

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown in the 1900's

Life Experiences

O. H. 390

MIKE SOPKOVICH

Interviewed

by

Maribeth Harry

on

May 8, 1976

## Mike Sopkovich

Mr. Mike Sopkovich was born in 1899 in Youngstown, Ohio. His parents' names were Joseph and Anna. Mike Sopkovich was married August 2, 1927 to the former Miss Anna Stanislav. The Sopkovich's had two children: Mike Leonard and Francis. Francis was born in 1931 and Mike Leonard in 1943. Mike Leonard is now deceased.

Mr. Mike Sopkovich was graduated in 1914 from Washington Junior High, Youngstown; this was the extent of his formal education. He was employed by the Ohio Works, Youngstown, from 1913 to 1918; and from 1918 to 1920 he was employed by Briar Hill Steel, Youngstown, in the chemical lab. He is not a veteran. He has held various odd jobs until 1971 when he became an employee of the Arms Museum, Youngstown, Ohio, as a custodian.

Mr. Sopkovich's church affiliation is St. Mary's of Youngstown. He is a member of the church organization--Holy Name Society of St. Mary's. His special interest is horse racing.

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Youngstown in the 1900's

INTERVIEWEE: MIKE SOPKOVICH

INTERVIEWER: Maribeth Harry

SUBJECT: Youngstown, Depression, Work Experience, Family

DATE: May 8, 1976

H: This is an interview with Mr. Mike Sopkovich for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project of Youngstown in the 1930 Depression Years, by Maribeth Harry, at 2929 Bernadette Drive, on May 8, 1976, at 3:00 p.m.

How long have you lived in Youngstown all together?

S: Since 1899.

H: What hospital, or were you born at home?

S: Midwife. I'll start with my dad coming here. There were coal strikes and my dad moved by way of freight to Minneapolis to my cousin's farm. On his journey back from Minneapolis he stopped at Youngstown. The west side of town was called steel mill originally. His first job was at the Ohio Works in Carnegie at the blast furnace, construction of the first blast furnace. That was 1898 and the construction took about a year long. The first cast of the Ohio Works blast furnace was in 1900. We lived in the neighborhood of Steel Street.

H: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

S: I had an older sister and an older brother. My dad must have been here about 1895 or 1896.

H: Is your mother from Youngstown?

S: She is from Europe originally. She was married in the district of Lowellville.

When I was born I was baptized at St. Cyril & Methodius Church on Wood Street.

H: Tell me what a day was like?

S: I went to Steelton School.

H: Where was that located?

S: Now they call it Hartzell Avenue. The school is gone already. It was just up to the fourth grade. From the fourth grade I went to the West Side School. That's off Mahoning, by West Avenue. I guess I was thirteen at this time, and when vacation came along I got a job in the mills. I worked all of vacation but two weeks; the law changed to eighteen. I went to get my pay and I got a \$10 gold piece, \$5 gold piece, and two silver dollars. The rate of pay was \$1.18 a term, ten hour days and fourteen hour nights.

H: Any overtime?

S: I never got overtime.

H: How long were you in school?

S: I went to the seventh grade and then I quit.

H: Which mill did you work at?

S: That was Ohio Works at Carnegie Steel. Then I got a job in the chemical laboratory at Briar Hill Steel.

H: How old were you then?

S: I was about eighteen.

H: You left the Ohio Works?

S: That was just in the summertime, a vacation job. If you dropped out of school then you had to have a work certificate signed.

H: It was common wasn't it? It wasn't like today; more people stay in school today.

S: Then I worked at the chemical laboratory. I finished up there until the strikes. It was an eight hour job. I had a white-collar job. We had college guys come in there in the summertime.

Our department, we worked twelve hours for four weeks to get two weeks off for vacation. Our department didn't have any extra help. The other departments had college kids working in them; they helped out quite a bit.

H: Did you go off to war?

S: No, I didn't.

H: About how many men were employed at the Ohio Works?

S: They employed quite a bit there.

H: A couple hundred or thousand?

S: Thousands.

H: When you were eighteen about how long was your workday then?

S: The chemical lab, our turn was eight hour shift. Our eight hour shift was before the steel mills were unionized. After it was unionized they were on eight hours too; before that they weren't.

H: Then you were more or less given special privilege.

S: That was our system down at the lab.

H: The other men were still working ten?

S: Some of them, yes. I forget the year when all this union business came around.

H: Were the unions welcomed more or less?

S: When one of those steel strikes took place was the year that East Youngstown was all in flames; they raided. It was a steel strike riot.

H: They burned?

S: Yes. The whole town was practically burned, the business section. It was called East Youngstown then; now they call it Campbell. That was the Sheet & Tube district. That wasn't the west side.

H: People actually went around and they were burning?

S: I was never down there, but there were write-ups on it.

H: How long did that go on before they got it under control?

S: A day or a day and a half. It was overnight mostly.

H: Did they get their demands?

S: They got their demands, I guess. It kind of took a while before they got straightened out with that affair.

H: I'm sure you remember the Depression. Tell me what a day was like, an average day?

S: In the Depression occasionally you would see people march down to the soup lines. There were soup lines out toward Salt Springs Road. People that had money in the banks, they couldn't get it out; the banks were closed. You saw all kinds of sights sometimes. You saw someone occasionally running down the railroad tracks picking up coal.

H: Did it affect you?

S: It didn't affect me. When I worked at Briar Hill my dad told me not to buy a used car, to buy a new car. I bought a Model T Ford. It was a crank starter. For the gas gauge you had to put a ruler in the gas tank that you kept under the front seat when you needed it. They only gave you one door on it.

H: One door?

S: The driver had to go in the same side as the passengers.

H: During the Depression did you work?

S: No, I didn't work. What was I doing?

H: I know there are many changes in Youngstown, but what is the biggest?

S: The expressway is a big thing. When the Model T's were out, there were all country roads. The car has improved too. I guess that's about the biggest change.

H: Have the people changed much?

S: In the earlier days there was more jealousy. They used to kid each other more about their ethnicity. You don't hear those ethnic names much anymore. Some took it as kidding and some took it for real. That's what would start fights.

H: What kind of games did you play?

S: We had a playground in our neighborhood. Saturdays or Sundays we would go out in the woods, either first woods or second woods. First woods was this side of Belle Vista and the second woods was the other side of Belle Vista. It was mostly pastures and barns. You would go around the creeks and catch the green frogs.

H: Candy, I'm sure, was very inexpensive.

S: They used to have penny candy stores and different things.

H: Do you remember what Cokes used to cost?

S: They used to be a nickel a bottle. Wartime came and it was hard to get things. That's when I got in to working at the welding company. When I inquired for work at the chemical works they said there were mostly girls hired for what work.

H: Was this World War II or I?

S: This was World War II. That was defense work. As far as the business went, you couldn't get stuff to sell.

I worked in the machine shop and I worked at different smaller factories. Then I worked at Chaney. From there I worked at Ohio Edison; it was custodian work. I retired there in 1965. I worked eight years there and you had to have fifteen to collect pension from Ohio Edison, so I was stuck. All I got was social security after 1965. I worked in a drug store. I worked in Mill Creek Park.

H: When did you come to the Arms Museum?

S: It will be five years in November. Our church is next door to where Mr. Wick lives. I was over at the church doing charity work, painting or something, and they called me over and they had a job for me.

When I worked in Mill Creek Park I picked up a piece of stone. I brought it home and put it between my shrubs. I was working here about four or five months and I thought of that. I showed it to him and he asked where I got it. He told me it was a piece of slag from that original blast furnace made by Pioneer Pavilion, out of there. They had some small chips in a glass cage before they had that up there. Now they have that big piece.

H: What did you think of F.D.R. and the New Deal?

S: One thing, he brought beer back. That I can't forget.

H: Was Youngstown hit hard by prohibition?

S: You would read in the papers who was raided.

H: Were they private homes?

S: Some were.

H: Were names given?

S: Yes. There were racketeers that were bombed or shot or different things. That was the other racket, the numbers racket.

H: You had a pretty good feeling about F.D.R.?

S: He was okay.

H: What about crime? You used to never have to lock your doors, is that correct?

S: That was in the early days, sure.

H: What would be the early days?

S: 1908.

H: When did refrigerators come?

S: (No response)

H: Was meat cheap?

S: There was a meat shortage and there was meat rationing. You would go out and get in long lines.

H: When the first cars came, were people really upset? I've read that they wanted the horse.

S: There were quite a few people that had cars made. Dr. Bob was one of the first car owners. Dr. Beecher was also one of the first car owners.

H: Since Youngstown was an industrial area people, more or less, succumbed?

S: There was more labor work. Of course, machinery replaced a lot of that heavy work now. That's where we employed a lot of people, labor work.



SOPKOVICH

7

H: Is there anything else?

S: No.

H: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW