

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Shenango Valley-Depression

Personal Experience

O.H. 1032

ALEX NERAL

Interviewed

by

Marilyn Lees

on

August 7, 1982

ALEX NERAL

Alex Neral was born on March 5, 1918, the son of Stephen and Ann Neral, in their home, in Masury, Ohio. They owned a small fifteen-acre farm with their eight children. His father worked at American Steel and Wire in Farrell, Pennsylvania, until it closed during the Depression. Since the farm did not provide enough income for his family, Stephen had to work in Denore, Pennsylvania for a year, but this plant closed, too. Finally, Stephen obtained a job with the WPA. Also, Alex's mother sold vegetables from the farm on Saturdays to buy groceries and other items.

Alex rode a horse-drawn van to grade school in Brookfield Center. During the Depression, Alex worked on his family's farm and earned money by working for other farmers. After graduation in 1936, Alex got a job at a gasoline station for a dollar a day.

In 1938, Alex was employed by National Castings and was able to help his parents by getting electricity and indoor plumbing for their home. During the war, Alex fought in the African campaigns and was married in 1950.

In 1980, Alex returned from National Castings and keeps busy with his garden and driving a bus for the Brookfield School District.

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INTERVIEWEE: ALEX NERAL

INTERVIEWER: Marilyn Lees

SUBJECT: American Steel & Wire, horse and buggy,
Yellow Brick School, WPA, family life on
a farm, school years, Christmas, lack of
money, mood of the people.

DATE: August 7, 1982

L: This is an interview with Alex Neral for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Shenango Valley during the Depression project, by Marilyn Lees, at Masury, Ohio, on August 7, 1982, at 2:00 p.m.

First of all, when were you born and where?

N: I was born on March 5, 1918 in my parents' home on Yankee Run Road, in Masury, Ohio.

L: What were your parents' names?

N: Steve Neral and Ann Neral.

L: What nationality were they?

N: Croatian.

L: Were they born in Europe?

N: They were born in Europe.

L: Did they immigrate here together, or did they meet here in America?

N: They met here in America.

L: What did your father do for a living?

N: He worked in the steel mills, American Steel & Wire, part of U.S. Steel.

L: Where was that located?

N: That was in Farrell, Pennsylvania.

L: How did he get to work?

N: Usually with a neighbor, or there for a while, I remember that Mother used to take him part way in. I don't know how many years she did this, but I know she did it.

L: How far would it be from your home to Farrell?

N: I would say three or four miles.

L: How many children were in your parents' family?

N: Eight.

L: Were you one of the oldest, in the middle, or one of the youngest?

N: I was the third oldest.

L: What were some of your duties as a child?

N: I don't know, we had our chores. Bring the kindling in, we had to go to the barn at night and feed the cows. As a small child, mostly carrying wood, pulling weeds in the garden, things like that.

L: How big of a farm did your parents own?

N: We only had 15 acres. All tilled, we packed it that way.

L: What kind of animals did you have?

N: We had cows, a horse, and of course, there were young calves, chickens, and ducks, I think. A few of those, but mostly chickens and cows. We always had a couple of hogs to go with them.

L: What kind of crops did you have in your fields?

N: I think corn was the big crop in the summer, maybe wheat.

L: Did you mainly grow them for your animals?

N: For the animals.

L: Your father would sell the animals when they got. . . .

N: Not all of them. We'd sell the calves or the eggs, what the animals produced, milk and cheese and things like that.

L: What kind of duties did your mother have then?

N: Taking care of the house and the canning. She was in the garden quite a bit, and she would milk cows until, I guess, us kids did it or could do it.

L: How close was your nearest neighbor?

N: Seven or eight miles [away].

L: How big was your house?

N: Five rooms.

L: What kind of games did you play as a child?

N: Well, the inexpensive ones, like tag and hide-and-go-seek and things like that.

L: Did you play mainly with your brothers and sisters, or were there more? Did the neighborhood kids play together?

N: There were always neighbors, they would come over. It seems it was always in the evenings, because during the day, we'd have things to do, especially in the summertime. This would really be the playtime. We had our little gangs and things like that. After supper, we were free.

L: Can you remember a typical day in the summer for you as a young boy, like what time you got up, and so on?

N: Not really. It wasn't like the big farm where you start at 4:00 a.m. or 5:00 a.m. I'd start, it would be 8:00 a.m. or 8:30 a.m.

L: What type of farm machinery did your parents have?

N: We had the house and the things that went with the wagon and the machine, the cultivator it was called.

L: It was all horse-drawn?

N: Oh, yes.

L: Did you have any pets at all?

N: Yes, we had a big dog, Sport, we called him.

L: What kind of dog was he?

N: A coon hound, they said he was, a real big hound, a friendly sort. We used to play. You would grab a stick or something, and you'd try to pull him down, things like that.

L: Did your father, or anyone, hunt in your family?

N: No.

L: Fish?

N: No. My dad worked in the mill. I mean, while I was young, before the big Depression came, it was ten-hour days or twelve-hour days. Sometimes, he'd walk to work, or he'd come home by horse and buggy. There wasn't much time for fishing.

L: What happened to your dad's job when the Depression hit?

N: They moved, they shut the plant down in Farrell. That was it.

L: Then, he was unemployed.

N: They transferred him to Pennsylvania, some town, Denore. He was there about less than a year, then I don't know what happened.

L: Did he have to leave home, then?

N: Yes, he went over there, and he boarded there. He would get back maybe once every couple of weekends, I don't really know.

L: Then, it was up to the rest of the children to keep the farm going?

N: Right.

L: Where did you go to school?

N: Brookfield.

L: What grade school did you go to?

N: Yellow Brick.

L: The Yellow Brick up at the center?

N: Yes, at the center.

L: How did you get there?

N: Horse, and we had vans, they called them horse-drawn vans. I think it was three or four years I went like that.

L: Did they pick you up right at your house?

N: Yes, they'd come down the road, because our house was by a lane. We had to be there. Sometimes, we ran down the road and had to catch it. There were a few times, like in the wintertime, we'd get the bobsled out, and they had the bells on the horses. That was easy then, because you could hear the bells jingle. That was nice. I was a little kid, in our family, and the little kids had to get a blanket and sit down, and we had to get out of the way. I envied the big kids because they would stand in the back and sing and yell.

L: Around how many kids would he pick up, on an average, in this van that the horse-drawn?

N: There were two horses. Oh, I would say around 20. There had to be, I think, around six of us in each family. I don't know how he squeezed them in.

L: It was at least two or three miles up to Yellow Brick School.

N: Some of the kids went further because they went all the way to the end of the road to catch their bus.

L: Were there any days when you didn't have school because of the bad weather, like we have snow days now?

N: I never heard of those.

L: Where did you go to high school?

N: Brookfield.

L: What today we call the junior high?

N: Right.

L: What were some of your favorite subjects?

N: I think I liked history, especially American history. I loved that because that was fascinating. I think

history was my biggest. I liked math, and that type of thing. I don't think I applied myself at that too well.

L: What were some of your school activities?

N: Mine, I think, was recess. Of course, they had the sports, football, basketball. I didn't get into that.

L: Do you remember any of your favorite teachers?

N: High school?

L: Yes.

N: I think my favorite would be Mr. Gold. He was good, and he was tough. I think he helped me a lot. I had him in eighth grade and when I went to high school, I had some trouble with geometry or something, and he called me and talked to me. He got me straightened out, and I'll always appreciate that.

L: What was discipline like at this time, in school? Do you remember any kids getting into trouble?

N: No, well except the boys were a bit rowdy. I remember one time, I don't know if it's proper to bring it up, but one of the boys had a little bit too much of his dad's wine. I mean, we thought it was funny at the time. Of course, there were the usual fights among the boys especially.

L: How would the school handle this, if there were fights in the school?

N: Well, we went to the principal. You notice, I said "we." You'd get paddled. Not always; sometimes, you'd get your talking to or whatever. When you needed to have a paddle, they gave it to you.

L: What would happen when you went home, because you were in trouble in school?

N: Usually we didn't say anything. I don't think there was the communication, at that time, between the parents and the school and the teachers, as there is now, if you were in trouble.

L: What did your family do for recreation on the farm? Since you came from a large family, did you do anything together?

N: Not really.

L: Did your parents have family around this area, like aunts, uncles, people like that?

N: No. They did have friends. They would come down. After we got a car, we'd drive or ride there. That was a big thing.

L: Can you remember when your parents bought their first car? How old would you have been?

N: I think I was 11. They had had a car, I was probably two, three, or four. Our road was not paved and it just ruined the car within an hour. In fact, that happened to the first two cars they had. We had two cars in two years, back to the horse and buggy. Then in 1929, we bought an old used car.

L: Do you remember driving the horse and buggy at all?

N: Yes.

L: Was it difficult to do?

N: No, there's nothing to it. Horses get smart, too. No, even on the farm, kids of 12 years old jump on the horse. After we got the car, we still had the horse and wagon on the farm.

L: When did you graduate from high school?

N: 1936.

L: Do you remember any students your age dropping out of school during the Depression years?

N: Plenty. I don't know if I could name them.

L: No, that's okay. Do you remember any boys or girls dropping out of school?

N: Oh, yes. If you just compare the freshman class with the senior class, a lot of them.

L: Do you have any idea what these people would do after they dropped out of school?

N: Most of them, I think, would get some kind of work. I think there was a lot that want to go to school, see how far they can get. Not too many people planned on college. Even I thought of college when I was younger, but I could see no way that I could make it. I think people would drop out of school and hope for some kind of work, maybe gas station, whatever.

L: What was Christmas like at this time? Even though times were bad, what was Christmas like?

N: Oh, we thought it was great, young kids. I don't think we got any toys. We got a box of hard tacks, and popcorn balls, and things like that. It was a time that we looked forward to.

L: Did your parents have a tree?

N: For years, we had a little, artificial tree. Hauled it out, hang a few balls.

L: Did you have any traditional things that you would do on that day, because of your parents coming from Croatia? Did they do anything special on that day?

N: I don't think we had any special ritual or rite. I know some people did. We usually had a good feast, or a good meal.

L: What would you usually have to eat?

N: Usually a ham, because we had it. By November we'd butcher. We'd have it then.

L: Any other special things? Did you go to church on Christmas Eve or Christmas Day?

N: Usually Christmas Eve we'd go to church.

L: What church did you go to?

N: Saint Anthony's in Farrell, that was the Croatian church.

L: You had to go all the way to Farrell?

N: I can still remember it, that old car, the side curtains, the glass, sliding glass we called it. It got pretty cold in there, too. It was still fun, part of the season.

L: How did you get around when you were a kid, besides of course, walking? Did you ride the street cars? That would be pretty far away, though, from Yankee Run?

N: No, we didn't use it unless to get into Sharon. We'd walk unless you wanted to go to Farrell, or something like that, then you'd jump on a streetcar. They had a streetcar to Youngstown, which my folks used a few times.

L: What did young people do for fun at this time, like young teenagers? Was there a lot of dating going on when you were in high school?

N: No, I would say, at that time, there wasn't a lot of dating. Some of the people, some of the kids that had cars, and an extra dollar, they would take girls out. There was dating, but not a lot.

L: Did you ever go to the movie theaters in downtown Sharon at all?

N: Oh, that was one of the big things. They had the Gable Theater down there and you could get in for a nickel or a dime, or something like that. It was great. I think it was a nickel to get in. Then, they would have the double feature, and a serial, some cartoons. You just had a great time down there. Spend the day on Saturday or Sunday.

L: Where did your mother usually go shopping, like grocery shopping, since you lived out in the country?

N: There was an A&P store, that's where she got most of her shopping done.

L: Can you remember what kind of things she would buy at the store, since you lived on a farm?

N: Lard, sugar, the staples mostly, because she did all her own canning. You needed lard, sugar, and salt, and that type of thing.

L: How often did she go?

N: Once a week, every Saturday. During the Depression, there was no money coming in unless somebody worked the farm or the harvest and made a dollar or something like that. We always had eggs, cheese, and butter. Mother used to peddle them. I think that was a big day, she had her customers. She would take a dozen eggs or a pound of butter, whatever they wanted. She would sit and talk with them. It usually took the whole afternoon, but we'd have \$3 or \$4 worth of stuff. I think she made \$4 or \$5, and that was great. Then from there, she would go to the store and spend it because we did need a pair of shoes or something like that. It was pretty tough. I have to give my mother a lot of credit, she worked hard.

Just as an example of how tough things were, I remember as a kid, I don't even know whether I was still in grade school or started high school, but I saved my nickels and dimes and pennies. I felt good, I had 90 cents saved up. Something came up and my folks needed

the money, and I gave them that 90 cents. I remember clearly because I was so proud of that, I almost had a dollar. I was probably a small kid then.

L: You gave it to them?

N: For whatever reason. They gave us a sack of flour. My mother made bread twice a week, and we had nothing else to eat then. I don't remember what it was for.

L: Did you know any people that were starving at this time, that really did not have enough food?

N: Personally, I don't think people were starving. I think they went hungry, because meals were pretty skimpy.

L: Did the farmers help one another out at this time either offering their help or exchanging goods?

N: Oh, yes. I think they did.

Getting back to starving and being hungry, when I saw people put lard on a slice of bread, that's hard, just to have something with bread.

L: What was one of the main things you would eat at dinner? Like you said, bread usually, because that would fill you up, what else?

N: Soup. I think my mother could make soup out of almost anything. Even if we had a chicken, first the chicken made the soup, then it was roasted.

L: There was no waste, in other words. They used almost every part of the chicken?

N: In my case, when I look back to some of the things we went through--I graduated in 1937, and we didn't have electricity in our house until 1939. In the early 1930s, they ran the electric line; you subscribed to it, and then you had to pay for the line a little bit extra. It would have been, paying for the line plus getting the electricity, \$6 a month. We couldn't pay it. We didn't know how we would come up with that much money. In 1939, I was out of school and got a job. In between, my dad, when he started working with the WPA (Works Progress Administration), that helped a lot. Because this little farm, it just didn't make it; it didn't make anything.

L: What did you have for lighting at night, if you didn't have electricity?

N: Oil.

L: You had your oil lamp?

N: Kerosene.

L: Do you remember when you got your first telephone?

N: That was after the war. My mother died around there. This isn't probably typical of everybody, but there were no telephone lines out there yet. The phone company came out and asked us if we had enough people that wanted it, and then they brought the lines out. This was in the 1940s.

L: Did you have indoor plumbing?

N: Not when I was a young one, not even when I was going to high school.

L: You mentioned that your father worked for the WPA. Do you remember how he got involved in that work?

N: I don't know. I would think that if you were unemployed, you qualified for it and you just applied.

L: Do you know what type of work he did?

N: He helped build the roads we have around here.

L: Any other projects?

N: He worked on roads all the time.

L: The steel mill that he worked for in Farrell never opened up again?

N: No. My dad worked on these roads with the WPA. He was put on one of those roads out that way, toward Brookfield. He had this \$100 touring car. They told him if he had this car, then he wasn't poor and he wasn't entitled to this work. There was no way of getting out there. I think he took several other people with him. They kept him anyhow. That was one thing. Somebody had threatened--I don't know what authority they had, but my dad was pretty upset or pretty worried about that.

L: Just because he owned this car, he might not be entitled to work for the WPA?

N: Yes.

L: Can you remember what the mood of the people was like during the Depression?

N: It was a good feeling. People were anxious to have work and make a living. I think it even drew the people closer together. I think they enjoyed each other's company. They enjoyed the simpler things, because you'd get two or three people together in the afternoon just popping a little bit of popcorn or something like that.

L: What happened if a member of your family got sick at this time?

N: We had good doctors. They would treat you whether they were ever paid or not.

L: Really?

N: There were two I can think of. One, Dr. O'Brien. You'd go in, and they'd never ask for money. If you can't pay, they never wrote you a letter.

L: Could you pay them in some other way besides money, if you didn't have the cash?

N: They'd probably take a chicken. Most people didn't have any. People that lived on little farms had some, they could do that. Maybe you could do some other work later on.

My dad was always--I don't know if he thought that would be it or not, but my sister had to go to the hospital, and they wouldn't take her in unless they knew who was going to pay for it. I think there was relief at that time. We had to go to the trustee, and they agreed that they'd pay for it. I think just the medication she took the first night was \$26. That was a lot of money.

L: Do you remember around what year this was?

N: No.

L: Did she live through it?

N: Oh, yes.

L: The hospital was going to refuse her treatment unless they were assured some type of money?

N: That's the impression they gave my mom and dad. Whether they would have or not, I don't know. Whether they told them to go see the trustees that managed the relief and whether they would have refused her, I don't know, but that's the impression they told my mother and dad.

L: Do you remember any personalities that stand out in your mind, for example Franklin Delano Roosevelt? Do you remember the reactions of the people when he was elected, and to some of his programs?

N: Yes. I think Franklin Roosevelt was a real ray of hope for these people. They loved him, the older people, especially the people that had struggled through these hard times. As a matter of fact, I loved him; I thought he was great because he gave you hope. Even the WPA was instituted after he came; that's one of his programs.

L: Did the people give him credit for that, for things picking up? Did they say it was because of Roosevelt?

N: No, I couldn't say.

L: Did you get a newspaper at this time?

N: I remember getting a paper for a while, then we didn't get it. We got it late, it was always a day late. I remember getting it.

L: Did any of the people in your neighborhood have a radio?

N: Yes. I know one person. We would listen, go down and listen. The kids piled around.

L: What kind of things were on the radio that you enjoyed listening to?

N: I enjoyed ball the best, Cleveland Indians and the Pittsburgh Pirates. Then, they had comedians like Eddie Canter and Joe Panner, this was maybe even George Burns. I thought that was good.

L: After graduation, what did you do?

N: Got a job in a gas station. That was a dollar a day. I worked seven days a week, so we'd get a check for \$7. You'd walk down to the bank just so they could see. I think I worked there probably about a year, and then I went to the National Castings and got a job there.

L: Did you consider yourself lucky to be able to get a job like this?

N: Oh, yes. No other people were working.

L: By that time, though, things had been. . . .

N: Things were starting to loosen up a little bit.

L: You mentioned you had an older brother. What type of job did he get?

N: He worked down there.

L: Do you remember how much you made at National Castings?

N: Yes. I got in where they cast and they started at \$5 a day for two weeks, and they'd pay \$50. I don't think there was anything deducted out of that. That was good.

L: Did you continue to live at home?

N: Yes.

L: Is there anything else that you'd like to add? Anything else that you remember about the Depression?

N: Let me get back to high school. I don't know, at that time, whether I thought it was that important to have all this schooling. I knew I couldn't go to college. I believe I would have liked to. There was nothing else to do, so I went to school, except the farm chores. So I continued with school. My senior year, I went to look at class rings. They were \$6. I couldn't afford it. It was a beautiful thing. They told me that I had to pay a dollar for the yearbook, that I needed that for my future, the yearbook. Somehow, I got the dollar. My senior year cost me a dollar.

L: With your class ring, you wanted it, did you ask your parents or did you just decide that?

N: I didn't. I think the way we had, what we had been through, I thought it was best. We just couldn't. Perhaps they could have and maybe they would have.

L: Is there any other thing you'd like to add about the Depression.

N: No.

L: Okay, thank you very much.

N: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW