

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Idora Park Project

Employment at Idora

O. H. 802

JOHN ZUPKO

Interviewed

by

Robert Toti

on

February 19, 1987

## JOHN ZUPKO

John B. Zupko was born on December 26, 1908, the son of John and Mary Zupko in Homestead, Pennsylvania. As a youngster, his family moved to East Youngstown (Campbell) where he attended school through the eighth grade. At age fifteen he went to work for the Pennsylvania Railroad Company to help support the family. On July 28, 1933, he was married to his wife, Ann, and they have two children: John who is a principal in the Flint, Michigan School System and Jo-ann who is a registered nurse. During the 1930's, Mr. Zupko worked at various jobs until he was hired on December 20, 1937 by the Youngstown Police Department. His work as a police officer was interrupted from March 10, 1944 to March 22, 1946 when he served in the U. S. Army Air Corps. Upon his return, he resumed work for the Youngstown Police Department until he retired on December 31, 1974.

To supplement his income, Mr. Zupko worked at Idora Park for a short time during the late 1930's and on a regular basis during the late 1950's through 1974. He spent time patrolling the midway and also worked in the ballroom on numerous occasions. Mr. Zupko attends Holy Name Church and belongs to the Fraternal Order of Police and Fire Retirees.

Rob Toti

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INTERVIEWEE: JOHN ZUPKO

INTERVIEWER: Robert Toti

SUBJECT: security guard duties, record hops, special days,  
dance hall, baseball field

DATE: February 19, 1987

T: This is an interview with John Zupko for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, by Rob Toti, at 220 South Dunlap, on February 19, 1987, at 10:30 a.m.

First of all, could you tell me a little bit about your childhood?

Z: I was born in Homestead, Pennsylvania on December 26, 1908. My dad worked in the steel mills, Homestead Steel. We left there. A couple of years later we moved to Campbell, which then was known as East Youngstown. My dad worked at Carnegie here on the west side. He left there and went to the Youngstown Sheet & Tube. I worked in the Bessemer Department for thirty-seven years.

I went to school in Campbell at what is now the Italian Hall. I went there for kindergarten. I went to Gordon School. In the meantime they had built Reed School so they transferred us up there. Then we moved to Hazelton on Hazeltine Avenue. Before that it was a wilderness, no paved streets, no sidewalks, no water, no electricity, no gas.

When we moved to Hazelton, we had everything. We were like lords. The school was just two blocks down the street. The church was just a block down the street, so we were very well pleased. Our parents were happy. They gave us a better way of life.

I attended Hazelton School and Center Street School which is now torn down. Then we were transferred to Lincoln School. I left Hazelton School in the seventh grade and attended Lincoln School in the seventh. In eighth grade my mother said that I had to go to work. At fourteen years of age I had to go to work.

I went to work for my uncle down at Homestead. I left there in December of 1923 and I came back home. In February of 1924 I started the Pennsylvania Railroad, at the age of fifteen. I worked in the shop track. At seventeen I started at the blacksmith's shop as a helper and I served my apprenticeship as a blacksmith. We moved the shop over to Mosier, up on this side of Girard. We worked there about three years and the Depression came along. That was October 29, 1929 when the bottom dropped out. I was furloughed in the last of November and I was unemployed for three and a half years.

Then I started playing politics. I got a job down at the Lincoln Park and I worked there from June until the last of November. I got laid off. I went down to Lyny Evans who was the park commissioner. He said, "What do you want, John?" I said, "Mr. Evan I was laid off." He said, "I know it. You were all laid off." I said, "Mr. Evans, I didn't work for three and a half years. Please, I would appreciate it a lot if you would give me a job back." He said, "Do you know Jimmy McGunnigal up at the golf course?" I didn't. "You go up there and tell him that I sent you up there. Don't say anything to anybody." So I did. We repaired the mowers and stuff, getting things ready for the spring. I worked there all spring, summer, and fall. Again, I was laid off in November. He said, "What do you want?" I said, "I want my job back." He said, "You were just laid off yesterday." I said, "Mr. Evans, I got married." "Okay," he said, "you go back to work." So I went back to work. I got laid off again the following November. He said, "What do you want now?" I said, "Mr. Evans, I have a baby." So I went back to work. This is the truth.

Then I took a job down at the mill for a short while. The strike came on. I went back after the strike and then on December 15, 1937 we were appointed and we started to work on December 20, 1937. I worked there until December 31, 1974. That was thirty-seven years and twelve days. For two years and twelve days I was in the Army Air Corps. I was stationed down at Tucson, Arizona. I raised a family. We had two children. I have been retired. I am on my thirteenth year and I worked at Idora Park.

I started at Idora Park before World War II. Gene Murphy was our secretary. I was transferred to the garage in the police department. Gene had charge over the police protection out at the Idora Park and he asked me if I wanted to work out there. I said, "Yes." So I worked out there that summer, the following summer. Then I quit. In those days you had no blacktop. It was all just dirt with oil on it.

We got crowds there. It was during the Depression. We had 3¢ days, kiddie days. The Vindicator, Isaly's, Schwebel's, and several other outfits granted those 3¢ days. They were big. There were 20,000, 25,000, 30,000 people. They had a good time.

I left there and I went back when John Carney had charge of it. This was in the late 1950's when I went out there. I worked the midway. I used to work as many as forty-two, forty-four hours a week during the summer months out there and forty with the city. Then I went to the dance hall.

I used to work the dance hall on Tuesdays by myself at the record hop. We started with 200 and we worked it up over 1,100 kiddies. I worked it by myself. Wednesday was big name bands. Thursday I would work the midway. Friday we had the record hop again with anywhere from 2,600 to 2,800 kiddies and Saturday was the regular Saturday night couples dance. Sunday was over eighteen dance. We had a lot of college kids who came out there on Sunday nights. We had a five or six piece band. I put a lot of time in at that dance hall.

We had the biggest of bands come out there. Years ago when I was courting my wife, we had Ace Brigode, Hank Biagginni, Jimmy Dimmick. I don't recall some of the other bands, but they were there for the season. They were hired for the season. Their day off would be Monday and they would play holidays, afternoon and in the evening, Saturday afternoon, Saturday evening, Sunday afternoon, Sunday evening. It was 5¢ a dance. By the time you went around once, the music stopped. You cleared the floor until the music started again. There were some great times out there.

I would say that that dance hall was the salvation of saving the park during the Depression. There were a lot of people who went out there to dance for 5¢. You took \$1 out and you had a date, you had yourself a lot of dances.

Towards the end there . . . On Saturdays we used to average 700 to 800 and then it dwindled down to 200, 250. If we had a crowd of 300 or 400, we were happy. In the last two years they took a beating with that dance hall. We just didn't get the people out there. We had the bands, same bands we had before, but a lot of our people gave dancing up; a lot of them got sick; some of them passed away; some of them moved and that was it. The young ones didn't want to accept our style of dancing and our music so we couldn't induce the young ones to come out there and take part. It was the largest dance hall between New York and Chicago.

T: Why did you decide to become an Idora Park employee?

Z: At the time the police department's salary wasn't very good. To tell you the truth, when I started with the police department I was making \$140.80 a month. That was big money during the Depression. It was on a graduating scale. The second year I got \$154 and starting the third year it was \$165. Then we were raised to \$180. That is what it was when I went into the service in 1944. When I came back, they were receiving \$200 a month and the pay was very, very poor.

Even though the mills were working 100 percent, politicians always found a way of excluding us, especially former Mayor Kryzan. Mills were working 100 percent and he wouldn't even meet with our committees. He would order them out of his office. We never got a raise for six years. In other words, of the thirty-seven years and twelve days that I worked for the city of Youngstown, sixteen years were dry years that we didn't receive any cost of living at all. So that's why I had to work extra.

I worked extra at the park, and the day that it closed on Labor Day, the following Friday, I went down to the Park Theater, the burlesque house, and I worked there seven days a week, seven evenings a week. I put in about twenty-six hours a week. I did that for twenty-two years down there. I had thirty years out at the park. Also, in between, at the Brass Rail . . . I used to work there on Friday nights and Saturday nights. When I would go to the Park Theater, I would have someone else work it.

I had to do it. I had two children who I wanted to give an education and I was paying on this home. As I said, the wages were puny. It was shameful, a disgrace of what they were paying us and we were out there risking our lives.

The population then was 186,000 compared to 94,000 today. We had 165 policemen. When I came on the job, we worked six days a week. We didn't have all of the brass that we have today. We had three captains, traffic commissioner, deputy traffic commissioner, twelve detectives, chief of police, chief of detectives. That was the brass. All the rest was patrol.

We used to have community days out there. We had Pennsylvania. We had fine community days. They were large. They were anywhere from 35,000 to 40,000, 50,000 people. The unions sponsored picnics out there on Labor Day and you had 50,000, 55,000 people out there. Everything was free. The union paid for everything. Isaly's sponsored three picnics out there a year, the junior, senior, and the family. They were big. Schwebel's sponsored a picnic out there for kiddies. We used to give prizes away.

Most of our business was from western Pennsylvania down as far as Homestead. We had enormous crowds, honestly, big, big crowds. In those days they spent money. There was an awful lot of money made out at that park. They had twenty-five golden years out there. Where can you look back in history where everybody was working for twenty-five consecutive years? My dad worked in that steel mill for thirty-seven years. He never put in a full year. These people were making big, big money.

T: Could you describe a typical day for yourself while you were at Idora Park?

Z: On the big days--they were during the week--we were supposed

to have three, sometimes four, policemen. We didn't have any carts like they had toward the end there. We had to walk. We had a different system then. The last several years that they operated you would purchase your tickets, a daily pass for all of the rides including everything, as you entered. Then there was a ticket booth near the dance hall, one up the midway by the Striker. Then they had one up where the airplanes were and then one up in Kiddie Land. Then sometimes we would have to go around. Each one was stationed in a certain area. "How are your tickets? How is your change?" They were doing enormous business. You would go to the office and pick up a roll of tickets and change.

There were days when I went out there with 35,000, 40,000 people and I was the only one. I never said anything. I kept going. I used to have to walk the railroad tracks to get away from the crowd. I would make better time. At the end of the day Max would say, "You have done one hell of a job today, John." I said, "I did?" He said, "Yes. There were supposed to be three of you." I said, "Where were the other two?" He said, "I don't know." He never put in an extra dollar for that day. I put in some rough days out there but I was happy. I was bringing home some bread. I wanted my children to get that education so I didn't care how hard I worked or how many hours I worked, that was the last thing.

T: So you say you worked forty-plus hours a week then at Idora?

Z: Yes.

T: Without many co-workers?

Z: That's right.

T: How were you dressed? Were you armed?

Z: Always in uniform, yes. We never had any problems out there. They were rare occasions, honestly. The only time that we had to walk somebody out was on those Friday nights; the first five or six weeks that we would open each season, we would have to walk somebody out to the gate. They became a little rowdy. We didn't want that anymore so we walked them out to the gate. If we saw them enter the park, we would run them out of the park. After that, we would have no problems at all. It was beautiful, honestly, working with those people, especially the ones from out of town. You had no problems with them at all. They were beautiful people. They came out there for a good time; they enjoyed themselves.

T: What types of problems were you trained to deal with and what were the park's policies concerning these types of problems?

Z: Once in a while you would have two bullies, one from one school and one from another school, and they would meet there and they were going to fight. We used to take them to the office. We would have to set an example from the beginning, so you sent them both in. In those days there was no such thing that a juvenile couldn't ride in a patrol wagon. The laws were changed later. In those days you put them in the wagon and you hauled them down, let the judge handle it. Then we wouldn't have any problems.

Like I said, I had very little problems out there in the thirty years that I was out there. The dance hall, one New Year's Eve someone had spilled a drink on a lady's mink coat. I went there and I asked the man and the woman, "Do you have a problem?" "No." In the meantime he turned around and hit this guy. I said, "Was your coat damaged?" "Oh, no." I said, "If it is, you send it to the cleaners and send us the bill." That was the policy, see. We didn't want any lawsuits. A couple of weeks later Max got a hold of me and said, "John, we have a problem." "What is it?" "We are being sued." I said, "Look, I asked that party if there was any damage done to her coat and she said no and he said no. We are off the hook, don't worry about a thing." That was it. These two couples, the ones who spilled the drink, I ordered them out. That was it. Those were the only two couples that I can recall in the thirty years that I was out there that I had to put out on a New Year's Eve. One other time was firecrackers. During the summer months there were tons of firecrackers, so we put them out. Those were the only incidents that we had. They were nice people out there, real nice, honestly.

To come out there on a Saturday night and see those people dressed, I'm telling you! They were middle-aged people and senior citizens. They put on their best. They took great pride in themselves. We had good bands, honestly, very good bands. We had some good times. I hate to see that place go.

I had my children out there. We had our grandchildren out there. Every time our grandchildren came to visit us we always took them out to the park. They had some great times out there. They really enjoyed it.

Did you get the history of the park?

T: Yes, a little bit.

Z: The Youngstown Railway Company were the original owners of Idora Park. They opened the park in 1895. Years later, Mr. Christie Deibel bought the park from the Railway Company and operated it by himself. Later he took Mr. Patrick Duffy as a partner as the work load was to heavy. Then Mr. Max Rindin, a former employee of Mr. Deibel's, bought in. Mr. Cavalier bought out Mr. Deibel and this made Mr. Duffy the majority stockholder.



Idora Park closed in 1984. It operated for ninety years. Many a couple met there for the first time on the midway, on the rides, on the picnic grounds, or in the dance hall and later on they marched up to the altar and said, "I do." We lost a treasure, but as they say, "Time takes its toll and time marches on."

The park had a theater directly across from the park office. Seating capacity was for about eighty people. They played Summer Stock. Lillian Desmond and her troupe played the theater for many summers. She married Dr. Rantz., a local surgeon. Upon his death, she sold the property and moved to Arizona.

I worked for Max. Max had charge of that park for thirty-five years. There was no set closing date like there is today. They close at 9:00 or 10:00. There was no set closing date. I would say, "Max, I'm tired. I want to go home. I have to get up in the morning. I have to put in another eight hours and then I have to come here again." "I know Zupko." About the third time, "Well, if you take a look up the midway, you see two people. Can't close yet, Zupko." Everybody was working on a salary then, all but the police. Maybe he would have two of us working for \$2 an hour. He made them a lot of money.

They had a man who ran around and did the booking for the park. He was the manager of the dance hall for twenty-two years.

T: Is it Al Conway?

Z: No. Al Conway ran a concession stand. The ballroom manager's name was Al Jackson. He was a musician, a very, very talented musician. He played in those clubs and hotels in Chicago. He worked there for twenty-two years. The day that the park would close he would start booking for the following year. We had closed days on Mondays but there were years where he would book six and seven Mondays. This man was terrific. One year Al said to Max, "I have more picnics booked this year than ever." You know what Max told him? He said, "Get more."

They made a lot of money out there. They were good people to work for. I loved it; I enjoyed it, honestly. I had a good time out there.

T: What do you remember about Aliquippa Day?

Z: I worked eleven of those. The church people from the Aliquippa area, they booked the park in . They worked on a commission basis. They sold so many tickets and after so many tickets, it was a percentage basis. It was good. They were beautiful people. Most of those people brought a change of clothes with them. They put on their evening refinery in

the evening. There were fifty, sixty buses that came in, maybe more. Then towards the end, a gang came in from Warren and they just tore things all up. They used to have a dance at Idora that evening and they would book in a big colored band and they would also put on a show. This gang from Warren came in and they just wrecked the place.

T: Was this during Aliquippa Day?

Z: Yes, that evening, yes. They rented the dance hall no more to them and that was it. It was no fault of anyone from Aliquippa. It was the gang from Warren that came in that caused all of the disturbance. I was there that night, breaking up fights, no kidding. That was the last one I ever worked. I said, "I'll work here but I'll never do another one like that, no way." They were good, good people, honestly. We had no problem of our own. That was the gang from Warren that did it. It's a shame. That was their fund raiser.

T: Do you have any reason why the fight might have broken out?

Z: They were looking for guns and knives a week before from Warren. Why, I don't know. That was the word around town.

T: Were these white people from Warren or black?

Z: No, all black. The only white people you saw there was some security and regular help. All the rest were black. We had no problem with them, just that one time. They just ruined it for everybody. They still had Aliquippa Days after that but they wouldn't let them use the dance hall anymore and they strengthened the security.

T: Do you have any idea what year that might have been?

Z: That would be in the 1960's sometime.

T: Early 1960's?

Z: Yes, early 1960's. Yes, it was a shame, honestly. We had no problem with them at all. The bus would never leave unless they had every person in that bus that they brought there. They had one person in charge with a list of names and they would call. If the party wasn't there, they would go and have their name announced. They were beautiful people, no problem with them at all. This was a fund raiser for them and they were on their best. It is a shame; those things happen. That is the only major incident that I can recall out there.

T: What would you say were the biggest fund raisers, which groups brought in the largest crowds?

Z: For dances, Youngstown Police. They booked in a band and it was for a one night affair and it snowed. Thank God it snowed. We must have had eight inches of snow that night on a Saturday night. We had 3,500 people in the dance hall. Everybody wanted their table; they wanted room to dance, so we had a problem. I told Giedner, who was then the president, "This is not a fly-by-night affair. This is going to be an annual affair. Why don't you make it a Friday and a Saturday? Have one color ticket for Friday and one for Saturday. Try to split your crowd," which they did and it worked out beautifully. Now, one night is enough.

Then the police held fights out there when I first joined the police department. They had some really good fights out there and the place was full. We would have 14,000, 15,000, 16,000 people out there. They ran those fights for several years and then we switched over to shows at Stambaugh Auditorium.

Idora Park served many purposes years ago. Professional ball teams played out there. We had big league ball teams that came out there. In those days a ball player didn't make what he is paid today. That was their only means of livelihood. Bob Feller would get like fifteen, twenty men and they would go through all of these towns and head south. They would get down there around December and then they would disman. That was a way of adding money to their payroll. Babe Ruth was out here, Nick Altrock and his partner--two clowns of baseball. I saw the St. Louis Cardinals here; I saw the New York Giants here at Idora. Then you have a lot of big league colored teams that came out here to play. Homestead Grays would come in three, four times a year and play some exhibition ball games. Philadelphia, Detroit, places always . . . Then for three years they had big rodeos there. That would last for a week. People here didn't go for rodeos so it didn't pay off. We had vice-presidents here, H. H. H. What was his name?

T: Hubert Humphrey.

Z: Yes. He was here. He was here and spoke at Idora and the crowd wouldn't go to the ball field to listen to him. They had no use for him. We had 55,000 people that day. I don't think there were 300 people at the ball field to listen to him.

Then they always put on a display of fireworks on July 4 and it was big. God, it was big! It lasted about thirty-five, forty minutes. We would have crowds out there. Years ago where the Kiddie Land is that used to be a swimming pool.

Then for several years Idora Park instead of sponsoring dances, it was an open-air affair. They would use plywood to seal it in and they would set up stoves and they would roller-skate there for a number of years.

T: Where was this?

Z: Idora Park at the dance hall.

T: At the dance hall?

Z: Yes, they used that as a skating rink because it was an open-air affair. It only had a roof on it. It wasn't until Tony Cavalier bought it. See, he was a contractor. He got these two partners interested and they went ahead and made it what it is today. It was beautiful, really gorgeous, honestly. I don't know what year that was. It had to be at least thirty years ago or better when they remodeled that dance hall, closed it in.

T: Getting back to the ball players, did they play during the off-season then?

Z: Yes.

T: The Giants and the Cardinals?

Z: The Giants and the Cardinals came here during the regular season, exhibition games.

T: Getting back to the ballroom, what was your relationship with Ed Molchan?

Z: Eddie came in there after me. I was with Idora for a number of years. When Al Jackson passed away, Eddie took over the ballroom; he was assigned to the ballroom. He managed the ballroom. Eddie worked for a number of years.

We tried everything out there to induce people to come out there, reduced rates and everything else. It just didn't work, that's all. I used to talk to people and say, "I don't see you out there anymore." "Well, John, we play cards now," or "We go swimming on Saturday nights." That is business that is taken away from you. It just went downhill. There was nothing you could do. Everything was tried. We advertised in the papers and everything else, not only locally but all over, down in Beaver Falls, up in the Canton area. We just couldn't get them to come, that's all.

T: What do you remember about the owners of the park, Patrick Duffy, Cavalier, Max Rindin?

Z: Max was a sharp businessman. You couldn't pull anything over on Max. He was all business, which was good for Idora Park. Old man Duffy had the concession stands and he would pay the park forty percent of what he took in. Then that was split three ways so he would get on-third of that back again. He was responsible for all of the concession stands. Then they

had three rides there that they leased, didn't belong to them. One of them was the bumper.

T: The bumper cars?

Z: The bumper cars, yes. That was there for . . . God, I was a kid when I used to go out there. I was sixteen, seventeen. When that closed, they still had it so you can imagine it was there a good sixty years. That was leased to them. It was worked on the percentage basis and there were two other rides.

Tony had charge of the dance hall and food concessions were handled by Mickey Rindin, that was Max's son. He handled all of the food concessions and he also had a helper. On big days they were kept going. They just couldn't keep up with the crowd; they couldn't. You had about four or five stands there and also they were responsible for the stand in the dance hall. You had to keep it supplied with beer and whatnot, so they were kept busy.

T: How often were these men at the park?

Z: Seven days a week all day.

T: Who did you deal with most often?

Z: Max, he was the prime minister.

T: Getting back to your job as security guard, can you describe any other unusual events that took place?

Z: Yes. Standing there with my back to the Lost River where the fire started, my back was to it and I was talking to someone. I was working the midway. He said, "John, look, soap suds." They were going up and up and up and up. First thing you know it was just like somebody dumped snow thirty feet high. They had a falling out, a misunderstanding with one of the local citizens. He hired two men and told them to go on that boat ride and dump those suds, which they did. As they came out we snagged them. They had the box so he had to make restitution. We had to drain it and he had to pay for all of that water and damage and everything else. I don't know what it cost but I know it was costly. After that, he turned out alright.

T: So these weren't pranksters then. They were hired to . . .

Z: They were hired, yes. They were hired to do it, yes.

T: Do you have any idea what was the cause of this problem?

Z: A misunderstanding over the rental of the dance hall. He wanted Saturdays and they wouldn't let him have Saturdays. They gave him Fridays. That was his way of getting even with them.

T: What do you remember about the Spencer brothers in 1968?

Z: Spencer?

T: When I spoke with Teddy Terlesky, he mentioned that there was a problem that arose. I guess it was around the time of the death of Martin Luther King. According to him, it was more of the troublesome times.

Z: He was in charge of security and I wasn't working the midway then. I had worked the midway the last fifteen years. I worked just the dance hall. If there was nothing at the dance hall, I didn't work. I got a little too old for that midway. It was a lot of work.

At one time we used to have two securities at the dance hall on any dance with the exception of record hops on Fridays. We always had six, sometimes seven at the record hops. Any other dance we always had two security people. We used to on the big name bands. We would book them on a Wednesday and sometimes a Friday. There was nothing to get 2000 people, and mostly from out of town. So your parking lot was full and your dance hall was full. You were dealing with strangers, but we never had any problems, no problems.

T: How often did you work at the Heidelberg?

Z: When I first started, I worked there about four times. They used to use that on Sundays for nationality days. The nationality days would always have a band there playing and they would dance. They served food there; it was very, very good. This was all run by the park in those days. They ran the kitchen; they ran the entire place and they would have maybe 200 people there dancing. It was nice, really nice. I worked that about four times on Sundays on nationality days.

I'm of Slovak descent and we couldn't get a Sunday. The best we could do was a Wednesday Slovak Day. Everybody wanted to rent on a Sunday. You had almost sixteen Sundays out of the season at the most and you just had to wait your turn. Well, we did wait our turn and finally we got Sundays. It was abandoned because of the intermarriage. The nationality days became a thing of the past. As a matter of fact you used to have two Italian Days out there, two different factions. They had Swedish Day, Irish Day, Jewish Day, Romanian Day. You name it, they had it. Ours was on a Wednesday. It was nothing to have 35,000, 40,000 people there. There were trains down at the square. They would get off of the Erie. They would cross that square and you would think there was a war going on with the baskets, bringing their food along with them, coming for the day.

T: Do you know if the park owned those trucks or buses?

- Z: No, that was all railway. Then you had the lagoon. That lagoon was beautiful. The car would go right around and drop you off and they would take off. They would load up and go downtown, drop you off. It pulled in one way, discharged and then it came in another way. Then they would back up and come on the other side of the square, load up and out you went.
- T: What were the sock hops like? You mentioned that they took place sometimes on Tuesdays?
- Z: Yes. I had them myself on Tuesdays with no problems. I weeded out the bad ones, which were very few. We had the better kids on Tuesdays. Fridays, like I said the first five or six dances we would have problems but then after that when we weeded them all out, we had no problems. Once in a great while you would have a small problem. When they came through, I would check them out. This way they knew that they were being watched. How could you control 2,800 kids if you didn't do that? It was just a matter of psychology, that's all.
- T: These were mostly high school kids?
- Z: Yes. When they reached eighteen years of age, we told them to come out on Sundays because they had already become more or less adults. They would come out on Sundays and we also had those attending dances on Sundays who attended college, girls and boys. They were a little better dressed. See, you start a sock hop and then you graduate to Sundays. After they dance a year or so on Sundays then you say, "Look, get yourself a date and come out on Saturdays." They would come out there with their parents or come out there with a date and they would have a good time. That is how they learned to dance.
- T: Did the sock hops have DJ's?
- Z: Oh, yes. We used to get Boots Bell out there and Swinging Sweeney. He used to be with WFMJ. They would bring a man with them. He ran the turntables, spun the records. They gave him \$10 and they kept \$65. You paid one man for \$75. Then you would get a band in there for \$37.50, a five piece band. That was the scale, \$37.50.
- T: For the whole band?
- Z: The band leader got \$11.50 and the other four got \$6 each.
- T: I guess you are better off being a DJ.
- Z: We had some great times out there, some great, great times. Then they all had followers. When they would get through and would walk up that midway and those kids were walking up that midway . . . You figure you have 2,800 kids. The average kid will get \$1 from his parents. They paid 50¢ admission

to get in and they had 50¢ to spend on the midway. You are taking in \$2,800. That's not bad for a Friday night just from the record hoppers.

At 11:00 we shut down. We marched them out to the gate and we stood there with them to make sure that nobody tried to interfere with them, tried to pick them up. Many a time I took five or six kids home myself. The uncle didn't show up; the mother didn't show up; the aunt didn't show up; the father didn't show up; the neighbor didn't show up. "Where do you live? Alright, get in the car." That's right, every Friday. It was very rare on a Friday when I didn't take somebody home because we always wanted these kids back and we didn't want any harm to come to them. Once some harm would come to them, then you are done. There goes your business.

Also, we got complaints from parents that we were selling beer there. They didn't get any beer out at Idora so we had two policemen out there going through the cars. They found beer in the cars. They would come in and bring the kid in. "Look, your mother called." They would call the mother up. "Come down to the park." "What for?" "You come down to the park. Here is the beer that was found in your child's car." That broke that up. There is always someone trying to pull a fast one.

- T: Did the policemen use a flashlight and search inside the car?
- Z: Yes. There was always a way of getting it in there in those days.
- T: What did you do in Kiddie Land?
- Z: They had the Kiddie Land rides. They had about thirty rides in Kiddie Land and those were beautiful. That was one of the few parks that had Kiddie Land rides. It would take youngsters there up until a certain age. That is where I started all of my grandchildren. We would take them out there to Kiddie Land. Then you took them on the better rides and eventually as they grew older you put them on the major rides. They used to reach a certain age and say, "I don't want to go on that anymore, Grandpa. I want to go on . . ." They wouldn't even want to go on the merry-go-round. They outgrew that.
- T: What was your busiest time of the year?
- Z: Any time during the season maybe you would have ten to fifteen big picnics that would draw crowds of 40,000 or 50,000 people.

Lyden Oil sponsored a gimmick. If you went to any gasoline station in town, a Lyden Oil gas station that sold Lyden Oil, they would give you so many tickets for so many gallons. Then they would rent the park out for a week sponsoring this event. That would be from 11:00 in the morning until 12:00 at night; that is thirteen hours of riding for seven days. They would



come out there with rolls of tickets. You were waiting in line forty, forty-five minutes before you could get a ride.

They would pass out from the sun hitting them. I worked on a kid one day who was out completely. I put him in the shade. I said, "Look, do you want to sit here?" He said, "No, I want to ride." He got back in line. Those were big, big days.

Then they tried to scab on one another and you were there to break it up. Or another one would come along. Here was a kid waiting forty minutes; he has five minutes to go before he gets a ride. He would say, "Here, here are forty tickets for this ride." He has that many tickets.

T: Were these huge crowds hard to control?

Z: No.

T: Did they seem too large for one person to deal with?

Z: No.

T: Did you ever feel boxed in?

Z: No. They respected the law. That is one thing I will say. Parents were a little more strict. The parents have become loose with their children in the last twenty-five years. Parents, more or less in those days, were closer with their children than they are today. What brought all of this about was big money.

T: How did Idora Park deal with night security?

Z: They had a man stationed there all night long. At times, years ago, they had a colored fellow by the name of Smith. He had a brother on the Youngstown Police Department. He was there every night, seven nights a week and he had two police dogs with him. One time they were going to surprise him, break into the office. He and the dogs got after them and he shot one of them. There were a couple of other times where they made attempts to break in but he and the dogs prevented them from breaking in.

T: Did you ever have to use your gun?

Z: No, not out there, no. There was no reason for it.

T: What was your reaction to the fire that took place in 1984?

Z: Well, that was my second home you might as well say. I went out there the very next day and what I saw brought on tears. I hate to say that but it really brought on tears. These people were very, very good to me and Idora Park meant something to

me and my family. Like I said, there were three generations that enjoyed the park hoping that it would be here forever, never giving a thought that one day we wouldn't have it. We took it for granted that we would always have Idora Park. Well, there came a day when we didn't have it.

The worst day that I ever was out there was Sunday when they had the auction. I happened to work that Sunday and that crew came in from Coldwater, Michigan. I can't think of the name of the outfit. It was a high class outfit. And the merry-go-round . . . I used to pass that and I just took it for granted every time I went by. I would stop and take a look at it. I admired it. We were one of the few in the country . . . This was hand carved and they auctioned it off. I never thought I would live to see that day.

T: Were you working when the fire happened?

Z: No. I was off. It happened in the morning. They were welding boats. I went up the next day.

T: Were you involved in the investigation at all?

Z: No. That was conducted by the fire department.

T: What do you remember about the reaction of the employees?

Z: They all felt bad. The last couple years that they operated they cut the wages way down because they couldn't afford to pay better wages. They tried everything. The biggest mistake they made--I hate to say it--but in order to open they went to the bank to borrow money. I don't know how much money they borrowed from the Dollar Bank. The Dollar Bank charged them twenty-two and one-half percent interest. There is no way that any business can operate when they have to pay twenty-two and one-half percent interest on their loan. Max voted against it. He said, "We can't operate under this, on that scale. Let's just stay closed." He was outvoted. They tried it for two years.

The help was only receiving \$1.50 an hour, which prior to that they were receiving \$3.50, \$4.00 an hour, some of them more. The help who did work there was only too happy to receive that because there were no jobs anywhere. They were putting in long hours so in the end they maybe made themselves \$14 or \$15. It was better than them hanging around the house or loafing around the corner somewhere and the parents didn't have to worry about them because they knew they were working.

We had a lot of youth who worked out there. I'm going way back. They made \$35 a week and they went through college on that. Muck Pennett, he was a former fighter, he worked out there for years and years, \$35 a week. Finally, he joined a stagehand union and he was getting \$75 a week. So he left them and he worked

the stagehand.

Gene Tunney came out there to referee fights. Joe Lewis came out there to referee fights. Gene Tunney when he was heavyweight champion, Joe Lewis when he was heavyweight champion, came out to referee fights.

T: Could you compare the Idora Park of the 1950's to the Idora Park of the 1960's, 1970's, and 1980's including the crowds and their attitudes and the way it was run?

Z: The base of operation was practically the same all of those years. Of course, the price of the rides did go up and food and drinks and whatnot in order to keep up with times. The crowds came out there for a good time. I had no problem. Like I said, once in a while you would run into something.

I remember one year there when I was working midway we had a problem with a kid. I put him out of the park. I didn't want him back anymore. The next time he came in I told him that that was it. Other than that . . . In those days you had three men working the midway, one at the upper end, one in the middle, and I worked from the merry-go-round down, but if there was a dance on I would be in the dance hall.

They had wrestling out there for a number of years out at Idora. But I think the nicest display that was ever put on was when we had the fights that we had. The first all steel ring in the world just was built and was given to us. We had that ring and had chairs brought out. We went down to Struthers Field House and got the auxiliary bleachers and brought truckloads of them in and put them up. It was really picturesque after it was all set up, honestly. It was like a street with sayings on, posts with sayings on it and everything else, sections. It was beautiful, honestly, really beautiful. We paid the fighters good money and the last fight that we had there they waltzed; they danced; they hugged and kissed. They wouldn't fight. Gene Tunney was refereeing that fight. Everybody was hollering to throw them both out of the ring. He wouldn't do that.

We had a ball team come up here from Baltimore. They played minor league baseball. They weren't making any money in the Baltimore area because Baltimore wasn't a big league town in those days. Joe Gamebria brought the ball team up. There were seven of them from that ball team that made the majors the next year. You show me any other minor league ball club in the country at any time that served up seven ball players for the following year into the majors and they stayed there. It was a good ball club.

T: If you could have done your job differently, what would you have changed?

- Z: Nothing, just do what I did. We have had fights out there. You break them up. They don't mean anything. I worked a wedding out there. So they are going to fight. So we blocked the doors. One guy came out and said, "I'll straighten everything out." Okay. I wouldn't open my door. My buddy opened his door. I would never open a door because if you got those two or three away then you would have no problem; they would be out of the park.
- T: Did you ever get hurt in a fight out at Idora?
- Z: Not at Idora.
- T: Are there any other humorous or unusual events that stand out in your mind when you think about Idora Park?
- Z: We had some weird people who came out there at times.
- T: Describe some of those.
- Z: I can't think of them now. We had a fellow who had a lawsuit. He received \$12,000. In two years he spent it all out there. He came out there dressed like a dude. He did rides and games and everything else and the money went. It didn't take long.
- T: Do you remember anything about the incident on the Jack Rabbit when a young person lost his life?
- Z: I worked that night. I was standing in front of the office. I saw them get out of the car in front of the structure, alongside of it. They jumped into the cars, three of them. The two ladies in front of them said, "Hey, you better not do that. You are going to get hurt." They had been drinking. They went down. Then there were the little loops. About that loop, when you go down and you are coming up, if you are not holding it is going to throw you and that is what it did; it threw him. When they came in, these two kids were white, actually white. They sobered up just like that. They went over and got the ambulance. He was dead.
- T: This was their friend?
- Z: Yes. There were three of them from New Castle. They sued the park but nothing happened. They had no lawsuit coming because there were too many witnesses there. I saw them when they got out.
- T: Do you remember approximately what time that took place?
- Z: That was in the evening between about 9:00 and 10:00 in the evening.
- T: What was the reaction of the other people on the car?

Z: They came in the office and they said that they found a couple of them were clowning around. They said that they told them to behave and that they were going to get hurt, and that is exactly what took place. As a matter of fact, you didn't have to call them in; they came in themselves.

T: What was the reaction of the employees when this took place?

Z: Nobody liked to see that. It hurts the park; it hurts the business. You don't want anything like that to happen because the people right away think that the rides aren't safe. It wasn't the safety of the rides; it was just that these kids were clowning around. We have had that happen before where they got on and had been drinking, but they were fortunate enough not to get hurt or you would see them standing up like on the Wildcat. You would see them standing up. That is the worst thing you could do. Your life isn't worth 2¢. That goes fifty-nine miles an hour full speed, honestly. It completes a circle in one minute, full circle. They used to run three of them there. Then they were told to cut down on three for safety reasons and just operate two. They would start out one and then after they saw the light flick on then it was safe to send the second one.

T: Do you think there is anything else in this interview that we have left out that needs to be mentioned?

Z: Let's go way back. We used to have monkeys at the park. Did you know about that?

T: You can tell me a little bit about them.

Z: Did anyone tell you that they broke loose one time? They were catching them down at Mill Creek Park. Yes, there is a lot of history that is connected with that park, a lot of history.

People used to go out there. In those days the main attraction was baseball at Idora Park and it was too hot to go to a theater. We tried to stay away from theaters during the summer months so we went to Idora Park. That is what other people did. Those streetcars were loaded. That is where you would go, Idora Park. It was great, really, really great. You would go out there in the summertime and, like I said, it was an open-air dance hall. It was cool in there; it wasn't that hot and you had good music. A lot of people used to come in there just to sit down where the concession stand is now because they had bleachers there. They would sit in the bleachers just listening to music. It was great, honest to God.

Those days are gone. We were one of the few in the country that had what we had and we lost it. They tried everything. They lost money but they tried. It just wasn't there, that's all.

When we closed on the closing date, we had around 1,100 people, 1,200 people. If just half of that crowd would have been out there every Saturday and every Wednesday, there wouldn't have been any reason to sell it. They could have operated it. They even operated on 200 people back then. That was the price of the band. They had other obligations. You want to make \$1 too because you are in business. They had insurances and five furnaces going; they are costly. It was just too much maintenance and then you would have a crew come in there to clean up. It took a lot of work and a lot of money. They wanted them to bring so-and-so band in, but then when they brought so-and-so band in, then they weren't there. A lot of those things, see. That's the way it is.

There is a day of reckoning for all of us, not only Idora Park. We were fortunate because we were one of the last in the country to still hold onto the park. There were larger cities than ours that had to give up on it. There were a lot of people who talked about the merry-go-round staying here. Where is it going to stay? It is going to cost you money for security, protection. Do you see how much money they are spending now renovating it?

T: They bought it for about \$400,000?

Z: Yes. Now they are renovating it. It is going to take two years before they can put it to use. A girl down at the Vindicator had an article about six months ago. She was told that it was in the process now of being renovated and that it was going to take two years. A lot of that we just patched up. They had to put new legs on it, so on and so forth, and new eyes, knock off all of that paint and start all over agin. You had to be a professional to know what you were doing. They got that in 1922. They paid \$2,300 for it.

T: Philadelphia Toboggan Company?

Z: Yes. \$2,300 they paid for it. Look how much money they made on that thing over the years. Then they started at \$500,000 and they brought it down to \$400,000 thinking that somebody was going to place a bid on it. They had the governor of Utah there and you had the representative from the Rockefeller Foundation and you also had this party that bought it from the park up in Brooklyn. At \$350,000 he bid on it and the offer bid up three times. He was the sole owner plus fifteen percent commission. That goes to the man promoting the sale, the auction. That would be \$420,000. It is going to cost him at least \$100,000 to renovate it, if not more. One day that is going to be in a museum somewhere. That is a costly piece of furniture. The instruments that played the music are still here in town. Somebody here locally bought it.

T: The organ?

Z: Yes. The train, that is up there in Hubbard.

T: McKenzie Square?

Z: Yes. I passed by there about two months ago and I saw it.

T: Is there any closing statement that you would like to make before I turn off the tape?

Z: I'm just glad that you gave me the opportunity to give yourself some insight on what took place. I had some good times out there and I know people who came out there who had good times. We had people come out to that dance hall from out of state who wished they had something like that back home. They would say that we really had something here. We did for a good many years. Then the crowds fell off. You can't operate when you don't have enough people there.

Record hops became a thing of the past. They changed their habit of clothing, which I didn't want Max to permit them to do here. I still wanted the original system. "No," he said, "let them wear blue jeans." I said, "Max, this is Idora Park. I don't care what they are wearing elsewhere." We had our own crowd. So we went to blue jeans and stuff. We had problems. That is what killed the record hops. But they were good kids, honestly. They came out for a good time and had a good time. They behaved well. I just wish it would have lasted forever. I guess it just wasn't meant to be. We were fortunate; we had it ninety years.

Incidentally, my wife and I spent our honeymoon at Idora Park. My wife and I went to the rectory of Holy Name Church asking Monsignor Kochis to marry us. He consented but no Saturdays or Sundays as the Catholic religion frowned on marriages on those two days. The reason we wanted Saturday, July 28, 1934 is because it was the wife's birthday. We settled for a Tuesday, July 28, 1934. We rode the streetcar to Idora Park on the 25th as it was Slovak Day and celebrated our honeymoon and it was back to work at the Municipal Golf Course on the 26th. Today they take lavish and expensive trips and some marriages don't pan out. We've been married fifty-four years, have two children and ten grandchildren and two great-grandchildren. So, you see, Idora Park and our family have a lot in common.

END OF INTERVIEW