mr. Cooney is a very active church member and devotes many hours as a volunteer for the Adult Mental Health Clinic. His hobbies are golf and he enjoys working outdoors in his garden.

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INTERVIEWEE: JAMES COONEY

INTERVIEWER: Dolores Margiotta

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

DATE: May 10, 1976

M: This is an interview with Mr. James Conney on the Depression by Dolores Margiotta, at 29 West Boston Avenue, on May 10, 1976 at 7:30 p.m.

Mr. Cooney, tell me what you remember about the Depression.

C: Well, actually you caught me kind of flatfooted here because at the moment I don't recall too much relative to the Depression. I was in a position that I actually did not know a Depression was on due to the fact that my father was a continuous wage earner. He was not laid off during the Depression, so consequently I had all the necessities of life and I wasn't troubled or burdened by any of the things that were surrounding me. Perhaps that's the reason I was not aware of what was going on. Nevertheless, I can relate perhaps some incidents that our neighbors experienced or other incidents that were generally city-wide.

I recall the other classmates in school. I know they were very troubled because of the conditions existing and many times they would tell stories about how they would have to walk to high school. Of course, there was no transportation. Sad stories would appear every now and then when we would be going to a prom or to a dance or something or other and the individuals could not attend due to the fact that it cost a half of a dollar or seventy-five cents. Their parents just didn't have the money to give to them to go.

M: This was Rayen School?

C: Rayen School. I know that some of the more fortunate kids had cars and even the ones that had cars, their parents could not afford money [for gas]. To go anywhere we would all chip in twenty-five cents and stop in a gas station and buy fifteen

cents worth of gas. Of course, in those days you could travel a lot farther on one gallon of gas.

M: Do you remember how much gasoline cost?

C: It was about fifteen cents. Of course, I recall very vividly when it was five gallons for a dollar. Everyone who pulled into the gas station would naturally say, "Give me a dollar's worth of gas," and that was five gallons.

There were an awful lot of hardships though in various families that did not have any income whatsoever. I would like to recall the incident of a family on Fifth Avenue. Fifth Avenue is a very exclusive street in the city of Youngstown and yet, the father of that family was hit just as hard as anyone else. Perhaps more so due to the fact that they were accustomed to living on a high plane. I recall them telling a story at that time why mother's rolled oats was sold in a five pound cardboard box. The ones that were empty she would cut out inner soles for the little kids for their shoes due to the fact that they had holes in them. This went on every night. She would have a new set of inner soles so they could go to school the next day. That would take care of the holes in their shoes.

We used to go downtown. Of course, in my adolescent years, the skies were always darkened. The smoke was coming out of all the stacks down at the mills. Of course, during the Depression that was a different situation entirely. You would go down around the Mahoning River; it was now all cleaned; there was no smoke coming out of the stacks and Youngstown was really a clean city like they expect it to be someday from now.

I also recall the issuance of the city script. At this particular time, the city of Youngstown was not receiving revenues because no one was paying their taxes or their bills or anything--revenues throughout the city, real estate taxes and so forth. Consequently, to keep the city functioning and to pay for the services and employees, why they had to issue a script. All the employees were paid in script which was redeemable by the city of Youngstown. It was a negotiable instrument and they could go into the stores and the banks. You could use the money just as you would our regular currency. The banks were financing the city by withholding the money until the day would come when the Depression would be over. Consequently, this money would be redeemed again.

M: Do you remember about any banks closing at that time?

C: I recall the banks closing, yes. I know my dad in fact, when the banks closed, was caught in the web too. "What are we going to do? All of our assets are all tied up right now." Of course, the banks did open. We did have one particular failure that I recall in Youngstown. Let me see, it was Central Savings & Loan

down on southwest corner of the square. That bank never did open. It was finally liquidated and I think they probably paid off twenty cents on the dollar to all the depositors in the bank. People were certainly scurrying around when they had no income whatsoever, even their life savings in the bank was tied up.

Merchants seemed to have helped a lot of the people during this time by extending credit and carrying people, but whether or not they all got paid off . . . I think perhaps maybe in good faith the people did finally pay off the grocer, the butcher, and various stores where they would only purchase necessities. I do recall at that time that neighbors were willing to help each other and perhaps they would borrow back and forth. They were willing to help each other. I think that we all must do that too because we were all in the same boat. What little I have I'm willing to share part with the other one, which is a good feeling for the community.

M: The neighbors were more closely knitted than they are today. You knew who your neighbors were.

C: Yes, you knew and understood your neighbor very well. People seemed to be a lot closer--willing to help whether it be misfortune or good fortune. They were always willing to talk and be with the neighbors to help them out.

M: Can you tell us a little bit about the neighborhood that you lived in?

C: The neighborhood that I lived in, of course, it was . . . Well, you would probably call it today in the upper average I suppose. The properties in our neighborhood were kept up just as usual. There were not too many houses up where I lived on the north side.

M: Where was that?

C: That was on Glidd Avenue toward Tod Lane. Youngstown was just moving north and there weren't a lot of houses up there. Heaven sakes, I recall walking from our house out to Gypsy Lane. You would only pass three or four houses all the way in the three blocks from there to Gypsy Lane. The houses that were there though, they were always kept up and you actually would never know that a Depression was on.

M: Did most of the houses have modern conveniences for that time?

C: Oh, yes. They were all very modern just as you see it up there today. The same thing prevails.

M: What about telephones? Did everyone have a telephone?

C: I would say yes, that everyone in that neighborhood did have a telephone. I know we did.

M: What kind of things did the kids do in the neighborhood for entertainment? Outside of radio they had nothing else. What did you do on a typical evening?

C: A typical evening in the summer . . . We were adjacent to Crandall Park. We would go down after school and play tennis or romp around Crandall Park. There was always something to do. I do know that in that particular time, I recall a gang of fellows congregated perhaps in front of some store; we always congregated under a street light and just sat on the curb and wiled away the hours just among ourselves. It was just a form of putting in the time. Without money your not going anywhere, so you might as well just sit down and relax.

My father was the yardmaster for the Erie Railroad. I know some of the fellows that lived in that area up in Briar Hill would tell me the story about my dad. They just thought he was one of the greatest guys because as the yard engines would go up and down the track my dad would give the fireman . . . He would tell them, "Instead of throwing some of that coal in the firebox of the engine, miss every now and then and throw it out the door." These various people would be walking up and down the track with burlap sacks and they would take it home so that they would have coal for their furnaces. Now this is getting down pretty deep when you don't have any coal for your furnace and you have to go out scrounging for coal, lumber or something to create heat.

M: Where would this be now, along what tracks?

C: This was on the Erie Railroad tracks up in Briar Hill.

M: How about down around Poland Avenue and those areas too?

C: Well, of course I don't know what was going on down there, but I know this is what dad's instructions would be to the firemen and of course the firemen would do it. They could just make a mistake and throw it out the side door instead of putting it in the firebox.

M: He seemed like a very charitable person. What about the cost of food? Do you remember what something would cost during those years?

C: No, honestly I don't remember as to the cost of food for the house at all. Even clothes, I don't recall what the prices were.

M: When you graduated, what year was that?

C: I graduated from Rayen in 1931.

M: You went to work right after that?

C: I did. I got a job fortunately. I don't know how I got it. It had to be through some recommendation of someone, but I had a job. I was cashier for the Waley Baking Company. They were a house-to-house bakery and the salesman would come around to your door and sell you baked goods, bread, and so forth. My job was to check the drivers in at night when they came in. At the point when the banks closed, naturally, we could not deposit any money and I had a vault out there. The vault was probably four feet by six feet. All this money would come in each and every night and we couldn't bank them so I was given instructions from the general office at Boston, Massachusetts to separate all the money. I had bags of halves, quarters, of all the silver denominations. I just stored the money. I would just keep piling it in. In fact, I ran out of space in the vault. There was no more room so the general office in Boston, Massachusetts, told me to start wiring money each and every day. I would wire \$5,000 to \$10,000, whatever it may be, to Boston until we finally depleted the monies and made room for other monies coming in. Of course, the banks opened at that time. I forget just how many thousands of dollars I had in city script. The city then decided to redeem the money so we balanced out over the long period of the bank closing.

M: Because of the Depression at this time, didn't a lot of people bake their own goods? Was this bakery profitable? Did they make enough money?

C: Yes, the bakery was profitable. I will say the city routes, the business was rather slow. You mentioned about baking bread. You would think that perhaps in the farming, the rural section, that they baked a lot of bread but we sold an awful lot in the rural sections, to the farmers and so forth, especially bread. Even when the harvest time would come it would be nothing for a farmer to buy 100 loaves of bread because the harvest team was coming through there with their various equipment and so forth. They would always buy a big, big supply of bread. The salesman on the routes, I wouldn't say they made a lot of money. They were strictly on a commission basis. They seemed to weather the storm though. Even though they did not make a lot of money it was certainly keeping them active and keeping them employed.

M: Did they ever say what they ever did with the leftover or what they didn't sell that day? What did they do with that?

C: Well, after two days we had what we called the retail store and all the stale goods were sold at half price out at the retail store.

M: Where was the retail store located?

C: On Hubbard Road.

M: Was that on Hubbard Road on the east side?

C: Yes. It was a very enterprising thing. The same thing as house-to-house form of doing business was great in the east. The same company that owned the egg plant in the east was located in Youngstown.

M: How long did you stay with this company then?

C: I was only there for about two years. At the end of two years beer was legalized. It so happens that the man who owned the company also owned a brewery in Rochester, New York. Mr. Waley decided to open a branch in Youngstown and also Cleveland. I was transferred from the bakery to the beer distributing and I was manager of both Youngstown and Cleveland. I would work three days in Youngstown, and three days in Cleveland. I was traveling back and forth. If a person didn't have fifteen cents for a loaf of bread or whatever, they would certainly go over and spend it on beer. In fact, when things got a little better, paychecks that were being cashed, the greater amount was cashed at a tavern rather than at the banks. The beer coming back was a great thing for the people. It certainly lifted their spirits and it made them forget about a lot of things that were going on around them because of their newness of the beer.

M: Do you remember before then when prohibition was in effect? Do you remember anything about that?

C: I recall when prohibition was in effect, sure. I knew where all the illegal bootleggers were located around in the city of Youngstown. I might say, they also had quite a thriving business too. A lot of them of course were mainly in homes where the person would make their own home brew and sell it because it was another form of liveliness.

M: Were any of these in your neighborhood, do you recall?

C: No, none of them were in our neighborhood. Mainly they were on the east side and up in Briar Hill is where they located. They were more with the Italian families. Of course, they were great; they always did make their own wine. This just went along with fermenting the beer too and they just got into the business of bootlegging.

M: Did Youngstown have any speakeasies then at that time, do you remember?

C: Yes, actually in their homes. They were bootleggers; they were the speakeasy. It was just their home. You would sit down at the kitchen table and you would drink like you were a member of the household. Of course, you had to pay for it naturally. They would take whiskey. You would buy a pint to go. Actually it was illegal, but then again there was no crime connected



with it because I still think that this is the only way that people had a way of making a living. It wasn't syndicated or anything like it is today in legal business. They would just make it and sell it.

M: Can you tell us a little bit about the taverns?

C: Well, yes. When beer came back it was legal. Beer came back first and then a year later wine and whiskey came back at the same time. Now the taverns were well-run; they were really clean and they had good fixtures, yet there was a lot of competition among the taverns. I recall we would get free spaghetti at times. There was one place downtown that even had shrimp, which was quite a delicacy, and popcorn, peanuts, and pretzels. Any of their meals that they served . . . You were supposed to serve meals. It was in the statute of the license thing that you had to serve a hot meal. Now when they started out, yes, they all did that, but later that was kind of discontinued and then they became known as just a drinking spot. The tavern, it was a meeting place. There was always singing. It was a good place for people to congregate at that time.

M: Was it unusual for women to be in the taverns at that time?

C: No, it was very surprising, it wasn't unusual. Women frequented the taverns just the same as men. They weren't just for men alone. Generally I would say that when it came to sitting at the bar, men generally only sat at the bar; the women were generally in the booth. Even children would be running around the taverns. The parents would bring their kids to the taverns. There was a lot of merriment and there were good times in the tavern.

The highlight of the time was when Franklin D. Roosevelt became president. He, of course, was known to be strictly helping the working man. He introduced a lot of laws that helped the situation of the working man, and also the social security. I know at that time I recall people who were really against social security saying that the government is going to take over our lives and we're going to become socialistic. I will never accept my social security check. There were a lot of people that were very much against social security, but looking back you would think what would happen today if the same people were not entitled to social security. F. D. R. being the orator that he was introduced the fireside chats. Mahoning County was primarily democratic and these fireside chats weren't listened to by everyone. He had a way of putting over his points to the people. He was the type of fellow that you could listen to hour upon hour. You would never get tired of hearing him because he always had something worthwhile to say. Everything was pointed to getting us out of the Depression--Public Works Programs putting people to work and all the various agencies that he started that were helpful to put people back to work and to bring us out

of the Depression.

- M: Some people say that he brought us out of the Depression and into a war. Would you say that is true?
- C: Yes. He has been blamed for getting us into the war by the various deals and pacts that he made, but I honestly don't think that he brought us or put us into a war. War in itself, as history goes on, is a meeting of the minds sooner or later. They decided that you're taking undue advantage of me and so forth and the only way sometimes to settle these things is by war. I definitely don't think that F. D. R. himself, in conjunction with Churchill, put us into the war. I perhaps take this stand because I certainly was a lover of F.D.R. His coming as president was very timely and the methods he used to bring us out of the Depression and put us back into a stable economy, why this showed that he was a far, far-thinking man. It's kind of hard for me to believe that with good times going on that he would purposely put us into war perhaps to enhance his own being president or to be retained in the job, although he did have the long tenure, that's for sure.
- M: Did he ever come to Youngstown?
- C: Yes, I recall being down on West Avenue--that's off of Mahoning Avenue--and he was in Youngstown. I don't recall what occasion it was, but I was down on West Avenue when he got off the train. There were people lined on the sidewalks, along the streets, and he came riding along with that broad smile and waving and doffing his hat and he just gave you a feeling of security just to see him ride down there. That's the only time I remember him being in Youngstown.
- M: Do you remember anything about the churches at that time in Youngstown during the Depression? Were they more well-attended than they are today?
- C: Yes, I think that the attendance at the church during this time was a lot more so than today. The churches were a great help during the Depression. They did as much as possible to help all the people, not only parishioners but even neighbors. They did a wonderful job relative to the youth. I recall down there now, they had programs, especially they had to keep the kids off the street and occupied. They had organized basketball. St. Patrick's also had the same program. They didn't ask you whether or not you belonged to the church, you would just come in and play basketball. There was always a referee there or a supervisor to operate the program and people relied on their church. Of course, they had more time, and I think it was probably a solice to them to attend church thinking that maybe the guy above would perhaps end the Depression or help out in some manner that some good things would happen to the country and a lot of people were praying for the country.

- M: Did they collect food or clothing for people who needed it?
- C: Yes, we had a food collection. Anyone that could spare any extra food, of course there was a lot of home canning at that time and the people would bring cans of various things to the church and they would distribute them to parishioners in need.
- M: These are the homemade can goods?
- C: Thank goodness we're out of the Depression anyway. I'm just hoping that it doesn't happen to this country again.
- M: Do you think that people who went through the Depression have any misgivings about it? Are they sort of, not miserly, but do they sort of watch their pennies a little more because of having lived through this? They don't want to do it again kind of attitude?
- C: Well, I think that the people, it was an education actually for everyone. Especially for the ones who got hard hit--they had their homes mortgaged and the banks would come in and they would foreclose on them and take their homes away. This particular lesson, I think, gave them a sense of planning also that in future years, they no doubt would have to be a saver of money and so forth and protection against this happening. I think that the children also, a lot of them, came out of the Depression with the idea that they had to save for later years and to protect themselves from any unfortunate happenings. Then again, when you look at today and the younger person, what a gambler in regard to buying. Everything is on credit when they're buying now. Let's hope that nothing may happen again because the same kids that are extending credits over and above what they should be right now would lose everything that they have.
- M: Do you think the kids of today, if they had to go through the Depression, would be as fortunate at being able to survive as we might have gone?
- C: I don't think that the younger person today could survive a Depression to the extent that my parent's went through. The person today, the younger person, is of the opinion that his horizon they're riding now is going to last forever. I think that the shock would be so great upon them that I can't see how they could ever withstand it. They have been living in their high economy and high living not knowing that things could change tomorrow, but I don't think they could ever withstand a tough break like losing a home.
- M: Remembering the Depression, if you do, do you have any final thoughts about it?

C: Well, I certainly hope that it never happens again. It did instill in me a trait which I think I have carried all through my life in regards of being a conservative person. I was certainly always thinking about tomorrow. It kind of left me with a thing of not being a gambler where perhaps I could have bettered myself by gambling on some future happenings, but I never did that because I still recall the blight of the Depression. I just hope that we continue to, that our economy continue to, keep at a high level and that nothing unfortunate happens that will bring about all the sacrifices that one would have to make.

M: Thank you, Mr. Cooney, for the interview.

END OF INTERVIEW