

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Niles Police Project

Experiences of Niles Police Department

O. H. 275

RITA JENNINGS GREGORY

Interviewed

by

Steven Papalas

on

August 19, 1982

RITA JENNINGS GREGORY

Rita Jennings was born on December 16, 1923 at 600 Mason Street in Niles, Ohio. She was raised in Niles and was part of a well known and influential family on the east end. Her sister and three brothers were Theresa, James, Sr., Joseph, Sr., and Leo, Sr.

Rita graduated from Niles McKinley High School in 1942 and attended nursing school at St. Elizabeth's Hospital from September of 1942 until the autumn of 1944. During that period of time, she was extremely active with the Red Cross. Rita went on to attend Ohio State University from 1944-1945.

On May 29, 1945, she married Earl Gregory, a former member of the 8th Air Force. They had a daughter, Karen Violette Gregory, who was born in 1947.

Today, Rita is a landlord and housewife. She is active in the Mount Carmel Church and the American Red Cross. She is also a member of the Y.M.C.A. Board of Trustees and has recently received a five year Red Cross pin for her outstanding work.

Rita grew up around the nightclub her father, Joe, Sr., owned and operated. The Jennings Nightclub was the center of activity on Niles' east side and Rita met many famous personalities, including boxers and musicians. Her recollection of her family's role in the Ku Klux Klan riot of 1924 is also noteworthy.

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INTERVIEWEE: RITA JENNINGS GREGORY

INTERVIEWER: Steven Papalas

SUBJECT: Niles Police Department, growing up in Niles,  
Jennings family, Ku Klux Klan riot of 1924

DATE: August 19, 1982

P: This is an interview with Rita Jennings for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program. It deals with the Niles Police Department and the topic emphasizes Jennings Hall at 600 Mason Street. The interview is given by Steven Papalas at Rita's daughter's house on Kearney Street on August 19, 1982 at about 2:30 p.m.

Rita, could you start by explaining to me where and when you were born here in Niles?

J: Yes, Steve. My name is Rita Jennings. I was born on December 16, 1923 at 600 Mason Street. At age two, we moved to 36 Russell Avenue. I lived there most of my life. I went to St. Stephen's School for eight years, and then to Washington for one year, and then on to Niles High where I graduated in 1942. I went into St. Elizabeth's nurses' training in September of 1942. I stayed there until December of 1943. The illness of my father made me debate whether or not to continue nurses' training. By then my mother and father were separated. I left nurses' training to come home to take care of my father. I then entered Ohio State in the fall of 1944. I went two quarters at Ohio State, where I met and became engaged to Earl Gregory of the U.S. Air Force. We were married in May of 1945.

P: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

J: I have one sister, Rosemary. She's the oldest. Next is Joseph, and my younger brother, Mark.

P: Let's start from the beginning with your family tree. Who and when did the first members of the Jennings family come to America? Where did they come from and where did they settle?

J: My grandmother and grandfather, Marco and Rosa DiGenero, came to this country from Naples, Italy in the late 1800's, as far as I know. My dad was born in Girard in 1888, and already had an older brother and an older sister. That would mean that my grandparents probably would have come here around 1884 or 1885.

P: What possessed them to come to Niles?

J: I don't know. As far as I know, my grandfather, when he first came to Niles he started a little store, and it was kind of like the corner store in the neighborhood. He had a little butcher shop and he sold groceries, much like Johnny Scarneci's down at the next corner.

P: Where was that exactly, the little store?

J: It was right at 600 Mason Street. It was a small store. I've also heard the story that when my dad was a . . . probably in his teens, that he and my grandmother would go to Youngstown by horse and buggy to the market, probably Pyatt Street Market. There they would buy all the produce and they would come back and go through all the neighborhoods in Niles and sell the produce.

P: This is how they finally, then, built the store?

J: No, the store was there, and my grandmother and my father used to do this, like on the side, maybe with fresh fruit.

P: About what year did you start high school?

J: I started high school in 1938.

P: What do you remember about school? Who were your favorite teachers? Who were some of your best friends?

J: My best friend was Virginia Cunningham from the tenth grade on. On Russell Street we had a really good neighborhood, and my other girlfriends were Martha Serrao, Alice Fagano, Rosemarie Sullivan, Anna May Bancroft. We had a group and we formed a club later on. Also, when I was in the seventh grade I met Anne Marie Dicrentis.

All of us girls used to play together and we formed a club called "The Seven Dwarfs." That lasted for a couple years, almost until we were out of high school. I was a big tomboy, and I used to play with all the boys on the block. In fact, I played football with them until I was in the eighth grade. I went to St. Stephen's School. That was from the first grade to the eighth grade at St. Stephen's. I knew a lot of girls and boys there that the friendship lasted throughout high school and, in fact, some, at our fortieth reunion that we had just recently, a lot of the classmates from St. Stephen's were there that we went through the twelve years of school with.

P: What were your favorite courses in school?

J: Biology, I liked, and chemistry. I had Miss Eason for biology and I really liked her and the class. Physical education, I did well in physical education because I liked all sports. When I was that year in Washington, ninth grade--everybody that lived up on the hill went one year to Washington before they went down to the high school--I think I was in every sport that there was, from volleyball, basketball, baseball, bicycling, hiking, and I have certificates from all of them. I still have them from the ninth grade.

P: Did your brothers involve themselves in sports at school?

J: Yes. My brother, Joe, played football. He was one of the better players on the team. He graduated in 1939. My brother, Mark, was track, basketball, and football. He was a three letter man.

P: Rita, if you were going to be walking down Mason Street, about the time you were in high school, towards the place where the store used to be, what would you see? What would a typical day be like on Mason Street at that time?

J: Mason Street is one of the few places in Niles that hasn't changed. I hated to see what they did to the downtown. Mason Street, very few new homes, and the people on the hill of Mason are families that have lived there for years, same families. Mason Street you could walk down and talk. It might take you two hours to get down. It was mostly an Italian neighborhood, and when my father walked down sometimes, the Italian flowed like music from one to the other. Mason Street,

at the lower end now, has changed quite a bit. The Italian families moved out and it isn't as nice a neighborhood as it used to be.

P: Why would it take you two hours to walk down?

J: You stopped and talked to everybody on the way. You knew everybody. It was the same way when you would go down Robbins Avenue. Robbins Avenue hasn't changed that much. You could walk down there day or night, either street, and never be afraid.

P: Who were some of the families that you remember on Mason Street?

J: Mason Street? The Stabiles, the Belcastros, my Aunt Therese Rose lived there. I can't think right off hand. Those are the ones that we used to stop and talk to. The Brutz's lived down, just across the street from us. Next door to us, Salerno's, the shoemaker. They're still there. Another Brutz's family on the corner. Then, of course, there was Mary Easile that had the store. You could go in there for penny candy all the time. What's the contractor's name? Marchese, Barbettis, I guess if I go down at each house I could tell you who used to live there.

P: Tell me about the store your grandfather opened. What happened to the store?

J: My dad then built the building where the store was in 1919. He built it. It was all brick. He got these-- they're still marked--fire brick. Some of it, I think, says Mahoning and not Youngstown, Ohio. He went to Mineral Ridge, to a lumberyard, for the wood. He got all oak for the inside. He built the original building in 1919, with two apartments upstairs. That was where my brother was born, I was born. I guess if we went back and thought about it there were quite a few other ones that were born there, but my younger brother, Mark, was born on Russell Street, where we moved when I was two years old. My sister Rosemary was born in Youngstown.

P: What did they name the building?

J: It was known as the Jennings Building all through the years. When my dad got his liquor license, then it was known as Jennings Nightclub. That club was known throughout the valley and into Pennsylvania. They

came there for live entertainment and my mother was known throughout the valley and Pennsylvania for her spaghetti and meatballs and her chicken and spaghetti.

- P: If you were going to walk into the nightclub, what would you see? What did it look like inside?
- J: Well, there were tables and chairs. They had it done in brown, sheer drapes with a melon drape under it on the windows. The tablecloths were either brown or melon. There were all wooden chairs, but they had them all fitted with chair backs. There was an orchestra pit, which is still there. They had live music with the dance floor in front of the orchestra. The bar was separate from the building, the one part of it. It was an L-shaped bar. I could probably make a list of different men and women that got their start there on the corner, started their jobs there.
- P: Who were some of them?
- J: Let me see, Alex Trember, Bree Naples, Rats Rivella, Frankie Flask, Sadie Peters, Dorothy Trimmer.
- P: What kind of businesses did they get into? What did they do?
- J: Frankie, I think, went on to his own bar business. Woppiesoda, he went into a car wash business with Jim Coates. Rats Rivella, Easthand Air Conditioning.
- P: Rita, you mentioned some people who got their starts in different businesses over there. Can you tell me about some of the floor shows that the dance hall had?
- J: Well, I really couldn't tell you about too many floor shows because I was young then, when that was going on, and my dad didn't like us anywhere around the building. He said when we were 21 we could come down. A few floor shows he did let us see and we met, I remember, the most vivid I think, were two midgets that performed, danced, and they also did sketches. I still have some charcoal sketches that they did of my dad and mother and my brother Joe and Jackie Roche, because my mother and father did raise Dick and Jack Roche from when they were small. The orchestra we got to see once in a while or when they were practicing. The floor shows, maybe my brother Joe could tell you more about those, because he was a little older and he was down there. He used to help my dad.

P: Were there boxing matches held down there?

J: When there was the store there there was, one part was divided and it was the Jennings Billiards, or the Jennings, A.C., I can't remember. I think it was the Billiards. That was where my Uncle Jim had a boxing ring. The fighters came there and worked out. I think the one that went the farthest was Teddy Easterbrook. Also, my brother will tell you more about that.

P: Did you have a brother who trained boxers?

J: My brother, Joe, yes, he trained boxers later on. I know my Uncle Jim, in the 1920's, also had a semi-pro football team. They played the Canton Bulldogs, they played in Youngstown, they played all over Ohio. We have pictures of them. Some of them were great successes in life later on.

P: Jennings Hall, in some of the newspaper articles, and sometimes in speaking with people that I've interviewed, refer to the area, to the establishment, the dance hall, as "the center of the east end." That's where so much of the culture was carried on of the Italian folks who lived there. They had dinners there, dances that you talked about. They had all sorts of gatherings. At times it had a colorful history, I've understood. Can you tell me anything about that?

J: It was the focal point . . . I don't remember the exact year, but the Ku Klux Klan was going to come in and march through Niles. The Jennings Building was the center. All of the east enders were armed. The word went out, and all of the Irish Catholics from Youngstown came in. I know my Uncle Leo O'Malley and several others got the crowd and they surrounded the convent at St. Stephens. The other men were armed and waited at McKinley Heights. When the Ku Kluxers came, that's where they were stopped. I've heard some different stories that there were some skirmishes. I don't know if that's true or not, but the Ku Klux Klan never marched through Niles. They were stopped. I know that my mother and aunt and all the neighbor women went from house to house and carried guns in their aprons and brought them to the east end so that the men could be armed.

P: I talked to Louise Liste who was there, and she said that some of the girls were pulling up the hoods on the Klanners and throwing pepper in their faces. Did



you ever hear anything like that?

J: I never heard of that, but I know that they never went through Niles.

P: You mentioned that there was an effort to surround the convent at St. Stephen's, to protect them over there, to protect the people who were in it. What about Mt. Carmel? What was Mount Carmel like at that time?

J: Mount Carmel then, Father Santoro was the priest and he lived in a little, gray, wooden house and that's where he had mass and everything. The Italian church was built, and the Italian women--and my mother was included in that. I think my mother sold the first brick of the church, of Mount Carmel Church, for ten dollars to Deacon Jones who worked at our club.

P: That's what the first brick was sold for, ten dollars?

J: Ten dollars, and Deacon Jones was a Protestant. Father Santoro, they always called him the "Little Saint." There weren't any nuns or anything connected with Mount Carmel then. In fact, Mount Carmel School wasn't built, the first one, until 1949. That's when the nuns came in.

P: What was Father Santoro's role in the Ku Klux Klan riot?

J: I don't know that he had anything to do with it. I do know that there was a complete circle of humans around the convent at St. Stephen's, because the Klu Kluxers threatened to go in to get the nuns, and when they burned their flaming cross all of the east ends and all of the Catholics put up their flaming circle.

P: What did the circle represent? Who made that up?

J: I don't know, but to me it means unity. A circle of protection.

P: Was Bree Naples involved with anything in McKinley Heights, with the effort to stop the Klan? I've heard that he was.

J: I wouldn't know who, exactly, was involved. I think anybody that was Catholic, mostly, and Italians and who didn't have guns or clubs, anything that they could fight with, they were there.

P: Did anyone come down Mason Street who belonged to the Klan? Did anyone try?

J: They told me that they never got past McKinley Heights.

P: Did you have any people in the city of Niles fighting the Klan with machine guns mounted on a car or anything like that?

J: Not that I know of. I never heard that story. It might be, because when they came through I was a baby. It's just different bits and pieces of stories that I've heard and that my mother told me. I know that the Catholics in Youngstown came in to join, the Irish Catholics.

P: What else can you tell me about the Jennings Dance Hall?

J: It was the center of attraction, I imagine. It was one of the nicest nightclubs around. There weren't too many nightclubs then. As I said, it drew people from Pennsylvania and all through the valley. It had live floor shows, live music, and good food.

P: Rita, before and a little while after the Klan riot in Niles, have you ever heard any stories about some of the colorful activity that may have occurred in the vicinity of the dance hall or in the dance hall itself?

J: After the nightclub . . . is it all right if I say about the gambling or not . . . they won't hold it against me? In the 1940's we had some gambling. It was craps, roulette, chuckaluck, and some machines. One thing that we all know for sure, it was our own family in the gambling. There were no outsiders.

P: It was a controlled situation?

J: It was a controlled situation. It was our own family; it was my dad and my uncle and later on my brothers and sisters and myself. There were never any outsiders. They tried, but my father would close down. Also, he threw a few out, because nobody got in with the Jennings family.

P: Can you give me any more details of people who tried to come into the Jennings family and control them?

J: It was outsiders, maybe, like from Warren or Youngstown. I don't know exactly who it would be. My dad never discussed much with us when we were young, but I know there was never anybody in there. In fact, we got bombed once--it's probably in the back papers--because he wouldn't let them in.

P: What year would that be?

J: In the 1940's.

P: Do you remember anything about shootings that occurred on the east end, Fenton Street, Mason Street area?

J: There's one fellow that said about a couple of different shootings that you might be able to talk to. That was Don Perrone. He knows a lot of stories. The only one that I know about is my cousin Marty who was shot outside of the club mistakenly.

P: Where does Perrone live at today?

J: He's up on Roosevelt. Marty was shot March 16, 1939.

P: Can you give me any details? What happened then?

J: There was an argument in the bar and Marty took them out and told them if they wanted to argue they could argue outside. They all left, but then he heard another commotion and he went out in front and when he did he was shot. They thought it was one of the others coming out in a white shirt. That's all they saw was the white shirt, and Marty was shot.

P: The gunman, in other words, mistook Marty for the person he had been arguing with?

J: Right. Marty died in my brother Pobo's arms on the way to the hospital.

P: Did he go in an ambulance to the hospital?

J: In a car.

P: There wasn't an ambulance then?

J: No. There wasn't too much ambulance service then, unless you would call. They didn't want to wait. They put him in a car right away and they were headed for the hospital.

P: Do you remember any of the mayors or policemen of Niles?

J: Yes, I can remember some, but I don't think it will go back that far. I think the most that I liked was Berhine and Matt McGowan.

P: Why is that?

J: They were always friendly. They were gentlemen. They were good police chiefs.

P: Can you give me any details about what type of person they were? Did you . . .

J: McGowan was for youth. He used to try, if a kid got in trouble he'd get him interested in boxing. He would get him to take his energy out on that. He had some good boxing stables. One of his best ones was Sonny Horn. Sonny went quite a distance, until he got sick. Also, my cousin Dick. He was a good boxer.

P: Dick who?

J: Dick Roche. Later, when he was in the service, he was the champion of the Navy, and he was Golden Gloves champ.

P: Was this because of McGowan?

J: I think a lot of influence was from Matt. Also from my brother, that he boxed. I'm not sure if Dick boxed out of Matt's stable later or not. When Matt had a stable my brother had a stable about the same time, some boxers. He volunteered for the service. He went in and he gave all his equipment--his rings, bags, everything--he gave them to Matt, because Matt didn't have too much to work with.

P: Where was Matt's boxing stable at?

J: I can't remember if it was over there by the Eagles or if it was . . . my brother would know.

Mr. Berlane, he was a really nice police chief. He was a tall, handsome guy. He was a good chief. I can't remember who was before then.

P: Do you remember any experiences they might have had as police chiefs or policemen?

J: No. I know they both came up the ranks before they were chiefs.

Mayors, I can remember Mayor Sid Lenny. I knew him from when I was little because he was Anna May Bancroft's uncle. His dad worked for my dad. Sid Lenny worked for my dad. Elmer Fisher, I remember him. He was a good man. I guess when you're young you don't pay much attention to politics either. It's more to the older people.

P: Did Mayor Sid Lenny's father work at the dance hall itself?

J: At the gambling. He was a poker dealer.

P: In your opinion, which mayor did the most for Niles?

J: Off hand, I don't know. I think, myself, Thorpe was a good man.

P: Why is that?

J: I think he was for the people and he did everything he could to help Niles.

P: Looking back through the years, are there any particular police officers that stand out in your mind, for any particular reason?

J: Well, I knew them all when I was younger. Some of them I even went to school with. Some of them, maybe a year behind or a year ahead.

P: Who were they?

J: John Scott, Brodie, Chuck Lawrence . . . there were about a half dozen or so. Jack Mahoney, I went to school with, and Burgundy, Anthony Marisco. I knew all of them. Anthony helped raise my other cousin.

P: Anthony is Burgundy?

J: Yes.

P: What kind of people were they in your youth? These are some of the guys I'm going to be writing about and I'd liked to try and see . . .

J: Well, they were all good students. They were all good. Some of them were good in sports. They were always friendly. They were always good guys.

P: What can you tell me about John Scott in school? Did he play any sports?

J: He played football. He was a football player. He was a nice fellow and I still know him and see him. I see him at the flea markets every once in a while. He married the girl who was my classmate in school and I think John was a year ahead of us.

P: Anything in particular that sticks out in your mind that you would think of when someone mentions the name John Ross?

J: He's been a good police chief, I think.

- P: I'm sorry, I'm thinking of Scotty--John Scott.
- J: Oh. I think he was a good policeman, and he was well-built, but you didn't want to argue with him.
- P: He was big even in school?
- J: Big in school and big while he was a policeman. I think that carried a lot of weight. You didn't want to argue with John when he said something. He wasn't abusive. He was always friendly, smiling.
- P: Was he the type who was a leader in school?
- J: Yes, I believe so.
- P: How about Burgundy?
- J: Burgundy, he was always nice to us and, like I said, his mother raised my other cousin. It was the half-brothers, Dick and Jack Roche. We were sort of like a part of the family. He was always nice.
- P: How was he in school?
- J: Burgundy was younger than me. I don't know about that much. John Brodie played football.
- P: What do you remember about Brodie in school?
- J: I didn't mix too much with him in school, but I know that he played football. He was ahead of me in school. He was out while I was in.
- P: And Lawrence?
- J: Chuck Lawrence is dead now. He got killed. He was a policeman not for too long.
- P: How did he die?
- J: Motorcycle or car accident. I'm not too sure if he got sick and . . . no, I don't think so. I'm not too sure about that.
- P: Is his mom still alive, do you know?
- J: I don't know. Jack Mahoney I went to school with, at St. Stephens. He was a good cop. He played football. He has always been a good cop.
- P: Tell me more about Lawrence.

J: I can't remember too much now, because Chuck died quite a few years back. He wasn't too old when he died, and I can't remember if he was sick for quite a while or not. I remember him because he used to ride a motorcycle and I used to ride with him on it, him and Paul Davis.

P: Rita, I want to ask you a little bit about your father. Looking at the pictures of him, he seems like a very prominent looking person. He was very, very proud of himself and his family. I'd like you to tell me what type of person he really was. Then I have a question, for a final remark from you. I'd like to know what the key was in closeness of your family. I noticed even here at the house, your brother is here, your niece, your daughter. Everyone always seems to be together when I see you in public even, you're with one of your brothers.

J: My dad was a gentle man and a gentleman. He was in a class all by himself. You never saw him dirty or with clothes that just weren't perfect. He dressed in the highest of fashion and they always said that Joe had class. With us kids he was gentle. He never whipped us, and he always made sure that we respected each other and respected my mother. Even after they were separated he said, "Never lose your respect for your mother." He treated us all equal, the six of us. My two cousins were treated just like we were. It was always, if one of us was bad, it was my mother who did the spanking. In business, my dad never had troubles with anybody. He knew how to avoid arguments, and if there was somebody who was really too drunk he would just politely take them by the collar and usher them out the door. Anybody that came in that had been drinking too much he would say, "I'm sorry, you've had enough to drink. You're not getting any more here."

P: About what year did he assume the ownership of Jennings Dance Hall?

J: He always owned the building, after he built it. He owned the building. From 1919 when he put it up, that was his alone.

P: Then he built it right over and around the store?

J: Right over and around the store, in 1919.

P: How and why do you think your family is as close as it is?

J: I think it's the way my mother and father raised us. We were a close-knit family. It was expanded with children of our own and grandchildren. We still, I think, are old fashioned as families go. My mother and father are still the head. My father still wears the pants in the family. There's not too much women's lib. The children are taught respect in the home, so that when they go out in the world they know that they respect their elders. Like I said, my dad never whipped us. All he had to do was look at us and we knew. If it was wrong we didn't do it. I think it was the good Catholic education that they saw that we got. We went to Catholic school when it was strict, and not the easygoing Catholic that it is now.

P: Is there anything else, before we close, that you would like to add, that maybe I didn't get to ask you, or that you perhaps forgot to tell me about the establishment, about your family?

J: No. Maybe when you talk to my other brothers and my sister they might be able to tell you some things that I haven't thought of. If I think of something I'll make notes and then maybe add to it.

P: Fine. I'd appreciate that. Okay, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW