

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Idora Park Project

Employment at Idora

O. H. 804

ALVIN CONWAY

Interviewed

by

Robert Toti

on

November 26, 1986

ALVIN C. CONWAY

Alvin Charles Conway was born on November 29, 1918. He decided to become an Idora Park employee in 1935 when he was offered a job as an extra. His mother was working at Idora and this made it easier for him to get a job. He continued to work at Idora Park for the next six seasons at various refreshment centers and popcorn stands. Then, in 1941 he left Idora to take a job at the Ravenna Arsenal. In 1945, Mr. Conway was employed by Republic Steel and he continued work for this company until he retired in 1980.

While he was working for Republic Steel, Mr. Conway wished to return to Idora Park for some additional income. He was re-hired in 1955 and worked as the ballroom refreshment manager. His job involved preparing refreshments for many kinds of activities which included: concerts, record hops, auto shows, dog shows and many others. He continued to work at Idora Park until the park closed in 1985. Presently, he lives at his home in Struthers with his wife Ardis who he married in 1944. They enjoy making ceramic figurines and traveling in their spare time.

Robert Toti

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INTERVIEWEE: ALVIN CONWAY

INTERVIEWER: Robert Toti

SUBJECT: various jobs, dance hall, park plan dancing, record hops, big name bands, midway fire

DATE: November 26, 1986

T: This is an interview with Al Conway for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, by Rob Toti, at 228 Omar Street, on November 26, 1986, at 2:00 p.m.

Could you tell me something about your background?

C: Working out there I started in 1935. I left there in 1941. I went back about thirty years ago. Before that when I first started I worked in a popcorn stand for Mr. Duffy. When I went back, I worked for Mickey Rindin doing refreshments. I mainly was at the ballroom, but I was all over the midway; it didn't make any difference where. I would be frying a hamburger one minute and serving beer the next and making snow cones the next.

T: What was your first encounter with Idora Park? How old were you when you started going to the park?

C: I don't know. I know the streetcars used to come out of town. In the summertime they would have cars that would go up . . . They would get on one down at the diamond down there, the square. The seats and railing ran the length of the car, sideways, and they were open. It was a summer streetcar and you sat there facing the street as you went out. It went out to Warren Avenue, cut over to Hillman Street. It went up Hillman to Sherwood, down Sherwood to Glenwood, up to Parkview, down around there, and then they used to go down around the back of the park. They had a fish pond and it would go around the fish pond and let you off. Then it would go down to where the merry-go-round was; down over the hill they had a platform where you used to get back on the streetcar. Then you went on into town and went about your business from there.

Then when I worked out there we would be out there until, say, 1:00 in the morning. If there were ten people on the midway, we stayed there. It wasn't closed at 10:00 or 11:00, not like it was lately. You stayed there until everybody left. I used to walk home. I lived on Garfield Street. A buddy of mine would come out. We would meet out there a lot of times; then we would go down through Mill Creek Park on home. At 2:00 in the morning we were walking down through Mill Creek Park coming out at the Falls Avenue entrance. You wouldn't go up there at noon now.

T: So how old were you when you were doing these experiences?

C: At that time in 1936 probably eighteen, nineteen, at that time when I first started out there. I was born in 1918 so I had to be about seventeen, eighteen years old.

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

C: My mother worked out there. She started out there before I did. She used to manage the hamburger stand. There was no calling Schwebel's and getting sliced buns. When they delivered the buns, you had to slice them. Mr. Deibel had a meat market on Westlake Crossing. He used to bring in a side of beef and he used to grind the hamburger and everything right there. There was no refrigeration the way you know it today. They had to grind their own hamburger; they had a crew in the back room slicing buns. They were making the hamburgers and they were selling them as fast as they could make them out front. That was the way it used to work. There was no going to call somebody to have them deliver fifty pounds of frozen hamburger.

T: So where did you work exactly?

C: At that time I worked at the popcorn stand. First when I started there, I used to work as an extra in 1935 and 1936. We would go out there; we would sit on a bench. If the Heidelberg got busy and they needed a busboy, you went up and you worked. Maybe you worked one hour; maybe you worked two hours, but you worked for about 25¢ an hour. Maybe you wouldn't work all day. Then the following year in 1936 I got a little more time and then in 1937 I went and started to work for Mr. Duffy in the popcorn stand. I worked there until 1941 and then I left. I went back about thirty years ago from now.

T: About 1956?

C: About 1956, 1957 I went back.

T: First of all, what made you decide to leave?

C: I got a job at the Arsenal. Then after that I got married. Naturally, I worked in a mill; I worked down at Republic and

while I was working in the mill, I was working out there part-time. You figure thirty years between working there and working down at Republic, well, that took up a lot of time. My wife was working out there too. I used to leave the mill and go right out there and go to work. I would work until maybe 1:00 a.m. I would work daylight in the mill. I would go out there and work a dance at night and might work until 1:00 in the morning and get up and go back to work the next morning. That is what I did for thirty years.

T: This was during the 1950's then, the late 1950's?

C: I started down at the mill in 1945. That was the whole time I was out there from 1956; I was working both jobs.

T: You said you started as an extra, worked in the popcorn stand, and then in the late 1950's worked with refreshments in the ballroom. Could you explain what a typical day would be like?

C: Back then?

T: At any one of those jobs.

C: Yes, a typical day at the popcorn stand, say, on a picnic, the whole front of that stand used to be a counter with the steam pipes underneath. It was like a big cupboard two-thirds of the way around that stand. We used to start in the morning and we would start popcorn and everything, say, on the Fourth of July. We wouldn't stop until we had all of that filled up underneath. That was where we kept it hot. Then that would be our supply. If we got busy at night, that was what we could fall back on, and we did too. Many of times we would run out of it. Then we would be making candied apples. I would make maybe twenty-five, thirty bushels of apples a day on a good day, of candied apples. They used to be 5¢ a piece at the time. Popcorn was 5¢ and 10¢ a piece. I worked with a fellow by the name of Frank Worley. He was in charge of the stand.

T: Where was the stand located?

C: Right at the side of the merry-go-round . . . The merry-go-round is on the midway and then it was where you go down in between the popcorn stand and the merry-go-round to where the streetcar spot used to be where you got on the car to head back to town. So it was just by that hill, that driveway like. There was nothing on the other side of the midway across from the merry-go-round; that was all empty. We used to set up tents for, say, a picnic. They would come in and would want to put a wheel up for the benefit of a club or something where we had the picnics. We would go out in the morning; we would set the tent up; we would put the wheel up and that was theirs. That lasted until I left. Naturally when I went back, they had built that up, that other end. They had a fortune-teller; she had a tent

there and stuff like that.

T: What do you mean by "set up a wheel?"

C: We put up a tent and the counter was . . . Say they had a piece of canvas with numbers on it. There were three groups of numbers, ten numbers each; that would be thirty numbers on it. The wheel would be a thirty number wheel. Then whoever went up there . . . A fellow would have groceries or something and he would spin the wheel. Whatever number came on that was who won. If nobody was on it, they wouldn't win.

One time there was a Jewish picnic there. Frank and I were working. Mr. Duffy over there was laying down \$3. Frank said, "What's the matter with the old man? Did he lose his mind or what?" The guy hollered, "Hey, we have a winner!" He handed Pat a piece of paper. About the third time we saw him do that, the guy hesitated--we watched them--and then he handed him the paper and Duffy came down and he was laughing his head off. Frank said, "What's the matter? Are you crazy?" "No," he said, "he's raffling off a ton of coal, champion black coal. I'm buying it. It's \$3 a ton. I'm covering the wheel for \$3. I'm getting a ton of coal." Coal at the time was about \$7.50 a ton.

T: So he was making some money.

C: The old man was shrewd. He was a good guy to work for, beautiful man to work for, but I have never known him to actually try to take anybody. I saw him shut a stand down because the kids working there . . . We had a busy night. It was crowded. 9:00 at night he caught a kid giving something away, and he shut that stand down rather than let that kid work the rest of the night. He couldn't replace him because we were too busy. He didn't have anybody to replace him with. Rather than have that kid giving the joint away, he shut it down.

T: Could you explain a typical day as an extra?

C: Just like I said, you hung around there. At that time you sat around. If they needed you, good, you went to work. They would work until the picnic was over and then they would help clean the place up and then they would leave.

That was like the pizza stand. Everything had to be cleaned up. That was what my wife ran. Everything had to be cleaned up, washed out, and washed down, get ready for the night business. Then at night when they closed up, the last thing they did was clean everything. The floors got scrubbed. Everything got wiped off, got ready for the next day's business. That was what Mickey would insist on as manager of the stands. He wanted those places like that.

In fact she ran the hot dog on the stick stand there. This Margie Mariner was out there one time--something to do with the newspaper. Mickey brought her in the back room. She remarked about how clean it was and everything. She told her, "There is a table there; there is a stove there. We [the help] eat here. This is our kitchen."

T: Now could you explain a typical day when you were working at the ballroom refreshment stand?

C: The nights you had your dances on, your Saturday night, you had different bands come in. Sometimes it would be pretty hectic. I know Ferguson was there one night and Stan Kenton. This isn't quiet; this is jazz. I heard somebody play something about 10:00 at night. I heard nothing before that because we were too busy. I had a habit--because we had the record hops and everything at the time--of after about ten, fifteen minutes of working I could block that sound out of my head and go ahead just about my business. Like I said I heard somebody at one time play something at 10:00 at night. Then after 10:30 I could hear the rest of them. We were busy that night.

Then we had polkas. I would have as high as seven people behind the two bars. Maybe if I got a chance, I would grab a sandwich and a bottle of beer and go out and sit in the car and have something to eat sometime during the day. The girls had to get so much time off; they couldn't stay there. They had to get away from the place; they had to eat. The fellows had to eat, so I was the last one. If I got a chance to eat, I ate; if I didn't, like I said, I grabbed a sandwich and a bottle of beer and that was it.

We had one polka there one particular time. Larry Welk ran the polkas. I had my camera there and I was taking some pictures. They had a picnic in the park and this parking lot was jammed with cars. I was taking these pictures. After I got them developed I was studying this one picture. It didn't look right to me. Finally, it dawned on me. There wasn't one single person in that parking lot. This was about 3:00 in the afternoon. I am talking about a load of cars. They were using the ball park. Everything was jammed up. Still when I took that picture there wasn't one person in that. You would think there would be one anyhow. There wasn't one person walking around the parking lot anywhere. They were all in the ballroom or up on the midway I guess.

Those polkas would run from 12:00 noon to 12:00 or 1:00 at night. I would open up at 10:00 in the morning and we would probably close sometimes 12:00, 1:00 at night. So it would be a long haul. That would be on a Sunday. Then I had to be at work at 6:00 the next morning down at the mill. I had to be there because the superintendent knew where I was the night before.

T: For how long did you juggle these two jobs then?

C: Until I retired from the mill, about four years ago, five years ago. I ran those two jobs about twenty years.

T: Did you work much during the week in the ballroom?

C: Anytime there was anything going. We had Wednesday and Saturday nights definitely as dances. Then they had picnics and they would have a dance in the afternoon. We would have an afternoon session. Sometimes it would be raining outside when they had a picnic. If they had games and stuff, they would have them in the ballroom. We would open for that. Sometimes it would get pretty busy in there.

T: Why types of concessions did you sell in the ballroom?

C: It was a refreshment stand. During the dances all we had were chips and pretzels and peanuts, a little bit of candy, beer, pop, and we sold ice and quarts of pop. If anybody wanted a quart of pop at their table and they had their ice and they brought a bottle in, well, then they used it for mix.

T: How much did these items cost, do you remember?

C: The setup on the ice and the mix would be about \$1.50. The beer . . . When we closed up, the beer was \$1 a can. The pop was 60¢ for a twelve ounce cup, so really it wasn't robbing anybody.

T: What were the busiest times for you at the park?

C: Some of our picnics were pretty busy. I was working the dance hall. We had a picnic. I couldn't tell you which one it was. I remember one time this one fellow kept bugging me. It was hot. He kept saying, "You ought to have the drink." I was sweating; water was coming off of me; it was warm. He said, "Why don't you have a drink? Why don't you have a drink?" I said, "I'm too busy." Finally he came up and I was standing there drinking a beer. He came up to get something. I said, "You will have to wait a minute. It was your idea." So I went ahead and had my drink. Mick called on the phone. Heidelberg was jammed up. About five minutes after we closed the ballroom I'm helping in Heidelberg to serve behind the bar. This fellow came up and said, "Hey, are you twins or what?" I said, "No, we're just busy so I came up to give a hand. I probably will sell you a sandwich before you leave." I was kidding. 6:00 he was getting a hamburger. I was behind the grill frying them.

That was the way it went. Mick would come up and wave at me, hold up three fingers. I would go down to stand three and go to work. I would drop what I was doing and go down there. That was the way we used to work it.

T: Were there many people who were as busy as you?

C: Yes, everybody was busy. I'm not saying that I'm the one who is by myself. Anytime when they took me someplace else, I still had to get that ballroom ready for the night dance. I had to leave that to go up there and give these other guys a hand because they were jammed up. They would be two or three deep at the bar or at the counter. It isn't the idea that I was the one who was busy. Everybody was busy. If they weren't, I wouldn't have been there. I would have stayed down around where I was.

T: Did you ever work the rides?

C: No, I never worked any of the rides. I never worked for that end. See, there were three different sections. You had the rides, you had the refreshments, and you had the games. Young Duffy was the manager of the games. Mickey Rindin had the refreshments, and Gabe Cene or Horvath or in the last couple of years Mike, they were managers; they took care of the rides. They were the ride superintendents.

T: What was an average crowd at the ballroom like?

C: I saw 3,500 in there with Lombardo. Sammy Kaye came in one time. He had about 4,400, somewhere around in there. I know no one danced; it was too crowded. They got pretty good sized crowds in there. Everytime Lombardo showed up you had a good crowd. Then you had other bands. You had your Ferguson. He used to come in. Stan Kenton, he used to come in; he had his jazz. Sammy Kaye used to come in once in a while and Lombardo. Then they used to bring in bands from Pittsburgh. They had Johnny Murphy; they would have Eddie Arnell from the Pittsburgh area and Buddy Lee, he was from the Pittsburgh area. They had Phil Nelson; he was from Cleveland. They had a couple of bands from Cleveland. That was our Saturday night bands. They were all eleven, twelve piece dance bands. There were no combos. We used to have good music; it was good bands.

I was talking to one of the fellows who used to come out there steady dancing. He said that these people didn't know what they missed. They didn't appreciate what they had.

T: Did the people get dressed up when they came out?

C: One time one of our band men who was a sax player said that of all the places he went to that he never saw the people dressed as well as they were on a Saturday night in that ballroom. There aren't too many ballrooms left in the United States. That was one of the very few. There are a lot of dance halls, but there are no ballrooms. Kenton used to come up there. These fellows would travel around. They would tell you. They would say, "There aren't too many left. There are only maybe about a dozen of them of that

size." Now that floor was 60 x 180. That was the dance floor; that was not the concourse. You had a little over 10,400 square feet, something like that.

Then they had the shows out there. That was a different story. We used to make a refreshment stand out of it. We would put in hot dog grills, french fries. We would have hamburgers, sloppy joe sandwiches, or anything that we could make up. They used to have dog shows out there. A kennel club from town used to have the dog show out there. They used to open about 5:00 in the morning. We would open the stand about 5:00 because people started coming in and we would go until maybe about 10:00 at night. I have seen as high as 1,400 dogs in that particular show. Then it got so big that they had to move to Canfield because they had too many of them, too many dogs. That was the bench show.

We had a Gaelic Society that had a dance one night. We had about 1,700 people and the dog show was supposed to come in the next day. Well, they had to move out all of the tables, put them down the cellar, clean the ballroom up, set up the benches--it was a bench show--so that all the dogs had their own little cubbyhole to sit in. That crew worked. At 7:00 in the morning they had the place ready for them. So they had a good crew out there, a good bunch of men working.

That one fellow, Victor Popescu, could really operate that clean-up crew. He was the grounds keeper. He took care of all the flowers and he also, like I said, had the clean-up crew who took care of the ballroom and everything. He is in Florida now. He retired and lives down there.

- T: Getting back to the ballroom and the dance bands, was there a dress code that was enforced?
- C: There used to be years ago but then they got away from it. You weren't allowed in there unless you had a tie or a coat on. You couldn't walk in there with a sport jacket on. Then they got away from that. That was the way it used to be when I first started out there. The same way with the regular hops, they had a dress code. Boots Bell used to be the disc jockey and then they got away from that dress code. Then after that the hops just went; they started dropping.

They had what they called the Cove out there. They would run that through the summer in the ballroom. During the winter they would have it in the Heidelberg Gardens. They would charge you 40¢ to get in. They gave you a ticket. That ticket was good for a bottle of beer or pop, either one. Then they had Mike Roncone, the Human Beings; they had rock bands like that playing at the time. They used to put 800, 900 people in Heidelberg Garden which is an awful small place for that number of people. There would be five of us behind that bar. We were busy.

T: Why did they have that at the Heidelberg instead of the ballroom?

C: In the wintertime you had your shows and everything down below. You couldn't depend on a weekend where you didn't have a two day show or something where this was just strictly open and they could use it anytime they wanted. They used to move it up there in the winter. It was strictly supposed to be for a college kid setup. That was the reason for the 40¢ admission and so forth, to keep it down. Then it got so that it got a little bit out of hand too because then they got away from watching the dress code. They let that go down. Once you let a dress code go, you are done.

We had a policeman working there, Pete Novosel. He used to work out there. When they took the dress code off it, Pete quit.

You had two policemen for 3000 kids. Maybe you had two men and this Ruth . . . I can't think of her last name. She was a police-woman. You had the three of them. At the end of it after they finally quit, they used to have about ten policemen for about twenty kids. It was just the reverse. They had to get out of it. It would just get out of hand, that's all.

T: Back at the ballroom what time did the bands usually start?

C: They started about 9:00 and they went until 1:00. We would open at 8:00. We would open up between 7:30 and 8:00. Actually we went to 1:00 too. The bands all started . . . Lombardo was the only one who started at 9:30. The rest of them all went from 9:00 until 1:00. They had about a half hour intermission. Now they could take two fifteen minute breaks or they could take the half hour break. It was up to them, how they wanted to play it.

Back in that time before I was down there, before I went back, when I was working the popcorn stand, they used to have these bands come in. We would play ball. They would be there a week at a time. They were territorial bands. So we used to play ball in the ball park. I never played ball. I kept score. We would go down the Flats in Mill Creek or we would use the ball diamond there and then we just had a good time. Tiny Hill was one; he used to come in. I'll tell you who we used to play ball with. It was Bob Hope's band, Les Brown. The only one we couldn't get a game with was Sammy Kaye. He wouldn't let his men play ball or anything. Les Brown, we played ball with him. Jerry Wald used to come out there. Ray Pearl, he had a band; he was out of Johnstown; he had a good orchestra.

We had some good bands who came in there. They would play a week at a time. If they were there for over thirty days, they had to join the union in Youngstown. Otherwise, they just paid their dues; that was it. Over thirty days, they had to join it. What they used to do . . . I know Ray came

in there one time. He played for about . . . Well, he had a four week engagement. Then he went out to Craig Beach. He played a one night stand out there which broke it up. Then he came back in and played another week in Youngstown. That was the way they used to get around that.

They had good singers. I had a bunch of pictures and they disappeared. I had some of the singers and I had some of the bands and everything else. I just wish I had them today because I think there are some who are on top today who used to come out there as vocalists for those bands. I think Dinah Shore was one of them. I think she used to sing with Les Brown.

T: Did Bob Hope ever come out to the ballroom?

C: Not that I know of.

T: How about Frank Sinatra?

C: Sinatra . . . I can't say really. I'm going back a few years now when I wasn't in the ballroom. I was up on the midway when Frank was going around like that playing with the Dorsey bands. His son was out there. I have heard him out there. Bob Crosby and the Bobcats played out there. All of the bands played there at one time or another. Jan Carber used to play there. I don't know; you name them, but they played there.

T: People like Benny Goodman and Buddy Rich?

C: Buddy Rich played there. He was there one time. Before the band started he came down and walked around the ballroom. One of the girls who worked there asked Rich . . . He was looking out the window and she went up to him. She said, "I hear you are a pretty good drummer." You don't talk to Rich that way.

They used to have those little things going on in the ball park. They used to have car shows or they would have little puppet shows for kids and stuff like that. I was in the ballroom one afternoon getting ready to open up. Some real tall fellow was standing there looking out over the railing. He came over and he started talking to me. He said, "Do you remember Howdy Doody?" I said, "Yes, I remember that when I was a kid." He said, "I used to be Clarabell the Clown. I have the puppet show over here in the ball park for the kids this afternoon." That is how you ran into people.

Then Lillian Desmond used to play out there. She would come out there with her stage shows. Above the hamburger stand across from the office there used to be a theater. You went around the back of it and went up the steps. Naturally you had a slope there, your seats and everything. I think the stage of the theater was just about the front roof around the hot dog stand. That was where Lillian Desmond used to put her shows on.

I can remember my mother going out there to see some of these plays. When I was a kid, she couldn't get anybody to watch me. Sometimes she used to drag me out there with her. That is how I can remember some of that stuff. She used to put on good shows out there. Then I saw some down at the old Park Theater that I saw . . . Well, it wasn't her; it was another group but I saw the same shows down there that I saw out there when I was a kid.

T: What do you remember about park plan dancing?

C: Park plan dancing, you went in there. It cost you . . . I think it was 25¢ to get in. They had two different types. They had one type where you got in there and you paid, bought tickets for 5¢ a dance or something like that. Then the other one was you paid 25¢ for the whole night or maybe in the afternoon, whenever they had that particular dance. The bands used to play in the afternoon or in the evening, the same ones that would be there. Les Brown, if we had a picnic in the afternoon, he played in the afternoon for the picnic. He played on Monday nights for the park plan dancing. Then on the rest of the week it was so much to get into the ballroom.

They used to have a railing around the dance floor where they had these poles. Now if you have been out there, you could see these colored poles all over the place. They used to have a railing around there. They would let the people in on one side and they went out the other side. That was how they used to change. Every time when a band would stop one session of one dance, another group moved on the floor and the other group went on out. Then they got tickets and went around and went back in again.

The refreshment stand used to be down at the other end of the ballroom. At that time it was a big, long stand that was way down on the far end. The bandstand used to be down there. The bandstand used to be in the middle at one time. Then it was down at the opposite end of the entrance today. Then they moved it over to the side where it is now.

T: For how long were the big bands popular?

C: They were popular for a long time. They were popular up until . . . Big bands today, some of the name bands, are still popular. They still get a pretty fair crowd coming in on a regular dance on a Saturday night, say, with a twelve piece dance band. Your young ones don't go for that type of music anymore; they don't want that music.

T: Would you say they were replaced by the record hops?

C: They were ruined by the record hops. I wouldn't say that they could be replaced; that's impossible.

T: But the record hops became more popular. What time period would you say?

C: Boots Bell was out there in 1956, 1957. Dan Ryan used to be out there. He started them out there I think. I don't remember when he started them; I can't tell you. It had to be when I was working there, but I never paid that much attention to who was running them until Bell took over. Once Boots took over then . . . He talked more with us. I got to know him a little bit better than I did the rest of them. Then they used to run the same thing at the Heidelberg. In the wintertime they would have the record hops up there. In the summertime they would have them down at the ballroom.

At one time that ballroom was opened up. There were no doors around it. It was all just a metal mesh all the way around. Maybe in August they would have their Harvest Moon Dance and they would close down for the winter because of no heating. There was no way of heating it. Like I said it was all opened up.

Then they had a big globe up on the ceiling. For the last dance they used to shut all the lights out and throw a spot on that globe. The mirrors would flash light all over the place. That was the way they used to close all of their dances.

T: Trying to do a chronological progression here you could say there were the big bands, then came the record hops, and then the rock bands?

C: Your rock bands and record hops were the same as far as I'm concerned.

T: What were the parents' reactions to this loud music?

C: I couldn't answer that because as far as I know there were never any of them who came out there and hollered about it. If they did, they kept their kids at home.

T: Did any rhythm and blues bands ever play at the ballroom?

C: By rhythm and blues what do you mean?

T: Bands with a black influence.

C: Oh yes. Clarence King from town used to run them. James Brown played out there. I saw 5,000 in there for him one night. As far as the big bands are concerned Fats Walter played out there a couple of times. Cab Calloway used to play out there. At that time they would have two dances. It would go from 8:00 until 11:00. Then it would go from 12:00 to 5:00, or 8:00 to 12:00 and 1:00 to 5:00. They would be sessions like that. There were two separate dances.

T: Why was that?

C: For black and white. The first one was for white. At that time this was the way things were.

T: So what was the reaction to the segregated dances?

C: Nothing. There was no problem at that time, not at that time there wasn't.

T: What time period are we dealing with?

C: There again I'm talking about 1937, 1938, around in that area. It was the same way with that swimming pool out there. There was salt water in that swimming pool. They went down about 800 feet and they hit a reservoir or something down there. It was salt water like in the ocean. That was what they had in that swimming pool. That is the one they filled in and made Kiddie Land out of.

T: When the Civil Rights movement began, did they start to integrate the dances?

C: I couldn't say. You have that period of time when I was away from there. From 1941 to 1956 a lot of changes were made. When I went back, say, in 1956, there was a lot of difference. The only thing is that the people had their own method of dancing, each group including your record hops and polkas. You have a certain type of music that you are going to dance to. You have a certain type of music that a black person is going to dance to. It is the same way with your polkas.

I worked a polka out there. It was the first one we had. It was an afternoon session. It went on late; it went on into the evening. Mick said, "Well, you work it. If we need any help, I will bring somebody in." You had two bands. You had a Slovak band and you had a Slovenian band. The Slovak band would play their type of music and you would have the Slovaks out there dancing. The Slovenians hit me at the bar. Then when they turned around, when the other band started, they went out and danced and I ended up with the Slovaks at the bar. It was the ethnic group. I had to get help. In fact, I ran out of beer that day. I was really jammed up because we had more out there than we figured on.

T: Are there any humorous or unusual events that stand out in your mind when you think about the time that you spent working in the ballroom?

C: No, not really, not anything out of the ordinary. I enjoyed working with people. I enjoyed meeting people and that type of work. Just like I told Mick, "You either have to be nuts or enjoy the work, one of the two." Who is going to work down at

the mill for eight hours from 7:00 to 3:00, go out there and work from 5:00 until 1:00, and then go back to the mill at 7:00 in the morning again? You have to enjoy that. I could work eight hours down at the mill and I would come home dragging. All I was doing down there was pushing a pencil. I could work sixteen hours out at the park and feel good, which I had done.

I put sixteen hours on that floor many of times. On a picnic I would be up making pizza from the time the place opened, say, about 11:00 in the morning. I would be up there from 11:00 to 7:00 in front of the pizza oven. Then I would go down and get ready and go down to the ballroom and open up at 8:00 and work until 1:00 in the morning. You don't put in hours like that unless you enjoy it.

T: What do you remember about the owners of the park, Charlie Deibel, Pat Duffy, Mr. Cavalier?

C: Mr. Deibel, he was a very strict man as far as dress was concerned. Working the popcorn stand, we didn't have to but, everybody who worked there had to be dressed a certain way. You had to be dressed, not everybody the same way, but you had . . . Fellows had to have a tie on. You had to have a clean shirt. You had to be presentable. The girls, it was the same way. In the ballroom it was a white blouse and a dark skirt. I used to call them up even when I started there later on in 1937, 1938. I used to call them up and say, "Mary, you work tonight. Make it a white blouse and dark skirt." This was the way we worked. We didn't have to at the popcorn stand. We had to have a white shirt and everything on, but as far as the ties were concerned, we didn't have to on account of the heat. They were gas poppers and they had four burners going plus all of those steam pipes around. It got pretty warm in there at times.

Mr. Rindin used to book picnics. The grocers had their picnics out there. At that time you had your 3¢ days and stuff like that. That was when he was booking picnics. He worked for Mr. Deibel at the time. Then he bought into it or got into it, and Mr. Duffy. I never worked for anybody in my life as good as him, no way.

Then you had Mr. Cavalier. He was good; he was a carpenter. That was where he made most of his money. Then he had the Nu-Elms and stuff like that. When somebody was driving a nail, he was standing there with a hammer too. I don't care how much money he had. In fact in his later years he fell off a step. He was out there helping a carpenter. He heard that nail going; he had to get up there like an old fire horse, pounding nails.

Then there was young Pat--not young Pat, but the middle Duffy.

T: Mike?

C: No. I'm talking about Pat Duffy. There were too many Pats there. I worked for . . .

T: Pat Jr.?

C: Pat Jr. and he was park manager there when it ended up. Mr. Rindin used to be park manager. There was a fellow by the name of Nelson. He used to be refreshment manager at one time. I didn't know too much about him. That was when my mother was working there. There was Al Jackson. He used to be promotion manganer. Al went out and booked picnics. He went out and he booked picnics; he managed the ballroom, booked the bands, and he also ran Heidelberg Gardens. Then when he died they had one guy booking picnics; they had one guy managing the ballroom; they had one guy running Heidelberg Gardens. They never did fill Jackson's shoes.

I worked for Mickey for years. Mickey was a nice guy to work for. I'm talking about anybody who I ever worked for; Pat Duffy was tops. He was a guy that you couldn't fool. He knew exactly what was going on and you weren't kidding him. He could sit in his office and know more of what was going on out in the midway than somebody standing there.

T: Do you recall any changes made in the many years that you spent at the park?

C: In what way?

T: Changes in policy, changes in the rides.

C: Outside of the dress code they got away from, no. They put the gate on; they had to put the gate on because you were getting too many kids coming out there splitting up. They would start at one end of the midway and the others on the other side of the midway, as they were walking down the midway, would start to yell back and forth; they weren't particular in what they yelled. So they had to throw the gate on. It cost you a couple of dollars to come in, but then you didn't have that. Then everybody was doing it. It wasn't only them. All parks are charging admission now.

T: That was 1968 or 1969 I believe.

C: Yes, it was somewhere around in there when they changed it. Then there were little changes I probably wouldn't see. Being there that close to it, it would come so slow that I wouldn't pay that much attention to it or something.

T: What was your reaction to the fire that burnt the Wildcat, the Lost River, and some of the other parts of the midway?

C: Well, I wasn't too happy about it. After all, the amount of

time you spend out there, that takes a hunk out of you. That fire when it ate, it went up as far as the merry-go-round. When it got up there, it was just like somebody snapped their finger and said, "Okay, that's it." It stopped. Right there at the tracks, everything else was hanging twenty feet or thirty feet up in the air at the end of the Wildcat; right by the merry-go-round that was where the fire stopped. It got on the other side of the midway; it chewed up some of that. Then they hurried up and replaced it so that they could reopen up the rest of the year the best they could that year because they had everything booked. These people couldn't book anyplace else. It wasn't the fire as much. It was the conditions of the day.

On an afternoon of a Westinghouse picnic I used to have maybe 100 cases of beer cold in the bar. I would get a lot of people from Westinghouse. They would come in; they would clean you out. Now later on you didn't have 100 people working for Westinghouse. It was the same way with your steel mills. They used to put 30,000 in that park. You don't have 300 working in some of those mills now.

We used to have a black picnic come out there from a town in Pennsylvania. It was booked many years ago. This was strictly their day. You could hardly walk across that midway because of the people. There was no problem. Everything was fine. Everything went beautiful, but you can't do that today for some reason.

T: Did you think that the park was finished after the fire?

C: The park was really finished before the fire. Yes, after the fire that definitely really finished it up. As far as the park was concerned, they couldn't operate. They depended upon their picnics. Once these mills closed down, once Westinghouse . . . Well, the only picnic they ended up with really was Lordstown, Goodyear. That was about the last of the picnics that they could count on because your steel mills weren't there. They used to have potteries out of East Liverpool; they used to have a picnic. The railroad had a picnic out there. Any of your . . . Sheet & Tube had the Labor Day picnics. Republic had theirs. They would have all of four or five picnics. St. Joe Lead had a good picnic out there; they're not in business anymore. That was what happened. You can't operate something that size and depend on local people. Today you have a car and you are going to go out of town to go on picnics. If you want to go someplace, you are going to go out of town, but we had a lot of people come from Pennsylvania up here. In fact we had them come up here for dances.

One fellow, he was from down around near Pennsylvania. He came up in the wintertime. He came up and he asked me, "What's the weather like?" I said, "Aren't you from around here?" "Oh, no," he said, "we came up here to practice on this floor. There is no

floor like this between New York and Chicago." Here they were show people. They used to come up here to dance, to practice on that floor. There isn't a dance floor like that around.

They used to have a skating rink in there. They used to skate in there. I used to take tickets. Bob Kuzny out of Niles had a skating rink there. He used to run skating there in the wintertime. They used to skate and then dance on the same floor. It was a good floor. It was the way it was made, the type of wood that would take this punishment. Thelma Murphy used to play the organ for that skating rink.

T: How would business have been in the ballroom during the last few years?

C: Like everything else it slowed down a little bit. On a Saturday night, roughly, I would say you had about 500, maybe 600 people who would go dancing every Saturday night. Then you had two places. You had Avon Oaks and you had Idora. If you had a name band at Idora, they got the crowd. If you had the better dance band out there, they got the crowd. They got the 300 and Idora got the 250. Or if we had the good band, they got the 250 and we might get the 300 or 400. That's just the way it was.

T: Were there any other types of attractions during the winter months besides auto shows and dog shows?

C: They hadn't had a dog show for years. They had craft shows; they had ceramic shows. WHOT used to have their half price sale. They would open up at 12:00 on that half price sale. They had some good stuff there, good bargains. I saw them four abreast from the front door of that ballroom out to the shanty by Canfield Road where it came into the park. They would be lined up four abreast all that. Then they would have a line coming down through the ball park to the ballroom. That line wouldn't break up until maybe about 5:00 in the evening. They only allowed so many people in at a time. They would have a line there until maybe 5:00 in the evening yet before they really would break it up.

You had your ceramic shows, your craft shows. You had your private dances, your Gaelic Society, your policeman balls. Youngstown Fire Department had their dance. They would bring out town bands then. Then you had different groups that would have charity deals like that with something to do.

T: Do you know if Idora Park still owns the ballroom?

C: No. Everything is Dr. Wagner with the church up here.

T: Mr. Calvary?

C: Yes. As far as I know, he has used it twice. He has had gospel singers in it at one time and I think he used it one other time since then and that was all. Now what part of it he used, I don't think he had the refreshment stand opened. I do know that he had two different groups. That is as far as I know. Then they burnt some of it down since then.

They had the fire out there that burned Heidelberg Gardens down. That was a joke. We were sitting there watching the 6:00 news. Here is this newscaster very seriously talking about the fire. He said, "That fire was so close to that Wildcat that people are going to be afraid to ride it." The other side of that Wildcat was completely burnt off from the first fire. Then we heard them talking about it on the 6:00 news that they were going to be afraid to ride it. We were sitting there laughing like idiots. That was too bad. That took care of the Heidelberg; that took care of the Fun House they had there. It just burnt that whole section down in there.

The pizza oven, the pizza stand that my wife ran, that went up to Third Street there in Niles. He bought that and he opened a pizza shop up there. The train, that went up to Hubbard.

T: McKenzie Square.

C: The merry-go-round, that went up to New York. They were supposed to build a park on the other side of the bridge. Whether they did or not, I don't know. From what I understand, it is still in the works.

T: Did you go to the auction after the park was closed?

C: I was there. Do you mean the auction itself?

T: Yes.

C: Oh yes, we were open. A few of the stands were open on that auction.

T: So you were working?

C: Yes, I was working all day on that.

T: What was your reaction to the auction?

C: What are you going to have? What are you going to do? All I know is one guy came in from Geauga Lake. He said, "I bought a french fry cutter. I haven't seen it. I would like to see what I bought." I said, "Are you buying it blind?" He said, "Yes, they auctioned it off. I bought it." It was good. I couldn't tell you exactly how old it was. The cutters were the same cutters. My wife took care of the equipment. The equipment was just about what was bought when the place opened, when they

first put the pizza stand in. I said, "Alright, wait a minute. I'll get it for you." I came out with a butcher knife. I said, "This is what we cut french fries with." He gave me a look. I said, "No, it is in the back room." What are you going to do? Just make the best of it, that's all. I didn't want to see it close up.

T: Did you take home any souvenirs?

C: From the auction? No. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed every minute I put in out there.

T: Is there anything that we did not cover in this interview that you think might be important to mention?

C: No, nothing I can think of right now. There was a lot of stuff-- some you forget, some you want to forget. They were all good years, that's all I know, many of them. We used to get out there years ago . . . When I first started out there, I worked in the popcorn stand. I bought a camera one time and paid \$15 for it. Duffy blew his stack. He said, "I could have gotten that for you for about \$8." That was for \$15 and I was making \$12.50 a week. One week we worked ninety-six hours. I made \$12.50 that week. The reason I remember, Frank was only making about \$20 and he ran the stand.

I imagine Boots Bell would remember me yet. We used to talk quite a bit out there. I don't know when the last time I saw him was, but the last time I saw him I know he still remembered me. He could tell you about those record hops because he was there for a long time.

Like I said, they had the Human Beings; they had Mike Roncone. I can't think of all the names. Jerry Wald, Ray Pearl, Les Brown . . . There are too many. I can't remember them all. I can remember some. Tiny Hill, he used to play out there. I think his son used to play piano for that one show they had out of California. I can't think of the band they had. It used to be a weekly show. Anyhow, he used to feature in that band. Tiny used to be there. We used to play ball with him. Then we would go out all night long, get up out of bed the next morning, go back out on the field, and play ball again. You never went to bed. You didn't have time.

We had a picnic one time. We didn't get out of there until 1:00 in the morning. We had to be there to open up at 9:30 the next morning because a picnic was coming in by train. They were going to be there by 10:00 so we had to be there at 9:30 to be ready for these people. Instead of going home and going to bed, we went down to somebody's house and played cards all night. By the time you would have gone to bed and gotten up, you would have been tired. This way we just played cards all night long and then went right back to work. We went down to

CONWAY

20

Frank's house. We had a good time. I really enjoyed it.

END OF INTERVIEW