

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Niles Policeman William Neiss

History of William Neiss

O.H. 417

IDA ELLIS

Interviewed

by

Stephan G. Papalas

on

June 11, 1982

Ida Mae (Neiss) Ellis

Ida Mae Ellis was born on August 14, 1901 in Niles, Ohio. She is the daughter of William Neiss, a policeman in Niles, and Henrietta S. Neiss. She attended Niles McKinley High School.

Mrs. Ellis was married to John Edward Ellis and they have a son, Donald L. Ellis, age 51.

She attends the First Christian Church in Niles and enjoys as her hobbies sewing and hand painting.

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INTERVIEWEE: IDA ELLIS

INTERVIEWER: Stephan G. Papalas

SUBJECT: Childhood, Niles Policemen, Depression, KKK,
Experiences with father

DATE: June 11, 1982

P: This is an interview with Mrs. Ida Ellis for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on Niles Policeman William Neiss. Mrs. Ellis is the daughter of Mr. Neiss.

When were you born Mrs. Ellis?

E: August 14, 1901.

P: Where at?

E: At 26 Hyde Street, Niles, Ohio.

P: Right in your parents' home?

E: Right in my parents' home.

P: Can you tell me a little bit about your family background? Where did your father come from or why did he come here and so forth?

E: My father was born in this country. His father migrated here from Germany.

P: And settled here in Niles?

E: Yes.

P: What can you tell me about your background, your family? How many brothers and sisters did you have?

E: I had three sisters that died in infancy. One was the twin of my youngest sister Wilma. Then I had Olive and Myrtle, and a brother George.

P: You went to Niles McKinley High School?

E: I went to Niles McKinley High School and Warren Avenue School.

P: Tell me about when you were in high school. Just briefly, what do you remember most about it? Who was your favorite teacher, for example? Who was the principal if you might be able to remember?

E: Well, Mr. Whitcomb was the principal and W.C. Campbell was the superintendent. I thoroughly liked all my teachers. I didn't have a favorite teacher.

P: How many kids were in your class?

E: I would say about nineteen as I recall.

P: A little about the city itself, let's say it's a Monday morning in the summer time and you're ready to walk down Main Street. What would you be able to tell me about Main Street about the time that your father was a policeman and you were old enough to remember?

E: Well, I can remember the drugstore, the dry goods store-- Will Hutching's dry goods store--the bank, the bankers; I remember them. It was a small town and we knew the people personally. My dad was always on duty and he was there to supervise me that I didn't stay too long downtown. I used to stoop down to look under the saloon door. I can remember that. President McKinley's home was down there. I'd go to the watering trough where the horses would drink water, and the pump where we could get a drink for ourselves. I knew the bankers, the bakers, the barbers, and the druggist; I knew everyone in town at one time in my life.

P: Who were some of those men? Can you remember?

E: Well, there was Clyde Ferguson the druggist, Mr. Homer Calvin the druggist, and there was Henry Hoffman who had Hoffman's Dry Goods Store, Dave Evans in McKinley Bank, and William Hutchings in the Dollar Bank. You name them and I would know them, but I've forgotten names too.

P: Do you remember where Holloway's Livery was?

E: Oh yes! I remember the time that Holloway's Livery was on fire and the horses ran out into the street. Yes, I remember that very well.

P: About what year was that fire?

E: I can't take you back in years and dates because I don't remember them. I just remember what I saw, the horses running down the street and the fire, the stable burning.

P: At that time when you were a child, was Main Street a dirt road?

E: No, it was brick.

P: If you were going to go up Robbins Avenue, where did the city limits end? Can you remember, let's say, 1910? Is that possible?

E: No, because I had a grandmother that lived on Fenton Street. I'd have to go up as high as Mason Street or Hartzell Avenue, but I don't remember whether that's where the city limits were or not. McKinley Heights is the limit that I remember today.

P: Of course, there probably weren't many people on Robbins Avenue during that time?

E: Yes, there were plenty of homes along Robbins Avenue. Like I said, when I walked from my home to downtown, people were sitting on the porches at homes. There was somebody at every home that would say, "Hi," and they would call you by name. It isn't like today, walking down and you never see a face to say hello to.

P: Oh yes, do you remember the streetcars?

E: I rode them back then. They were transportation that we had until I was a young woman.

P: How far could you go in a streetcar?

E: Well, to Youngstown and Warren and Leavittsburg, and then when they put the buses on, we would switch from the streetcar to a bus. We used to go over to Struthers and those small towns around by streetcar, but that wasn't too often.

P: I want to talk a little bit about your father, William Neiss. In my recollections from what I've been reading in the Niles Times from the turn of the century up to 1916 so far, everything I read about him was quite favorable. He was a well respected police officer. What are your earliest recollections of your father? What do you remember back to your youngest age?

E: Well, it was always dad who took us out into the yard

and watched us play, would sit there and give us moral support if we were playing games with the children around. He took us camping.

He took us to the merchant picnics that we would have to go on by railroad, which were called excursions.

He was a very loving and devoted father who saw that we had the proper training and bringing up and we got around to see things. He would take my mother and myself and any of the other family children that were around--that the age difference wasn't too much--to Youngstown, out to dinner. We had a nice life together; He was a very loving and strict father.

P: Do you know how old he was when he became a policeman?

E: No, I truthfully couldn't say that, but I would think he was very young because I remember my brother spoke about him working in the mills. That I knew because I heard my dad talk about it. Then through hard times he went to work in the woods up in Michigan and then he would come back to Niles when work picked up. I don't know how old my dad was. He was older than my mother by seven years, and I know she was young when they got married, like sixteen, seventeen years old. That's all I remember, nothing else about the age.

P: Where was he born, here in Niles?

E: My father was born in Niles in that house down on the corner of Chestnut and Park Avenue, where the gas station is now.

P: What did he look like when he was a policeman during those years, when you were growing up and you were at the high school? How tall was he? What sort of man was he?

E: My father, I'm sure, was six foot tall and he weighed in the 300 pound area because he was a very straight man. He walked straight as a die and he was a handsome man in my estimation. He was such a good father that he couldn't have any bad looks as far as I'm concerned.

P: Where was the police station at the time that he was a police officer?

E: On Park Avenue in the back of the old city building, in back of the fire station on the alley.

P: Where the bank is today on the corner?

E: No, it was alongside of the post office.

P: Yes.

E: The jail, the police station, if you went in it from Park Avenue through the front door, you went back through a hall. If you went to the police station to the desk, you went back the alley and in the side. I never saw the cells. I was never taken into that part of it, but I knew where my dad worked and where; if I needed him I could get him.

P: Was he a soft-spoken man? Did he have a deep voice?

E: He wasn't a loud person. When he spoke to you he spoke with a determined voice that you knew that he meant what he was saying when he was in earnest. If he was joking, you also knew that he was joking with you. He was a very kind and generous man.

P: How many years was he on the Niles Police Department? Do you have any idea?

E: Well, I know he retired in 1932, but possibly around thirty-five years. I wouldn't know. I don't know, to be truthful.

P: Did he ever come home and did you ever overhear him speaking about any experiences he had as a policeman downtown, any incidents that he may have been involved with that are memorable?

E: No, my father didn't bring that home to us children. He gave us his lessons and we knew how we were to behave for him. If we had friends, our friends had to come to the house. He wanted to know who we were with and what we were doing and where we were doing it. Now, I don't mean to say that he didn't allow us privileges, but I do mean that he kept watch. We were told the facts of life and what to be on the look out for. He did not come home and tell stories of what he did to this person or that person or what that person . . . If there was a robbery, he might have casually mentioned that there was a store robbed or something like that, but the gruesome stuff he did not tell us.

P: Do you remember any of the men that your father worked with, any of the police officers or the police chief?

E: I remember them all. They were like uncles at the time I was young. Today it has been years since I've even thought of some of them, and only by looking at that picture do I remember who was who. They were all just like uncles to us as children.

P: Do you ever remember a man named Chief John Bruder?

E: Yes, I do.

P: He was the second police chief.

E: That I wouldn't remember, but I know who he was.

P: Do you remember anything about him? Did you ever see him?

E: Oh yes, I saw him. That's so far in my past too; I played with his daughter. I couldn't describe him to you. I just know that he was a healthy looking, normal, very nice looking man.

P: What about the third police chief, Chief Rounds, Lincoln Rounds?

E: I knew him well. He was just like a second father.

P: What could you tell me about him?

E: He was a very friendly man, a very trusted man. If he could help you, he would help you. He watched the children to see that they did what was right. I was at their house many, many times. I wasn't afraid of him. To me he wasn't a Chief of Police and my father wasn't a policeman.

P: What did he look like?

E: Mr. Rounds? He was the opposite of my father. He was a tall, slim man with reddish hair. My father was heavy, tall and fair-haired.

P: What do you remember about any of the other police officers? Did you know a Mr. Whitaker?

E: Yes, I did.

P: Can you remember him?

E: Not personally, just to go downtown and speak to him or stand and talk to him when my dad was around and that, or say, "Hi," as we passed on the street. That's all.

P: What type of person was he?

E: As far as I knew, a very likeable man.

P: Jovial, laugh a lot?

E: No. I never knew any of the policemen to be like that.

I always thought that they were concerned with how we were concerned about them. They tried to treat us like they felt that children would like to be treated. They weren't solemn all the time and they did laugh with us, but there was none of that play stuff. It was mostly all just standing around talking.

P: They were very concerned about their image then?

E: That's right.

P: Did they walk a specific beat? How did they operate? Did they have shifts?

E: My father had turns. Sometimes it would be night turn, sometimes it was day turn. I don't remember the length of the turns or anything. When they were downtown, they were on the street walking around and watching what was going on. I can remember when a young policeman, Mr. Booth, had a motorcycle. He was called a traffic cop to get to places fast that they wanted to send him.

P: About what year may that have been? Do you have any idea? Was it after 1928?

E: I would think so, but I don't remember.

P: Was his name Ague?

E: No.

P: How many policemen were in the Police Department when you were a child?

E: Well, I knew Lally, Whitaker, Mears, Gilbert, Berline, Casper, Nick Warsaw, and Rose.

P: Who was the most interesting, other than your father?

E: I didn't know them that well to form an opinion like that. To me they were just my father's friends. They weren't policemen. They were just my father's friends. They had their uniforms on and I just respected them. I didn't have any favorites, because they were all very nice to me.

P: I want to move on just a little bit to a particular week. It's a fascinating story of the city of Niles. It made history all across the country. That's when the Ku Klux Klan tried to come through Niles and many people, especially from the east end, tried to stop them on Main Street.

What do you remember about this week? What did you see, anything in particular that strikes you?

E: I was not allowed to get out and get involved in things like this. We were taught to stay away from trouble. I had had a Halloween party in my home in my basement and my sister got hurt. We called the doctor. Doctor Omerod came and she had broken her ankle. We had to get her to the hospital to have it set. We got in the doctor's car and went out North Main Street to go to the hospital, Warren Hospital, and we were stopped by men with guns and white robes. We couldn't go through because they threatened to shoot anyone that would go through. The only thing we could do was to turn around and come back and go out the River Road, out Warren Avenue, out past the cemetery and the Republic Mills and into the hospital that way, and come home afterwards. Of course, she stayed in the hospital. That's the way we had to come home. Nobody molested us. It's just that the trouble was there and they were not letting people go through. We were in the doctor's car and they wouldn't let the doctor through.

P: Did they actually have guns in their hands?

E: There were guns, yes.

P: How many of them would you say there were?

E: I would say four. I don't know. I didn't dwell on it because they didn't harm me. There was no harm done that I saw. I just knew that it was with the doctor and we tried to go through and we couldn't, so we did the next best thing. There was nothing done to us or nothing said, just that we couldn't go through that area at the railroad crossings over there on North Main Street.

P: What role did your father play during that week? Do you know? Was he out there at the intersection?

E: I wouldn't know.

P: Can you remember if you were worried about him?

E: Oh, we worried about everybody because there's gun play . . . we were taught to be careful of that gun. My father carried one and that was a no no. We didn't go near that gun. We knew where it hung and we stayed away from it and any gun that anybody had we were taught to stay away from. I have a brother and when he cleaned his gun he didn't do it where we were, and we weren't allowed to be where he was. We were taught to be careful at all times.

P: What was your life like later on, ten years after the Klan riot? During the Depression, how was your father able to take care of the family? What was Niles like at the time?

E: Well, Niles has always been a town that I have great loyalty for. It was where I was born, where I was raised, and I still like it. I'm in a big town now, but I would prefer to be in a small town if I had my choice.

Well, I have to tell you this in earnestness, that people were concerned about other people. There was very little work. I had brother-in-laws and my husband, and they were out of work. They had to get out and do what they could to make money to put bread or food on the table. Jobs, he was a mill man by trade and there was no work. If there were turns, he would work a turn and he may not have work for another week. You couldn't tell. If it wasn't for my mother and my father . . . my dad worked steady. He was a police officer and he worked steady. The city had enough money that they were paid the monthly wage. My parents took care of their children even though we were married and had our own homes. They saw that we had enough to eat. There was welfare and all that, but people helped people in those days. We didn't look to the city to really take care of us. We tried to take care of one another.

P: Did your mother work?

E: My mother never worked.

P: Where was she originally from?

E: She was born in England, and she came here with her parents when she was two years old, and they never went back. My grandfather, her father, came with them. My grandmother's father was a minister, an Episcopalian minister over there. He put them on the boat with my uncle, Charlie, and with my mother as youngsters. Before the boat sailed her grandfather said to her mother, "Rosanna, you take this Bible and if you need any help after you get to America, you open this up and you will find the help that you need." They never went back to England and they never saw each other after that departure, but she got the help that she needed from her Bible.

P: Where did your dad meet your mom at?

- E: It wasn't in school, but they were young people. I wouldn't know, unless it would be at a dance, because I know she said my aunt was with them when they got together as a group and were at a dance. It was here in town.
- P: Do you know anything about the mayors that your father served under as a police officer? How about Mayor Naylor for example?
- E: I knew Mayor Naylor, but he was one of the first, I believe. I knew Mayor Crow really well and I knew Mayor Marshall well, and I believe Ferguson was mayor for a while. I knew them because they lived in the area, in the neighborhood. I knew them well. Other than that, I know that our families played together, the children, and that's all there was to it. We were just good friends.
- P: Is there anything that stands out about their administrations that would identify them apart from other mayors, accomplishments that you might be able to remember?
- E: No, because I was young and I wasn't opinionated and thought, well, he's not doing what I want him to do and this and that. No, I just thought that they were nice men and they were the fathers of my playmates and what they did was pretty all right with me. I know there were times that I heard older people talking, the adults, about how this wasn't right and that wasn't right, but I knew many people in Niles and I think they all came out pretty good in the end.
- P: Do you remember anything about their personalities? Did you ever get to say hello or anything to Mayor Naylor? Did he ever talk to you?
- E: Not me, I wouldn't know him. It's the others that I mentioned that I knew well enough to call them by name and talk to them.
- P: How about Mayor Bruder?
- E: Yes. His daughter was one of my friends.
- P: Mayor Crow?
- E: Mayor Crow and Marshall, they're the ones I knew. Ferguson was mayor, I knew him.
- P: Did you ever speak to Mayor Crow?
- E: Oh yes, I played with his daughter; I went to his house.

He had a daughter and son. They lived on Warren Avenue not far from here and we played together. I was at their house and I was at the Round's house as much as I was at home.

P: Where about on Warren Avenue did the mayor live?

E: Butler Street comes up and ends right there at Warren Avenue and the corner house . . . I think it was either the second or third house. It was a little house that sat on the grounds. I knew Mr. Crow before he was mayor-- when they had the shoe store. Of course, they moved after that. I'm talking about when I was a child who played with the children. They went up on the other end of town and lived up there after that.

P: As a police officer your father lived here on Hyde Street?

E: Yes, right down there--third house from my sister Wilma's home where I am now visiting.

P: Do you remember the address?

E: 26 Hyde Street.

P: Where did Chief Rounds live at?

E: At the time that I was growing up that I was most familiar with, he lived out by McRobert's Farm, out at the end of Park Avenue just before you go across the black bridge, that house on the left. I think McRobert's eventually moved in there. I've forgotten. That's where I went to play on Park Avenue. Then later on they moved up onto Maple Avenue.

P: Growing up in Niles, were there any areas in the city that had reputations for being a challenge, perhaps for your father as a police officer, rough areas?

E: Well, as far as I know, East Niles; they called it Russia field, and the railroad went through there with the hobos that ride the trains in here and come up and beg door to door. If they were getting away from something that they had done, I guess that they would ride the trains by rail into town. Do you know what I mean? The east end was where there was more trouble because there were saloons over there as it was, like a settlement, like downtown, like a town. They had stores and things over there. We had our little stores here. My grandmother lived on Fenton Street and we were allowed to go over there without any fear of any harm coming to us. I wasn't afraid of those people over there. It was just that that was

the area where the depot was and that was where trouble seemed to come in.

- P: The newspaper accounts I've read, they often referred to the immigrants coming over and perhaps that they helped to add to the color or the rambunctious times that occurred over there on the east end. Do you remember any of that? How did people perceive, let's say, the newly arrived Italians?
- E: Well, that I couldn't say because we lived over here and as children we were kept pretty much at home, over on this side of town. My grandparents lived over there, so we would go over and visit over there and I played with them like they were the same as me and I was the same as them. There was no racial difference or religious difference as far as I was concerned. We weren't concerned with that.
- P: How about amongst your friends? Did you, as a child, ever perceive any prejudice attitudes between adults who were, let's say, lifelong residents of the community and immigrants just coming from Europe?
- E: No. If there was a new child that came into the school . . . No, I never noticed any of that. They were all my friends and I felt as though I was their friend. I don't remember having any trouble in that line.
- P: In what decade, if you might be able to recall, did Niles receive a greater number of immigrants from overseas? When would you feel you could see it actually expanding, the community, population wise and industrial wise?
- E: I don't know. I remember when the mills were on strike. I don't remember an influx of foreigners coming in. I don't think I paid much attention to that really. I know the town grew. I knew everybody, nearly, in town. Today I know very few people; I know very few.
- P: Going back to your father, William Neiss, after he retired what did he do?
- E: Just retired, just spent his time with his grandchildren around. As I said, we all lived on this street and he and my brother would go fishing. He was just a family man. He didn't do anything. He would visit from home to home with his children and that was it.
- P: What other sports did Mr. Neiss enjoy?
- E: He had a radio. He didn't live to enjoy television. He had a

radio and he would sit with his ear to the radio and listen to "Amos and Andy" and the boxing matches. He got real pleasure out of radio. We were always sorry that he didn't have the pleasure of watching television.

P: What else did he listen to on the radio? Was he a sports man? Did he enjoy baseball?

E: Fishing and wildlife, that type. Baseball, oh yes.

P: Where did he go fishing at?

E: Up to Michigan.

P: Oh, he traveled then?

E: Oh yes, he would take my mother and my brother and my younger sister would go along. I never went, but the four of them would go up there and spend two weeks along the river fishing and having the most wonderful time.

P: In his retirement years, who were some of his closest friends?

E: His family. So many of the others passed away or were younger men than my father was. No, he wasn't a man that would visit one with the other like that. He was a family man. He would take us and we would go places and do things. We used to go out past Waddell Park to the McRobert's Farm, go back through there along the Mahoning River, set up camp and stay two or three weeks. He would come into work and come back out there at night. He would take his family. That's the way we spent our youth, going to Silver Lake, and excursions or picnics that we had.

P: Where was Silver Lake?

E: I don't know; up near Geagua Lake? I don't know. The railroad would run a special excursion and we would go over there and get on the train with our picnic baskets and off we would go.

P: Was he involved much with winter sports, like skating or the sleigh races they used to have on the river?

E: Oh yes, he took me down there. We used to go down and watch the sleds, with the horse, race up and down the river until the river got too polluted that it couldn't be done anymore. We would skate on Mosquito Creek and

skate down there. We had a boat that we anchored down there, a row boat that we would row up the back waters and camp like I told you.

P: What else was he involved with?

E: My father?

P: Any hobbies that he had?

E: No, hunting is all I could say. He loved to go rabbit and squirrel hunting, and fishing, and being at home with his family; those were his hobbies. When he was home we would play games like "Flinch". He just didn't sit around and not pay attention to us children. If we went out in the backyard to play, he would go out and sit there and watch us play.

P: You mentioned the game "Flinch", how did you play that?

E: It was a deck of cards with just numbers on that you played, something like "Hearts" or that type. The deck would be about that big and you just build up to fifteen numbers and you had your pile that you played from, your stockpile. Whoever got rid of their stockpile first won the game. That was as a family, we played that as a family, all of us--the children that were home at night.

My father was one to supervise us, I'll tell you, and my mother too. They expected to know.

P: Where did he hunt?

E: Up at Garrettsville, and Leavittsburg, up in that country and out towards Milton Lake.

P: He had his own car then?

E: No. Eventually when my brother was about eighteen, he had his first car and he took them in the car. Other than that, I don't know how they got there. They went with somebody else. They never had an automobile, my parents.

P: Why was that?

E: They were too old. They never got around to it. Their children grew up and had the cars and they didn't need it. Then, of course, we would go out to Milton Dam where my parents had a cottage and spend the summer out at Milton

Dad living in that. My father, if he had to work, he would be in working and would come out on Friday and stay the weekend. Of course, my brother had a car and my brothers-in-laws would have cars. We went as a family. There would be 28 and 29 of us out there in the cabin with tents on boards. Do you know how they make a board frame and you live in it? We got along as a family. It was a very wonderful family. I'm proud of them.

P: Mrs. Ellis, at the end of his retirement years, when did your dad, William Neiss, pass away?

E: In March of 1942.

P: How did the town respond to that?

E: Well, the force turned out in full force and marched to the cemetery and they showed him all the respect that anyone could ask for. He was well-liked. I never heard my father speak an ill word of anybody. I don't think people did that about him, not to us anyhow.

P: What cemetery is he interred in?

E: Union Cemetery off Vienna Avenue.

P: If you could, how would you summarize your father's life in Niles?

E: I would say that if my father was living today and he had a choice of going from here on out, he would go back and go over his life as it was because family life was so much different. Everything was so much nicer for everybody at that time; you knew people cared. It's so impersonal today. I would think that he would like to live, which is the way I would like to do it too. If I had a choice offered to me, I would rather go back. I'm not talking about improvements or inventions or things that we have that make life easy. I'm tired of the push-button age. I think it was more living when we had to use our hands and our minds to do what we had to do and take care of what we had to take care of. Even to the family, I think that there's nothing that can replace family life.

P: Going back earlier, even from his own childhood, can you shed any more light on that before we terminate the conversation?

E: I know that he had brothers and sisters. There was a large family. His brothers lived and I knew three or four of them really well, my uncles. I knew my grandmother and my grandfather very well. I really just think

that there couldn't be anybody that was treated with more respect than my father was because he treated other people . . . He was good to his parents. I don't know what more I could ask for or what more I could say that would pin a rose on his lapel that would tell him that I love him and I was proud that he was my father, that he married my mother and that they gave birth to me.

P: What incident do you remember in your life with your father that would summarize the way you knew him?

E: Well, the only thing that I can think of is when I was eight and I had a baby sister come along; there were a set of twins that came along. I was eight years old and my father had made a baby of me, pretty much; I was the youngster and he looked after me. What I wanted, I pretty much got everything I asked for. Then along come these two babies and I felt that my nose was a little bit cut off. One day when I came home from school, he was sitting in front of the stove smoking his pipe and I thought, this is my chance, I guess, because I really did it. I crawled up on his lap and he sat there rocking me and just talking to me, doing what you would do to a child that you were trying to show that you loved. I pretended that I fell asleep and he couldn't sit there all day and hold me, and he decided that I should go back to school after I had my lunch, but he wasn't going to do that. He told my mother, he said, "Ett, I'm going to lay Ida on the couch. If she's asleep don't wake her and send her to school, let her sleep now and have a nice rest." He gets up and leaves me and I lay there pretending I'm asleep, but they both knew I wasn't. (Laughter) I always felt that that showed more love than anything else to me. I knew my sister hadn't taken my place; I was just to move over and share his good graces with her.

P: Okay, fine. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW