

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU Depression Project

Personal Experience

O. H. 103

WILLIAM M. RONCI

Interviewed

by

Mary Belloto

on

July 15, 1974

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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YSU Depression Project

INTERVIEWEE: WILLIAM M. RONCI
INTERVIEWER: Mary Belloto
SUBJECT: CCC, WPA, job availability, life during the
Depression
DATE: July 15, 1974

B: This is an interview with Mr. William Ronci for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program by Mary Belloto, at Mr. Ronci's home, 600 Audrey Lane in Struthers on Monday, July 15, 1974, at 9:30 a.m.

Mr. Ronci, did you know many people who were long out of work during the Depression? How did this seem to affect them? Were they largely bitter about it or did they tend to feel, that after all, everybody was in the same boat anyway?

R: I agree that most people felt insecure, uncertain, and as a . . . At a time they were all sort of grouped together so the feeling was almost on the rationale that they all felt about the same.

B: How did people feel who were out of work? How did they feel about accepting welfare?

R: Well, there was a tremendous loss of pride, and welfare at the time was sort of like a dirty word.

B: Were there many local projects designed to help people that were out of work?

R: If I can recall correctly I think there was a CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) Camp for the young people, young males, and there was a WPA (Works Progress Administration) for the elderly, married family people.

B: How did people feel about the federal government's unemployment measures, such as the Civilian Conservation Corps? Did you know anyone who worked on local CCC projects, such as the ones in Mill Creek Park?

R: I knew a lot of young people who worked at these projects and it was very, very good for them. It kept them off of corners, it kept them out of gangs and it kept their attitudes correct and their posture in life was good. It kept them busy.

B: People by and large then felt that they were good things?

R: Right.

B: What did people feel was the main cause for them being out of work during the Depression? Was it business interests at home that were to blame or something else?

R: Well, I think the business interests were synonymous with the Republican party at that time so I'd have to relate the two together along with the President at the time.

B: What view did people take of the state government's efforts to relieve the Depression?

R: I think they felt like there was nothing being done at the time.

B: And how about the federal government, or the city's?

R: Same thing. I think people felt like they were being let down by the federal government and the state and other high officials.

B: Were there any specific individuals to blame for causing the Depression?

R: Well, I think if I could name one person who would be popular at the time would be President Hoover.

B: What did people tend to think of Hoover during this period?

R: Well, I think they considered him to have rich interests only and that would be Hoover's thing; and the Democrats would probably be the people's interests only.

B: How do you feel that they felt about Franklin Delano Roosevelt at the time?

R: I think they felt like he was probably the light tower

in the White House.

B: Did people worry much about what was happening around the world at this time, for example, the rise of Hitler in Germany during the 1930s?

R: Well, I think the American people at the time had little interest in world affairs and I don't think the publicity and the news that we have today was available to them at that time in their life; and I felt like their current problems were too severe at the time to be worrying about world affairs.

B: What do you think that people thought of the Democratic party during that time?

R: Well, I think they felt that the Democratic party was the saviour of the country.

B: And the Republicans?

R: Well, I think it was just the opposite.

B: Were there any times during the Depression when people sensed that things were about to get better?

R: I think during Roosevelt's nomination and his speeches and his radio talks at the time were really beneficial to the public.

B: Were people reluctant to go on strike at that time?

R: Yes, I think people were afraid to go on strike and I think there was a feeling that a loss of jobs would be a consequence and they would be going against their owners of the companies who they worked for; and so there was a general fear of unionism at the time.

B: Do you remember how well supplied grocery stores were during the Depression, were their prices high or low, and did the fact that some people raised a part of their food affect grocery store prices in any noticeable way?

R: I think prices as a whole were generally low, and I don't think the people who were raising crops in their homes had any effect on the general economy. But their eating habits were more controlled at the time so having their gardens at home had no effect on the store prices.

B: If people had regular jobs, what did they do with their spare time?

R: Well, there was little recreation at the time. Most of

their activities were in group attachments--fraternal, social--activities of that nature.

B: Do you feel that maybe some of the social gatherings occurred at churches?

R: Yes, I think religious gatherings were foremost at the time.

B: Did a lot of people raise gardens, as is sometimes said?

R: Yes, I think a lot of people raised gardens. A lot of backyards were just . . . row after row of homes had gardens in their backyards.

B: Do you know of any people that didn't have gardens?

R: No. In the neighborhood class I was in, I was in a class section where most people raised their own gardens.

B: What about people who succeeded in earning and saving money? Did they put their money in banks or did they distrust banks?

R: No, I think most people distrusted banks and they had what they called the "cellar banks," or another form of hoarding sort of savings.

B: Do you know of anyone who put their money in the stock market or anywhere else?

R: No, I don't.

B: Did families try to get extra money? Were women and girls encouraged to find work?

R: Yes, girls were definitely a major source of employment at the time because they were probably having an easier time finding work than the men. They were in domestic work and housekeeping, et cetera, like that, where the pay was low but they were working.

B: What kind of work did boys do?

R: Well, to my recollection there were a lot of caddies at golf courses, lawn work, gardening, general labor, that sort of thing.

B: Did many young people tend to leave home during the Depression or did young people tend to remain at home longer than otherwise would have been expected of them?

R: No, I think people stayed at home longer. They were

- dependent on the family group for support and they needed each other more at the time.
- B: Would you be able to say whether family life improved or suffered during the Depression?
- R: No, I think family life improved. I think the family control centered on the head of the house at that time and it was good for the family.
- B: Do you remember if church attendance was up or down during that period of time?
- R: I think church attendance was up at the time.
- B: Could you remember if it applied to all church groups or only to some?
- R: Well, I would be more specific about the Catholic church because that's where I'm affiliated with, and I think at that time the Catholic church was up.
- B: Did many people not complete their schooling as a result of the Depression? Could you give any examples?
- R: I think many people who were college material at the time had to shorten their education to go to work. For example, I have a sister who is very, very intelligent and could have gone to college and she had scholarships offered to Italy, and et cetera, but she had to refuse them on account of having to go to work.
- B: How far did parents feel that their kids ought to go to school during the Depression?
- R: Until they could find work.
- B: What age group would you say that would be?
- R: Well, I would say if the boys could find work in the tenth grade that is as far as their parents think that they should go. They could find work earlier or later, whatever the situation would be, they would try to get them out and into the working force.
- B: Do you remember kids being generally more or less independent of their parents and their parent's opinions during this period of time?
- R: No, I think the kids were more dependent on their parents, and especially on their opinions on political life and social life and this thing--you know they say the parents were Democrat and the kids were Democrat and their kid's kids will be Democrats, and I think this is all based on the family life.

B: How did people feel about obeying laws during the Depression? Do you feel there was any decline of law and order?

R: No, I think law was observed. It was very, very good at the time. I didn't see too much of neighborhood stealing or public property being disturbed in any way shape or form. Streets were safe.

B: Many stories exist about the appearance of rackets at the time. Do you think that any of this is true?

R: Well, I think they had probably large gambling skills. Like the bug was prevailing at the time. As a whole there was nothing serious like there is today, I don't think.

B: Do you know of any organizations, mens organizations, that were active during the Depression?

R: Oh, not too many of organizations being active. No.

B: You couldn't give any instances of the mens' organizations? You wouldn't know of any national organizations?

R: Not national organizations but there were some nationality organizations that were sort of political for power blocks, et cetera, things like this.

B: Do you remember there being any talk about conservation in ecology during this period of time?

R: Well, preservation was foremost and that is where these federal projects came into being, like the CCC Camp. I think they had some forestry and things like that that were prevalent at the time.

B: Who had radios during the Depression?

R: I think every family had a radio or radios. I think radios were the most popular medium of the time.

B: What year would you say that this . . . ?

R: I would say in the 1930s, late 1930s.

B: What were the most popular radio shows during this period?

R: Well, I can remember Jack Benny being very popular. I think sports, radio sports, were active; popular at the time. I think people like . . . If I can remember another name it would be Joe Penner, would be a popular

person; Lux Radio Theater.

B: What was your own favorite program then?

R: I sort of remember Jack Benny being the most popular for me.

B: Did many people go to the movies during the Depression? Were they cheap or comparatively expensive to go to?

R: No, I think movies were cheap at the time and many went there as a place to hang out. It was a popular place to be.

B: Who had automobiles during the Depression?

R: I suppose the rich people had automobiles.

B: Can you remember when the first automobile made its appearance on the block where you lived?

R: Well, not really. I can't remember the first automobile being bought but I can remember the richest family in the neighborhood having an automobile.

B: Can you remember what year that was?

R: I suppose it would be late 1930s.

B: Do you remember ever taking any vacations during the Depression?

R: No, we never had a family vacation during the Depression.

B: Do you know if the people that did take vacations stayed at hotels or do you think that they camped out when they went on vacation?

R: I don't think camping was a popular thing back in the Depression times. I suppose if people were taking vacations it would probably be more of the motel type.

B: Were you or anyone you knew in college during the Depression?

R: I knew of no one that was in college at the time.

B: Was something you probably heard about but didn't know of?

R: I just knew of colleges being a place that people went to for further education and nobody that I was ever acquainted with had gone to college.

- B: Do you recall what union members at the time were generally interested in? Were they interested primarily in politics or economic matters?
- R: I think they used economics as a base. I think they were into the power of politics at the time.
- B: Are there any other specific memories that you have of the Depression?
- R: Yes, as a youngster of the times I can recall vividly having to go down with my parents to get relief. To me it was a loss of pride that I felt. I can recall having to wear the government shoes and my parents mixing the white oleo. I thought it was very, very degrading. As a youngster I felt this way and I'm sure my parents felt it as older people. They felt, as I'm sure many people like them felt, that they would rather be working and not receiving a welfare benefit. I think that feeling prevailed throughout the community that I was raised in. The idea of receiving wasn't considered good and yet working was considered the thing that they wanted to do most. The times then, I feel, were very, very good for the people in that they had this working ethic rather than receiving ethic.
- B: Mr. Ronci was born in 1922, graduated from high school in 1940, and has been an insurance underwriter for many years.

END OF INTERVIEW