

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Depression Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 267

MARY NICALEK

Interviewed

by

Richard Nicalek

on

July 15, 1974

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Depression Project

INTERVIEWEE: MARY F. NICALEK  
INTERVIEWER: Richard Nicalek  
SUBJECT: Depression, education, presidents  
DATE: July 15, 1974

RN: This is an interview with Mrs. Robert Nicalek, Mary Nicalek, for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program by Richard Nicalek at my home, 712 Devit Avenue, Campbell, Ohio, on July 15, 1974. This interview is in regard to the Depression. Mrs. Robert Nicalek was approximately seven years old at the time of the Depression.

During the Depression, did you know many people who were long out of work?

MN: Most of the people in our neighborhood, the men, were out of work. But some men had better jobs and they were able to get one or two days a week in the steel mills.

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

MN: Those that had to accept welfare took it in stride, since the children had to be fed, and there was no other means of obtaining food for the family. While others were proud, and if it was possible for them to find other means, like trade off work for food, they did that instead of accepting welfare. Even medical expenses for broken arms and legs were exchanged for labor. Some of the doctors had farms and in cases where they were unable to get a fee for their services, usually the father went to work on their farms to work off the bill. It was that or nothing. In families where there were a number of active boys in the family, a father could be kept quite

busy. I do remember where I paid 50¢ to have a tooth pulled without Novocain. Sometimes part of the gum came out with the tooth.

RN: What did people feel was the main cause for them being out of work during the Depression?

MN: Well, I think the main thing was that the banks were closed and people that did have money, that saved their money and had money in the banks, they couldn't get it out of the banks.

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

MN: Everyone blamed Hoover for the Depression and felt he wasn't doing anything to better things.

RN: What did these people think of Franklin Delano Roosevelt?

MN: He was their idol, because then the country went off the gold standard and the banks opened up, and he started the National Recovery Act, the NRA, and then the people had more faith in the government. Then things started looking better.

RN: Did people worry much about what was happening around the world at this time?

MN: Definitely not. We had plenty of our own problems right here.

RN: Were there any times during the Depression when people sensed that things were about to get better? If so, when?

MN: Mainly, it was when Franklin Delano Roosevelt was elected president. The people had more faith in the government.

RN: Were people reluctant to go on strike?

MN: The majority of the men working were reluctant to go out on strike. They were interested in making a livelihood for their families, but some of the men were bound and determined that there was to be a union, and they resorted to a lot of violence. There was a lot of violence during the strike.

RN: That strike you're referring to, is that the Little Steel Strike of Youngstown in 1937?

MN: Yes, it is.

RN: Do you remember how well-supplied grocery stores were during the Depression?

MN: They were very well stocked. A lot of the people had their own gardens and a lot of the farmers that had a lot of produce tried to get rid of their wares in exchange for money since money was so scarce.

RN: Were their prices high or low?

MN: The prices were very low. I remember pork chops sold for five cents a pound.

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

MN: Well, for the men, there was always the kid's shoes that had to be fixed. The women did their own sewing. They made their own bread and there was always something to do.

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

MN: A lot of the people that had money in the bank and could not get money out, every now and then the banks would . . . If you came to the president of the bank and asked him for money during the winter time for clothing for the children going to school, you were able to withdraw something. It was not much, but at that time money went a long way.

RN: Did families try to get extra money?

MN: When the men weren't able to find employment, a lot of the women went from the smaller cities to the large cities and were hired out as domestic workers.

RN: Would you be able to say whether family life improved or suffered during the Depression?

MN: I would say it improved. It seemed everybody was in the same boat. If there was anyone that needed help there were usually the neighbors or the friends or someone always willing to help. Everyone was in the same boat.

RN: How do you remember church attendance during the Depression?

MN: Church attendance was way up. It seemed that more people had time on their hands and they seemed to find a little

bit of peace and tranquility in church.

RN: Could what you remember be applied to all church groups or just yours?

MN: Well, I can only speak for mine.

RN: Did many people not complete their schooling as a result of the Depression?

MN: Very many, there were many children that didn't have clothing, proper clothing to go to school. A lot of the children just didn't have shoes.

RN: Till what grade did parents feel their kids ought to go to school?

MN: Most of the parents felt that as long as the child was able to read and write, he was able to gain employment anywhere he was expected to do so, even if he was only 14 years of age. If the companies were hiring children at that age, they were expected to help out financially at home. That was more important.

RN: How did people feel about obeying the laws during the Depression?

MN: I remember there were some boys in the family that would go down to the railroad tracks and would steal coal out of the coal cars. As far as anybody stealing money from one another or material things, I guess there wasn't that to go around.

RN: Were veterans' organizations active during the Depression? If so, what kind of things did they want?

MN: I can remember the World War I veterans were picketing the White House when Hoover was in office. They felt that they were entitled to the World War I pension.

RN: Who had radios during the Depression, everybody or only some?

MN: There were a few families that had radios and those that didn't have them were invited to the neighbors to come and spend an evening listening to the radio.

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

MN: I remember Amos and Andy seemed to be a favorite with everybody.

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

MN: Very few of the people I knew went to the movies. They  
were relatively cheap, but people just didn't even have  
that kind of money.

RN: Who had automobiles during the Depression?

MN: None of the people that I knew, outside of the mortician.

END OF INTERVIEW