

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Niles, Ohio Project

Life Experiences

O. H. 606

RAY J. SULLIVAN

Interviewed

by

Beth Kantor

on

March 7, 1984

RAY J. SULLIVAN

Ray J. Sullivan was born on August 21, 1907 in Niles, Ohio. He was the son of Daniel and Jeanie Elizabeth Sullivan, also of Niles. He attended school in Niles, but did not graduate from Niles McKinley High School. He started to work at the Niles Steel Products Plant and worked there for a total of twenty-seven years. During his work at the company, he helped to make parts for the bombs in World War II. He later moved from the steel plant to Boswick Steel Company and remained there for twenty years. He retired from Boswick in 1976.

From 1928 to 1930 Sullivan was a member of the National Guard. In March of the following year (1931) he married Pauline Meeker. They had two children, a girl Beverly, who is now fifty-one years old, and a son, Ray Jr. who is now forty-six years old.

Mr. Sullivan served as a Noble Grand of the Odd Fellows; he was given an honorary life membership in the United States Air Force G.O.C. because he was Chief Observer in the 1940's. He served on the P.T.A. while his children were in school and that is how he became politically involved in Niles. He served on city council for eight years. Mr. Sullivan and his wife are both Lutherans. Their hobby is rock collecting and they have gathered rocks from all over the United States.

Beth M. Kantor

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INTERVIEWEE: RAY J. SULLIVAN

INTERVIEWER: Beth Kantor

SUBJECT: Streetcars, steel plants, serving as councilman,
Niles P.T.A.

DATE: March 7, 1984

K: This is an interview with Ray Sullivan for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Niles, Ohio, by Beth Kantor on March 7, 1984 at 10:00 a.m.

Do you want to tell us when you were born?

S: August 21, 1907.

K: Were you born in Niles?

S: Yes, on Ann Street in Niles.

K: Where is that?

S: That is on the east side of Niles.

K: What did your father do for a living?

S: My dad was a bricklayer. He was from Ireland. He realized that this country was the place to be. He labored for the city of Niles for quite a while. He earned a good living for his family.

K: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

S: Yes, I had five brothers and two sisters.

K: What was your early childhood like?

S: We were happy. Things were slower paced in those days than they are right now. We helped dad and mother. We had our own garden and raised chickens and things like that.

K: Did you have a very big house?

S: No. It was like six rooms. We first lived on Depot Street in Niles and then moved up to Cherry Street in Niles. That is when my mother died and my dad died.

K: What was Niles like?

S: Well, if you had a wedding you hired a horse and carriage for it. Automobiles weren't too plentiful in those days. In a funeral the hearse was drawn by horses. Union Cemetery in Niles was not too old. I can recall that for funerals going down Hartzell Avenue in Niles they had to have double horses on there to pull the hearse through because the mud was deep.

We had streetcars and then later buses took over. I worked for the streetcar company for about three and a half years. Then automobiles came in and business fell off and buses took over. A lot of the motormen went and got jobs driving buses in Warren and Niles.

K: What was high school like?

S: It was almost like now. We had good teachers at the time. Discipline was pretty good. They had control of their rooms at that time. Football had uniforms. When they had to substitute in football they had to change shoes and uniforms because they didn't have enough to fit everyone.

K: Did you belong to any organizations in high school?

S: No, I didn't. I really didn't graduate from high school. I left school more or less to help my dad. Work was scarce at times. I started to work at Republic Steel and then I left there and went down to the streetcar barn and worked for the streetcar company. Just before they closed down we knew they were going to so I looked around and got a job at Niles Steel Products; that was an independent company at that time before Republic took it over. I went in there as an electrician because I did electrical work on the streetcars. Then I switched over to the machine shop and learned the trade there. I eventually worked myself up to die maker; that is what I ended up with.

K: How old were you when you started at the streetcar company?

S: I was about seventeen.

K: How old were you when you started out in steel?

S: Three and a half years later I went down to the Steel Products.

K: What exactly was your job?

S: It was a fabricating plant and we made dies; they cut and form and shape all kinds of metal. Mostly then it was automobile parts that they made. They also had a pail division where they made pails and barrels. Our work was mostly in the automobile line, running boards and that. Cars had running boards in those days. Later on we made parts for refrigerators, more housing and all that.

During the war then we converted to war materials. We originally started making the incendiary bomb at Niles Steel Products. The engineers came in while I was working one night and called all of us fellows from machine shop and laid the plans out in the drafting room, what they wanted and needed. We went to work on it. Material was scarce. We had to have a certain machine that would tap a hole in for the detonator in the bomb. We went out and got transmissions out of those Chevrolets in the junkyard and we rebuilt them and converted them into the machines that we needed to do that. After we got the bombs going then other companies started making parts for it. We made over six million bombs there at the Steel Products.

Then Republic decided to get out of the fabricating business. I had the opportunity to go to Cleveland and work up there and in Warren, but I turned them down. I'm just a little country boy; I didn't like big cities; I had no part of Cleveland. I went around and got a job at Boswick Steel Company. I had a job part-time in the selling field, but I would spend too much time on that away from my family and home so I decided I would go back to trades and went over to Boswick.

K: How did you meet your wife?

S: At a dance.

K: What was Niles like during the Depression?

S: It was pretty hard hit like everyplace else. We got married in 1931. The bottom fell out of the stock market and the Depression started in 1929. It hit home and really collapsed in 1931. I started at Steel Products in 1928. When we first got married we moved to Warren. I had to walk from Warren to Niles to see if I could get a day's work. I started at Steel Products at 58¢ an hour. Every so often when we went to go home on Friday night we would have a little slip on our time card saying that starting Monday our wages would be 48¢ or 38¢ or on down. I went down to 30¢ an hour because they kept cutting wages back, and then finally there was no work. I got one day's work in two weeks--pay, \$2.40. They

took 76¢ community corporation out of it, so I had \$1.64 to live on for two weeks. That was the way things were; it was really bad. It wasn't anyone's fault; it was just that everybody was out of work. Everybody was in the same boat. We were willing to work for any wage that we could get, and do anything that was honest to earn a dollar. The opportunities were just few and far between. Some people had work and never even knew there was a Depression. Their wages were cut some, but they worked steady. A dollar then went a long way with potatoes selling for 25¢, 50¢ a bushel. If you could get a dollar it could go a long way to sustain families. That is the way Niles was.

K: Were there soup kitchens in Niles?

S: I can't really tell you. The WPA came in and you worked a day a week and got grocery orders. You took that down to a building downtown and they filled your grocery order according to the size of your family. That was the first relief they got. Then the CCC took a lot of young people and gave them jobs in big parks in conservation and all that. That is how we got our high school stadium built. That was one of WPA's projects in Niles.

K: How would the store owners in the downtown area work out credit?

S: Law's was one of the big grocery stores down there. Fred Law handled a lot of the relief orders too. Hoffman's was the department store. We had quite a few stores in Niles at that time. I think at one time we had four movie picture shows. Pop Warner used to stand out in front of the Warner Theater and greet everybody.

K: How much did it cost to go to the movies?

S: Five cents.

K: Did you get anything in return for going? Did you get any Depression plates?

S: Not in those days; that came later. We had a lot of good theaters in those days.

K: Was that something to do on a Saturday night?

S: Saturday night was the big shopping night too. Everybody was downtown on Saturday night. Niles Times was down on Main Street before the viaduct was put across there. This area used to be all flooded out. Mahoning River came up and flooded all the tracks and the area.

At the end of World War I it was quite an interesting part in my life. My brother was in the army; he was over in Italy. The whistles and bells started ringing one night and my mother went to the telephone and asked the operator what the excitement was about and she said the war was over. That was the false alarm; there were two. It was a short time later that it actually was over. There was something about needing newspaper boys so I ran down to the Niles Times and I was first in line. We didn't have radios and those things. They started the presses rolling and they just grabbed a big bundle of them when they came down the shute and they handed them to me. I started for the street and never got out of the office. People were grabbing my papers out of my arms and handing me half dollars and quarters. Then other boys started coming. You would get in line and they would give you another bundle. I think about the third trip I got out on the street and finally got uptown. When it slowed off I took a big bundle of them over to General Electric and sold all of them there. I was coming back down to the office to pay them for the papers and I had all pockets full of money and I was counting it out and getting it arranged. A couple came by and said, "Look at all the money that kid has got!" I went down and paid up for how many papers I got. I never saved one for myself.

K: Tell me a little bit about World War I. What did that do to Niles?

S: We started to make airplanes for Niles in World War I. None of them ever got in the air, but they started to make them over here where Steven's Metal Company was in Niles. Republic took that over. They used to be the old streetcar barns. They opened those up and started building airplanes there. Before they got the first planes in operation the war ended. That is why the big part of Niles on the northeast end was built; that was built by the government. I don't know how many hundreds of houses were built up there on Lincoln Avenue and Washington Street. That whole area was taken over.

Niles played quite a part in World War II too. A lot of our plants here went into war production. Our big production was the incendiary bomb as I said. They were designed to be used in Japan. They had flimsy housing and all that. They were tested out in Germany in saturation bombings. We made different changes in those bombs too. When they first started to use them, when they would drop they would explode and the firemen would run over and put them out before they did damage. They came back and said they could do as much damage with rocks. They made a change in them, and it was a brutal thing. When they dropped the bomb, they improved the way they dropped them; they put them inside a regular bomb

casing. They had about twenty to twenty-five bombs in a case and would guide them to their targets better. When they dropped out then each bomb would split down the sides and drop all the incendiaries. The incendiaries had a tail like a kite that would drag in the wind and be sure that they dropped straight down. They could cover three or four miles with those. When they exploded they automatically set off a fuse. There was a charge in the bottom of that so when the firemen rushed in to put out the fire they were just like little hand grenades that exploded. The fuse was ignited by the impact of a shell exploding in there. The fuse lit and then the bottom part was all gun powder and that exploded as the firemen rushed in. They became very effective during the war. That was our contribution to the fighting.

We had a German fellow working at Steel Products and Karl said to me one day when the United States went into the war, "This is the end of Germany." I asked him why and he said, "This country can mass produce war materials faster than they can destroy it." He said that would make the difference. Niles played quite a part in the war. A lot of companies had certain war contracts that they filled.

K: Did Niles lose a lot of young men in World War II?

S: Yes, they lost quite a few. A lot of the younger fellows left the Steel Products and went into the war. I never had a deferment, but we were working on war materials and naturally the fact that I was married and was in government work I was never drafted. I never had any deferment. I would have went if they would have got down to that, but they didn't.

K: Had downtown Niles changed any?

S: Not too much. Until this urban renewal thing Niles was pretty well set. We had a donut; streetcars came in from Youngstown and went around the donut and back on to Warren. It circled all the stores in Niles. There were a lot of businesses and you could get off at anyplace in town, any corner. It wasn't until urban renewal came in that they started to tear down a lot of buildings. Niles had deteriorated to a certain extent. One of the reasons is that we had a lot of out-of-town owners that leased buildings and didn't take care of them. Down around State Street they started to deteriorate. The Warner Theater burned down and they finally closed that. Hoffman's burned down too. I was on city council at that time and I called the police and there was only one policeman on duty. The rest were handling traffic. I asked the policeman on duty if

he needed any help and he said to come on down. I went down and manned the phones in the fire department while he took care of the police department. Luckily no other fires came in at that time. Those firemen really had a job there. One fireman came in and he was so exhausted he couldn't even take his raincoat off.

K: How long did it take to put out the fire?

S: It took quite a while. It had quite a head start before they could get to it.

K: What time of day was it?

S: The afternoon. It was hard to keep people out of the way.

K: How did it get started?

S: I don't think they ever determined that. It came up the stairwell really fast. I don't know whether it started in the basement or not.

K: Tell me a little about your experiences on the P.T.A.

S: I got into the P.T.A. because I opened my big mouth. They wanted to send delegates to Akron for the P.T.A. council meeting over there and it was going to cost \$30 and we only had about \$35 in the treasury. I asked the question of what benefit the youngsters in the school would get from it. Nobody answered. The next year they came to me and said they would have a better chance of getting more men out to P.T.A. meetings if they had a man president. I took the obligation. Like most of the schools in that day we put on fairs once a year to raise funds. The merchants in Niles were very good. When I went to the merchants to ask for donations I acted differently. Isaly's, for example, said they would give us ten gallons of ice cream. I told them we would come for five gallons and they could keep the other five. If we needed it we would have come after it. If we didn't need it they would still have it and it wouldn't be wasted. I had a big sign listing all the merchants that donated so that they got the proper credit too. We raised quite a bit of money; I think we raised \$500, and that is big money.

The next year we raised a similar amount and wanted to buy a visual camera and projector for teaching in the school. The superintendent wouldn't let us buy it because the other schools didn't have one. It was unfair because we went to work and earned the money to buy it, but they wouldn't let us. We did get it and we bought a lot of books for the library and things like that.

The next year they wouldn't let us have the fair in the building because the building was getting too old and they didn't want to take a chance with the crowds we were getting. We got the city to string lights on the outside for us and we had it outside. The saddle club in Niles donated horses and ponies and we gave the kids rides on them.

I got into politics by doing a good job in the P.T.A. They wanted to see if I could do a good job in the city. I had the burden thrown on me, believe me. They elected me to do a job and I tried to do a job. My first recollection of a councilman was that of a link between the people and the administration. Harry Davis, a township trustee at the time, gave me a book on Niles with the duties of all the councilmen. I was lucky; I got in with honest, good men who worked for what was good for Niles. Burt Holloway, I don't think, ever got the credit he deserved. Burt had settling bases built downtown for the water system. We ran the water from the Mahoning River and ran it through sand and settling bases and purified it. That was before we had the sanitary district with Youngstown. Burt worked with that and was instrumental in getting that promoted.

The first couple of meetings we got into a contract with Ohio Edison. We had our own distribution system and any contract we could make with them was important. At one of the meetings an ordinance came up signing a contract with Ohio Edison. I had only been to a couple of meetings and was just getting acquainted with it. Being chairman of the ordinance committee when the ordinance came on the floor I questioned it. I got up and asked the president of council where the ordinance came from. I told him I had never seen it before and that I thought it should have come through the ordinance committee. One councilman suggested we recess and go down to the mayor's office and talk it over. The whole council did that and councilman Solmanson said he brought it in. I asked to have the clerk read the ordinance and it came to the coal clause and it said that it should be based on not more than \$4 coal. Burt jumped up and said that it was wrong, that it should say it should be based on not less than \$4 coal. The higher the coal clause entered, the better the deal for Niles. We changed that and read the rest of the ordinance and everything seemed to be all right. We went back up to council and passed the ordinance. I got shocked; I thought I did a good thing. The next night the paper came out and it said, "Council unanimously passed an ordinance that the chairman of the ordinance committee admitted he had never even seen before." I found out later though that the man I had beat for office was a very good friend of the newspaper reporter. So I learned fast in politics that it isn't what you do, but what they say about it.

I never made any money on council. We used to get \$25 a month. I think now they are getting \$200 a month or something. Then it went to \$35 and then it went to \$85; that is the highest I ever got.

They started to encroach the commercial business on Robbins Avenue in Niles. That is where we had a lot of our better homes and that. I didn't feel that it should go up any further. One doctor wanted to move his office up one block. He is a good friend of mine and I've known him a long time. I said, "No." He moved up there and if he wanted to go up another block, all right. If he didn't stay there then maybe something else commercial could be put in there. I refused to go along with it. I was the only one who voted against it. He was talking to my daughter a few years later and he said that I was right and that he thought I was a good councilman.

During the war we had an excess amount of money in the water and light department because we couldn't buy equipment that we really needed and that; it wasn't to be had. What we did with part of our surplus, we had the McKinley Memorial Bonds and they were maturing at \$10,000 a year. They were \$1,000 bonds. I was chairman of finance and created the McKinley Memorial Bond Retirement Fund. I think we put \$25,000 in it. They started to mature and the city bought them back. We used that to pay for the McKinley Memorial. When I ran for mayor I didn't make it, but before I went out of office I put another \$25,000 into the bond retirement fund. I did all of this with the consent of the entire council. Those are the kind of things that I take pride in doing.

They tried for years to get the railroad overpasses in Niles. We started pushing that. We finally got the ball rolling with the state and federal government and they hired an engineering group from Cleveland and they were the big engineers on it. I made quite a few trips down to Columbus for it out of my own wages. They paid for my mileage and room and I lost no wages. The engineers came down one time and they wanted a committee to go down to Columbus for the last signing. Bob Wick was president and he wanted to know who they wanted on the committee. They said they didn't care who was on the committee, but they did want to have me on it. I had run for mayor and was going out of office at the end of the year. I told them that I didn't think I should go, but somebody who was going to be on council for the next two or three years. They said they thought I did a good job and they wanted me to be there when it was wrapped up.

One thing I opposed was an income tax on the city of Niles. I was chairman of finance and I got up and opposed it. All the years that I was on there we ended in the black. I told

them it was unnecessary and that it would be surplus money. It would be just what the politicians want to play with; the politicians can't help but spend money. I felt it was unfair to the people. They put it on later.

K: What were the dates when you were on council?

S: In the late 1940's up to 1951. I did what I thought the job required to be done. I never considered myself a politician.

K: How has Niles changed in 1984?

S: Niles doesn't have what I believe in right now, a two party system. Today everything is too much one party; that is the change in politics today. Anyone should know that all good men are not on the Republican party and not all good men are in the Democratic party; you have good men in both parties. The main thing is to get good men to run for office and to serve people. It is hard to find today.

K: Is Niles depressed right now?

S: No, I think we are on the right track. I think Jack Shaffer will do a good job. I voted for him because I thought that. I think he has had enough experience that he can keep control of things. It is like any business, or your own home, you have to watch your finances.

K: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW