

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Niles Police Department

Personal Experiences

O. H. 511

KENNETH WEBER

Interviewed

by

Stephen Papalas

on

October 13, 1982

KENNETH D. WEBER

Dr. Weber was born in Galena, Ohio on August 17, 1907 to John and Ella Davis Weber. He was an excellent athlete and graduated from Galena High School in 1923.

Weber attended Ohio State University and was a quarter-back until he was permanently sidelined with a knee injury. He did, however, coach the team's backfield during his remaining undergraduate years and earned letters in basketball and track. Weber graduated from Ohio State in 1927 with a degree in physical education.

Upon graduating from college, he got a job teaching in the Niles City School System where he also coached various sports including football and basketball. During the Depression, Weber ran the municipal swimming pool at Waddell Park where he trained an excellent swimming team.

In 1933, Dr. Weber returned to Ohio State University where he earned his M.A. in school administration. He transferred to the Braceville School System in 1938 and moved on to Harvard University two years later where he earned a Ph.D. in physiology. Upon graduation from Harvard, Dr. Weber returned to Ohio and worked in the Warren City School System until he retired in 1976.

His wife, Rowene Snowball Weber, whom he married in 1928, passed away in 1980. They raised one son, John W. who is now fifty years old. (The only All-American Basketball player from Niles).

Dr. Weber is active in the Niles First United Methodist Church and is a member of the Masons and the Rotary Club of Warren.

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Niles Police Department

INTERVIEWEE: KENNETH WEBER

INTERVIEWER: Stephen Papalas

SUBJECT: Childhood, Mayors, Police Officers, Years as  
Niles Coach, Bootleggers, Klu Klux Klan

DATE: October 13, 1982

P: This is an interview with Mr. Kenneth D. Weber at his home on Lincoln Avenue for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program. The date is October 13, 1982 and the interviewer is Stephen G. Papalas. The topic is the history of the Niles Police Department, plus many other wandering remembrances.

Mr. Weber, could you tell me how old you are today?

W: Seventy-five.

P: How long have you lived in Niles?

W: Since the summer of 1927. I came right from Ohio State to Niles for my first coaching and teaching job.

P: Where were you born?

W: In Galena, Ohio. It is in Delaware County.

P: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

W: I am an only child.

P: How about your own parents? Where did your dad and mom come from?

W: My dad lived in the Columbus area all of his life. His background was German. I remember that he did not want to go to school as a little boy because they were sending him to German school. He did not think that was right.

P: What about your mom?

W: My mother is a graduate of Ohio State with the class of 1901.

P: Coming from Galena, what sort of things can you recall about high school?

W: In the first place, Galena ia a very, very small town. It is still about the same size. We did not live on a farm. We lived right in town. It was agricultural all around it. There were a lot of orchards, as well as regular agricultural endeavors.

We had a rather surprising thing. We just seemed to have one of those things that happens in a small town occasionally. We had a group of great, big, well-coordinated boys. We were absolutely terrific in athletics for four or five years with this group. We had an excellent coach. He started when we were coming into high school. We would scedule one tough team and the rest of them would be easier. The next year he scheduled three or four larger schools. The last year that I played, we didn't play anything except big schools.

P: How did you do?

W: We won them all.

P: Is that right?

W: For example, I had a backfield that had a fullback that weighed over 200 pounds and was fast. One halfback would go about 185 pounds. The other one would go about 165 pounds and there was me. I was playing at about 145 pounds.

P: What position were you?

W: I was the quarterback.

P: Outstanding. What did your dad do for a living if he wasn't a farmer?

W: He had a little creamery in the town for awhile. Which eventually, he sold that to a company in Columbus and became the superintendent of the city dairy. Gradually he merged with more and more until he had the nucleus of what is now Borden Dairies.

P: In other words, he was the one who really began Borden Dairies?

W: No, Borden was a swiss and eastern company. Borden offered a merger arrangement, which eventually resulted in moving corporate headquarters to Columbus.

P: He must have been a real businessman. Good mind.

W: He worked well with people. In my best estimation, he was a tremendous supervisor. He was continually thinking of his men. He was one of the first to offer health and life insurance and pension rights, all the modern perks.

P: What did you do at Ohio State? Did you play any athletic sports there?

W: I was expected to be their quarterback starting in the fall of 1924, but got ruined my freshman year and didn't get to play any more football, much to my mother's pleasure. I participated three years of basketball and three years of track.

P: What possessed you to come to Niles, Ohio?

W: Dr. Basil, he played football at Ohio State. He was down to see the athletic director at Ohio State. They needed another coach. The athletic director called me up at the fraternity house and said, "I think we have a job for you." I said, "That is fine. Does this fellow know how old I am?" He said, "Yes. I told him how old you are. It doesn't matter to him." That senior year, since I wasn't able to play football, they named me an assistant freshman football coach. I coached backs on the freshman squad. This is a background that most graduates have not experienced.

P: What year was it that you came to Niles?

W: Fall of 1927.

P: How old would you have been?

W: Nineteen.

P: Only nineteen years old and you were coaching in Niles?

W: Frank Lukz was captain of the team then. We had a mighty good ball club.

P: What kind of man was Frank Lukz as a student in school?

W: Things had become tough in their family and Frank dropped out of school one year, the year before I came. (He needed to work). They were having some financial reverses in his family. The next year, Frank came back to school and played ball. He graduated and I arranged for him to go down to Ohio State. He played and won some letters three straight years. He played a guard and was quite good. He played for Sam Willaman.

P: Is that the only sport you coached in Niles?

W: You coached everything in those days. They had not had anything except football and basketball. In football the two coaches had been fired. They knew that they were going to be. Consequently, they didn't do a thing about developing any material. In any sport, that is a serious matter. You can build football players faster than you can build basketball players. A basketball player has to work on instantaneous reflexes. In football, a play is called and you have time to concentrate on your assignment before action begins.

In basketball, we had difficulty attempting to build a team with inexperienced material. There wasn't anyone left from the undetested team the year before.

P: This is interesting. I have never been able to interview a person who I might say came from the outside. You don't seem to have deep family roots as some have for generations in town. The next question I want to ask you is what was your first impression of Niles? What did you think when you came in?

W: One of the most interesting introductions to a town that one could ever have, I think, because here I was nineteen years old coming from Columbus which was absolutely bone dry in prohibition. Dr. Basil picked me up at the railroad station and said, "We are going to have dinner with the superintendent. Before we pick him up, you and I will stop at Louie the Owl's for a drink." We went to Louie the Owl's. We are on Mason Street. The boys are passing the drinks back. They are standing a couple deep at the bar passing drinks back over their shoulders to each other. Never having had a drink, I proceeded to get it up to my lips a couple of times. I put the glass down and we picked up the superintendent.

We went down to the Ohio Hotel, a new place with excellent food. We uttered discussions and then I was interviewed by the superintendent. Mr. Keefer took me around town to meet the various members of the board and was offered the position.

P: Louis the Owl's? Is that O-W-L's, like the animal?

W: Yes. I don't even remember where it is. Some of the old-timers around here will know. I don't remember because this was my first visit and that night I was very well-oriented.

P: What other places did you learn that existed in Niles on the east end?

W: Very shortly, you got acquainted with Jim Jennings who was the top bootlegger. He had later built the hall that is over on Mason Street now. At that time, he had a much smaller place. It was interesting because he sent two of his boys over to see me the first week I was here.

P: For what reason?

W: He wanted to know if I would furnish them a point spread on the games. I told the boys I didn't know any of the teams or the personnel of other teams. I told them if they wanted to know who was hurt, who isn't and who is ready to play, that I would be glad to let them know on Wednesday or Thursday. Jim called me on the phone a little later. He said that was great and all of the information that they wanted.

P: Do you mean the games that Niles would play? How would you know the point spread? You had an idea how strong the team was?

W: I had no idea of our opposition and I couldn't make any estimates. I could tell them if any of our boys were hurt. If we were hurt, we weren't going to do as well as we would if everyone was in good shape.

P: Can you tell me a little bit more about Jim Jennings?

W: During the Depression is when Jim Jennings really came to the front.

The first thing about the Depression that I remember was I used to weigh and measure the boys at least at the beginning and the end of the school year. Then over the the summer I had a chance to look and see how much they have grown. When school opened in 1931, many of the boys had lost weight or hadn't gained. I rushed my information down to Mr. Keefer, the superintendent. He then collected a number of mothers from the various schools. The janitor set up trestle boards with horses down the hall and they were served soup and sandwiches to the children and this continued all through the Depression years.

As far as Jim was concerned, if children didn't have shoes or clothes to go to school, we would call Jim and let him know. He would call you back in about ten minutes and tell you to send them down to this store or that store. He said, "I have told them that they are to have shoes or clothes or whatever they need." That fellow must have spent thousands and thousands of dollars on children's clothes during the Depression.

P: What did he look like? Tell me a little bit about the man. It is very interesting to me because so many people talk about him.

W: He is hard to describe. He really is. He was kind of round-faced. He was a little bit rawboned with high cheekbones. He had a lot of Italian touch in his voice because when he was at home, they spoke Italian. His English wasn't the best. He was certainly an interesting character.

P: Did he have any problems with the "Black Hand"?

W: I don't know. That was the sort of thing you did not talk about.

P: What are some other outstanding moments that you might remember with Jim Jennings?

W: I remember that he was terrifically interested in sports of all kinds. He had a girls basketball team that he recruited around the valley. His outstanding star was a big, tall girl by the name of Suzy Sporsellar from Leavittsburg. She was absolutely terrific. She could have played on any boys team around the valley.

P: Did you ever go into the Jennings nightclub?

W: No. Being in the education business, it was just something that you didn't do.

P: What other times did you get to talk to the man? You said that you found him interesting. In what ways? Can you give me examples?

W: Largely because you could see that basically he was a very sound businessman. He ran a tight ship. He had to because he had some boys who were a little rough to handle. Some of his boys were running liquor down from Buffalo or Port Clinton or wherever the shipments came in. He was handling a lot of bonded liquor that was being imported from Canada.

P: Who were some of the people around him?

W: Marty Flask was one of his boys. Marty was an interesting character because he had a raccoon coat. Jim had furnished his boys with Chrysler convertibles at that time. They were the fastest things on the road. They had the springs strengthened, so they could carry a good, heavy load in the trunk without the back sagging.

The fellow that got into the argument and shot Marty, Chippy Mango, lived here on the next block.

P: What kind of guy was Chippy?

W: He was a real good boy. Marty had quite a reputation for being a lady killer. People in town were quite unhappy with him. They got into some sort of an argument one night. Chippy went home and got his shotgun; one blast settled the matter. Chippy left town. They didn't find him for years and years. When they did find him and brought him back, I understand they picked him up through the IRS; everybody that knew anything about the case was dead. They just turned him loose.

P: How interesting.

W: To tell you the truth, all of the people thought it was good riddance.

P: Of the fellow that was shot?

W: Yes.

P: I take it he was an unpopular type person.

W: Yes.

P: What was he like? A short little man?

W: No, he was about 5'10". He was slender, good looking and a killer with the girls. There was that raccoon coat and car. I was talking to one of the older ladies the other day, she said that she had worked at a place downtown and Marty would go past in his convertible and all the girls would wave. He would wave at us and we would wave back very quietly so nobody would notice. She said that their parents would kill them if they knew.

P: Was Marty in charge of anything in particular?

W: He was just one of his drivers. He and Chippy as I remember were the two main drivers.

P: Did Chippy have any other responsibilities in particular?

W: I don't think so.

P: What was he like?

W: It is awfully hard to remember because that was so far back. He was gone from town for so long.

P: Who else was around the Jennings'?

W: Jim's brother.

P: Joe?

W: Joe was there. He was the one who had the beer distribution place down in southeast Girard in town. Do you remember?

P: Yes.

W: Jim and Joe were an awful lot alike. They were real nice, basic fellows that they didn't think they were doing anything wrong. There was demand for liquor in town. They were supplying it and that was all there was to it. That was a great deal

of the story on prohibition everywhere. That is the reason they finally wiped it out.

- P: Could you compare and contrast the Jennings brothers Jim and Joe?
- W: I think Jim was really the business head. He was the fellow that could really make the operation go. At the same time, there was an understanding with Muncane that the Niles boys never delivered anything at all in Warren. The Warren boys never came down here to make any sales. Of course, it was the same thing with Youngstown. Everyplace had its own little territory and they didn't trample on each other's toes.
- P: Would you say then that the organized crime at that time called the "Black Hand", now the Mafia, really got its clutches on some of the outfits in Niles?
- W: From what I could see at the time, and this is rather superficial because I was busy with athletics, it didn't seem to me that they were into much else at the time other than bootlegging. The matter of getting into all of the other things seem to have come later. It probably came when the profits went down with prohibition being rescinded.
- P: After the prohibition years, did you ever have a chance to go into the nightclub?
- W: I never bothered to go. I didn't think it was the thing to do.
- P: Do you know of any other places similar to Jennings' nightclub that operated in the city?
- W: One of the other places that was notorious in those early years was the Jungle Inn near Masury. It was one of the biggest gambling spots between New York to Chicago.
- P: Everybody talks about that. I wish I would have been around just to see the inside.
- W: I had been in there. There was only one door to get in. As you walked in there and turned to look up, there was a curved section of boiler plate with slots in it. They had tommy guns sticking in the slots so that somebody wasn't going to stop by and hijack them. If a bunch of fellows would have walked in and they weren't protected that way, they could have walked in there and wiped out thousands of dollars off of the tables. Take one of the crap tables where there were thousands of dollars laying out, there were thousand dollar bills out on the table.
- P: Incredible.

W: The fellows came in here from Detroit and from Cleveland, New York and so forth to gamble. It was really a big operation.

P: Can you tell me anything about the police department that you remember in your early years when you came into town in 1927.

W: One thing was you always had foot patrolmen walking the beat down around the old doughnut and up Main Street and so on. A uniformed officer on the foot patrol was largely preventative.

The only name I remember was the chief. It was Chief Nicholas. He had quite a record because he had not had a single unsolved murder during the years that he was chief. Everything was so up and above board that when anybody was going to shoot anybody they did it out in plain sight.

P: What do you remember about Nicholas? What was his personality like?

W: He was a very quiet fellow. He was excellent in his ability to question someone. He must have done a good job of thinking as he did his questioning. I have forgotten the names of most of the policemen in the early days for it has been too many years ago.

P: How about Dickey Neiss?

W: I don't remember him.

P: Do you remember a man named Whittaker?

W: Yes. I remember Whittaker.

P: Booth?

W: Booth, yes.

P: What did you know about Booth?

W: One night my wife and I and another couple stopped at a stop-light and he pulled up and put a foot out on our running board and I asked him what was wrong. He never said a word. He just stood there and took off. I still don't know what he was doing. I had heard tales from some of the people around here, the younger set. They couldn't afford Jim's liquor. They stopped at some of the other bootleg places to pick up the cheaper liquor. Then, they would take off with a whole carload. They would go up Mason Street and across over to McDonald and so on out to the country.

I remember hearing the story of one group of six or eight

of them in the car. Here came Booth on the motorcycle. They started throwing liquor bottles out on the sidewalk.

P: So he wouldn't catch them?

W: Yes. They just bought all of that and had to throw it all out.

P: Did you ever have a chance to know any of the mayors?

W: I knew all of them more or less. I knew Crow from way back then.

P: You knew Crow?

W: Yes. He was still around when I first came into town. He was retired in the late 1920's.

P: What kind of man was he?

W: He was absolutely nuts about baseball. That was about the only thing he ever knew. He had been a semi-pro baseball player. He came here riding the rails on a freight train. He played a little here. Several teams in the Mahoning Valley we organized and played each other with large bets placed. He became the mayor, largely because he was so popular as a pitcher.

P: One othe the things that beat him was the Klu:Klux Klan riot.

W: That happened just before I came to Niles. It tore the town apart for years.

P: What did you know of the Klan? Did you ever have a chance to hear anything about them when you came here?

W: I knew about them from home because I remember being out at Buckeye Lake one weekend at a big Klan conclave. I think that in Central Ohio it was similar to Indiana. The Klan was just an underground political party and was not having any real confrontation that occurred here in Niles. A group of outsiders came in to have a parade with their robes on and the hoods pulled down. The local Italian boys decided they weren't going to have it and a serious confrontation occurred. The National Guard was sent in by the governor. I remember my wife talking about how the high school kids were in the habit of walking over to town for a soda or ice cream after school. After the Klan trouble, they weren't even allowed to congregate on the streets. The National Guard would send them right home. It took a long time to get those sores cleaned up.

P: It left some scars for the town?

W: They left a bunch of bad feelings. The worst one was the breach

between the Protestants and the Catholics. Tom Murphy, a newspaper man, was the one who healed that problem more than anyone else. Tom was the one who organized and got cooperation to put on the dinner meetings.

P: Tom Murphy?

W: Yes. Tom used to be a reporter for the Times. Tom was concerned about the friction between groups of people. He went to the clergy of both churches. He got them to get together for a banquet and to invite the top members of their congregations to come and sit together. Tom saw to it that there was a Catholic and then a Methodist and then another Catholic and maybe a Presbyterian, et cetera. He saw to it that everybody was all mixed up so that they could get to be friends instead of acting like a bunch of little children.

P: Where were these dinners held?

W: They held them in different church basements. I remember attending one up at the Christian church basement. They had them there and they alternated back and forth between a Protestant church one year and a Catholic church another year. That healed the old problem more than anything else. It was one of the nicest things that one person did for Niles.

P: Are these dinners still held?

W: Yes, they still have them once a year.

P: What do they call them?

W: Ecumenical dinners.

P: This is why they were started?

W: Yes. Tom Murphy was the organizer of them. He did it on his own. He probably put a lot of his own money into sponsoring the thing in the beginning. It sure did a lot of good.

P: What other scars were there?

W: I think one of the leftovers there were the Italians got put down again. They had been fighting their way up in the beginning to have some better jobs and their kids were beginning to get some education and go away to school. They just got slapped in the face again. Everybody got mad at everybody else. The Welsh on the south side didn't want anything to do with any of the Italians. The English that lived up on the north side . . . The Klanishness produced wide separations at that time. I still have my doubts that there were many local people involved.

P: I understand the Jennings' again were amongst those who led the resistance against the Klan?

W: Yes, right.

P: Did you ever hear of a man named Bree Naples?

W: Yes. He was quite a boxer. He was very good and fought professionally.

P: Was he trained by the Jennings'?

W: Yes.

P: I didn't know he was a boxer.

W: Yes. He was good.

P: I understand that he was one leader that day who helped to resist against the Klan.

W: Yes. He had an awfully short fuse.

P: He did?

W: Yes.

P: Did he become rather influential in town?

W: Not too much. Everybody knew him. Everybody just thought of him as a professional boxer. That didn't give him very much prestige.

P: After the Jennings' faded out, did anyone come in to take their place?

W: I don't know. I was away for three years when a lot of this happened. By the time I got back, everything was so quiet around that there didn't seem to be anything going on. You know how quiet it is with the Jennings Hall now.

Jim's two boys didn't stay in the business. After prohibition was removed, bootlegging was no longer necessary. Both of them were in the soft drink business. They distributed out of Warren.

P: What did Joe do? How did he differ from his brother Jim?

W: Joe didn't seem to . . . He was the younger brother. The older brother was the top man. Joe just followed along and took orders. Later on as prohibition took over, he did the buying and organized his own beer distributing company in Girard. It still exists. Joe is gone now too.

P: Did you know any other police chiefs?

W: Can't remember them at all.

P: How about mayors? Who do you think was the most interesting mayor this town had?

W: I think Carmen DeChristofaro was one of the best. Elmer Fisher did accomplish many things when he was the mayor. Elmer eliminated grade crossings and getting with the railroad built viaducts. Up until that time, the railroad grade crossings were dangerous; someone was killed every two or three years. Elmer worked through the state and with the governor and managed to get some state money up here. It made a real difference. The town was separated by the railroads cutting out across there. They also built the viaduct over to the south side. It was under Elmer that the city was unified. I don't remember who was responsible in council but whoever was in council in those days had to have backed Elmer or he couldn't have accomplished it alone.

P: Do you remember any outstanding crimes or incidents that involved the police department in your years here in Niles?

W: I think the one that there was more talk about than anything else was the time that Marty Flask got shot. That was one everyone talked about for a long time. Chippy just disappeared and nobody knew where he was for years.

P: That is really interesting.

W: I don't remember any other one that seemed to bother people much. It didn't make the headlines.

One of the interesting things is that Niles has always been a city tremendously interested in its sports. The high school team has always been very important to the people. We had a very good playground system. At the time of the Depression, we built the stadium. At the same time, we built the pool out at Waddell during the Depression. I managed the swimming pool out there. I was out there before it opened.

An interesting sidelight on that was that Gus Hall, who is now the top man in the Communist Party, was here in Niles at the time. About every week he managed to get a walk out there among the WPA workers blocking the pool and building the stadium. We were getting awfully disgusted with Gus.

We ended up with a very nice pool at that particular time. It didn't cost the city a cent. That was all federal money to make work.

While I was superintendent, people simply didn't have any

money to do anything. We made the price for a swim very cheap, a nickel and a dime.

I saw to it that at least once a week and sometimes twice a week that we would present some kind of entertainment for the city people.

I had a swim team and I also had a group of very good divers, that we had taught. The people walked because they couldn't afford to buy gas. People walked several miles from up on the other side of Mason and out in Russia Field, all the way to Waddell Park to sit in the bleachers and watch the swim meets and diving shows that we arranged.

P: Which team did you enjoy coaching the most? Which sport?

W: My best sport is track. I had some fair track men here for awhile, but none to match the great ones I had later in Warren. Dominic Match as a sprinter was extremely fast. Years later he was an assistant coach with Joe Bassett.

P: I'll be darned.

W: At the same time, I had a boy by the name of Chester Dugan who was an excellent miler and cross-country runner. He did very well in the state cross-country meets and the mile run in track. Chester Dugan was over six feet tall and Dominic was about 5'5" or 5'6". They used to jog together. They were an odd looking couple because Dominic took about three steps to Chester's one.

Of the other sports, I enjoyed coaching basketball more than football. It didn't make much difference.

P: Did you coach wrestling also?

W: Only as fun. We didn't compete. In physical education, the boys learned a lot of wrestling. We used to have a pool in the old high school building. We had swimming and lifesaving classes there.

P: Where was the pool?

W: It was right behind the gym. They turned it into a storage area eventually. We alternated with the boys and girls using that pool. We had been fortunate. On the girls side, we had a couple of instructors who were excellent swimmers and teachers. Martha Hurlinger was one and Martha Ransdale, who became Martha Madden, was particularly an excellent swim instructor.

When I opened the pool at Waddell, I must have had thirty or forty boys who could have been lifeguards. It was a

difficult job trying to select six or eight of them because there were so many good ones.

You probably remember some of the boys who were guards out there. Chuck Kramer, George Coates, Harry Pierson, Cutty Sheehan, Dick Eaton were guards. We never even came close to having an accident because of close attention to prevention by a good staff.

P: In school you taught physical education?

W: Yes.

P: What else did you teach?

W: That was all. I taught a solid core of physical education. the girls' instructor did the same thing. She had a good physical education program too.

P: When did you retire?

W: I retired in 1976 from Warren.

P: From Warren?

W: I left the Niles school system in 1938. After some additional work, I was at Braceville for two years. Then I came into Warren and spent the rest of my teaching life in Warren. First, I was coaching and teaching science, then I became city director of audio visual education. I eventually added the Northeast Ohio Instructional Film Library, extending the services outside the city.

P: So when you went to Harding in 1940 you taught science and what else?

W: I had been coaching at West Junior High School and then went to Harding coaching cross-country and track. In 1950, I went over into administration.

P: Which was with the film library?

W: Yes. We started an audio visual program.

P: You retired in 1976?

W: Yes.

P: You knew Mr. Blakely?

W: Yes. He was the first colored teacher hired in Warren. He helped solve a lot of problems now and then.

I remember a silly thing one night. At the end of football practice, Snook Campbell, the backfield coach, had read off a list of names of people who were to report back to the stadium at 7:30 that night. There wasn't a black name called. The colored boys got all upset and others were concerned because there weren't any colored boys called. Blakely was one who helped solve the problems with a couple of other people. When they finally stopped long enough to find out what was going on, Snook Campbell had been looking at the movies and he picked out about eight boys who had been making horrible mistakes in the game on the preceeding Friday night. He was inviting those boys to look at themselves and try to get mistakes straightened out. Every one of the colored boys had been playing very good ball. They didn't need to come. That was all there was to it. It was bad there for two or three days. The colored boys were going to strike and weren't going to play on Friday night.

P: In what point of your life did you meet your wife? Was it after you came to Niles?

W: I met her the first fall I was here.

P: How did you get to meet her?

W: A boy on the team said that living on his street were two nice girls that I should know. I met the one girl first and a few nights later or the next week, he took me up and introduced me to my future wife. The amusing thing about it was that we walked up on the porch, he rapped on the door, and she came to answer. He had his head down on his chest, mumbled something or other, and ran. Here we were standing there looking at each other. I don't think either one of us was too sure of the other one's name. We were standing there laughing. That was an auspicious start.

P: How interesting.

W: That was really funny.

P: What was Niles generally like then in 1927 when you came here? Was it a quiet town or a busy town?

W: It was quiet, but the mills were working hard. Everybody in town was delighted to have the sky smoky. Everybody was working when it was smoky. When it was cleared up, everybody was out of work for awhile and it wasn't good.

One of the bad ones that I remember was that "Little Steel" strike. That was a nasty affair. That was the one where the CIO came in and were going to take over the mills and put their union in in the place of the old amalgamated association of steelworkers.

P: Here in Niles?

W: It was nationwide. The CIO was setting up a new union and going to move in across the board and get everybody in one union with the same status for everyone. Whereas the amalgamated had separations for each job level for the fellows that worked on the rolling mill. It was a little different.

They really brought in a bunch of goons with ball bats and rifles to man the picket line.

P: Here in town?

W: Oh, yes. A lot of the executives stayed in with the rollers on. They were dropping food in by airplane. At the Warren mills, they could land right inside. While they were landing and taking off fellows with deer rifles were shooting at the planes. The police department and the sheriff's department paid no attention and looked the other way. They didn't dare.

Things were bad for awhile. I suffered with that a little, because I had the best basketball team that I had during the years that I was in Niles. My team split right down the middle on me. The fact of the matter is that I couldn't even let them all dress in the same locker room. When we went to practice, I put the CIO gang in one locker room and the AFL gang in the other locker room. I put them out on the court together and they wouldn't pass to the other ones. I ended up making two teams. I would play one the one quarter and the other team the next. We just alternated because they wouldn't play together. Any of the fellows whose father was in on supervision or administration at all, the other kids wouldn't have anything to do with them because all of this talk was going on at home. It sure ruined a good basketball team. We had one that was good enough to have gone to state. It was really too bad.

P: Were there any racial problems at that time?

W: No, not at all. The colored people weren't allowed in town. They used to have signs downtown about, "Nigger don't let the sun set on your back in Niles."

P: Where were the signs at?

W: They were chalked up here and there and down there. Some of them were just sheets of paper with stuff written on them. There were no colored people in town. The first colored people in town were the Dixons. The father was a plasterer. They had a boy by the name of Vincent who played an end with us. He was quite good. He became a plasterer later and is still in business. They were the first colored family

in town.

P: Were the colored accepted pretty well?

W: They stayed by themselves. As I said, in those days, they knew their place. They didn't bother anybody. He went ahead and did his work. He was a good plasterer. Some of the contractors preferred him to anybody else because his work was excellent.

W: The father of the family was the plasterer. Then he taught his trade to his son. Then he went on and he was a plasterer.

P: His son was the football player?

W: Yes. Vincent Dickson was his name.

P: He played what?

W: He played an end and he was good.

P: Vince goes on to be a plasterer and it is probably his son that is a policeman today?

W: I think so. Ask him.

P: I will. Is Vince still alive?

W: I don't know. After I came back up and even though we lived here, I was at Braceville and then into Warren. My time was taken up there. I did not have time to be around Niles much. Getting back from meets on Saturdays . . . so for all practical purposes I practically lived in Warren except to come down home to sleep.

P: What year or years would that be that the signs were put up?

W: That would have been way back. That would have been in the late 1920's and early 1930's.

P: Was there a showdown at the swimming pool once concerning black people being admitted to the pool?

W: Mr. Wilder the park commissioner and superintendent got the thing settled finally by offering them some free time. The colored kids could come over mornings and swim free. That was when we were cleaning the pool. By then there were not very many of them in town. I guess that Tabers were here by then. Anyhow, there was just a handful of them. They were out there and helping my boys vacuum the pool and wash down the decks and so on and having themselves a big time helping them work.

P: They enjoyed it? Was a police chief or somebody that told one

of the black people when they were trying to use the pool that if they used it they would be hurt?

W: I don't know. Those were all rumors. You heard rumors but I never heard or saw anything personally.

P: Did you hear any of the rumors?

W: They were passed around a little bit. An awful lot of people were afraid that the black would come off in the water I guess. People get awfully emotional about things.

P: That stuff would not hold for one second today, the sign business et cetera. Who put the signs up, Italians or just the Protestants?

W: I haven't any idea.

P: How ridiculous.

W: For years it was a matter of Niles deciding they weren't going to have any colored people live in town and that was all there was to it. I have no idea where it came from. It was in existence when I came. I can't remember. Young Dixon might be able to remember when his family moved into town. As I remembered, it must have been in the late 1920's. It seemed to me that Vince was playing football shortly after, in the 1930's. If you look on some of those newspapers you would probably pick up that name on some of those line-ups. If I remember, he played with my young brother-in-law. He played some time there in the 1930's. I remember that Al liked Vicnent. He was an awfully nice fellow. He was a gentleman. Also, there isn't anybody much nicer than Louie Taber, the elementary principal.

P: You are right.

W: He is a gentleman.

P: Is there anything else that you would like to include in this that I might have forgotten to ask you?

W: I will probably think of something tomorrow.

P: Let me know if you do. I certainly appreciate the interview. Thank you a great deal.

W: It is a lot of fun to go back and think.

END OF INTERVIEW