

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Niles, Ohio

Personal Experience

O. H. 1085

THOMAS A. SCHROTH

Interviewed

by

Beth M. Kantor

on

June 8, 1984

THOMAS A. SCHROTH

This interview was with Tom Schroth. He lives at 20 Neil Street, Niles, Ohio, 44446. He has lived in Niles all of his life. He was born on March 9, 1922 and is sixty-two years old. He is not married. He was a member of the Corp of Engineers for three years (1943 to 1946). He attended Miami University and received a B. A. in architecture. He attended Niles McKinley High School previously. He received his M. A. from Western Reserve and his thesis was on Oriental architecture.

He was first employed by a company in Warren, an architecture office from 1948 to 1956; he then went into business for himself and helped to build the Trumbull New Theater in Niles, Ohio. He is still in business.

Among the interesting things about Mr. Schroth is that he helped do the cartography (maps) when Admiral Byrd came back from the Antarctic. He is very involved with the Trumbull Art Guild and the Chamber Orchestra. His hobbies are cooking and reading history.

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INTERVIEWEE: THOMAS A. SCHROTH

INTERVIEWER: Beth M. Kantor

SUBJECT: background, experience, play for celebration
of Niles, Ku Klux Klan uprising, history

DATE: June 8, 1984

K: This is an interview with Tom Schroth for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Niles, Ohio, by Beth Kantor, on June 8, 1984, at 9:00 a.m.

Can you tell me a little bit about how you got involved with TNT?

S: Yes, that was after I was in World War II. After three years in Europe I came back and discovered none of my friends were around here anymore. I started looking around for something to do with time and heard about TNT community theater. I found somebody who was a member and I joined. I think for the first five years I did all of their stage set work. My initial interest was in doing sets and I eventually got induced into doing the boards.

K: Have you always had an interest in theater?

S: Yes, I remember from grade school on little theatrical class plays. I did a little bit of theater in Miami in undergraduate years. I got as much theater in as possible while studying architecture, which left very little time.

K: Do you like to do the text side of acting?

S: Originally I was concerned with the text side of theater. I find as I get older that physical stamina lessened. In my last five years of involvement with TNT I took on one major role a year. I did Willie Loman in "Death of a Salesman," Father Rubard in "The Runner Stumbles," that

sort of thing. I went in for one intense blast of theater a year, and then stayed away from it the rest of the year. That was an attempt not to get so involved that I gave up architecture.

K: How did you get involved writing the Niles Sesquicentennial Pageant?

S: Nancy Sandon, my lawyer's legal secretary, told me they were trying to find someone to write this pageant for the sesquicentennial. They had found somebody, but the committee had expressed the desire that the people involved in it be from Niles. Someone had suggested that I might do it. She talked to me about it and it sounded pretty interesting so I said I would.

K: How have you gone about starting this?

S: She was a great source of materials; she belongs to the Niles Historical Society, so she gave me a bunch of materials. I had some materials here at home. Margaret Dennison gave me some material that she had on early Indian trails in Ohio and a book on the canals.

K: What have you found most fascinating about Niles that you didn't know before?

S: I was pretty familiar with Niles history to begin with. I have seen generations of parents, grandparents, and great grandparents buried at the Niles Cemetery. There is a great great grandfather out there who has a bronze plaque and fought in four major battles of the Revolution. I've always had an interest in Niles history. I suppose the thing that has been most fascinating is that in the reading and preparation of the documents I keep bumping into relatives. It has been some family research as sort of a bonus addition to all of the other stuff.

One of the things that I find fascinating about history is that there are residual sensitivities. Probably one of the most fascinating things about the history of Niles was the Klan uprising in 1924. Surprisingly enough there are still sensitive families about that. We were under martial law for one week. There were thousands of Klan people. You can go to the back issues of the newspapers in the library, and the two days that the uprising was at its peak, those pages are taken out of the issues for the local history. It made the front page of the New York Times for three days running.

K: Are you going to include that?

S: I'm really trying to treat the whole history of the area lightly. Niles is a small community and not of any great importance outside of Niles really. I think it would do the town a disservice to do it as heavy drama, so it is not going to be treated frivolously, but rather lightly. I will do the Klan uprising just briefly and just as an incident and see if I can't find some humor in it.

I've been doing some research on Niles' involvement in the Civil War, and it will be treated as one incident in the pageant.

A crazy incident is when Morgan's Riders entered Southern Ohio through Cincinnati. They were doing a march diagonally across the state up to this area. Three prominent citizens from Niles got the word from someone on horseback one day that Morgan's Riders were headed toward Niles. The three leading citizens of Niles gathered a few soldiers around and appointed themselves major general and other things and decided to march out to capture him. They took with them as their only piece of artillery an old, Mexican war cannon. They got as far as Canfield the first night. They were all chiefs, very few infantrymen. They got as far as Canfield when the word came that Morgan had been captured at Lisbon, so they turned around and came home. It was probably the most spectacular incident dealing with the Civil War.

K: What year are you going to start with?

S: I think the most fascinating part of the readings are the very origin. The early French and English influence are very fascinating and this is pre-Revolutionary times. The salt spring are the reason for the settling of this area, and the French and English occasionally would do forays into this area just to get the salt.

K: Are you going to talk about the streetcars coming through?

S: Yes. I remember streetcars. I remember we used to go to Warren on the Streetcar. They were rather elaborate cars. I hope in the pageant that there a lot of cartoon-like sets. One of the things that is proposed is a streetcar.

Another thing that is fascinating and a little bit heart-breaking is when I read about the early structures. I hadn't realized that the grist mill was the original one built in the first decade of the 1800's. That was here

until the 1940's when it burned down. That was here before the town was established. The first house in Niles was at the top of Robbins Avenue. It was torn down in the 1960's. It was a great, brick structure with a circular stairway that was all done in cherry. It was bulldozed.

One of the things that I find particularly sorrowful from the past are the marvelous old, Victorian buildings on State Street that have been wiped out. There is no way to stop that sort of thing. Niles is certainly more sanitary looking downtown than it used to be. A good bit of the romance is gone.

K: Are you mentioning anything about the department stores that burned?

S: The Homer Hoffman Department Store, I did a comedy skit on it one time because so many funny things happened. We had a fire chief who was habitually late for fires. He lived over on the south side at the time that the department store burned down. Most of the citizens of Niles were down there cheering the fire on. When the thing was out and the fire trucks were all parked in front the story goes that the fire chief came roaring over the viaduct, sirens going, and had a brake problem and smashed into one of the fire trucks. This is funny, but again, it is a sensitive area. I've had communication from a lot of families who don't want things talked about.

I remember a child going to Jackson School on the north side, on Warren Avenue. I remember there was a character by the name of Marty Flask who was somehow connected with the Roaring Twenties mob. He had a great car; I think it was an Auburn Speedster. A great, chrome horn was mounted on it. It was musical. When he would drive past the school, because he had been there, he would lay on the horn. We, as kids, would all rush to the window and sing, "See Marty Flask." We would be disciplined for the rest of the day.

K: Are you going to touch upon how World War I and World War II affected Niles?

S: I have had, alternately in and out of the thing, references to all the wars. When you are looking at that much of a period of history, depending upon where your interests lie I suppose you could make an hour program out of any war. I think what I am going to do is sort of lump them together. As far as Niles goes, historically there isn't that much difference between World War I and World War II

on just a local perspective.

K: How are you going to handle our founding father of Niles, McKinley?

S: Again, I think I'm going to approach this rather frivolously. He was not the greatest of presidents and it would be silly to try to make him look that way. The chief benefit of McKinley to Niles, I think, was the building of the memorial. It is a beautiful, gorgeous building. What I'm doing with McKinley is that I've got some quotations from his inaugural speech and I'm going to have McKinley appear on the field--we're going to do this at the stadium--in a black cutaway, which he wore, and a black top hat standing on a platform with bunting around him that conceals him from the waist down. The point of all this is that he will deliver a few lines from his inaugural speech and one of the people waiting in line to see him will shoot him twice. There will be two shots and a blackout. During the blackout McKinley will be dressed in white shoes and white trousers and a white top hat. When the lights come on he will be the statue of the middle of the memorial all in one.

I thought the interesting thing locally was the raising of the funds for that memorial. The touching part of it all was that school children collected pennies for that, so I'm going to have a construction shed in back of the statue. Little kids will come in with big, copper pennies and give them to the construction men who will in turn give them a column. They will surround the state with columns and the memorial will be built in front of your eyes. I think any pageant is for children and it has got to be approached that way. It is necessary to use them because they are the ones that have to learn about history.

K: Are there going to be Niles' residents?

S: Yes. We will pull from the school. I'm spending a good part of the pageant, too, with the building of Niles' churches, mainly because pictorially I think it will be interesting. What is going to happen is that as all these things are talked about, cartoons of the buildings will be brought in, and they will stay; they are never taken off. At the end of the pageant will be this whole composite panorama of Niles before urban renewal got rid of it all. The church drawings that I have of the early churches are child's sketches from people remember the early churches. The Sunday schools will hopefully do the churches as individual projects.

K: Is there excitement here for this?

S: I don't know. I have had very little contact with any of the committees, which is the way I wanted it. I asked to be totally protected from them.

K: Is there an excitement in the community about the whole celebration?

S: I've been noticing literature on it in the past couple of weeks, so I gather the momentum is starting to roll.

K: Can you tell us a little bit about the hot dog?

S: A man from Niles supposedly invented the hot dog. He invented the process of putting the two things together. At first I wrote this off. I've had a lot of static from people who think this is one of the great events of Niles history. This part is still being rewritten.

K: How many people is this going to involve?

S: I'm not sure on the logistics of all of this. We hired Patty to direct it. I've felt there should be one responsible position, and that was the director. Patty has had great experience handling crowds and children. The other person that will be important is the producer. We have a great producer. There are standing committees and groups also. The historical society has been working on this for a long time. I'm pretty much protected from all of that though. There has to come a point where you say--I've written enough. Now it needs to be read to get some sort of timing to the thing. I have no idea how long it will run. I have an idea that the director will want to do some slashing, and it probably will be with the amount of action that has to be done on the field. There will have to be a lot of talk fill, so I have excess material that I can insert if she needs more cover time. It is going to be a patch together thing in its ultimate form because of the number of people involved. I think it will be a flexible presentation and there won't be that much rehearsal time.

K: Where will it be?

S: It will be at the football stadium, so that means things on a grand scale. I understand it will only be two nights, August 18th and 19th. I imagine we will all be happy to hear the last of it by the time it is done.

END OF INTERVIEW