

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Shenango Valley Depression Project

Life in the Depression

O. H. 654

EVELYN LEES

Interviewed

by

Marilyn Lees

on

July 22, 1982

## EVELYN LEES

Evelyn Lees was born on May 8, 1905, in Sharon, Pennsylvania, the daughter of George and Clara Swogger. Her parents moved from a rural community in Pennsylvania to Sharon in 1910 and her father worked on the streetcars. Evelyn married Joseph Lees in 1925 and lived in a two-room apartment. Her husband worked as an electrician at Sharon Steel and their first child, William, was born in 1926, and later in 1932 another son, Robert, was born.

During the Depression, her husband only worked two days a week, but Evelyn recalled that they had it better than most people at that time. As a housewife, Evelyn had to watch their money very closely. From her parents garden Evelyn canned many vegetables to help stretch their income. Evelyn believed that raising children at this time was much easier because there were fewer temptations. Also, even though she was a registered Republican, Evelyn voted for Roosevelt because "we needed someone to put us back on our feet again."

Due to ill health Evelyn does not have many outside activities, but continues her career as a housewife.

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INTERVIEWEE: EVELYN LEES

INTERVIEWER: Marilyn Lees

SUBJECT: Franklin D. Roosevelt, Erie gang, raising  
children, prices

DATE: July 22, 1982

ML: This is an interview with Evelyn Lees for the Youngstown State University on the Shenango Valley during the Depression, by Marilyn Lees, at Sharon, Pennsylvania, July 22, 1982, at 6:30 p.m.

First of all, how long have you lived in the Shenango Valley?

EL: All my life, 77 years.

ML: Where did your family live?

EL: Do you mean the whole time I was living here?

ML: Just at first.

EL: My father and mother, they lived out at Bethel, Pennsylvania, and then they came to Sharon. They came here in about 1910. In 1910 they moved to Sharon.

ML: What did your father do for a living?

EL: He was a farmer originally. Then he moved to Sharon to be a streetcar driver.

ML: What is your nationality?

EL: Scotch-German.

ML: What do you remember about your parents and family?

EL: Oh, my mother and dad, all I can remember is that they

were hardworking people. They raised seven children and they all had to walk the chalk line. My dad died in 1934, and my mother in 1950.

ML: Being a newlywed during the Depression, what was it like getting a start?

EL: It was pretty hard. You just lived very commonly, didn't throw any money away. Every penny had to count for itself, but other than that, I guess okay. I guess we didn't know anything else. You just got along the best way you could. It didn't take much to make us happy. Out of little things, trivial things, we got life enjoyment. Of course, then after we started our family, why they were raised a family. They weren't given money to throw away by any means, and they enjoyed life with nothing. They didn't have to have a lot of everything. A small thing would make them both happy.

ML: The first home you lived in you rented, right?

EL: That's right, an apartment.

ML: How many rooms was it?

EL: Two.

ML: Two rooms?

EL: A two-room apartment, a kitchen and bedroom.

ML: What kind of furniture did you have?

EL: Oh, just common furniture.

ML: Did you buy it?

EL: No, it was furnished.

ML: Do you remember how much the rent was?

EL: \$7.50 a week.

ML: Seven dollars and fifty cents?

EL: Seven dollars and fifty cents!

ML: How much was your grocery bill, on an average of a week or month?

EL: For \$5 you got plenty.

ML: Five dollars a week?

- EL: Oh, yes, you could go and have your arms filled for five dollars of groceries.
- ML: As Uncle Joe mentioned, you shopped at the local grocery store.
- EL: Yes, at your neighborhood store. We didn't have supermarkets then, no supermarkets at all.
- ML: What was it like? Was the grocery store big or small?
- EL: No, they were small. They were small, country stores, but they carried everything.
- ML: He had meat, fresh meat?
- EL: Yes, they carried everything in the store that you would need in the home.
- ML: Did he have fresh, farm vegetables?
- EL: Yes, there was everything. They had vegetables, canned goods.
- ML: Were there any shortages at this time, like shortages of meat?
- EL: No, I had everything I can remember. Of course, that wasn't during the Depression, that was after the Depression.
- ML: During the war years?
- EL: During the war, that was when we had shortages.
- ML: Did you have canned goods?
- EL: Yes, but we canned most of our own. We did most of our own canning, making our preserves, things like that.
- ML: Did you have a garden?
- EL: My dad did. Then after he died, then Joe began in the garden. My dad always had a big garden.
- ML: What kinds of things did you grow?
- EL: Potatoes, radishes, squash, tomatoes, cucumbers, cabbage.
- ML: Did everybody share as family members?
- EL: Yes.
- ML: After you lived in your apartment, then you rented a house, correct?

EL: No, we went back home to live with my mother.

ML: How long did you live there?

EL: We lived there until 1933, and then we rented a house.

ML: How much did you pay for rent?

EL: Twelve dollars a month.

ML: Was that considered high at that time?

EL: No, that was just about average.

ML: How many rooms did you have?

EL: Five.

ML: By this time, how many children did you have?

EL: We had two.

ML: What was it like being a mother during the Depression? Compared to now, do you think you had it easier, harder?

EL: No, I think it was easier, because we didn't have the worries that I think mothers have today. Your children, they listened; they obeyed. They stayed near their home; they didn't wander away at all. As they grew older, then they would go out and you would be proud of them. I think this is much easier; then there weren't temptations like today's, out to divert you. I wouldn't want to raise children today. If I could go back to when our boys were little, that's the time I would like to do it.

ML: What was your typical day like? What time did you get up in the morning?

EL: Up at about 6:30 to get Joe out to work. When he would get out to work it would be time to get the boys up for school. Get the boys out to school, then you would start your housework. You would do your washing, and maybe the next day your ironing.

ML: Did you have a washing machine?

EL: No, we had what they call the motor, water motor.

ML: What was that?

EL: That was a wooden machine that had two hoses connected to your waterline in the kitchen. You would turn the water on and that would start your machine, back and

forth, back and forth, and clean your clothes. But many a time when I was growing up I would have to go to the old, galvanized washtub and wash there. I remember many, many times I had to do that. When mother got this water motor, that was the greatest thing on earth! You would put your clothes in there and that machine would go to town.

ML: You thought that it was saving you a lot of time and work?

EL: It was saving a lot of work.

ML: Would you spend a whole day just washing clothes?

EL: No, you would get up early. Then we had to hang them out on the line, out in the yard. You would start your washing; you wouldn't even spend a whole half of a day. Many a times after we got the electric washer I would have two lines of clothes out before 6:30 in the morning.

ML: Before 6:30?

EL: I would get up at 5:00 and get the clothes done, didn't think a thing of it.

ML: After the boys were sent off to school, then what did you do?

EL: Then you would go all around and get your housework done. Of course, we were baking all the time then. We had to have baked goods for the lunches, baked goods for dinner. Every day it was baked goods.

ML: In other words, you had an abundant amount of food, even though it was hard times?

EL: Oh, yes. We always had plenty of food, always.

ML: Do you think this is true of most people, or was it just true of your family because of your garden and so on?

EL: I won't say that everyone was as plentiful as we had, but I don't think anybody went hungry, because things to them . . . there were thrifty people in those days. They didn't have a lot of money, no, but I don't think that they ever went hungry.

ML: Did you have any animals?

EL: No.

ML: No dogs, cats, or cows?

EL: No, you couldn't feed dogs and cats; you kept that all to

yourself.

ML: What did you do with leftovers?

EL: Kept them for the next meal, heated them up. Used up every little bite and crumb.

ML: How much was the electric bill, gas bill, things like that?

EL: Oh, your electric bill back in those days, and your gas bill . . . I wish I had some of those old receipts! They were just the pickings to what they are today. Five, six, oh dear, seven dollars would be a high electric bill.

ML: A month?

EL: A month, oh yes, that would be very high.

ML: How did you heat your house?

EL: Coal furnace.

ML: How did you learn to stretch your money?

EL: I suppose from my mother. Save today, want not tomorrow. Of course, mother was Scotch. It was just drilled into us to save for today because you do not know what tomorrow will bring.

ML: Did you have a banking account or did you just save?

EL: No, we had a savings account.

ML: What were holidays like? Like Christmas, Easter. Since things weren't plentiful, what were holidays like? Today we think of Christmas as having gifts, and buying as many toys as you can for children.

EL: No, Christmas was the day when the whole family was home. That was your brothers and sisters and your own family. But gifts, there weren't many things spent on foolishly. They were small; they wouldn't be toys. Most of it went into clothes. They were the happiest times.

ML: You had more practical gifts then?

EL: Oh, yes. They had to be practical. You couldn't throw your money away on frivolous things, not in those days. Then, of course, after the boys got older they had electric football games, and they had those to play with.



ML: During the Depression, the Christmas was mainly spent with the family. Did you have a big dinner?

EL: Oh, yes. My goodness, yes.

ML: Where did you usually go?

EL: That was always at my mother's. We never went away from home for Christmas. I don't think we ever did go away from home for Christmas.

ML: Did you have a tree?

EL: Oh, yes. We always had a Christmas tree.

ML: Decorations?

EL: Yes, decorating. It was just a big time, decorating the tree. We used to wait until the boys went to bed. That was too much, so then it was trimmed before. They would help trim it.

ML: What kind of food did you have at Christmas?

EL: Always a turkey, and your potatoes, and your sweet potatoes. We didn't have salads like we do today. No heads of salad, but of course your cranberries, your rolls, and your bread, and your desserts. Plum pudding, fruitcake. Oh, the fruitcakes we used to make. When you think back it was just a wonderful, happy day.

ML: Everybody had a stocking?

EL: Yes, and it would have a big orange. That was a great flick, to get that big orange in their stocking. There always had to be a big orange, and then there would be some little toy or something in there. Popcorn balls or some candy in their stockings. Every Christmas their stockings were hung up.

ML: What was the Erie gang?

EL: They were fellows that just didn't work. They hung around the Erie train in the Erie depot, and they didn't work. They used to call them the bums, the Erie bums. They would go around from house to house. One day, one of them came, he wasn't the Erie gang; he stopped down home. Of course, Joe knew him quite well. Joe told him that the potatoes didn't come from the store yet. Of course, Saturday night we always walked uptown. That was a big night, and the town was buzzing with people. Well, here we met him up on State Street. By then he was really torched, and he said, "Have your potatoes come yet, Joe?" That was your Erie gang; they didn't work.

ML: They just rode the railroad?

EL: Yes, and they just bummed their food. They just bummed around feeding their people.

ML: Around how old were they?

EL: Oh dear, they would be men from thirty up.

ML: They weren't any younger?

EL: I can't remember anything younger than that.

ML: They went from house to house asking for food?

EL: Yes they did, sure.

ML: They were alcoholics?

EL: Most of them. They call them that today. In those days, they called them the old drunks.

ML: Did you mother take them in?

EL: Oh, we would take them in and feed them at the kitchen table. When this one came back that night and peeked in the window, no more came in the house. We would take them their lunch and they would sit out on the front steps.

ML: What did unemployed people do at this time?

EL: I guess they stayed around the house, played horseshoes and baseball.

ML: Did you have any brothers that were unemployed?

EL: I had three brothers, but they were very fortunate, very, very fortunate. There wasn't one of them that ever, what you could say, was completely unemployed.

ML: What kind of jobs did they do?

EL: One was a baker; one didn't sell cars then, during the Depression. He was a car salesman, I guess. Henry, he was in Toledo. I think he was sheriff then, up in Toledo, Ohio.

ML: Did you ever think of working yourself at this time?

EL: Well, you couldn't get work as a woman. I worked before we were married. Then, when we were married, why . . . You see, married women in those days didn't work, unless you were a nurse. And of course, schoolteachers in those

days very seldom married way back then. A nurse, she would work after marriage. No, when you married your duty was in the home to take care of your family and your husband.

ML: Getting back to your typical day, after noontime, well, we'll take it even further, when Uncle Joe came home, then you had your dinner around what time?

EL: That would be around 5:00.

ML: And then what happened?

EL: You would get the boys in and get them all washed up, and have your dinner, and have your dinner work done up. Well, then your radio, that was your entertainment. You would listen to your radio, and then usually around 7:00 my dad would go to bed. He didn't care who was there, that was bedtime.

ML: Seven o'clock?

EL: Seven o'clock.

ML: Even in the summertime?

EL: It made no difference, that was bedtime. He was up at 5:00 in the morning; every morning at 5:00 he was up. You would visit. Neighbors would visit back in those days. You would just visit, then come home and go to bed. We didn't have, what you call, pleasure, today, going here and going there. Our pleasure was so different.

ML: Was it more family centered?

EL: Yes, and you were more neighborly. Your neighbors were oh, so neighborly in those days. You really enjoyed being with each other; you really enjoyed it. You didn't have to be out whoopty-whooping and doing what you pleased to have a good time. You could just sit and talk and laugh, and really enjoy it.

ML: What kind of things did you usually talk about with your other neighbors?

EL: You talked about what your children were doing, tell the different things your children would do. If they knew somebody, they would say, "Well, I saw so-and-so," and they could tell you quite a story, who they had seen, and ask you, "Well, do you know so-and-so?" You would say, "No, I don't." They really could talk up a storm.

ML: What was the mood of the people at this time?

EL: I thought we were all happy. We were all happy people. Work or no work we were still happy.

ML: Looking back then, would you consider these to be the good old days?

EL: Yes, in some ways they were the good old days, because you had peace of mind. You could go to bed and not think of every window and door being locked. You never had any fear. I know when my sister and I were young, we didn't have any street lights. It was as dark as eight black cats when we would be out. We wouldn't be a bit afraid to go down the hill to visit our girlfriends. When it was time to come home, if we were down there her mother and Kathy would walk halfway up with us, and if they were at our place, we would do the same, walk halfway down. We weren't a bit afraid of anything in those days.

ML: You said you even fed the railroad bums right in your home.

EL: Yes, we brought them in the kitchen, put them right at the kitchen table. We would have our meal over; we would be out there and they would want something to eat and Mom would say, "Well, come on in!" She would sit them down at the table to eat.

ML: Did you have a telephone?

EL: Oh, yes.

ML: You did?

EL: Yes, we had a telephone.

ML: Did you use it often to call family and friends, and so on?

EL: Well, I tell you we didn't do any long distance telephoning, that's for sure. We were local.

ML: Is there anything else that you would like to add, that you can remember about the 1930's? Yourself at this time, what did you think of Roosevelt and his new programs?

EL: Well, I'll tell you. Roosevelt, I voted for him, every time. One day the Republican party, I was registered to vote Republican, and here they came to the door for me to vote. I said for sure, "Well, what in the world are the Republicans coming here to take me to vote for?"

ML: They came to your house to take you to vote?

EL: Yes, to take me to vote. Why I said, "I voted for Roosevelt." They said, "Yes, but you're a registered Republican." It

didn't dawn on them that I voted for Roosevelt every time.

ML: Why?

EL: Why? I guess because I felt that we needed something to put us back on our feet.

ML: Did he inspire you?

EL: Yes.

ML: Did he give you a feeling of optimism?

EL: Yes, I loved to hear him talk on the radio. I just loved to hear him talk on the radio. He had wonderful ideas. He wasn't in there 24 hours till he closed every bank, to get them back on their feet. Banks were just closing terrific. We had one here in Sharon, Dollar Time & Trust. In Farrell, they had two or three banks that closed in that crash. He went in, and he closed every bank in the country.

ML: Did that scare you?

EL: Well, I don't remember. I suppose it did, but I don't remember. That's what he did. He organized and got them all back on their feet and started them up again.

ML: What kind of changes did the Shenango Valley go through at this time?

EL: You mean during the Depression? Well, I think at that time it stood still. There wasn't much activity in it, because your cities and that didn't have the money.

ML: Do you remember the PWA (Public Works Administration) workers?

EL: I sure do. Yes, I remember that. Those men they put to work. They built sewers, and they built roads. Otherwise, they wouldn't have had anything coming in.

ML: Did people think this was a good idea, or did they think it was too radical?

EL: No, I wouldn't say. I couldn't call it that. I was like a helping hand. They were putting out the helping hand and getting something done that needed to be done. They were getting paid for doing it.

ML: Today people complain because they say we're going through something like a Depression. Do you think today is worse, or is it better?

EL: Today is different than the Depression in the 1930's, because then everything, your cost of living, everything went down to what wages the men were making, where today, it isn't. Your cost of living, instead of going down, it's going higher. The people that are unemployed, they aren't in on the incentives, but just unemployment. They haven't worked long enough to get the incentives. I would think that it would be very, very hard. In fact, we had a man stop here. Joe was in the yard, and he asked if he had anything that he could do, that he would like to earn a little money so the children could have supper. I didn't know about that. If I would have known, I would have given him potatoes, a quart of tomatoes from the basement, and some ground chuck. Joe said that you don't know; you know what we went through before. Well, he wanted to work; that man wanted to work; he didn't ask you to give him a dollar or so. When you hear things like that it certainly must be hard, very hard for people like that. There was a man on television here, talking about the high interest rates. He said, "Well, we never passed through anything like this." He said, "Before, in the last Depression, even your interest fell." I can remember we got 2% interest in the bank. It lowered to 2%. He said that even your interest rates fell. He said that today they're going higher. Really, you can't compare. I wouldn't think it could be compared, because I would say it was much easier in those days than what we're passing through today.

ML: Is there anything that you would like to add, anything else you can remember, or just anything else you want to say?

EL: I can't remember.

ML: What stands out in your mind?

EL: I thought I forced it all out of mind years ago.

ML: You got your soup bones . . .

EL: The butcher would give you soup bones, to get rid of them. They would give you liver and wouldn't charge you; we would get suet. Now, we pay for all of that today.

ML: How often did you have soup? Did you have it a lot?

EL: No, we didn't have it too often.

ML: Did you have meat every day to eat?

EL: No, back in those days, no. We were trying to figure the other day, what did we live on? No, we didn't have meat every day, no. It would be potatoes and vegetables. It would have to be.

ML: Did you make your own bread?

EL: My mother did; I never did. No, mother, she baked. Of course, we had our own pies, cakes, cookies, and things like that.

ML: Did you have a mixer?

EL: Bread mixer? Mother did. She had a bread mixer.

ML: Anything else that you want to add?

EL: Then we could go to the store, and for \$5 we could get a ham, a sack of flour, and 25 pounds of sugar. We would carry that home for \$5. Those were really the cheap days. I can't think of anything else, Marilyn.

ML: What would you do if a member of your family got sick? Did the doctor come to your house?

EL: Oh my goodness, yes. Your doctor came right to the house. He even came to the house when mother passed away in 1950. Oh, yes, he came every time that we saw him.

ML: Do you think doctors were more reliable then?

EL: Of course, doctors today, that is the times. They do everything according to the times. In fact, it was, I didn't realize it then, but I do think it was just a wonderful, contented feeling that you knew when you were ill. You called your doctor and he was there. I know I have thought, well in mother's last illness where the doctor came to the house, we would have had to put her in an ambulance and taken her to the hospital, but no Dr. Radkin came right to the house. That was those days; now this is today. I would like to go back, though, to those kind of days. You call and they come. I would really like to go back to that, but we never will. They would open up their satchel and give you this bottle and that bottle. Even when we were first married, when we would go to Dr. Fiffian's office, he would give us enough medicine for the whole family. Two dollars an office visit.

ML: Two dollars?

EL: Two dollars! He would give medicine for the boys. Joe, at that time, he didn't take medicine. He would give me a bottle of medicine. Oh, yes. Those things, they were wonderful. Still, we didn't have cars to run around in like we do today. You see, it kind of balances even.

ML: Were the horses and buggies still around?

- EL: Of course, because they had the livery stable on North Dock Street. Cars were coming in then. We didn't have a car until about 1934, but we lived on the hill. Cars were coming in, but you know, we did a lot of walking. When we were going to visit a friend's house, we walked. We would take our boys and walk. Everybody did that then.
- ML: Even the doctors would walk?
- EL: Our Dr. Moses would walk. Now, not that he had to, I think he had a car. Dr. Moses, he had a car. He walked even after we moved up here. We would see him with his black satchel.
- ML: Did you have church related activities as entertainment?
- EL: They didn't entertain in the churches back in those days. They didn't. The only thing we had is what we called Christian Endeavor.
- ML: Christian Endeavor?
- EL: That was on Sunday nights before church; that was at 6:30; that was for the young people. We would go to Christian Endeavor at 6:30, and then the night service was at 7:30. They didn't entertain and have things, dinners and things in the church way back then, like they do today. That part was different.
- ML: What church did you go to?
- EL: Presbyterian.
- ML: You had Sunday school in the morning, and then a church service at 11:00. Then everybody went back to church at night?
- EL: Yes. I think we were probably about twelve when we would go to Christian Endeavor. Then we would stay right through the regular church service.
- ML: Okay, thank you very much.
- EL: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW