

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Shenango Valley Depression Project

Life During the Depression

O. H. 633

JOSEPH LEES

Interviewed

by

Marilyn Lees

on

July 22, 1982

JOSEPH LEES

Jospeh Lees was born on August 5, 1893, in Reynoldsville, Pennsylvania, the son of John and Ellen Lees. His father had emigrated from England and found employment in the coal fields of Pennsylvania and then sent for his family of four. When Joe's father was accidentally killed in 1901, Joe was forced to leave school and work in the coal mines with his older brother to help support the family. In 1916, Joe came to the Shenango Valley to find employment at U. S. Steel (later called Sharon Steel) as an apprentice electrician. In 1925 he married Evelyn Swogger and had two children, William, born in 1926, and Robert, born in 1932.

During the Depression, Joe was still employed at U. S. Steel but only worked two days a week on an average. Being a Republican at this time, Joe recalled that he did not favor the New deal and blamed today's problems on this "give-away" program. Joe believed that his family did not have it too bad during the Depression since he did have a job, and things were so much cheaper than they are today.

Joe retired from Sharon Steel in 1960 and still remains quite active in the senior citizens' programs, bowling leagues, and gardening.

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Shenango Valley Depression Project

INTERVIEWEE: JOSEPH LEES

INTERVIEWER: Marilyn Lees

SUBJECT: English immigrants, Sharon Steel, TWA,
New Deal

DATE: July 22, 1982

ML: This is an interview with Joseph Lees for Youngstown State University on the Shenango Valley during the Depression by Marilyn Lees, at Sharon, Pennsylvania, July 22, 1982, at 6:30 p.m.

First of all, how long have you lived in the Shenango Valley?

JL: From 1916.

ML: To now? Where did your family live?

JL: Reynoldsville, Pennsylvania.

ML: What nationality are you?

JL: English.

ML: What do you remember about your parents and family?

JL: My folks?

ML: Yes, and family. Just briefly, a little background.

JL: They were born in England.

ML: Both of your parents were born in England. What about yourself?

JL: I was born here. Your granddad, he was born there. They came. My dad came first and my mother came after. It was 1908 when dad was killed. Bert and I, I left school

school when I was thirteen and went into the coal mines in Sharon.

ML: That was your brother?

JL: My brother. From 1908 I worked until about 1913. I left there and I went to Yatesville and I worked in a coal mine there for about two years. In 1960 I came to Sharon and got a job in U. S. Steel.

ML: Why did you move to Sharon? Did you know about the job, or did you just move here?

JL: I just came here. Your granddad was here. I went down to Farrell, to U. S. Steel and got a job. He asked me what I wanted to do, and I told him electrical. I started in electrical work, and I took a course at Hockett's, got their books and that.

From there until about, 1920 or 1921, or 1922, one of them, U. S. Steel picked out a certain amount of employees to learn the trade. They brought a man in from Penn State, and he held classes for three years, and I went to that. After they built an upkeep with foremen I got a foreman's job; I think about 1940.

ML: Was work plentiful then, during the 1920's? Were jobs easy to find?

JL: Yes, they're much easier to find than now, today. Back then, I think what helped us a good bit was what all the girls that worked in these mills, in the offices, whenever they got married, they were out. They quit work. I think that helped a great bit because there was only one in the family working. They had kids.

ML: How many days did you work in the 1920's, five days a week, seven days a week?

JL: No, you worked six. You worked eleven hours day turn and thirteen nights night turn. You got a day off every eighteen days.

ML: How much did you make an hour, on an average?

JL: I started out at 16¢ an hour; that was 1916. Up into the 1930's, we were getting, that's the top man, I was top then, I was getting 65¢ an hour.

ML: That was considered a good wage at that time, 65¢ an hour? Did you get paid overtime or any special benefits at that time?

JL: No, not then because it was before the union.

ML: So this was pre-union days then?

JL: That's right.

ML: The unions weren't around. Being a newlywed, what was it like getting a start during the Depression? Aunt Evelyn and you were married right before the Depression, and then where did you live? Did you own a house, rent a house?

JL: First, we took out an apartment on Logan Avenue. We went from that, up here on Erie, to the corner of Simon Road.

ML: Was it hard finding a place to live?

JL: Oh, no.

ML: Did you have steady work during the Depression?

JL: No, but I would be called out, maybe for a couple hours, two or three hours.

ML: Was this still at U. S. Steel? You were still employed at U. S. Steel and they would just call you out? How many days a week, on an average, did you work, a day, two days?

JL: About one, I guess.

ML: Did you consider yourself lucky to have a job? At least you had a job, you weren't totally unemployed.

JL: No, what they did back then, too, if you were a good, reliable worker--you didn't lose a lot of time and they could depend on you--they took care of you. You didn't have a union back then, so a good worker, they took care of you.

ML: In what way?

JL: I was an electrician, but back then you had to learn different jobs beside that. You had to learn to run the crane; you had to learn to use the burner, to burn steel, all these things back then. When things got slow they took one of the cranes off. They lost time and stuff like that; they would put one of us fellows on there.

ML: What were your wages during the Depression? You said before you made 65¢ an hour. What did you make, if you can remember, either on a daily basis or on a weekly salary?

JL: \$55 for two weeks. That was just before the Depression.

ML: What were the working conditions like?

JL: Good.

ML: What happened if someone got hurt in the mill? Were you taken care of by the company, or were you just sent home?

JL: Oh, no, the company took care of you. They always have their hospital down there. No, they took care of you at the hospital.

ML: How did people help one another out then? Did families help each other out, did the neighbors?

JL: Neighborhoods did.

ML: Can you remember anything about how your neighbors helped you out, or you helped your neighbors out?

JL: Well, there was Claude Gibbons. Claude got a lounge and Jack Garchlower was putting a roof on there and that was all free. Claude would come up if he wasn't doing anything and help you out. If he was in the yard, Mr. Rigger would come up. Yes, they helped each other out, but we did too. Neighbors, it would be maybe 6:00 to 8:00 in the evening, and we would go up there and pitch horseshoes.

ML: What did you do for enjoyment as a family? We have television now, what did you do?

JL: You listened to "Amos and Andy" at 7:00. You went to bed at about 9:00 or 10:00.

ML: Did you get newspapers, and things like that?

JL: Yes, we always did.

ML: You listened to the radio for entertainment?

JL: Yes.

ML: What about church activities, were they important at this time?

JL: Oh yes.

ML: What did people do that were unemployed?

JL: They, what did they call it the P . . . The one they

had putting sewers in?

ML: PWA (Public Works Administration)?

JL: Yes. Sterling Avenue down through there, they put sewers in there.

ML: That was through the government, through the PWA?

JL: Yes.

ML: What were these days like under the New Deal of FDR? Any personalities that you remember at this time, that you liked or disliked during those first 100 days when he was putting through all these programs?

JL: Right then, we were Republicans. I couldn't see what he was doing. I didn't like it.

ML: Do you remember his fireside chats, and things like that?

JL: I remember those.

ML: How did you feel about him? Were you more optimistic when he came into office or did you think that his new programs weren't going to work?

JL: Truthfully, I didn't like what he was doing.

ML: Why not?

JL: I didn't think it would work. It was a give-away program, and I didn't think it would work, and it isn't, now.

ML: You think, then, that the problems we have today kind of stem back from the New Deal program?

JL: Yes, I do.

ML: That FDR started, like social security, the banking reforms?

JL: I think it was meant for a good purpose, but there was too much graft in it. For instance, you take the infallible on the welfare. This is just recently here, but they would maybe take two or three of the neighbors' children and give them a home, and put them on the welfare, and things like that. The food stamps were never right. My gosh, those people got things they weren't supposed to get.

ML: How did people during the Depression, that didn't have an income coming in...today we have food stamps and welfare programs and so on, do you remember the families that didn't have anything?

JL: Yes. I'll tell you what you had, and we'll go back to that. You had your neighborhood stores or your deli, and they took care of you.

ML: How?

JL: They just carried you along.

ML: You mean that if you didn't have the money for your groceries that week you could go there, and they would just . . .

JL: Yes, because most of the people dealt with one store all the time. We dealt with Shigum's, no place else. We never got groceries from anyplace else.

ML: How far was that from where you lived?

JL: Just a block or so.

ML: What events stand out during the Depression, in your mind--the bank crash of 1929 and things like that--that you remember as having an impact?

JL: Well, Evelyn could answer that better than I could, because with her mother . . .

ML: Do you want me to wait and ask Aunt Evelyn that?

JL: Yes.

ML: What kind of change did the Shenango Valley go through at this time? How has it changed from then until now? Were roads built? How did the downtown area change any during the 1930's?

JL: Oh, yes.

ML: Were more buildings put up?

JL: No, they were left. The downtown stores, a good many of them, were just let go. They depreciated it.

ML: The owners went bankrupt?

JL: Yes.

ML: They were empty?

JL: Yes.

ML: Were there any new roads built, schools, things like that, any improvements made?

JL: You mean in the later years?

ML: Yes.

JL: No, not that I know of. Well, out through the country.

ML: Were your roads paved around here, or did you still have dirt roads?

JL: These were paved here.

ML: You had paved roads. Looking back, would you consider these days the good old days?

JL: Today?

ML: No, during the 1930's?

JL: Yes, they were much different. You think back, when I first came to Sharon here, when you had a date you went to the theater, which would cost you 35¢ or 40¢, something like that. You would stop and have a dish of ice cream, and then you would come home. When it was 12:00 you heard a rap and you had better get out. (Laughter) Just before I met Evelyn, that's going back maybe a little bit far, but what we did, we had what would be maybe fifteen or twenty girls and boys, and we had hayrides. In the wintertime, we had the sleigh rides, and that would be about the same. There was no, back then you never heard of a girl smoking or drinking. There was no such thing. I think the first lady we saw smoking was when Billy was born, down on State Street.

ML: Around what time was that, 19 . . .

JL: 1926.

ML: 1926 was the first time you saw a woman smoke in public?

JL: No, she was in an automobile. We were taking Billy to Dr. O'Brien. We mentioned to the doctor the woman smoking, and he said to us that would be anything. He said, "If I won't see it, you will. There won't be enough mental institutions to take care of the children who are being born today, not being right."

ML: Caused by women smoking. Are you saying then that the morals were different then, during your time, compared to now?

JL: Oh, yes. All together different.

ML: A lot different. People say, now, that of course we're

living through a bad time at the moment, with the unemployment and so on. Do you think it was better or worse during the Depression, or now, during the 1980's? Was it better or worse for people, in general?

JL: Well, it's worse today, I would say.

ML: Why?

JL: If you're talking about the way children are . . .

ML: Just in general.

JL: Back then you never heard of dope, marijuana. You never heard of such a thing. I don't think even when Bob went we ever heard of it. Bob, going back to then, the children didn't have an allowance. You would give them 10¢ on Saturday, each one of them; 5¢ for the Gable show and 5¢ for popcorn, that was it. They had to be in at a certain hour.

ML: Do you think children were more obedient?

JL: Oh, sure. They run around here like wild animals. Some of the girls here, six and seven years old, out until midnight and after midnight, right here.

ML: How do you think you have benefited living through this time?

JL: What?

ML: How do you think you may have benefited living through this time, during the 1930's? Maybe how you benefited, but then maybe how it might have been bad for you also.

JL: I don't get what you mean.

ML: In other words, do you think that it helped you, in any way, living through the Depression? In other words, did it help you, or did it hurt you more?

JL: It didn't hurt us. The people you dealt with back then were very good.

ML: You think people were more honest?

JL: Yes. You take that Wilson's now. We bought all our furniture there. All they told us, that was during the Depression, "If you have \$5 bring it in, if you don't when you get back to work, start." They all didn't do that, but most of them did.

ML: Did you travel very much, what did you do for transportation, getting back and forth to work?

JL: Walked.

ML: You walked everywhere?

JL: I walked from up here down to Farrell.

ML: Do you remember anybody having a car?

JL: A few.

ML: Were there streetcars?

JL: There were streetcars and buses, but you had to walk. My wife and I, when we lived up here walked to Main Street. In fact, we walked downtown to get the bus. We would go down across the bridge, down that steel hoop and go in. We walked all the time, so did your grandmother.

ML: What would be the furthest trip you would take? Did you ever go back to Reynoldsville, up to visit some of your relatives there, or did you mainly just stay here?

JL: Mainly just stayed here. It was kind of hard; it was just hard to do, get around then. It was not like it is today.

ML: Is there anything else that you would like to add about your impressions of the 1930's?

JL: The only thing, I would think, like I told you, is that this thing that we're in today, it all comes back from when Roosevelt was here, the give-away program. People don't want to work today.

ML: Do you remember how people reacted to Roosevelt?

JL: I think most of them liked him.

ML: Most of them liked him?

JL: I think they did. I think what it did too, I think it . . . You take like today, now, here you have even the neighbors that are out of work. You ask some of them if they ever think they're going back to work. Now here's a man with four children; he has an automobile; he's got a pickup truck and a van; he's got a boat; he's got two motorcycles. I asked him, "When do you think you'll get back to work?" He said, "I hope I don't go back for a year!" I said, "Why?" He said, "Well, I'm doing better now than when I

was working because I'm getting food stamps; I'm getting a sub-pay. You sit down and figure out to pack them the lunches, and gloves, and different things like that, that you don't have to do today," he said, "I'm ahead." That takes the initiative away from the people who want to work. That's the bad part of it.

ML: What might have been some of the good things that Roosevelt did, can you think of anything?

JL: I think that Social Security was a good thing, but there you go again. The way he put that through, it isn't today. You had to work. If you didn't pay into it you didn't get a nickel. Everybody's getting it today; they're even getting it to go to college, which is wrong. You take Evelyn and I, back in our day, it was a mess. We took a policy out with the P.H.C. for a college education.

ML: P.H.C.?

JL: Yes.

ML: What was that?

JL: Protected Home Circle.

ML: You took that out?

JL: We took policies, about \$5 every two weeks, for a college education. When you graduated that money was there. DeBartolo said all the banks do those things. Back in those days, before the give-away programs passed through, you had to look ahead. You would put a little bit away in the bank. They don't do that; they don't have to. Everything is given to them. Our system today is wrong.

ML: You think it stems back from these programs started by FDR?

JL: Yes, there is no question about it. You go back to the days in the 1930's, you either had to work or starve. That was the whole thing, you worked. That's all there was to it.

ML: What kind of things did you do without then? Since money wasn't plentiful, what kinds of things did you deprive yourself of?

JL: Oh, a lot of pleasures, like taking trips or anything like that. Clothes, we didn't buy a lot of clothes. Your children had to dress different back then, too. They had to change their clothes when they came home from

school.

ML: They had school clothes, then they had a set of play clothes, and that was it. What about yourself? Would you have maybe one suit to go to church?

JL: That's right.

ML: And then you had your work clothes?

JL: Yes.

ML: Could you remember how many pairs of trousers you had?

JL: Oh, a couple of pairs, that's all you had.

ML: Just two?

JL: You would work around the house. Your Sunday suit, that is the one you wore.

ML: Is there anything else that you would like to add?

JL: No, I don't think so.

ML: Okay, thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW