

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Westlake Terrace

Personal Experience

O.H. 918

MILDRED PORTER

Interviewed

by

Joe Rochette

on

November 21, 1985

R: This is an interview with Mrs. Mildred Porter for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Westlake Terrace, by Joe Rochette, on November 21, 1985, at 21317 Kimmel Street, in Youngstown, Ohio, at approximately 5:00 p.m.

Tell me a little about your background, where you were born and raised and went to school.

P: I was born here in Youngstown. The first school I went to was Covington. Then my father passed away and we moved back to the West Side. I was born on the West Side of Youngstown on Steel Street. After my father passed away, we went back to Steel Street and that was where we stayed until I got out of high school. When my husband passed away, I moved into the housing project. He passed away in the summer of 1950, and I moved right into the projects.

R: You said that you had gone to Covington. Was that Old Covington?

P: Old Covington School.

R: Was that right around the area where the Covington School is today?

P: It was around the same area, yes. I think they just tore down old houses or something that were there. I do not remember that. They improved Covington School; they rebuilt the school. I do not remember what year that was.

R: Now that was grade school, right?

P: Yes, grade school.

R: That would probably be in the 1930's and early 1940's into that era there.

P: Yes, because I only went there for the first grade.

R: What do you remember about Youngstown back then? What things do you think were different about Youngstown than they are today?

P: It was a lot more friendlier then. You never had any problems. People looked out for one other. I was from the West Side from Steel Street. We were the only blacks in that neighborhood and they took care of us. We lived with my grandmother; she took care of them. You could see the men going back and forth to work with their lunch buckets, and you could catch the bus for \$.10. On a Sunday, we would get a Sunday pass which was a treat. We would ride all day, all over Youngstown with a Sunday pass. People would go fishing all the time. There was no television. They had radios, but we listened to the radio at night. When we would go fishing, it did not matter whom; we all would go fishing.

- R: Did it seem like in those days the neighbors in the neighborhood were closer and cooperated with one other?
- P: They were closer and they cooperated with one other. There were never any problems, no fights, or anything like that. Even when the kids fought, one of the neighbors would take care of it. There were no problems.
- R: It was like a lot of times how people say, "Everybody watched over everybody's kids" If a kid was misbehaving, a neighbor would see it.
- P: They would get a spanking, yes.
- R: It did not matter? Now parents would make a big deal if somebody else would.
- P: It did not matter who it was. We were the only blacks there. There was a white lady next door. If she saw us doing wrong, she would give us a good one.
- R: In the neighborhood where you lived, were there neighborhood stores and places?
- P: There were neighborhood stores. One store I remember is Tothe's. It was like a family store. The food was better then, even the meats. I do not remember the prices of food then, but it was very low priced.
- R: So it was just like a little local grocery store where you went?
- P: A little grocery store. In fact there was one on this side and one on this side. Maybe this grocery store had a special kind of bread you liked or a special kind of fruit that you liked, they had a better fruit than this man over here, or this man over here had better meat than the man over there. So you trade at both stores. Then we had a neighborhood shoe store and a neighborhood clothing store right there on Steel Street.
- R: So people pretty much did a lot of their shopping and things right in that area?
- P: Right.
- R: You would not have to go far away?
- P: No. There was a bakery right there, Steel Street Bakery. They used to give us kids bread.
- R: You could go there and they would always give you something?

P: Yes.

R: In the neighborhood where you lived, did you notice if there were a lot of different ethnic groups?

P: Yes, mostly Hungarians, Polaks, and Czechs were all in that particular neighborhood.

R: Probably when you were growing up you heard a lot of different languages.

P: I knew it then.

R: Probably from playing with the kids?

P: Yes, from playing with the kids. They taught us. I did not keep up with it, so I have forgotten it now, but back in those days I knew how to speak Hungarian, Slovak, and whatever you call it.

R: What about being afraid of leaving your doors unlocked?

P: No, you could leave your house and go on downtown. You could leave your keys in the car, if you had a car. You could leave the door open; you could leave your clothes outside, bikes, toys, anything.

R: It was not like today where you have 50 locks?

P: No.

R: Of course, in those days that was when the steel mills were all going and everything like that. Do you ever remember there being a lot of soot and dirt from the smokestacks?

P: I guess we were so used to it. Where we lived, we were right under the mill. I guess we just thought it was an everyday thing. We never even gave it much thought. We even hung our clothes outside and never worried about that.

R: When you were a little kid in the time when you were going to grade school, what were some things that you remember doing just to have fun or to get you busy or whatever?

P: When it rained, we would go outside and play in the rain. The water would be running down the street, and we would take our shoes off and play in the rain. We played marbles on nice days with the boys and jacks. You never worried because if you got lost, if you went a little too far, all you had to do was tell somebody that you were lost, and they would see that you get home. There were no problems. Then we had a bicycle and we used to skate on the sidewalks then. We used to skate on the sidewalks and play hopscotch.

- R: All the games. What about in the winter when it would be cold and snow?
- P: We loved the snow. We would go out and make the biggest snowman, and we had sleds.
- R: So in the winter time, snow was the big thing?
- P: Yes, snow was really a big thing. Then we would sled ride; we did a lot of sled riding. The kids who did not have their own sleds would make their own sleds. We would make our own skis and go down to Mill Creek Park. They used to have a wooden barrel, so it made a nice ski. You put it on your feet. The poor kids did not have ice skates. We would go watch the rich kids ice skate, but we would get on the ice. We put something on our feet and slide like we were ice skating.
- R: Most of the kids and families who lived in your neighborhood were pretty much the same economically?
- P: Yes, they were all the same because their husbands or fathers or whatever worked in the mill. Everybody worked in the mill in the neighborhood, so we all had bicycles and skates and sleds, but we did not have ice skates. When I got older, I had to pass the bicycle down.
- R: There was no throwing anything away back then?
- P: You did not throw anything away you passed it down to your brother or sister.
- R: During those years in the 1930's and 1940's with the Depression and with the war blooming, those were hard times. People probably had to do without a lot of stuff. Do you remember?
- P: We never had too many problems because in the summertime we had to work. In the summertime my grandfather had a garden. In all the empty fields we planted a garden. Then after the garden grew, we had to can that stuff, all that stuff for the winter.
- R: Would you have corn and tomatoes?
- P: We had corn, tomatoes, okra, string beans, green beans, peas, black eyed peas, all your vegetables.
- R: In those days, you had no need to run to the store and get a can of corn or something like that; you had your own.
- P: We would can all of that stuff. Then my grandmother had a brother who lived out on Meridian Road, and that was where we got our meat. They raised hogs out there. Then we had chickens out there, so we did not have to buy any eggs.

- R: It seemed like in those days, a lot more people had chickens and maybe a couple of pigs or a goat or something like that. They would have their own source right there?
- P: That is right. Then the one family next door, somebody had a farm, and they had milk. Sometimes they would bring us extra milk, and we had to make our own butter. We got a furnace after the war broke out. My grandmother went to work in the mill down the hill on Albert Street; they are out of business now.
- R: It was the big mill that is down there. It is all falling down?
- P: Yes, she went to work there. I do not know what she did, but that was where she went to work. Her first pay she had a furnace put in our house. I remember that was when we got our furnace. Before that we had a coal stove. In the wintertime, everybody would be sitting around the coal stove burning up in the front and freezing in the back.
- R: In those days what are some of your memories about whenever you used to go downtown to the stores and the whole thing, when can you first remember downtown at all?
- P: I do not remember too much about going downtown. We did go downtown, but I do not remember too much about it because I do not think we really had to buy anything downtown. We had our store out there where we always bought our clothes in my younger days.
- R: It was probably when you were older and married.
- P: Yes, when I was older and married.
- R: I suppose in those days everybody just took the buses right?
- P: Yes. We loved to ride the bus. We would pay our \$.10 and get on the bus. Maybe everybody did not have \$.10, but you could get a pass and get by the window and give the pass to whomever did not have the money so that they could get on the bus and then they would hand the pass out. The bus driver knew, but he never said anything.
- R: That is one difference between those days and these days. The bus driver today would never let it even if he would have known.
- P: Back then they did not care who you were. Let us say I knew that you did not have \$.10. I would pass you the pass to get on the bus. Then you had a friend. You would sit by the window. Whomever was by the window, if they knew what you wanted to do, they would move over and let you sit there by the window and let you hand the pass out. Then another person would get on the bus.
- R: I suppose in those days if you would go downtown, the main difference today is that there

just would be a lot of people and cars and things.

P: Yes, there were always people around town. It was always crowded all night long. I remember as I got older we used to go downtown and sit. You would see people there up until 9:00 or 10:00.

R: When was the first time you remember either hearing about or seeing about Westlake Terrace?

P: My mother went away to school to become a beautician after my father passed away. That is why my grandmother raised us. When she came back, she got a house on Federal Street. We moved from there to Federal Street. I think they built the projects before we moved on Federal Street. When they were building it, everybody was running around trying to get into the project. I guess some of the homes were pretty old, and they did not have furnaces or hot water tanks, which we did not have. We were allowed to go through the houses and look. It was so nice. It was nicer than anything we had ever seen. It was brand new. Everybody wanted to move into the projects.

R: There were just so many of them, so many buildings?

P: Yes. This end was for the colored. Up on the hill was for the white.

R: Was Madison Avenue the dividing line?

P: Yes.

R: The lower section of what is now the Rescue Mission used to be the YMCA, (Young Men's Christian Association)?

P: Yes, the YMCA was there.

R: When you eventually did move in, what do you remember about what you had to go through to apply?

P: It was hard to get into the projects. They did not just let anybody in the projects. You had to be married. You took your marriage license. I am not sure, but I think I had to take the kid's birth certificates because I was a single woman because my husband had died. You had to have proof of your income, marriage license, and birth certificates. You had to make a deposit. In fact, I think you had to have reference, I am not sure. I know it was hard to get into. Whatever, I did get in. I think it took about three months before I could get in. I had to pay a deposit in case a window or something or they had to paint or whatever, but it was very strict, but it did not bother me. It might have bothered some people because you had to cut the grass; you had to keep the yard clean; you had to keep your apartment clean. They

would come and inspect.

R: So all of that was your responsibility as far as grass and the whole thing?

P: Yes. You did not have to cut the grass all the time, but you had to keep your own grass. Maybe about once a month it might come your turn to cut the grass or once every two months.

R: Everybody in the building had a turn?

P: Yes. They had it posted somewhere. I do not remember where. I think it might have been in the laundry room. When your time came, you cut your grass. Maybe somebody would help you. Then my kids were small, but they picked the paper up and I cut the grass. If you did not want to cut the grass, you could tell the office and they would send somebody out and you would pay for it. Then you had to clean the laundry room. If you used the laundry room, you cleaned it up.

R: Would they have a schedule for the laundry room?

P: Yes.

R: How many laundry rooms would each building have?

P: Each building did not have a laundry room. I stayed in this building, and the building across from me had a laundry room. This lower building, that lower building on that side, and this building used that one laundry room.

R: What would it be? Would it be a certain day a week?

P: A certain day like Wednesday would be my day. If I did not wash that Wednesday, maybe somebody else wanted to wash that day. They could wash in your place if you were not going to wash, and then you could wash on their day or somebody else's day. I always washed on my Wednesday. Then they had a place where you would hang your clothes. It was a fence because they had a section for each person to hang their clothes like a locker room. It was not like a locker room.

R: Like a little tunnel maybe?

P: Yes, like a little tunnel with a cage around it. You put your clothes in there and hang them up. At that time when I first moved in there, you did not have to lock it.

R: Would there be washers there?

P: Yes, because I did not have a washer. I do not remember if you had to pay or not, but they had a washer and dryer there.

R: They would probably be those old, ringer kind of ones.

P: No they had automatic. They did not have a dryer because we had to hang our clothes up. It might have been a grinder type of washer.

R: When you first moved in that day, did you have to bring a truck with your stuff or did you just have all kinds of people helping you?

P: Yes, all kinds of people helped. Everybody helped when somebody was moving. Even the next door lady would fix dinner or something for you so you would not have to cook. I do not remember too much about moving. All I know is that a lot of different people were helping. They helped me put the beds up. You had to get a hammer and put the bed railing around it.

R: So really when they said that you had to make your bed, you really had to.

P: You had to make sure that it fit right into the slot. If you did not, it was not put up right.

R: Back then did the apartments come with anything like a stove?

P: The stove and the refrigerator, yes.

R: So you just had to bring the rest of your furniture.

P: Yes. The stove and the refrigerator were already in there. They were nice apartments. I had two bedrooms in my apartment, and I think I paid \$.18 a month. My husband had passed away and I think they had just started social security.

R: When you would pay that \$.18, would you go down to the office there?

P: Yes. The first day of the month everybody paid their rent. There were never any problems because they knew that was what they had to do. You would go down to the office and pay your rent, and then they would give you a receipt. There was a lease too. Yes, you passed for a year.

R: Was there a cashier?

P: Yes.

R: When you mentioned that occasionally they would inspect the apartments, was it somebody

from the office who would come up?

P: Yes. The lady who was in charge, Mrs. Knauf, was very strict. She expected you to keep that apartment clean, and you kept it clean. When they came to inspect, they would look to see if it was nice and clean. There might be a little dust or something. I guess what they were looking for was dirt. Hardly anybody ever got put out for a dirty apartment back then. I think they did send you a notice telling you it was time for inspection. They would come and inspect. You did not have to be there because they had a key.

R: So they would just go right in there if you were there or not?

P: Right.

R: About how often would that be? Do you remember?

P: I think once a year.

R: So they would probably come in and look at the walls or whatever.

P: If the walls needed paint, they would send somebody to paint the walls. You never had to worry about painting the walls. In those days we never had roaches. A lot of people say that they had roaches there, but if you kept it clean, you did not have to worry about roaches. There were so many people living in such a small place.

R: What kind of system did they have for garbage or stuff like that?

P: We had our own garbage can at that time. You had to have a green garbage can, and you had to have your apartment number on it. Each can had to have your number on it. You put it in a round paper bag. You wrapped it in newspaper or anything, but you had to wrap it up. Then you would put it in your garbage can. That would keep green flies and maggots away.

R: What if there were any kind of problems with plumbing or something like that, did they have maintenance men?

P: Yes. They would check the building. If you had any problems at all, all you had to do was call the office or go in and report. They would come right out and fix it.

R: You mentioned how Mrs. Knauf was strict and the people were strict. It almost seems like they had an eye on everything and knew where everybody was going and doing. Did you have a feeling that they were always kind of checking up on you?

P: No, because they had rules. If you followed the rules, you did not have any problems. They did ask you not to have roamers or somebody who was not on the lease in there. Most

everybody did have somebody come and stay there. Nobody told anybody when they stayed those nights. So we never had any problems. My sister went away. When she came back, she stayed with me until she found somewhere to go. Nobody told; she did not know.

R: Do you remember any time when they did find out about somebody or what they would do if they did find out?

P: They had to pay for it, pay for the time they stayed there. If there was a bad tenant, they probably would have asked her to move. They did find people. I do not know how. Maybe somebody got mad at somebody or something.

R: Did it seem like when you were living there that a lot of people were moving in and out, or did it seem like most of the people stayed?

P: No, they stayed. There was no place nicer to go. We could not rent a house anywhere. There were certain places and houses that we could rent, but it was not even worth going to rent. So you spent a lot of your time there.

R: So you got to know your neighbors?

P: You knew all of your neighbors. In fact, I think I knew everyone in the vicinity.

R: Who are some of the people you remember, who you lived by or talked to a lot?

P: Mrs. Preston, she lived a couple of doors over. On this side was Liz Boggright. Over here Mrs. Sanders was upstairs, and there was an older man downstairs. I believe his name was Mr. Frightman. Then there was Mrs. Ruth. She stayed in the corner. Then in the next building there was a man who had seven kids. His wife had died and he raised those seven kids by himself. His last name was Crawford. I think he had three or four bedrooms. He had all boys and no girls.

R: The ones with three or four bedrooms, would those be the ones at the end of the buildings that would have an upstairs and a downstairs?

P: I had an upstairs and a downstairs. I had a two bedroom apartment. What they did was they took some of these three apartments and made a six room apartments out of it because my sister had nine kids, so she had a six room apartment.

R: So that way they could take bigger families in a room.

P: Yes. It had two bathrooms, one upstairs and one downstairs.

R: While you were there with other women in your building or in the area there, would you ever

get together or have anything? Would like once a week get together and do something?

P: Yes, we got together and sewed. I think that is mostly what we did. We had sewing classes. That was what we liked to do. Other groups did other things. There were some girls who got together and played cards, and some would get together and I do not know what they did, but we sewed.

R: So people did form little groups and maybe met every week or whatever.

P: Yes, little groups. Then after we were allowed to go up to the settlement there, they had different activities there that we could do.

R: Could kids use them too?

P: Yes, but at first it was only for the whites.

R: So in the beginning time at the Lexington Settlement House, it was just for whites?

P: Right.

R: For the lower section, would a lot of people go to the YMCA?

P: Yes, the boys would go down to the YMCA and swim. The girls would go to the YWCA, (Young Women's Christian Association). They had little activities down at the YMCA for the boys. My boys used to go down there. Then in the summertime, they always had someone at the playground and they could play at the playground.

R: With certain areas, did they not have a little place where there were slides and that?

P: Yes, they had playgrounds.

R: When you were there, I have heard some people talk about that they had little fountains or something?

P: For the kids, yes. They were little water fountains. The water would go up in the air and the kids would all run around it.

R: When you think back over the years while you were living there, what are some of the overall memories that you have of the time that you spent at West Lake Terrace?

P: I was there about five years, maybe six. At that time, you did not have to worry about the kids fighting. If they were a little bored or playing marbles, there were those fights like that, but not any fight. You could let your kids out and play; you do not have to worry. If

they were doing something wrong, one of the neighbors would stop them, I liked that. Later I found a job, and I was able to leave my kids right there. The neighbors knew what days I worked, so they would take care of the kids and feed them. They knew when you worked. They knew when you had to go downtown. When you had to go, you could leave your kids with someone. That was nice then.

R: When you were young you talked about stores around where you lived. What about around the Westlake area there if you wanted to go to a store or something?

P: Yes, there were some grocery stores. There was one small store right across there on Griffith Street. He did not have too much. He had bread and milk. A couple of blocks over there was a bigger store. He had everything. That was a nice store. Mr. Fine was his name. You could go there and buy whatever you wanted.

R: Do you remember any stores or anything on Federal Street?

P: Yes, there was a store on Federal Street, but I never went down Federal Street.

R: You did not have to?

P: No, because they were right there. When you wanted to buy a large supply of groceries, you would go up on Belmont. There was a big supermarket. Or you could go downtown to a supermarket. We would pay someone with a car. There were a few men in the project who had cars. They would take the people downtown who did not have a car for \$1. Gas was like \$.25 a gallon.

R: While you were living at Westlake, do you remember going downtown for whatever?

P: Yes.

R: You probably would go there and get clothes too?

P: Yes, that is where I went to get clothes for the kids.

R: There was Strouss.

P: Strouss' and McKelvey's. I do not know how many stores were down there. You had certain stores where I used to go to buy my kids clothes for school. I do not remember the name of it. Then Strouss' used to have dresses there for \$5 or \$3 or \$7 or something like that. I had a daughter and two sons when I lived there.

R: During those times, do you ever remember just going downtown with your kids or whatever to maybe movies or to walk around or maybe something like that?

- P: Yes, they used to love to go downtown. They used to walk around. They were always down there to the movies.
- R: Of course, downtown then there were a lot of movie theaters?
- P: A lot of movies, yes. I used to take them downtown to the movies. I would take them downtown and maybe we would get some candy or some ice cream or just walk through town; they loved that. I think that was when I went downtown more when the kids started growing.
- R: When you moved out, did you have any bad feelings that you were moving away from the people whom you knew?
- P: Yes, I did. I had gotten married then. He had a good job, so he made too much money. He worked down at Valley Mold. We looked for a house so that when we got married, we could move right into the house. He could not come there because he made too much money. When I left, naturally, I hated to leave. The kids cried, they did not want to go.
- R: Because of all their friends?
- P: All there friends were there.
- R: During that period what ages were your kids?
- P: I think when I moved out my daughter was five. I only had one who went to school. My daughter had to have been like ten or eleven when we moved out.
- R: Did they go to Covington School?
- P: Yes, my daughter went to Covington School.
- R: By the time it was the new building?
- P: Yes, it was the new building, I think they remodeled that building and built that when they built the projects. I am not sure.
- R: Can you think of anything else you would like to add or just say about that period?
- P: I really liked the projects. They were nice. It was a good place for a family. It was good housing. You had your bath and it was a nice clean place. Even though it was strict, I still think it was good. You knew what the rules were. If you did not want to move there because you thought it was too strict, it was good to stay out. I enjoyed it, and everybody I knew around me enjoyed it. As long as you followed the rules, you had no problems. The only

rules there were to keep your place clean and not to have outsiders coming in to live with you. It was just a nice place to live and clean.

R: Thank you very much.

End of Interview