

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Great Depression Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 374

WILLIAM VAHEY

Interviewed

by

Daniel Flood

on

January 27, 1976

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: WILLIAM VAHEY

INTERVIEWER: Daniel Flood

SUBJECT: World War I, Influenza Epidemic, WPA, Entertainment

DATE: January 27, 1976

F: This is an interview with William Vahey at 3556 Glenmere Drive, Youngstown, Ohio, on January 27, 1976, at 7:15 p.m. This interview is about the Great Depression.

Mr. Vahey, do you want to start off by giving us the background about where you were born?

V: My name is William Vahey and I was born in what is now called River Bend. In my day that was called the Monkey's Nest. I started to school up there at the old Caldwell Street School, later known as the Butler School. This school had four, large rooms. It had a first, second, third, and fourth grade. After that the children would be transferred from that school and go up from the River Bend area over the railroad tracks up to Covington Street School on Covington. I remember some of the old teachers at that school: Mrs. Coe, Miss Willie, who later became Mrs. Batesman, and the janitor who used to be more or less of a patrolman. His name was Mr. Jones. The neighborhood that I lived in at that time had a very large ethnic population: Croations, Slovaks, Italians, Greeks, Irish, Welsh, and a few English. Briar Hill lay to the north across the Erie tracks and to the south was the Mahoning River, steel mills, and the Pennsylvania Railroad. The River Bend area, or Monkey's Nest, was pinched off at West Lake Crossing where the old Erie tracks crossed Federal Street and Rayen Avenue as they have done until the present time. Those of us who were Catholics usually transferred down from Caldwell Street School to St. Columba's which was in the old, brick school on the corner of Elm and Rayen Avenues. The school was taught by the Ursuline nuns and the principal of the school was very much beloved Sister Holy Angel.

- F: Can you remember any of the sections of town which could be classified as "affluent" or "very low income"?
- V: The north side, north of Rayen Avenue or Youngstown State University, was the section where lawyers, doctors, dentists, and professional people had their homes, from Lincoln Avenue to Wick Park. The area north of Wick Park was the golf course. That north side area of higher middle-class homes ended at Covington Street, and the north side from thereon was the Briar Hill section, which was about ninety percent Italian.
- F: Where were the blacks living at that time?
- V: The blacks were living down on West Avenue down near the river, generally in the very poor areas of downtown Youngstown and along West Federal Street before you came to the Italian section of Briar Hill. They also were on some of the lower streets of the east end at the beginning of Wilson Avenue and the beginning of some of the other streets that ran east from what was then the Elephant Bridge. There was a very small population of black people prior to 1917. Black people were brought into Youngstown by a strike which occurred in the Youngstown Sheet & Tube in late 1916 and early 1917. The National Guard was brought in to Campbell to maintain order. To break the strike the mills had brought in workers from the south and they took the boxcars in which they were transported up here, removed the wheels, set them down beside the tracks, and ran water over to these boxcar encampments and they used these men as strikebreakers.
- F: They were something like scab labor?
- V: Yes. Their wages were very good. There was an old story told about the Negro boy who had been a farm worker down south and he had never made any more than a few dollars working for a week. During the war the price of silk shirts went up to \$25 a piece and he went in with his new pay and bought a couple of the silk shirts at \$25 each. That was the beginning of Youngstown's black population.
- F: As far as Campbell, you said the National Guard was brought out. I can remember reading someplace about Campbell being burned down or the business section of Campbell being destroyed. Was this during that time period?
- V: No. William Foster, who later became an organizer for the CIO, was brought in here. There were a few militant socialists. Seldom could they find somebody who was willing to face company police or face the National

Guard. They only had a handful of men they could call on. One of them was William Foster and he came in. His tactic for handling the National Guard was to go around to the people in Campbell and say, "Invite these fellows in for a meal. Give them some pigs in a blanket, or spaghetti. Give them a drink of your wine. Give them a drink of your own booze. Get talking to them. Make friends with them. You make friends with them and they are sure not going to shoot you." It was the first time I ever heard of that kind of thing being done.

F: Do you remember much about World War I and how it changed Youngstown?

V: I only remember a little bit of it. I was very young. My most vivid memory of it is about a fellow that used to play with your family, Dan. His name was Lawrence Burns, my favorite uncle, and I didn't want him to be drafted. If I've ever met a saint in my lifetime, he was one; he wouldn't harm anything. I used to say to my mother, "He's not going to be a good soldier. He doesn't like to shoot anything. He doesn't want a gun. He doesn't even want a club. He just walks around a fight. He won't take part in a fight." Of course, I got my wish as he wasn't drafted. He was medically okay, and they were ready to send him off to camp when the war finally ended.

(Written comment from Mrs. Vahey)

The war brought much sorrow to Youngstown as it did all over the United States. The influenza epidemic was devastating and there was no medication to stop its spread. It hit all the army camps as well as all communities. My mother was immune to the bug, and she worked for the Red Cross. They tried to isolate the cases to prevent the spread and beds were set up in church basements, any place they could get. The Red Cross was of great help--not only with the influenza epidemic, but all women who could, would devote a day a week to make bandages and medical supplies to be sent to the front. The front was where the fighting was, Germany mainly. It was said that people were dying like flies from this outbreak. The camp at Chillicothe, Ohio, was practically wiped out. That was where so many Youngstown boys were sent. It was said that if you contracted the flu, it was only a matter of hours until death set in, unless you were very healthy and physically strong.

There was great support for the war. Patriotism was rampant. Songs about victory were written and sung everywhere. Records for the old victrola were available. Every weekend there were parades downtown with the

stars and strips prominently on display, with bands rendering all national songs, uniforms of all kinds participating, gold star mothers, Red Cross members, et cetera. All this with many heavy hearts. No one wanted to be labelled "a slacker." The motto was: Enlist for Uncle Sam. Beat the Hun.

Headlines on the daily newspapers were in large black type and war stories had priority over local news. Daily there were lists of the dead. Trench fighting was used in this war and it was the last war to engage in this. It was a sad time for everyone to know what suffering the men endured in those trenches.

Every house where a member of the family was serving displayed a flag with stars in the window designating the number of family members serving his country. Lapel pins with stars were worn by family members too. To serve was an honor. One concern was to win the war and beat hell out of Kaiser Wilhelm.

Food became scarce and rations were established on certain items: sugar, coffee, and meat, as I recall.

People bought Liberty bonds or stamps. Children bought them in schools--all to support the cause.

There were two armistice days, the first being a false alarm. But celebrations and noise making went on for both days. The first one, the false, let everyone know the end of the war was only a matter of hours away. It was a day of great rejoicing. People were alerted to the good news by the newsboys carrying the news down the streets shouting in loud voices, "Extra, extra, read all about it. War ends, armistice is signed."

V: Because of the deterioration of our neighborhood, my mother sent me up to Canada to school.

F: That was after what year of schooling?

V: I went up there in the sixth grade.

F: To Canada?

V: Yes. I went to a boarding school across from Detroit in a town that has now been encompassed by the city of Windsor, Ontario. I stayed up there until I finished high school. I did come back for one year of high school at Rayen. From there I went to Notre Dame University where I studied for a BA and took some law courses. Also, I got a master of arts which was later awarded to me by the University of Western Ontario.

F: Let's go back to Notre Dame. What can you remember about Notre Dame? When were you there?

V: I went to Notre Dame in 1922. The thing I remember about Notre Dame was that Rockne, who had a hope to get his school in the big ten football league, had met reverse after reverse in every attempt that he tried. He had a great team in 1921 with Johnny Mohart. It was the same game in which Gip had played and died later from strep throat. His prestige as a football player and Notre Dame's prestige was very much on the uptrend. At the end of the 1922 season, there were two towns in Southern Illinois, coal mining towns, who had highly competitive athletic rivalry. One was Carbondale and one was Thompsonville. The townspeople from Thompsonville hired the football players from the University of Illinois and they hired several football players from the town of Carbondale. Carbondale hired many of the members of the Notre Dame team. Neither of the teams had met head-on for many years and there was a great football rivalry between them. Coach Zupfy was at Illinois and Rockne was at Notre Dame. At any rate, the two, small coal mining towns agreed to play. They gave each player about \$50 a piece and they paid for the room, board, and train fare back to South Bend. A scandal broke out shortly after the game. A Chicago newspaper said that these football players from Notre Dame had accepted money. They admitted it, and of course, their careers had ended for the acceptance of that money.

In 1923 Rockne came back after the scandal and started new men on the game. He had a fullback who was a great fullback by the name of Kastner. He had a halfback by the name of Elmer Layden, who later became a fullback. He had one of the Miller brothers, Don Miller. Several of the Millers had played for the university of Notre Dame. He had "Sleepy" Jim Crowley, who was another halfback, and a quarterback from Massillon, Ohio, by the name of Harry Stuhldreher. Later on, all of these players became all-American and were known as the four horsemen.

The following year in 1924 Rockne won the national championship. Notre Dame was the national champion under Rockne with the four horsemen mentioned above. At this time there was no attempting to become a member of the big ten. Notre Dame had established itself as a very good, independent football college. With the Army and Navy and the other schools they were able to get a schedule.

F: What were some of the football rallies like?

V: The football rallies were spotlighted by humor. Rockne was a great storyteller as well as a great football player and a great coach. He was a dynamic personality. He used to use a character in his talks who was quite sissified.

He called the character "Two-lump" Fitzpatrick Pratt. "Two-lump" Fitzpatrick Pratt didn't like football; he didn't like roughhouse tactics; he didn't like man-to-man combat. He didn't like any bodily force at all. Rockne always was able to get a screaming, howling, acclaim for this comic character at the rallies. He was also a fine emotional speaker. He had great power. His English was superb and when he talked there was something staccato in his speech as it was so rapid fire. It was like machine gun chatter, actually.

I remember he surprised me very much. I saw a group of boys ahead of me on my way to class one day and they all surrounded a little fellow wearing a hat that looked like the hat Bear Bryant has been wearing lately. It was a little hat that you pulled down around the ears. They were walking to school with Rockne so I got up on the outskirts of the group to listen and Rockne turned around and saw a new face. He said, "What's your name, young man?" I told him what it was. He said, "Where are you from?" I said, "Youngstown, Ohio." He said, "That's where Harvey Brown is from." Harvey Brown played guard on that football team in 1923. Not only did he do that with me, but with everybody that joined the crowd. When he passed you, you were all set to say hello to him, but he generally beat you to it. He never called you boy, it was man.

F: Did he talk about Gipper in his speeches?

V: No. Gip was playing the game of kickball in a field. He saw how coordinated he was and asked him to come and play on the freshman team.

F: After you finished Notre Dame, did you go back up in to Canada?

V: I went over to England and I studied English courses over there. Then I came back to Canada. I taught at Assumption High School and College in Sandwich, Ontario.

F: Were there good times in Youngstown during 1928?

V: No. Hard times started in Youngstown around mid-1927. Those who had steady jobs for a length of time were pretty sure of a job. Nobody was putting on new men during 1927, 1928.

In 1929 the automobile sales started to fall off and General Motors came out with a terrific car in competition with Ford called Chevrolet. I was helping my brother who was an automobile dealer in Warren, Ohio. Ford dealers were committing suicide almost daily. A college degree meant very little in 1928. Teachers were lucky as no schools shut down during the Depression days.

F: You were mentioning before about Hoover and that bonus Army?

V: He had destroyed himself with that.

The best thing that happened during the Depression was the homeowners loan corporation. The banks were going broke. Some were closing up forever; some were not able to give you two cents on the dollar. Those who could give you any money had to issue passbooks. Some of these passbooks were ten cents on the dollar, some were twenty cents, thirty cents, forty cents, or fifty cents. You could find out how much your passbook was worth by turning to the stock page every day. During the Depression that passbook buying and selling got to be a commodity. The banks wanted to get in what money they could. You owed money on a mortgage so they would foreclose your mortgage. If the mortgage was too high, nobody would have that kind of money to pay for it. That helped a lot of people keep their homes. Some homes were stolen from people and sold for practically nothing to bring a few thousand dollars in to the bank.

F: The homes that were stolen, how did the people react to this? Were the people mad at the banks for doing this?

V: Yes, they were very bitter. The banks would give as many extensions as they could. Finally, they would realize that they were going to go broke so they would take the home, foreclose it, and sell it for what they could get. That would give them a few more days of operation. When the federal government came in, the banks were paid off a full mortgage to put them back in business. The people were given longer term mortgage payments and smaller mortgage payments. If they were unemployed, it would be stipulated that their payments wouldn't begin for six months. If they were still unemployed, they could go in and make an application for an extension. It was abused by some, but in ninety percent of the cases it was a blessing in disguise.

F: Do you think this is when a lot of people switched over and became Democrats because of F.D.R.?

V: There's no question about it.

F: Would you recount some of the stories of the coal that was stolen off of the railroad cars?

V: When times got hard so far as fuel was concerned, coal was at a premium and most of the homes were heated by coal. There used to be shipments of coal that would come from Southern Ohio down the Erie track to the mills. There was also coal coming from Pennsylvania, carried by other

railroads, and coming up from Pittsburgh toward Cleveland and Chicago. This was good quality, bituminous coal that came in lumps, easy to handle. The men first started to hop the freights to throw off the coal. This was a common practice in poor neighborhoods. The railroads increased the number of railroad detectives to protect that coal because they were finding by the time it got all the way through the poor suburbs of Pittsburgh, the cars were only about three-quarters full. Some of these detectives were really rough. They would take a man and two of them would throw him off the train into the hillside from the railroad tracks. That put the clamp on stealing coal. Then the fellows started hiding down in between coal cars. They waited for the detectives to get in to the coal car and then surprised them. They would take a pick handle or axe handle and climb in after them and belt them on the rump or do worse.

F: As far as the homes in Youngstown at that time, do you think a lot of them were without fuel?

V: You could always obtain wood to burn. You could chop down trees along the river. They would go into Mill Creek Park and chop wood too.

F: Do you think there were any places in Youngstown where people could go to find food, like soup kitchens or bread lines?

V: Oh, yes.

F: Where would they be located?

V: The first soup kitchen that I remember was at St. Columba's Church basement. There had been a soup kitchen at the Salvation Army for almost a year before the Depression started. That is a soup line that still is in effect. This was a big thing. They had to cut down the portions they gave because they were giving it to several thousand people. They had one at St. Patrick's too, as I recall. Many organizations took care of their own. The K of C took care of their own. There were the Knights of Pythius, the Masons, the Elks, the Eagles, all used to do something. They took up collections for food.

F: What about pawnbrokers in town?

V: They got so that the only thing they would take was used clothing.

F: Because of the fact that people needed the clothes?

V: Yes. They would sell them to someone else. They wouldn't take a loss on your clothes.

F: What were some of the prices like in town during the 1930's?

V: The cheapest price I ever saw in meat was on bacon ends. They sold for three cents a piece. I don't know how much meat was in them, maybe a half of a pound. The thing of it was you could put them in with cabbage; you could use it in making all kinds of gravies, or you could mix it with vegetables, you could make it with rice. Coffee was three pounds for 15¢ to 17¢. Now it's about a dollar a pound.

F: The people who worked for the city of Youngstown, did they stop giving out money when these people went with script?

V: Yes. They came out with script, and they talked about how dependable it was for a month. They were going to come out with it and pay the city workers with it; they were going to pay their bills with it. If you wanted to deal with the city of Youngstown, you were going to have to take it. If you wanted to work for them, you were going to have to take script. If you wanted to sell something, you had to take a payment in script. They got bankers to appear in the newspapers quoting how dependable this was, but it was only a temporary thing. When things came back on a normal basis, the script was taken out of circulation. It worked perfectly and it was a wonderful thing. Anybody that tried to discount script would be reported. The city would strong-arm anyone that tried to discount that.

F: As far as the bug operations at that time, do you remember much about them?

V: Oh, yes. That was a time of dream books, dream numbers. This was around 1932, 1932, 1933, or 1934. Everyone was playing that bug. Everybody was trying to get a job selling the bug. It was hard to get the price of a drink; it was hard to get the price of a pack of cigarettes. The Greeks were in control of the bug here. They had collectors all over town and pickup men. You played with some friend who knew you or came in to your office or store or came to your house. You would make out a sheet and he would go on his route. He would cover a certain amount of territory. Then he would turn over his money to a pickup man. The pickup man would bring it into the head office. The number used to be based on the daily sales of the New York Stock Exchange. It was based on the third digit from the end.

Another thing was the home brew. The home brew was mostly sold in ginger ale bottles, 25 or 26 ounce bottles. It would have about half of an inch to three-quarters of an

inch of yeasty settlement on the bottom. When you went to pour it out, you had to be like a diamond cutter. You would take the bottle and raise it gently and you would pour the beer in. You didn't want to disturb that yeast. If you did, it was like eating a cake of yeast. The sale of home brew was so good many made their living on it, but undercover.

F: What were some of the forms of entertainment in Youngstown at the time?

V: The big entertainment during the Depression was the radio: Grace Allen, George Burns, and Jack Benny on Sunday nights. They had day baseball games on radio and night baseball and college football games during the fall. There was very little basketball on radio. They didn't broadcast basketball in my memory. There were dances at Stambaugh Auditorium and in the church halls.

We didn't have any minor league baseball in Youngstown during the 1930's. There used to be some pro-football here in Youngstown, independent leagues. It was a heart-ache for everyone that tried to promote and manage it. It wasn't hard to get a good football team here, but you could go to Pittsburgh or Cleveland. All the good teams were a short distance away and that was bad for local teams.

F: You made mention of a local girl that won five thousand dollars?

V: Her name was Lyden. She married a boy by the name of Kane. He got into the pinball machine business. That was another big recreation in Youngstown. They had little hand sets and it was a pinball machine. Youngstown had a big pinball factory. This was the biggest thing commercially that came out of Youngstown during the Depression. When the racketeers saw how well it was going, they took it over. All they did was keep the business for themselves.

F: What about the local girl who won five thousand dollars?

V: We had a local girl that won five thousand dollars by counting the number of faces that could be found in a cartoon drawing of trees. The faces were hidden in the leaves of the trees. She found the most faces of anyone in the country. This was a national card game and she was paid off by that.

F: Did a lot of people get involved with these contests where you write in?

V: There were an awful lot.

F: Did they think it would be an overnight, get-rich-quick scheme?

V: Yes. The main thing around was the chain letter. One would get several of these letters in the course of a month telling you that very bad luck would follow you if you didn't keep up the chain. The letters would ask you to send a dollar to the first name on the list and to send seven of these letters to names on the list and add one new name. If you didn't keep up the chain, you would die, probably of strangulation during the night. People fell for that. They sent out a dollar to the person above when they could barely afford to send out five cents.

F: Did marriages more or less fall down during that time?

V: That was a very funny part of the Depression. During the early part of the Depression, when a young man would plan to get married and was laid off, he might postpone his wedding for a month or two. I knew of three different cases where they got married and the girl lived with her folks and the boy lived with his own folks until he got work on the WPA [Works Progress Administration]. Then they would go off by themselves.

F: How about the music at that time, do you remember any of the records?

V: One of the most popular bands around here was headed by a man who came from London, Ontario, Guy Lombardo. He started in Cleveland. During 1928 we used to drive up to a little nightclub there and listen to Guy Lombardo and His Royal Canadians. He was very popular. That was the time of big bands. Idora Park had a marvelous dance hall and they had all the big bands come there. Idora Park Dance Pavilion was known nationally.

F: What about some of the national programs like CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] and WPA? Give us your opinion on those.

V: The WPA was paid out directly from money in the treasury to certain areas and they took care of it. The WPA were public works which were financed by the government, but done by private industry. They had to hire men, a certain quota for a certain amount of work.

One of the finest programs that they put through was the CCC. They picked up boys that were approximately from the age of fifteen to nineteen. They took them to an army camp and they gave them some training, a physical examination, fed them good, and got them in good condition. They had them running and doing calisthenics. They supplied them with clothes and an allowance for

entertainment. They supplied them with an allowance for tobacco if they were over eighteen. They gave them all transportation, all food, everything that they needed. They would send them out to Yellowstone Park to clean up certain areas, to cut out the dead wood. They would send them out to the beaches to clean up the beaches. They would send them to Florida and the great northwest. They would help build roads into the Indian reservations. The funny thing about that was that every now and then in the newspaper you would read that a ten year old boy was found in the CCC. He would misrepresent himself and get into the CCC. He didn't want to be sent home and begged not to be sent. I suppose that when they got a kid like that they didn't want to send him home either. He didn't have anything to go home to. I think that they knew that the kid was only ten, but they kept their mouths shut until somebody came and proved that the boy was only ten years old. They kept him but they wouldn't let him do the heavy work. At least he was fed. It was wonderful the way they handled that.

F: I wanted to ask you about a couple of big news stories at the time. One would be the Lindbergh kidnapping. Can you recall how some of the people felt?

V: That was really a pathetic case. I can remember how they caught this German carpenter with the lumber that matched up and how they matched it up microscopically with each section. He never thought they could match lumber. I can remember the coverage in New Jersey and the night of his execution in Trenton. Everybody had a very vivid recollection of that.

F: Was this Lindbergh someone that everybody was more or less attached to?

V: No, he wasn't. The strange part of it was that he didn't have the capacity to live with a crowd of people that was interested in him. He wanted to be alone. He didn't want notoriety. He didn't want fame and he didn't want to be bothered. I never heard anybody express any sympathy for the execution.

F: What about "War of the Worlds" by Orson Welles?

V: I missed that.

F: I'd like to thank you very much for this interview.

END OF INTERVIEW