

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Niles, Ohio

Personal Experience

O.H. 1585

BEATRICE PARKER

Interviewed

by

Marcelle Wilson

on

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W: This is an interview with Beatrice Parker for the Youngstown State University Oral History, on the Niles Project, by Marcelle Wilson, on October 18, 1994, at 714 West Park, at 6:00 p.m.

What was the community attitude and ethic in your neighborhood as you were growing up?

P: We lived in the company housed owned by the brickyard. Most of the folks were from Kentucky and it was in the near east side so one end of the street was Kentucky, one side was Italian, and across the street on Pratt Street we had blacks. So it was a real mixed neighborhood.

W: What was your families work ethic as you were growing up?

P: You worked. My father worked there for let's see, he died in 1966, he worked there for almost 25 years before he died. My grandfather worked there and you were just glad to have a job and you went to work. My father, I can remember the brickyard, his fingers were smashed from working with brick and everything but. I couldn't count what few days we missed. You just worked.

W: What is your father's name?

P: Herbert Everman.

W: How and when did the first members of your family come to Niles.

P: My father is from Kentucky. He came back in 1940, I think. He came to Niles looking for a job. He rented a room from my grandmother who lived on Pratt Street and he started working at the brickyard.

W: What was your neighborhood like as you were growing up? Were you all friend with the different sections?

P: Yes. By living in company houses, and those were owned by the firebrick, there were several houses on Pratt Street. We lived at the very end-it was a lane. It was like, they worked together and you socialized together. We grew up with kids that the fathers worked there. Then, later when they sold those houses or tore them down there were company houses over on Langley Street, right across from the brickyard. You just sort of socialized with those people.

W: How many people were in your family?

P: There were my parents, myself, at that time I had two younger brothers. I have got three

brothers and a sisters. My dad still worked at the fire brick when my younger brother was born. I am trying to think. It was so long ago. The last year my dad was alive my sister was born. He still technically worked there but he had a brain tumor and Mr. Sutter was the head of the plant there. Dad could not deal with the brick anymore. They were afraid to let him around the kilns. So he was a night watchman. They sort of took care of their own. I can remember standing in line, we used to go over to the firebrick office, and stand in line for wallpaper and paint to do the house.

W: They provided all of that?

P: They provided that.

W: What did your dad do in the fire brick?

P: He took the bricks out of the kiln and put them on pallets. Like I said, he was the financial reporting secretary for the union for years. So I don't know exactly other than keeping the books for the union. When he became ill, they would try to transfer him around so he would still have a job until the very last when he could not work at all. He knew everything about it. Just a couple years before he died, he was the watchman that watched the temperatures on the kiln and stuff like that. By living close to the brickyard, if anything went wrong during the night or after turn they always called Dad. They discarded bricks, that would be their break after they took them out of the kiln, or did not meet their standards, they would haul those out of the plant and along the fence of the brickyard you would have big stacks of broken bricks or old bricks they couldn't send. The kids in the neighborhood made houses out of the brick. We just always played with the bricks. That sounds strange now, but yes. It was right there in the neighborhood.

W: What did he do for the union?

P: He collected the dues, he kept track of the dues. I can remember him working with the union cards and handing out the I.D. cards for them. There were a lot of Italians working there too. There was a big mixture of the names, but he handled all the union books.

W: Where did you go to school?

P: I went to Jefferson Elementary. That's where most of us went. Edison Junior and then the high school.

W: What did you do for fun when you were growing up?

P: Our big thing was going to the movies usually Sunday afternoon or Saturday afternoon. Either the Robbin's theater or the McKinley theater. A lot of activity was like after school was out, after supper the kids would play ball in the street. It was a different time

then. You could do a lot of that. You could just roam the neighborhood safely until dark and then you heard everybody being called home.

W: What types of subjects did you learn in school? What were your favorite subjects?

P: I was an academic major. I graduated with my bachelors from Youngstown State, too many years ago to talk about. I do remember, I graduated in 1965 from high school. My brother graduated in 1966. I started at Y.S.U. My father was ill, like I said, those last couple of years. I remember the union taking up collections to pay my tuition. Like I said, they worked together. I see a lot of them are real old now, but I will see them and they talk about the brickyard. In fact, I met somebody in the hot dog shop whose father worked for the brickyard at one time. You just talk about the times there. My major was psychology and sociology. I'm an administrator with the County Welfare Department.

W: What teachers did you have back in school?

P: My favorite was Mr. Bullock. I took Latin, Math, all the college prep courses. I was going to be a math teacher until my junior year. My father always said teaching was the profession to go into. I was in that until my father died. This was my chance to change. As a junior, I changed my major to sociology. I was going to be a math teacher. Times were starting to change. There were a lot of discipline problems. Nothing like they do now. I thought, "Am I going to be able to handle that?" I did not think I was so I switched.

W: How many of your family members completed high school?

P: All five of us. There were five children.

W: You went to college. Did any of your siblings go to college?

P: No.

W: Where did your family go to church.

P: Church of the Nazarene. The kids went. My father did not go. My mother was an epileptic so she did not go. He took us to Sunday school and he picked us up.

W: Who was your minister?

P: We had several, Reverend Baltz, Reverend Sullivan, Reverend Hastings. They are all gone now.

W: Where was this church located?

P: At that time, for most of our lives it was located on Linden Avenue. The church was sold and now the church is out on Vienna Road.

W: How long did your family or your brothers and sisters attend church?

P: Until we got out of high school. There was a big difference in age between us. There is seventeen years between my sister and myself. She is the youngest so it is like two separate families.

W: What was your favorite thing to do when you were young?

P: School. At that time I did not have any sisters. It was just me and three brothers. I always had a little brother. Mostly it was just boys in the neighborhood. So usually school was my favorite activity.

W: What did you like least?

P: Babysitting for the younger ones.

W: What was your house like? You said you lived in company housing. Can you describe?

P: The first company house we lived in was, like I said, at the end of Pratt. It was two bedrooms, there were four rooms. We had an outside toilet. During the last couple of years we lived there, my dad got the brickyard to build us an inside commode. We had no bath so we used a tub Mom brought in. It was like, they built the toilet in the closet upstairs. There was four rooms and we had lived at the end of the lane by the tracks at the very end of the brick yard. There was only one time when the Mahoning River overflowed and the water came up. We had a coal shed, we had a stove in the living room. Most of the company houses were heated with coal. There was a stove either in the living room, I think my friends house they had one in the middle room. The houses were all painted maroon and a creme color. They were all alike. They were different sizes. I cannot even remember what the rent was, but the rent was real minimal. I do not know why I could never remember the brickyard without company houses. Of course I remember after they got rid of them. They always sort of took care of you. Like I said, your wallpaper, your paint. If there was major repair you just had to put in a slip and they got it fixed.

W: Were the houses allotted to people according to their family size or what position they held in the brickyard?

P: You know what, I could not tell you. I do not think it was a position that was held in the brickyard because I can remember families moving in and out. I think if there was a

vacancy you went on a list. Of course, a lot of the folks did not have transportation. So a lot of them did not have cars, but they lived there right by the plant.

W: Did you share a room with your brothers and sisters or did you have your own room?

P: I always shared one with them. When we moved from that house, they decided they were going to tear that house down. I think the Niles Fuel Company bought that property back there at the end of the brickyard. We moved to a company house on Langley Street. It was a mansion, as far as size wise, compared to this one. I had my own room. I was fourteen or fifteen and we did not have hot running water. When they decided they were going to tear the houses down on Langley Street, my father finally bought a house on East Park. This was all in the vicinity, within walking distance of the brickyard. That was the first time we had hot water. I remember doing the dishes. I would do them six times a day, just to use the hot water. That wore off real fast.

W: How many rooms did that second company house have on Lanley?

P: It had eight rooms.

W: Did that have indoor plumbing?

P: Yes.

W: Was it also painted maroon? (Laughter)

P: They were all painted the same. Truthfully, I think our house, the first one we had down at the end of the lane was the only one that did not have inside toilet facilities. It had running water and that. I think that was why that was one of the first to go. They did put, like I said, a commode in the house. We did not live their very long. I do not remember what reason or rationale there was for tearing the housed down, other than possibly the brickyard was being sold to Kaiser Refractories at the time, I think. Probably bigger corporations did not want to deal with the company house thing.

W: What chores did you and your siblings do as you were growing up?

P: The dishes, the beds, the garbage. My primary job was baby sitting. Like I said, she was usually ill. I always had one of them with me when I went to the show on Saturday or Sunday. Seems like I could never get away from them. That was why I like school so much. Just the regular chores.

W: Did your family own or run a business in addition to your fathers job?

P: No, not while he was at the brickyard. The last couple years he was alive, we purchased

the house on East Park. That's the only purchase he ever made, truthfully.

W: Did anyone in your family belong to a local social club or fraternity like the Eagles or the Elks?

P: No.

W: What was a typical family meal like?

P: Fried Potatoes or macaroni, cornbread, beans, things like that. My husband's grandfather worked at the brickyard. In fact, "Paul, didn't your grandfather live in a company house?" Yes, his father never worked at the brickyard, but his grandfather worked there (She talks with her husband). For a while there were a lot of people coming into the brickyard and working. You had to work to live in the company house. She asked me how you were assigned the company house. I think you were on a waiting list. They had no children. He was divorced. It was just him and his wife. They did not do it by family size. I think the Cline's, the house on the corner, they had three daughters. Most of the company homes were Kentuckians. There were some Italians. Villios had a company home. Williams, most of them were Kentucky families.

W: Who was present? Was everybody present when you sat down for your meal?

P: Yes. That was one thing that meals always rotated around Dad. When Dad came home from work, Mom had the meal on the table or it was close to being ready. Dad always got a cooked breakfast. He always had eggs, bacon, or something like that. I think all of them functioned that way because we always hit the streets at the same time. You could tell by supper being over and you could go outside, play for a couple hours until it was dark. A lot of the social activity for the adults, it was never that you went anywhere truthfully. You sat on the front porch for a while. You yelled back and forth to the people across the street.

W: A real close knit community.

P: Yes, it really was.

W: What did your family do to celebrate a birthday back then?

P: Birthday cake, go to grandmas, usually. Grandma lived on Pratt Street which is the street that runs right along side of the brickyard. In fact, my grandfather worked at the brickyard, too, even prior to my dad working there. He worked there a short time. He was hurt at the brick yard. A bag of lime burst in his face. They put lime in the brick. He was blinded for several months. We cooked at grandma's. For Sunday dinner, noon was always your main meal. We always went to grandma's. We always got fried chicken.

W: Did your grandparents live in company housing at the time?

P: No, they owned a home up on Pratt Street.

W: What did you do for holidays, anything different or special?

P: Other than getting together, of course, after Christmas everybody got their new toys out. Usually our celebrations of the family kind always centered around my grandmothers. In fact, one Christmas I do remember one of the guys from the brickyard, Ben Hensley. The Hensley's had several family members working for the brickyard. He would be a great source for you. He works at General Motors right now. I think he is getting close to retirement. He lives up on Belmont or somewhere up there. I would be glad to call him and give him your number or something because he was there when it closed and worked there himself. So he would be a real good insight. I remember when he first came to town, he is also from Kentucky. He was Santa Claus one Christmas. Santa Claus knocked on the door. They did stuff like that together.

W: Did the company ever give out turkeys to the families?

P: On the holidays, on Thanksgiving, and Christmas, you always got a turkey or a ham. Like I said, if one of the families was in need, if somebody got hurt at work or was not able to work not only would the company provide--bring in food--but the families together would. If someone was in the hospital having a baby it seemed like that family was always invited around until she got home from the hospital. You know, you fed their kids.

W: It was a nice tradition.

P: Yes, it was. I am almost 50 and I will see people who have worked the brickyard or kids who have worked at the brick yard. You still can stand and talk. There is a closeness there even after all the years.

W: What were the typical kinds of gifts that you and your brothers and sisters received at Christmas time?

P: Doll, trains, I remember one year we got matching desks. My brother and I got matching desks. My dad thought that was a neat idea. Mine were the dolls and Tom got trains.

W: Did you have any special family traditions that you did every year, special meals, special recipes?

P: Like I said, tradition was you always went to eat at Grandma's. Then for Sunday night



super you would always eat leftover from the noon meal. Nothing other than just your regular holiday meals, a family gathering. That's about it.

W: We like to eat cake at home. It is like a special recipe.

P: Grandma's was always pies on Sunday. There was pie for desert on Sunday, always. There was nothing open on Sunday's. There was nothing. You got your bread and milk on Saturday. Saturday evening Grandma would cook the pies. She would fix the chicken on Sunday. She always fixed a cake or pie for something for Sunday meal. I sound like the Walton's.

W: It reminds me a lot of my family.

P: Saturday night was bath night. (Laughter) You got your hair put up for church on Sunday. Even grandmas on Pratt Street was not until later that she put a shower in the basement, one of those old tin shower stalls. I can remember having the wash tubs. They would bring the tubs in on Saturday and fill it with hot water in the kitchen. The kids took their bath here and you got your hair washed. Like I said, it sounds like the Walton's, but that's the way it was back then.

W: Did you have your special Sunday clothes?

P: Yes. Those with your Sunday shoes, your Sunday dress. You always got a new outfit from skin out on Easter. From underwear out you got a new outfit.

W: My family does that, too. I can remember when we were little.

P: We got a whole new outfit, shoes, socks, everything. That was your Sunday outfit for the year until, you know. That was what you wore on Sunday. You never wore it to school, only when you got your picture taken you wore that outfit to school. You passed stuff around.

W: What happened when a family member died?

P: Back then? I had nobody die during the time I was growing up back then. It was the same as now. People brought in food, you would take care of the kids, other people took care of arrangements. Truthfully, most of them went to Holeyton's Funeral Home here in Niles. There was always a big basket from the plant. Usually the grocery store you frequented sent food over. When my dad did die-back in 1966, the plant - there had to be six or seven boxes of food they brought over. The stores did the same thing. It seemed like the men in that area would always check on their families. If your husband died, you could not really have the house any longer. Sometimes in the company house were extended families. The grandfather had worked their and if the son was working there

you'd have two or three families living there, but they were all families. I remember some of them my dad went with somebody to find him a house because the husband had died. They tried to help you out any way.

W: That was a strict rule?

P: Yes, you had to have a working member working at the brickyard in order to live there.

W: Was that when you moved to East Park?

P: Dad was still working at the brick yard when we bought the house. Like I said, I don't know why or cannot remember him ever explaining to me why they tore the company houses down. Other than Kaiser Refractories had bought the fire brick probably thought the houses were more of a liability more than anything. Truthfully, they were not in bad shape, but because of plumbing or whatever.

W: They were behind the times. What did things cost when you were growing up, a loaf of bread?

P: I am trying to think. Bread was like a nickel a loaf. I tell you what, I cannot get over this still. I went to Dairy Mart last night and my son for his lunch, I got two of those Hostess Cup Cakes, the orange ones. I almost died, 99 cents for one. I told my husband last night, "Do you remember when these were twelve cents?" A bottle of pop at that time with twelve ounces was either a dime or twelve cents. I cannot remember what sugar was. There was a little Italian store - Merola's was on the corner or Pratt and East Park. Another store, we called it Nick's and he was down on East Park not to far from him. Nick would run an account. Merola would too because the company let you run an account. When you paid your bill, Nick would always give you a big bag of candy bars or whatever. People trusted each other. When my father was sick, there was Dane's Gas Station down there by the brickyard. He let my dad put gas on credit. When my dad's sick pay would come in he would go pay. The thing was you paid what you owed. When Dad's sick benefits check came he had a list of people he had to pay first and then we had what was left. I think only twice did we ever have to go for commodities, for like the flour or the wheat or whatever. Then they had what they called "relief." You would go for commodities. They published in the paper when there would be a shipment of flour or oats. The peanut butter was terrible. The canned meat was terrible. There was only a couple times and that it was humiliating to anybody to go over there.

W: Was that by the town or by the government?

P: I think it was by the county. The county did that. Though, Niles had a relief office up in the Niles Bank Building. I can remember my folks going up there. I can remember my dad being humiliated because he had to go up there. You know, you figure you work all

your life-only a couple times. You would go up there and you had to ask for a food order or whatever. A lot of times, people would do that only when they felt like they were making an imposition on the company. Their friends would help them so much they just could not help them anymore.

W: That is interesting. How much was a cup of coffee back then?

P: I could not tell you. I know this sounds awful, but we never ate out.

W: Were there many restaurants or places to eat?

P: There were no fast food places. I am trying to think, there were a couple of places downtown like the Victory Cafe', what they called Spinelli's. It was down here by the brickyard, but those were also bars. Kids never went in, very few women went in, at that time. My father, in the evening or on the weekend would go play cards. They call it the Star Cafe' here in Niles on State Street. He would go and play cards. I had no idea of what he won or what he lost. We never went hungry. If he won, I know that he would stop at Islay's and would get ice cream squares. That was the only entertainment there was. I read in one of my sociology classes there was a book called Talley's Corners which showed the culture of black men and how they would stand on the corners and talk. That was their culture.

When I read that book for one of my sociology classes I thought, "That sounds like what I grew up in." The men would stand on the corner and talk. You would see the women at the bus stops standing there, waiting for the kids to get on the bus. My dad would go up to the Star Cafe' or they would call it "The Rum House." We just nick named it "The Rum House." They played cards. A lot of that was the socialization then. Some of the guys I can remember at the brickyard would drink on Saturday night. Friday night and Saturday night were the nights to drink. You don't see anybody drinking on Sunday. You had to go to work Monday. Very few people drank during the week. When they drank, they drank on Friday night and Saturday night. My father did not drink. He had drunk at one time. I do not think it was because he was with the union, but because he was a friend of a lot of them. They would end up coming to our house and my dad would end up taking them home. They took care of each other like that.

W: How many hours did your father work at the brick yard? Were they long?

P: No, he had to be at work at 7:00, I think. He got off at 5:00 or 5:30. At that time they were not considered long. Mom would pack Dad's lunch bucket just like the old metal lunch bucket, take two or three sandwiches, a thermos of coffee. He wouldn't even consider them long hours at that time.

W: Did he work on Saturday?

P: Sometimes, it depended if they had an order to get out that he worked. If he worked on Saturday he only worked half a day. There was no working on Sunday at all. The only time he ever worked on Sunday was when he became a kiln operator and had to watch the temperature on the gauges. That was the only guy who worked on Sunday.

W: What music or groups did you like as you were growing up?

P: Me or my father? I liked Elvis Presley. I can remember playing the records, the 45's, and my father would say, "If I hear that song one more time," just typical teenager. My husband and I were talking the other day. On Saturday, because of the background, the country music, everybody used to listen to WWBA out of Wheeling, West Virginia. You could go down the street and hear that at several houses. Sometimes you would see somebody sitting on the porch playing a guitar or banjo, but it was country music. You'd hear Elvis Presley. We were typical teenagers. I remember on East Park I took a Fan magazine and took out all the pictures. It was one of those big ones that say, "Fifty-two pictures of all your favorite stars." I scotched taped them around my room. It was mostly country music. I did not like country music then. My folks did, but I like rock and roll.

W: Did your parents every Saturday listen to the radio? Was it a part of their life or a part of their entertainment?

P: No, my mother listened to a lot of radio. She was the one who listened. Usually my dad was playing cards. After work he would come for supper. He would clean up, he would have supper and go play cards for a couple of hours, never a long time. Usually he would be home by 9:00. My grandmother had the first T.V. on the block. All of them were watching wrestling on Saturday afternoon. The screen was so small that you had to sit right in front of it. She taught, she was a teacher. She had the first color T.V. on the block. That was a big deal. You had the big, wide bands of different colors, orange, green, that was ugly. You know, the radio, games.

W: Board games?

P: Card games mostly.

W: Bridge?

P: No, war, fish, rummy, knuckles, those sort of games. In the evening, you would gather out in the street and play hide and go seek until dark. We played "Mother May I" until dark, that sort of thing.

End Of Interview