

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Women's History

Personal Experiences

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CHARLOTTE KELLY

Interviewed

On

February 23, 1996

By

Beth A Burr

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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SUBJECT Women's History

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B This is an interview with Charlotte Kelly for the Youngstown State University Oral History Department The topic is Women's History and how life has changed for women The interview is being done by Beth Burr at Charlotte's home on Navajo Avenue in Lehigh Acres, Florida This is Friday the 23rd of February and it is about ten o'clock in the morning

B Ok we are just going to start back as far as you can remember, you can tell me about your neighborhood where you grew up, about your family, what you and your friends did for fun, a little bit about early education and school and the differences, if you saw any at that time between the boys and the girls That is sort of what I am looking for

K Well I grew up on Mill Street and there was a family next door to us and their last name was Wagner and on the other side the families' name was Gross and they both had large families There was six children in our family and we played outside a lot and we never had any fears about going out after dark We played hide and seek and we did all kinds of acrobat tricks out in the yard We would have theatres, one of the neighbors had

an enclosed back porch and we would put a blanket across it for a curtain and we would have shows. Before the show we would get the cats and the dogs from the neighborhood and we would parade around the block. We would dress up in some of our mothers' old clothes even though they would be dragging on the ground, we thought we were just it. I remember one time I had a doll it was so big and it sat out on the front steps and a friend of my mother's drove by and she stopped quick and she backed up. She thought it was my brother Pat sitting on the steps. She ran up to the doll and she was quite surprised to see that it was a doll because it was just as big as a baby. And I just loved that doll, to this day I don't know what happened to it. I went to Sunday school at a Methodist Church. The Sunday School class there and this one Sunday school teacher was going to go south and I said to her "When you go down there, every time you eat a banana think of me." Then she told me when she got back, that's what happened. She said every time I ate a banana I thought of you. Well I left the Methodist Church when I was a teenager because it seemed to me that all that the class talked about was where they were going and what they were going to do and the dates that they were going to have, things like that. Which I really wasn't interested in it, I was interested in Girl Scouts and camping. I used to go to Camp Pete for the Girl Scout camp.

B Where was that at?

K That was in Conneaut

B Was it?

K Yeah, we would camp out. I know one year it rained so hard that we all had to go into the dining room with our beds but we had fun anyway.

B What about school?

K I went to Broad Street School From there I went to Old Main they changed the boundary lines, from Main Street School I went to Conneaut Jr High then to Conneaut High School As I look back I see that every school except the Jr High School, which is now the high school has been torn down I said they are trying to tell me something I enjoyed school, especially the fifth grade I always remembered Miss Benson, she had a convertible, and if the kids stayed after school she would always give the kids a ride home I know more than once I had stayed after school, not because I had to but for extra things like we would clean the black boards and the erasers and things I know she read the Bobsy Twins to us and I really enjoyed that We had that special time when it was story time If everybody attended class, we had a chart on the board and if everybody was there in the morning you got a half mark on the chart and if they were there in the afternoon you got another half mark And when that chart got filled you got a day off And so that was an incentive so that the kids were at school unless they were actually sick I know we had plenty of them And then another thing that she did that was very interesting was in Geography Class We took a matchbox, which was a large sized matchbox and we decorated it We would put emblems on it, for every place we went we could put an emblem on it Like if we went to Berlin in Germany or something like that and every place we went we would pick something up as a souvenir When we got through our matchbox couldn't hold all of our souvenirs It was just an interesting way to learn Geography

B You obviously remembered it, so it must have had some worth to it

K And then in high school there wasn't that many memories, just studying and work on the side

B Where did you work in high school?

K Grandma Burr had a little grocery confectionary store and I used to work for her I dipped so much ice cream that when I got older I didn't want to see anymore In them days your ice cream was hand dipped You took a metal container and put a cardboard container into it and you stored the ice cream in there until it was full

B You did more of that than you cared to remember probably

K Right I remember ice cream suckers Grandma Burr was one of the first ones to have them, and she hand made them She took a wooden stick and she put a little cardboard disk on it and a scoop of ice cream on top of that and then dipped it in the chocolate And that was like an Eskimo pie I remember that very well I used to do housework for different people in Conneaut I spent most of my summer vacation with my grandparents in Wesleyville, Pennsylvania Seems like the day school got out I was on the train and was on my way to Wesleyville I got off the train in Erie and took a street car and took it to the end of the line which was a street that they lived on and I would walk up to their house, it wasn't too far from there The streetcar conductor would take the moneybox from one end of the car to the other end and get out and change the wire overhead and start his way back up town We used to go to Erie shopping quite often That was a big thing I would go with my grandparents to the market There was this large Twelfth Street market and it was so white Everything was white, all of the counters were white, and everything in there was just white It seemed to me that most of the people who worked there were white We would pick up whatever we wanted for the week We would get the meats and the vegetables, and that was always a Saturday

morning trip to market Over the market there was a skating rink and we used to go roller-skating So I really enjoyed that

B Anything else about childhood? You've done well

K Um, not that I can think of off hand

B Another thing I'm interested in is how like national events affected you and your family Such as the Depression and how the Depression affected your family Do you remember it being hard on the family?

K No I can't remember it being hard on the family The sugar was rationed and this was World War I that my father was in Well he was in the war I goofed this up He was in World War I, I was born the year after he came home The Second World War we didn't have hardships in our family My father worked all of the time The Depression didn't affect us The only thing I remember was instead of a new pair of shoes every week it had to be once a month So we didn't have what you would call a hard time I remember food being expensive I can remember paying sixty cents a dozen for eggs I was just a teenager and went to the store and when you went to the store in those days it wasn't a supermarket, you went in and stood on one side of the counter and everything was on the other side and you told the clerk what you wanted They set it down on the counter It was the same with meat, it wasn't prepackaged You had to go in and pick out what you wanted They would weigh it and you would buy it that way

B Very different from today's world What about working, we'll go on to your career

K Well I've always worked, from the time I was out of high school One of my first jobs was working for a family who needed someone to stay with this lady and it was an

enjoyable job because it was at a beach home. She had had tuberculosis and was over it but she needed somebody there to do cooking and things like that, which I did, and I was there that whole summer. Well when they moved back to their winter home I believe it was her sister who was able to come and stay with her. So I got a job in Erie at a boarding house. That's where I met Alfred Burch, we married and we had two children. I worked at Polakas' that was the candy store. But I worked in the kitchen making sandwiches.

B Did they have a deli as well? Or were you just making them to sell or was it just work?

K No they had a small restaurant besides the candy and then they had an old fashioned ice cream bar where you would go up to the counter and sit and they would serve you ice cream. From Polakis' I wanted someplace to work that was closer to home. We had moved out to Harbor Creek and I wanted someplace so I worked for Miller's Barbeque. They were only a seasonal place, they were only opened in the summer time. So when they closed I happened to go in town and I said something about it, I said I was going to get part time work at the W T Grant Company. So this relative of mine that worked there says why don't I go up and apply for a job, which I did. Then I got the job I'd run the elevator for a couple of years, which gave me my ups and downs. When I quit because of transportation I stayed at home. Before I went to the Grant Company I worked for Lovels during the war making airplane parts for airplanes and that was in Erie. But then to get back to Grants, I was off about six months and the personal manager called and wanted to know what I was doing and I said not much, and she said that my elevator operator is off sick, would you come in and help me out? I said yeah I'll

come in so I went in and I worked a couple weeks until the girl could come back and then I was told that there was two openings, there was one in the yard goods department and one in the drapery department. Would I like either one of them? And I said that I wasn't planning on full time work but yes, I'd like to work in the drapery department. So I started out, the lady who had it and had given her notice and was supposed to work with me for about a week. She was to show me the ropes and how to order and how to set up the department and so on and so forth. She went to lunch the first day and never came back. So I learned it and I learned it the hard way. And what you learn the hard way they can't ever take away from you. You will never forget it. I worked for Grants for twenty-eight years. They had an anniversary party for me on my 25th year. I worked there until 1975 when the store closed due to bankruptcy. Our store was making money but Grant closed all of his stores.

B What about on the job was there specific men jobs and women jobs? Or was there some intermingling?

K Well I know most everybody did, at Grants everybody did either way. But I do know that I had worked my way up in the store and I was a supervisor, and I was in charge of several departments. But also the men had a higher pay scale from what the women did.

B Even though you had an equal job.

K Even though I had an equal job the men were paid more than the women.

B That just amazes me. This was even up into the seventies? Was it still that way or had they started to correct it?

K No that was that way up until the store closed in '75. It never was changed.

B Oh boy What have you seen just within your working, just within your everyday life? Things have changed for women since the time when you were little and you saw what your mother was doing You growing up and now with your own daughter and granddaughter

K Well I have found that more women are working then they did when I was a child When I was a little child there were very few women who worked outside of the home One man's salary could take care of things It's a shame that it is not that way today The children would be better children if they had someone home to guide them After they are grown up if the mother wants to work then I can see no harm in it But I do feel that a child until they are a teenager out on their own should have some supervision in the home

B Do you think it needs to be the woman in the home?

K No, it doesn't have to be the woman, it has to be somebody I think a lot of men can do just as well as the mother can

B Do you vote?

K Do I vote? Yes, I do

B That is another thing that I am interested in, the way well politics, and women in politics, they were ignored for a really long time They didn't get the right to vote until after you were born So they were considered second-class citizens I was just wondering what you thought of women being in politics and how that has changed over the years. What have you noticed?

K I think that women should be in politics, I think that their version of the different things, let's see how can I explain that? I have said that if we had a woman president

then we wouldn't have the problems that we have today I was glad when women could vote, you can have your say and if anybody doesn't vote then they shouldn't complain about how things go

B Do you think that it is as equal as it is going to get or what do you think?

K No, I think it is going to get more equal than what it is I think that we are going to get more women into politics, more women into offices, and I might not live to see it but in time we are going to have a woman president

B Good, I hope I live to see it

K Yes, you just might Becky

B Do you have anyone who served as like a role model? Anyone who you looked up to as a kid or even later in life that helped form your ideas and opinions?

K Both of my grandmothers, Grandma Burr was in the business world and she was sort of a role model and Grandma Domer, I just idolized her

B Why?

K Well she just had so much love in her

B Oh did she? You are going to make me cry too

K She's the one who I always went and spent the summers with Not only summers but they would come to our home in Conneaut for Christmas or Thanksgiving And when they went home I went back home with them And before I could walk I don't remember back that far, they took me home with them and practically raised me I learned to walk when I was at my grandparents I always went home to go to school but outside of that I was there A lot of Fridays I would go to my Grandparents and then on Sunday I would come home on the nickel plate train

B It was more of a mother figure than a grandmother figure almost

K Yes, yes

B That's neat I'm jumping to the present Actually I want to ask about your grandmother owning the store was that uncommon? Were there other women business owners at that time?

K I think it was unusual, I don't know of another woman who had a store When Grandpa Burr passed away, Grandma had to do something for a living and I was a younger girl, I can't remember what year it was but she opened up the store in what they called the harbor block And it was a pretty good-sized store Then she had a store down on the corner of Fifteenth and Broad I think that was the corner it was on Then she went up to that little house on the corner up by the railroad tracks The street behind Sandusky, she had a smaller store there That's where I worked, I worked on the harbor block and I worked at that one for her

B So she opened this all on her own, she did this all on her own

K She did that with the help of her sons, my father and my Uncle Howard and my Uncle Bill They helped her get organized here in the store She ran it herself and it was her store

B Great Good for her Now we'll jump to the present What do you do today to keep busy?

K Well that is the hundred-dollar question I do a lot of sewing I make mostly all my own clothes The neighborhood knows that I sew I do all of their alterations, there isn't a week that goes by that somebody doesn't come in and want something done I

work at the church I'm the assistant secretary there, I'm the director of the WRM
women on missions

B What is that? What do you do with that?

K Well we have our prayer sessions and we have a half hour social and every year
we make something special for the nursing home There are about 125 people in the
nursing home here in Lehigh and we have a project where we make something for them
Now this year we are going to make them lap robes, so we are going to have to make 125
lap robes

B Do you like meet weekly to do this?

K We meet once a month and then you work on your own at home

B Oh okay

K Then I do a lot of crafts, like teddy bears and I make dolls I'm not very
successful with gardening down here because it is so hot and you have to water, which I
fail to do. I don't get out and water it like I should and then they don't do too good

B Back to the building committee, let's talk about how your church has grown

K Well when we first started out at this old church five years ago we had anywhere
from 40-50 If 50 people were in church on Sunday we thought we had a big turnout
Last Sunday we had 266 in church, and 128 in Sunday school We have a lot of young
people Young people are very active We have all age groups and we find things for
them to do We have vacation bible school Last year we had so many in vacation bible
school that we had to turn them away So we have a building program going which has
been going for two years, and we almost have half of what we feel we are going to need
to build this new sanctuary It is going to seat 500 people We are going to bring it up

before the church committee next month to see if they are ready to start and we would borrow the other half Pastor Tony says that he does not want to strap the congregation with a large debt People have gone along with that and we have had donations and we have had a funds campaign and I am the chairperson of the building funds campaign I'm quite proud of what we are doing

B Good So you should probably start building here soon

K Well if everything goes as expected we would start a year from March We would have a business meeting in March, we figure a year from this March we would start, unless the funds come in faster And they have been coming in, and as soon as we are halfway there with the Power Allegations approval we will start building

B Great and are you going to contract it out or is it going to be volunteer work?

K We have hired a contractor and he has given us a firm price so that we can have this meeting in March There are some of the things that, well we have people in the church We have a man who has donated the roof and he is a roofer His crew is going to put the roof on

B Great

K We have a plumber and we have an electrician So those things we are going to work with the contractor

B Great Let's see I think I've asked you all of the questions I need to ask you Do you have anything else that you want to add? Anything that you remembered along the way?

K Well I should say that in 1962 Clair Kelly and I got married and we have been married for over 32 years We moved to Lehigh Acres, sold our home up north and bought one down here We are very happy down here

B So you like Florida?

K I love Florida

B Good, although we miss you

K I miss my family at home I have a sister and brother and nieces and nephews and I do miss the family

B Your kids are here though

K Our children are here We have one about 15 miles from us in Ft Myers and the other is in Point Sienna, which is about 125 miles So we do get together with the children

B What about the grand kids?

K Grandchildren, I have three in Northeast Pennsylvania and one in Atlanta, one in California, and two in Florida Great grandchildren I have two in California, and two in Florida, and eight in Pennsylvania

B How often do you get to see them?

K I don't get to see the great grandchildren that much I see the grandsons in Florida and the one in Georgia That is not his permanent home He is a contractor, he is there building a million dollar school, just outside of Atlanta His home base is on St Croix in the Virgin Islands

B He must hate Atlanta Anything else?

K I think I've pretty much covered it all That's my life here