

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Niles, Ohio Project

Life Experiences

O. H. 607

THEODORE M. VANDERGRIFT

Interviewed

by

Beth M. Kantor

on

November 11, 1983

THEODORE M. VANDERGRIFT

Buck M. Vandergrift was born on April 8, 1908 in Youngstown, Ohio. He was the son of Jesse and Ida Vandergrift. He attended school in Mineral Ridge. He was a member of the football team in high school, but did not graduate from high school. His first employment was with Republic Steel Company in Niles. He was there for twenty-one years. He worked for a short time at Steel Products after Republic. He was then employed by the Niles Rolling Mill for thirty-five years, and retired from there.

In August 1936 he married his wife, Lottie, and they had one child, David, who is forty-two years old. Buck is a member of the Church of Christ in Mineral Ridge. He enjoys attending the Senior Citizens Center in Niles where he and his wife are involved in the choir. They also enjoy going to the Golden Agers meetings. He really likes to bowl and that has become his hobby.

Beth M. Kantor

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Niles, Ohio Project

INTERVIEWEE: THEODORE M. VANDERGRIFT

INTERVIEWER: Beth M. Kantor

SUBJECT: Niles, Mineral Ridge, improvements made to Niles,
favorite pastimes

DATE: November 11, 1983

K: This is an interview with Theodore M. Vandergrift for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on Niles, Ohio, by Beth M. Kantor on November 11, 1983, at 9:00 a.m.

First of all, could you tell me about your parents and family life as a young child? Be sure to include the date you were born.

V: There were nine children. There were two sets of children, three to my first mother and six to my second mother.

K: Where did you live as a young boy growing up?

V: When I was about two I lived about 100 yards from where the dam is in Niles. I moved to Kelly Street when I was three years old. I went to school at Mineral Ridge High School.

K: What was elementary school like?

V: It wasn't called elementary school when I went there; it was just grade school.

K: What did your father do for a living?

V: He worked on the railraod; he was a car inspector.

K: Did your mother do anything on the side?

V: No. With nine children you don't work outside the home.

K: What type of home did you have? Was it large for the times?

V: It was a nice, large home. There were five boys and four girls.

K: What were your special interests in high school?

V: I did not get through high school; I only got to the second year. I couldn't get math so I quit school. They promised us a football team in our freshman year and they didn't give it to us, so twenty of the boys quit school. I was one of those boys.

K: Where did you go to work first?

V: Tool and Die in Warren. I think it is still there.

K: What was your first job there?

V: Heating tubes to make chisels. I was thinking I wouldn't do that for long. I only stayed there for a short time.

K: How old were you then?

V: Eighteen. That was my first job.

K: How did you get up to Warren?

V: We had a car pool. There were four of us.

K: Where did you go from Tool and Die?

V: I think Niles Steel Products. I started there when I was nineteen or twenty.

K: What was your job there?

V: Forming buckets on what they called the first pull-on. I worked there about seven years. The reason I left was because they were building a new mill and we were supposed to have preference in the new place. When they got a bill we were out of a job. We stayed in the old place and worked there, five of us. We worked fourteen hours a day. When that started up we weren't considered in the job.

K: When did you meet your wife?

V: We knew one another all our lives. We were neighbors. She didn't like me and I didn't like her, and we finally got married.

K: What did you do for fun after work?

V: We went fishing. I always bowled all my life. I like to golf. My wife likes to do everything I like to do; that makes it all the better.

K: What effect did World War II have upon your job and your life? Was there a change in how you had to live?

V: It wasn't a change; it made it better for me because I just missed the draft by a couple of hours. They stopped carrying the thirty year olds. I think I was thirty-two and they were going to take me. They passed the law on a Saturday night that they weren't going to take anymore thirty year olds. I was due to go Monday morning to Cleveland. That would have wiped out our mill. They wanted to bring women into the mill, so we worked double time and overtime and everything to keep them out. To be truthful with you, we did. When you got in the mill you didn't know when you were getting out. You had to stay there, and I profitted by it. I made money to build my home.

K: When did you build your house?

V: I've lived here thirty-six years. I built it in the 1940's.

K: After the war where did you work?

V: I stayed at Niles Rolling Mill. I worked with titanium. I worked many long hours to develop that product. Through some bad circumstances I lost my job. I had to go to Ohio Cordigain when I was fifty-five years old to go to work and start all over.

K: What kind of change did that establish in your life style?

V: It didn't change my life style. I give a lot of credit to my wife for that. When I would come home she would tell me, "Don't forget, every cloud has a silver lining." I set dies at Ohio Cordigain. It was a good job.

K: When did your son come along?

V: Five years after we were married, 1942.

K: What was Mineral Ridge like in the 1920's, 1930's? Was it a quiet town?

V: It has always been quiet. There is not much change now except for the housing projects on the main road.

K: Was there a lot of commerce in Mineral Ridge or did you go to Niles?

- V: No, we had two stores in Mineral Ridge at one time. We had four churches. That is unusual for a small community. At one time they had six churches.
- K: Has Mineral Ridge grown up any since the old days?
- V: Yes. When I went to school we had about 400 or 500 in our school. I think we have around 800 now. We had two schools then and now we have three. We have a high school, junior high, and an elementary school.
- K: Did you get to Youngstown much?
- V: We went to Youngstown quite a bit before the change.
- K: What was Youngstown like?
- V: I liked it. It had good restaurants and shows. There were four or five theaters there.
- K: What was downtown Niles like?
- V: They tore half of Niles down. We had the old streetcar tracks in the middle of the road. There were four theaters. They had some restaurants, but not like Youngstown.
- K: Where did the streetcars run from?
- V: They went down State Street in Niles. They turned off to the car barn on Robbins Avenue and then came back on to North Main Street. We had a streetcar here in Mineral Ridge too. They first started out with two cars; one would leave from Niles and they switched at the light. One would stay there until the other one would come.
- K: When did they tear up the tracks?
- V: They never did; they just filled them in.
- K: When did the streetcars stop being in existence?
- V: Before the war.
- K: You mentioned that your father worked on the railroad. Was the railroad a real important thing to this area?
- V: Oh yes! The railroad was your transportation until your trucks came in; that knocked them out of business.
- K: Was it a simpler way of life without as many complications in the war years and early 1950's?

V: It was a more simple life I think. You could quit one job and walk across the street and get another one.

K: The demands on life style were much easier weren't they?

V: There isn't much to it than that.

K: Was there anything special you were involved in at church?

V: My wife and I always went to church. My wife and I sang in the choir. We belonged to what they called the youth group; we chaperoned.

K: Was there more of an interest by the youth to get involved in things like that?

V: We never had any trouble with the youth.

K: Tell me a little bit about how Mineral Ridge got its name.

V: From Rt. 46 east there is soft coal and ore, those are your minerals. Rt. 46 is the ridge; that is where they get Mineral Ridge. The Erie Railroad tracks ran right through here. All the secondary roads were built from the cinder from those old furnaces.

K: Did you ever get up to Cleveland much?

V: At the ball games. I saw Joe DiMaggio and Babe Ruth.

K: How much was a ticket?

V: It wasn't too much. I can't remember how much. This was in League Park, not the stadium. It was small. It would seat about 35,000 or 40,000. It had a real high fence in right field and left field. There was a concrete wall with a fence on top of the concrete wall. I saw Babe Ruth knock the ball over the fence, over the road, and hit the top of a building on the other side. They played for one-third of the money that they get now.

K: Do you think in the days of Joe DiMaggio and Babe Ruth that they played for the sport and not for the money?

V: I really do. I think money is going to spoil the sports.

K: Do you feel that Niles, Youngstown, and Mineral Ridge are at the end of their days?

V: No, you can't think that way. You have to think positive. There is a chance for things to change. Things have always changed, why shouldn't they now? At one time Niles had five steel mills. They had Falcon, Republic, Mahoning Valley, Empire, and Thomas Steel. All of those mills are gone and Niles is still on the map.

END OF INTERVIEW