

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

The Depression

O.H. 1759

INTERVIEWEE: ROCCO MODERALLI

INTERVIEWER: Cynthia Marsh

SUBJECT: The Depression

DATE: October 18, 1995

CM: This is an interview with Mr. Rocco Moderalli Jr. for the Youngstown State Oral History Department, on the Depression, by Cynthia Marsh at 441 Illinois Avenue, Girard Ohio on October 18 at approximately 11:10 a.m.

CM: Mr. Moderalli can you tell me a little bit about your family, about your parents?

RM: Well there are nine brothers, eight besides me, nine boys, and no girls. My mother and father came from Italy; I was born in Youngstown, on Burlington Avenue, that is in the Briar Hill section. When I was still a little kid we moved to Lafayette Street, which is still in Youngstown and things I remember when I was young: we didn't have big holidays, Christmas maybe we'd get an orange or an apple in the stocking. We didn't have any toys. My dad used to cut our hair once a week, whether we needed a

haircut or not. He had the old shoemaker stuff in the cellar and he'd repair our shoes, with old tires or anything that could fit on the bottom of the shoe. Two of my brothers, maybe there were three of us had six months to go to graduate and they all left school to go out and work because there wasn't much work for my dad in the mill. He worked 44 years for Youngstown Sheet and Tube in the blast furnace. At that time he was lucky if he got two days a week of work, and most of it was labor work. Most of the brothers that were older than me went out to work on farms. There used to be a farm out on Churchill Road, called McCull Farm. They spent the day picking beans or whatever. We had a tough time but we all stuck together and the whole family was together. One brother would help the other as the years went on. We argued a lot but we never fought with each other. You know how brothers are, one says this and one says that and one thinks he's right and the other one thinks he's right, but to this day my younger brother and I are the only ones left out of the nine of us.

CM: Did your mom work at all?

RM: No my mother stayed home and took care of the kids and my dad like I said he worked in the mill and some of the older brothers went out and found whatever they could do, golf course caddy or gathering empty bottles up. You used to get a deposit on empty milk bottles and pop bottles. Some of my brothers worked for the grocery store across the street, they'd deliver groceries and work in the store. In fact later on I got a job over there, doing the same thing during the war, delivering groceries to people's homes that is when they had free deliveries. Now you can't even find a store that will deliver you a bottle of milk.

CM: No you can't.

RM: So that's some of the things that I remember when I was young and some of the things that happened.

CM: What was your first impression about the Depression? What was your first memory?

RM: Well I really can't recall much but you just were poor. Families used to help one another. Most of the time you ate a lot of macaroni and greens and beans. Everybody had a garden in the back yard and you ate most of the stuff out of the garden. You very seldom, but when you did go to the grocery store it might be to buy a chicken to make soup. My dad used to raise rabbits in the back yard and every weekend he would go out there and slice a few up, hang them up and skin them and then he would prepare them and then we would have rabbit meat for our Sunday meal. We ate a lot of bread, a lot of homemade bread, and a lot of pizza. Those are the things that I remember. In the wintertime people would go down along the railroad tracks and jump a boxcar that was passing by that had coal on it. They would throw big lumps of coal off the boxcar and by the time the conductor would catch up to them, they were up to the top of the hill and the conductor wasn't going to pick up the coal and throw it back in, he would hop the freight train and get back on and then as soon as the train would pass everybody would go down with burlap sacks to pick up the big chunks of coal that was thrown off the boxcar and they would take it home to heat their coal furnaces in the winter time. We didn't have a lot of clothes. My mother used to buy the Pillsbury flour, the 24-½ pound sack and that came in cloth bags so she would make clothes out of that. She would make undershirts, they call them t-shirts now and she'd make suspenders out of that, she'd make shorts. She could make anything out of those flour bags. I remember they used to have a

company store in the mill, and sometimes if you needed a pair of shoes, I don't remember what all they sold but I know if you needed a pair of shoes or a pair of pants you could go down with you father or whoever worked in the mill and get them, and then they would deduct it out of his pay. We wore a lot of black stockings, knee stockings with knickers when I was a little kid, a lot of knickers. You know like the baseball players now wear them up to their knees, well that is the way that we used to wear them. We wore knickers and black stockings and big heavy shoes, big cloud hoppers we used to call them. Sometimes we used to put cleats on them so that they wouldn't wear out. We'd put cleats on the back and cleats on the front. It was poor there were no soup kitchens and there was no welfare. I remember a lot of things; we never had a key for the front door. The doors were never locked because the families were always, well a family would walk in and if you were eating, they would eat whatever you were eating and if you were up at their house, you walked in the door and you ate what they were eating, especially on Sunday with a lot of sauce and homemade bread, you'd dunk it in the pot while it was cooking you know. Those are some of the things that I remember when I was a little kid. I never had toys, I never owned roller skates, and I never owned a bike or a sled. If we went to Crandall Park the rich kids had all of the equipment, we'd go ice-skating with our big cloud hoppers. We'd pretend we had skates. They had ice skates and we had our big cloud hoppers. Say we were playing football, they had all of the equipment and all we didn't have anything except for the sweater and the big heavy shoes. It seemed like they had the equipment but they could never beat us. We had much more get up and go. Families were much closer than they are today, well we didn't have the troubles but now it is a much different world. If someone was sick there was always

a neighbor coming over and helping the woman. I remember my mother had a broken arm and we were still little then and my neighbor would come and fix her hair, maybe bring a pot of soup or whatever they had and we were happy, we all grew up to be happy. We used to take things out of somebody's garden when we were little like tomatoes, but we didn't damage the garden, we would just steal a tomato or shake an apple out of the tree or climb a tree and pick some cherries.

CM: The neighbors didn't care?

RM: No, as long as we didn't destroy anything, like they are doing now. We'd go in and steal a tomato or a cucumber, but we didn't trample everything down. They used to holler at us but it was just a gesture to get you out of the garden or whatever. We didn't destroy things. I don't know, more people were closer together than they are today. It is just one of those things. Most of my brothers all went to work at an early age, doing whatever they could to help the family out. My oldest brother he worked for a fruit company down by United Engineering years ago and then he went to the Inkleing Warehouse down on Hubbard Road and he worked there over forty years. So he helped to support the family. A few of my other brothers went up there and worked too, none were married at that time. So in other words all of us were single and there were the little ones, and everybody was home. I guess maybe that's why we were so close in the later years.

CM: Can you describe your home a little bit for me, what it looked like?

RM: Well my home stood there on the street where I was raised and it had a basement, a first floor, a second floor, and there was an attic. It was a great big house, and there were two bedrooms up and we made one down off the living room. Like I said we didn't

have much but we were all happy and we all got along good. The house is still there and I stayed there until later on when I got married and moved out. That is some of the things that I recall and I remember.

CM: Do you remember what school was like back then when you were younger?

RM: Well I went to Jefferson School, which is still standing there today. I don't know it seemed like I was the principal's pet. She would call me out of the class to deliver notes to certain teachers, her name was Miss McNad, but she could never remember my name. She would always come in and say, Ralphy. Ralphy go do this, go do that. I used to take the attendance sheets around. We had six grades and we used to have two grades in a class. We had like 1A and 1B and 2A and 2B. You were on one side of the room and you were say 5B and the other side of the class was 5A, you studied and you listened to them. I really did enjoy school and when I went to Junior High, but I don't know maybe when I went to school there were a lot of well to do families that went there. It seemed like you were snubbed a lot by the so-called rich kids. I had no interest in it, when I left it didn't phase me and to this day I'm not sorry that I left. I had a good life, my wife and I raised three good kids and I'm happy in my home and I had a good life.

CM: Do you remember anything when you were growing up about FDR? Had you heard anything like about his fireside chats?

RM: Well I really didn't pay attention to that, but when he got elected it seemed like there was a little bit of work that came up, like the WPA, people would get jobs to go and put brick streets in, in fact south Avenue still has the brick street. There's not too many around. Some of the younger kids would go and work for the three C's, the CC Camp. I don't know too much about that but I never was one for politics. I'd read who was

running but apart from that I never got really serious with them. You know to listen to their speeches because they'll tell you one thing and then after they get in they'll forget what they promised you. See they do everything then you see them after they get elected and they don't have time. So half of the time I don't believe three quarters of the politicians, some are good and some are bad. That is the way that I look at some of the situations and the politicians. So I didn't really listen to many speeches, only when they announced about the war. I was at a show when they announced in '41, but I already had four brothers in the service by the time WWII started. One got drafted and the other one volunteered so that he could be with them. So there were six of my brothers in the service at the same time. Fortunately they all came back. I didn't get to go because I volunteered before my younger brother got drafted and I was turned down. I went up to get examined in the army and got rejected and at that time they never told you why you were rejected, like they do now, you know you've got a bad arm, you've got that, you've got this. When I went they didn't tell you why you got turned down they just said 4F go home and then I tried the naval air core in Cleveland, I tried the Merchant Marines, they wanted me to go and work on the oil boats to get experience, I said I isn't going on the oil boats to get experience, you either want me or don't want me. I never did go into the service. My oldest brother and myself did not go in, he was married at the time, he was older so.

CM: When you were growing up do you remember what games you and your friends would play because I understand that there wasn't a lot of material things.

RM: Well the games we used to play, we used to play Mr. Mumbly Pegs.

CM: What's that?

RM: Well we didn't have sticks we used to use pipe and stick it into the ground and try to hit the other person's pipe out of the ground or we would play mumbly peg with a knife that had two blades and a piece of wood, we used to try to flip it and make the blade stick in the wood.

CM: Oh wow.

RM: Well let me see what other games, those are the two games I remember we played. We used play, you get a broom stick handle, a small piece and you make points on both ends and then the other piece of the broom stick, maybe it was about two foot, you used to try to hit the end of the tip of that little piece of wood and see if you could, kind of like what the kids do now with the paddle ball you know. Well you try to hit and see how long you can keep it up and see how many times we could hit it and after we hit it up, hit it as far as you can.

CM: Oh wow.

RM: Well that was another game; let's see what other games did we used to play? We used to go up to empty fields and hit golf balls, we had one club, we'd have one club maybe a putter or a driver and we'd use the driver for everything, for driving the ball and putting it into the hole and maybe seven guys would use the golf club, because you only had one club and where the club came from who knows. I remember some of the older guys, like my brothers, a couple my brother's age, maybe one had a bike and everyone would ride it. Or one guy had a sled, where he got it, I don't know, but everybody would ride the sled. It would be one of those big flexible sleds, a flexi, you don't see too many of them around. We used to play a lot of ball when we were younger.

CM: Baseball?



RM: Softball, we didn't play baseball we played a lot of softball down at the field and that is something that we enjoyed. We used to make our own softball leagues, slow pitch, we were doing that when we were kids, now they have big leagues. We used to play slow pitch when we were little kids, down in Briar Hill School yard. We'd have a lot of married men and single men playing on teams. You'd have like eight or nine teams, you'd pick teams. You picked out of a hat so you might have got five married guys who didn't know how to play ball, but it was fun. A lot of people used to come down there and watch the games, and just like they do now they would bring chairs and sit and watch the game and that was another thing that we did for enjoyment. We used to go swimming and people think we're crazy now because But I don't know if you know where Crandall Park is but down along where the swans used to be they used to have a big trough like where the water used to come out, I guess it was sewer water but we didn't know any better. Everybody would go swimming in that trough and then the water would go over to where the swans were. Of course we didn't have swimming pools. We'd swim down in back of Carnegie Steel; they used to call it BAB. I won't tell you what that meant, but it was bare beach.

CM: Oh okay.

RM: We'd also go swimming in the Mahoning River, right in back of where Valley Drugs used to be. The ice house, where they used to make ice down there also. Then you'd go down by the tracks and you'd go swimming in there. I only went there once when I was little, but the older kids, that's where they went. Or they would go swimming up by General Fireproofing, they used to call it Signos, there was a little pond up there and there was a wall and one side is where the guys would go swimming and the other

side whoever had a fishing hook would be trying to catch fish on the other side. So you had swimmers here and fisherman here and it was the same pond but it as like a brick wall.

CM: Oh really?

RM: Yes, it was up by GF and they used to call it Signos. I remember the first time my brothers took me up there. We went across a walkway of some kind and my brothers used to say that before we go across you have to whistle we're going into Italy and we used to whistle we believed them. They'd say you've got to whistle and we're going into Italy, but that's some of the things we did to have fun. We used to put tin cans on our shoes. Bend a tin can and make an imprint and the end of the can would come over the sole of your shoes and then you would walk with clod hoppers, that was another thing we did for enjoyment. Why, I don't know but it was something we did to get some fun out of life.

CM: Did you ever try ice-skating with those tin cans on your shoes?

RM: No we ice skated with our big heavy shoes because nobody had ice skates. We'd go to Crandall Park and that is where we would ice skate. I did try ice skates out once but my ankles would fold in. I had no balance on my ankles. I can't recall even who had them but none of the kids our age had any toys. Everybody now has their own toys, their own car. When we got a little bit older, one kid had a car and there would be seventeen guys in one car, we'd go all of the way out to Idora Park, get whoever had a penny or two cents and get a couple of buckets of popcorn, then get back in the car and drive home, but everybody would get in that car.

CM: Do you remember how old you were when you started working?

RM: Well when I quit school at sixteen I went to work at, it used to be a printing company on Rayen Avenue right where the, it used to be the International Truck Garage, but at that time I think it was United Printing. They used to print shopping papers like they deliver to the houses now. They used to print this shopping paper and it was just about the size of the Parade that you get on Sundays. I used to help bundle them. It was so many years ago that is all I remember. I didn't work there long. I went and worked at the grocery store, I just went across the street to the grocery store. I used to help the one fellow deliver groceries, before my brother got the job there. In fact he's the one who taught me to drive a truck. He always used to tell me to watch my feet, watch what I do and watch my hand how I shift the gears, you know the gear shift on the floor. So I used to watch him all of the time and then one day he said do you think you could drive yourself? I said well you have to put a brick on the seat so that I can see over the hood. So I took the truck up the hill and delivered the groceries and went back to where he was. He was in someone's home having coffee and pizza with one of the neighbors. So he taught me how to drive when I worked at the grocery store. I've had so many jobs. I worked down at Youngstown Sheet and Tube and I worked at Republic Steel, I worked for a trucking company, then Youngstown State. Now that I am retired I'm enjoying every bit of it. I do what I want to do, and if I want to do it, I do it, and if I don't, I don't do it. I can enjoy myself under the tree sitting in the sun.

CM: Do you remember what dates were like when you were younger, when you were a teenager?

RM: Well we didn't date much but I do remember when I, I knew my wife from school. I met her at Lanterman Falls; they used to have dances up there. Me and two

other guys went up there and she was there and I started talking to her, this was after we had finished school. She asked me who I was and I was a big BSer back then and I told her all kinds of stuff, I told her that I had just come back from California, that I had two brothers stationed in the army in California, I've got another one in Texas, there's two in Virginia, and another in Missouri, I gave her all that lying. I asked her out for a date and we started dating and we went together for three years before I married her. She was 21, I was 24, but we went together for three years before we got married. So I didn't date too many girls, plus I didn't have any money and I didn't have any good clothes, so you didn't go ask a girl out if you didn't have money to take her someplace. So if you met them someplace you started talking to them, if you didn't meet them someplace, that was it you know. Usually when I was younger, we were a gang, we would go sit on somebody's porch, or sit on the corner and talk. That's some of the things I recall when I was younger.

CM: Well I think that about wraps it up, thank you very much for the interview.