

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

History of Industries in Youngstown

Personal Experiences

O. H. 539

CONSTANTINE ECONOMUS

Interviewed

by

Janice Cafaro

on

July 24, 1986

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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History of Industries in Youngstown

INTERVIEWEE: CONSTANTINE ECONOMUS

INTERVIEWER: Janice Cafaro

SUBJECT: Greece, Immigration, Education, Depression, Legal practice

DATE: July 24, 1986

C: This is an interview with Constantine Economus for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the history of the industries in Youngstown, on July 24, 1986, by Janice Cafaro.

Would you like to tell me about your background?

E: I came to the United States in 1916. When I got off of the boat that docked at Ellis Island seventeen days later, I found out, much to my sorrow, that I didn't have anybody to come to and was detained there to be sent back to Greece.

The Immigration Department requested a bond of \$1500 to allow me to come to Youngstown. I came with a group of people, some of whom were also coming to Youngstown. One of the other men who was on the boat was coming here to meet his brother-in-laws who operated the Federal Restaurant near the Powers Auditorium. He told them that I was detained in New York and they put up a bond which enabled me to arrive here three days later.

I had a brother in the United States, but we hadn't heard from him in a decade and I didn't know of his whereabouts. When I was allowed to come to the States, I thought I would put an ad in the Greek newspaper in the hope that I would find him. Evidently, he saw the ads and sent me a check of sufficient funds to come to San Francisco where he was. However, the man who put up the bond for me and others thought that it would be better if he came here to Youngstown. Apparently they wrote my brother without my knowing anything about it and told him that I was sick and in the hospital. As you know, the United States declared war on Germany and the army mobilized in early 1917. He was drafted and was to report to Chillicothe in May to be inducted. Unfortunately,

he caught double pneumonia and died and was buried in Belmont Cemetery here in Youngstown.

C: Why did you come to America?

E: I came to America because the information that I had while I was a student in Greece was that this was a great country and offered a lot of opportunities for anybody who was willing to work. Indeed, I found out that this country offers a lot of opportunities and that every law-abiding citizen has an absolute right to his property, to his liberty, and to his own pursuit of happiness.

Not knowing the English language, I worked in the kitchen of a restaurant, washing dishes and mopping floors, gradually waiting on tables for \$6 a week. I observed that people were very nice, very hospitable and kind. Five years later, two cousins of mine joined me in buying The Savoy Restaurant at the corner of West Boardman Street and Champion.

I joined the YMCA night school where I learned the rudiments of education. Teachers from other schools taught at night there. All of them were nice and they helped me a great deal. I don't think I will ever be able to repay this country and the YMCA for the opportunities I have enjoyed.

C: What kind of things did they teach you?

E: They taught me high school courses. I had education up to high school in Greece before I came here. Naturally, I had to start at the bottom again and then I went to high school.

C: What interested you in becoming a lawyer?

E: When I was a young man, I was thinking about law. I wanted to become a lawyer, but my parents did not have the income to finance me. I hoped to do something for myself because I was enthused with the subject of law. As a matter of fact, whenever there was an interesting case in the Common Pleas Court of Mahoning County, I went there to hear the lawyers trying the case.

High school graduates desiring to study law were required by law to have at least two years of college in liberal arts. When that was accomplished, I entered the law school from which I graduated in June of 1933. I took the Bar the first week of January in 1934 and was admitted by the Supreme Court of the State of Ohio on the second day of February, 1934.

The morning that the Plain Dealer had the information that a few of us were successful in taking the Bar examination,

I met Clyde Osborne in front of the Mahoning National Bank. He congratulated me and asked if I did not have any other arrangements, he would have a space for me in his office. Paradoxically, he was two doors north from where I am presently located in the Mahoning Bank Building. To me this was indeed a great opportunity because Attorney Osborne was one of the best all-around lawyers of the Mahoning County Bar and I obtained a great deal of knowledge regarding the various facets of law

However, the Order of Ahepa, of which I was a member, elected me a delegate in 1934 to their Annual Convention. Here the delegates elected me to the Supreme Secretary's position, which meant that I would have to relocate to the organization's headquarters at the Investment Building in Washington, D.C. I also edited the Frat's Magazine for four consecutive years.

Shortly after I went to Washington, D.C., I entered into a marital relationship with my wife from which marriage we were blessed with two sons, George and Peter. It is interesting to note that the marriage was performed by Archbishop Athenagoras of North/South America, who came especially to Youngstown for the purpose. We were married on June 30, 1935 and lived at the Jefferson Apartments on 16th and "M" Streets, directly across the street from the National Geographic Building. Our first son, George, was born in Washington, D.C. and has been associated with me in the practice of law since 1964. Peter was born in Boardman Township and is now a Common Pleas Judge of Mahoning County, Ohio.

- C: What was the practice of law during the 1930's? What were the people coming to you for? What were the problems?
- E: Their problems dealt especially with immigration. A lot of people were interested in becoming United States citizens and I tried to help them. Moreover, I had a general practice, that was all.
- C: What did they have to do to become citizens?
- E: They had to file an application and appear before the immigration authorities to be tested in their understanding of the English language, their character and their reputation.
- C: What was Youngstown like during the Depression?
- E: During the Depression, a lot of people lost everything they had. There were governmental organizations that gave the people employment, such as improving roads, and they helped them try to make both ends meet.

- C: Do you think that churches and other organizations might have helped out?
- E: Certainly. They did help out.
- C: Did that situation change prior to World War II?
- E: With the election of F. D. Roosevelt as President, conditions began to look better and World War II helped a great deal to help everyone emerge from the Depression.
- C: Did economic hardships, especially most recently with the steel shutdowns, cause stress in many families, and did this affect your law practice?
- E: Most assuredly. My practice went from mainly immigration cases to civil and domestic cases.
- C: Have you done criminal work?
- E: I have done some criminal work, however, I don't enjoy criminal cases very much.
- C: Are there any other areas you have gone into?
- E: I have dealt with some corporation and real estate cases.
- C: How would you compare America to Greece?
- E: There is no comparison. This is a great country. I appreciate my Greek heritage, but I found the opportunities to be greater in the United States.
- C: You have one other brother? Do you have anyone else?
- E: I had four sisters who are all deceased. I have a brother, Demetrios, who still resides in Greece. He is a retired lawyer.
- C: Does he ever come over here and visit, or do you go back there at all?
- E: My brother was here in 1967. I go back to visit practically every summer, the most recent being in 1982.
- C: Have you ever been in the service?
- E: No, I haven't.
- C: What do you remember about World War II?

- E: I remember the people became very industrious. The Bar Association had me make speeches over the radio to encourage people to buy bonds.
- C: Do you have any further thoughts about your experiences in Youngstown, as an immigrant, or as an attorney, that you would like to leave with us?
- E: The only thing I would like to say is this: I would encourage young men and women who want to pursue a career in law, management, or any field for that matter, to stay in school, to find a way to educate themselves further, to stick with their dreams and to walk a straight line. If everyone would do this, it would be a better society in which to live.

My four years in Washington, D.C. were very interesting and pleasant. They gave me the opportunity to visit a number of states in the United States and a number of places in Canada and I met people from every walk of life.

As Supreme Secretary of Ahepa, I was officing in the Investment Building on 15th and "K" and was also editing the magazine of the fraternity.

In the Fall of 1936, I entered the Columbus Law School for post-graduate studies and obtained my Master of Laws on the 9th day of June, 1937. The thesis for my Master's was assigned to me by Dr. Wynn, a professor of Harvard University who was invited by President Roosevelt to Washington as a "brain truster" and he was assigned to the State Department editing treaties and conventions. The subject for my thesis was "Aristotle's Politics and the Constitution of the United States." It won the Faculty's Prize.

Moreover, often times I was requested by groups who came to Washington to see the President, to make the necessary appointments for them for that purpose. It is interesting to note at the early part of June 1937, a group from the Empire State, including the Rev. Dr. Lessee of the Episcopal faith, came to Washington to see the President. They stopped at the Hamilton Hotel and called me at the Jefferson Apartments, where I was living at the time, to tell me that they came from New York to present a Certificate of Membership in their Chapter to President Roosevelt and wanted me to go to the White House with them. When I asked them what time was their appointment, they surprised me by saying they had no appointment. In the morning I called the Secretary to the President who said that he couldn't give me any assurance that the President would see them, but to be at the White House about 11:00 a.m. for he had no other appointments except a luncheon engagement with the Prime Minister of Belgium and his wife,

and the Ambassador of Mexico. The secretary made it clear that if the visit materialized we should not take any more than ten minutes of the President's time. One of the members of this group had a package of cigarettes monogrammed with "FDR". He had presented the President with a similar gift while the President was Chief Executive of New York State. At his request, I presented the package to the President and said, "Mr. President, this tobacco magnate offered you a similar gift while you were the Chief Executive of the Empire State and he expressed the opinion that some day he may be permitted to present you with a similar gift in the White House. Providence has made kind provision and he is here today for that purpose."

By that time more than fifteen minutes had gone by and the Secretary opened the door to remind us that the President would have the luncheon in a few minutes and indicated that we must go. However, the President said, "Well, never mind about the luncheon. Let those people feel a little more hungry as I want to talk with these people from the Empire State a little more." When it was about 12:00, I signaled to the group to leave and as we were leaving, the President got ahold of me and Dr. Lessee of the Episcopal Church and remarked that there were clouds in the international situation. He sent the Under Secretary of the State to meet with Mussolini and Hitler but there was not anything that could be done to avoid a world conflagration. He said every time he talked to Congress they "tell me I am a warmonger, but I think that I am right and the danger is imminent." With this, we terminated an important meeting and agreed not to mention what the President said until he repeated it more than a year later at Virginia University. Then Rev. Lessee wrote me and said, "I imagine we can refer to that meeting now."

At the end of the four years I returned to Youngstown, Ohio and opened an office to practice law.

END OF INTERVIEW