

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Idora Park

Personal Experience

O H 1395

DR DONNA DeBALSIO

Interviewed

by

Scott Smith

on

November 20, 1990

DR. DONNA DeBLASIO

Dr Donna DeBlasio was born in Youngstown, Ohio on December 11, 1953 She is the only child of Alessio and Clotilda Dilullo DeBlasio. Donna DeBlasio grew up in the Smoky Hollow region of Youngstown. She has been a life long resident of Youngstown She attended St Joseph's Elementary School and Ursuline High School where she graduated from in 1971 She gained her Bachelor of Arts degree from Youngstown State University in 1974 Donna DeBlasio also earned her Master's degree in History from Youngstown State in 1976 Donna then pursued her Doctorate in History at Kent State University, where she graduated from in 1980

Dr DeBlasio is presently supervisor of the Youngstown Steel Museum. She is employed by the Ohio Historical Society, for whom she has worked for the past five years Donna DeBlasio is active in the YWCA Board of Trustees, the Youngstown Rotary, she is president of the Oral History In Ohio Association, and the American Association for State and Local History Dr. DeBlasio is single and enjoys reading, travel and needlework

S This is an interview with Dr Donna DeBlasio for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Idora Park, by Scott Smith, on November 21, 1990, at the Youngstown Steel Museum, 3 00 p m.

Dr DeBlasio, before we start talking about Idora Park, I would like to find out some information about your own personal background, about your childhood and growing up and your education.

D Well, where do you want to start?

S Wherever you feel most comfortable Where are you from?

D I was born in Youngstown in December of 1953 and I grew up in Smoky Hollow My mom is still down there and I lived there most of my life. I went to St Joseph's School which is now a parking lot across from the YWCA Then I graduated from Ursuline High School in 1971 Then I went to YSU where I got my Bachelor's in History in 1974 I had an assistant ship for two years and got my MA in 1976 in History Then I went on to Kent State, they were the teaching fellowship and I had a four year teaching scholarship and I got my PH.D in History in 1980

S So, you have lived in the Youngstown area for a majority of your life

D Yes.

S Did you go to Idora Park when you were young?

D Who out there did not, yes I did I cannot remember how young I was, I recall going there probably around the ages of seven or eight when I was still riding Kiddie Land rides Then going continuously while I was a teenager through college to ride the roller coasters

S Now what do you remember most about Idora Park when you were young?

D It is really funny, the one thing I really remember was the sites and smells The park has its own aroma I do not know if it is the combination of the grease from the French Fries and the stuff they grease the rides with, which may be the same thing, but everyone is a comic There is something about the aroma. I think it is a combination of all those odors, amusement parks have there very own distinct aroma, and I think that is what I really remember as a kid

S I know my favorite thing when I was a kid at Idora Park was the pig and hippo that used to suck up the paper

- D You are young, they did not have that when I was a kid That is a latter innervation if I recall When I was a kid, they were not there. We always went for Italian day. They always had ethnic days My dad did not work in the mills so we did not go out for those company picnics But we always went out on Italian Day and I used to get ticked because I am an only child and I did not have anyone to go on the rides with I had to go by myself and that was okay in Kiddie Land, but to hit the adult rides, the only thing I could drag my mom on was the rockets
- S Do you remember the different concessions and the games?
- D Yes, I like to play the fish thing where you fish, if the fish had a number on it you got a little prize I used to like that one when I was a little kid because it was something the kids could do
- S What rides do you remember the most as a kid?
- D The Kiddie Land I was a roller coaster buff from way back so I liked that. I remembered the little train for kids, the one in the middle of Kiddie Land It had pretty much your typical rides, but I really wanted to go on the adult rides, I did not think that the Kiddie Land rides were as much fun
- S, As you got older, did you go to the Park more often?
- D With my friends, yes What we would do since we were fourteen, fifteen years old and did not drive, we would walk downtown and one of the older brothers would go with us. We would come downtown and take the bus We lived so close to town, so we would walk and we would go about 10 30, 11 00 or whenever the park opened It was around 11 00 or 12 00 We would go early and then stay until 4 00 in the afternoon so it still was not dark, we were still coming home in the light. We would do that when I was a teenager and ride the rides
- S By that time you were able to get up to like the Jack Rabbit and the Wild Cat?
- D Yes, I was on the Jack Rabbit and the Wild Cat by that point
- S When I talk to people about the Wild Cat, they always say that that is probably the best roller coaster they have ever been on regardless of whether they have been to Cedar Point or Kings Island What do you remember the most about the Wild Cat?
- D It was my first ride I was in high school when one of my friends shamed me into it She is now in California. She said, "Look at all those little kids riding that." And I did it and we went on. We were at the top of the big hill and my friend looks over and says, "Hey, you can see Youngstown State from here!" I said, "What do you mean?" After that the

ride was over and I said, "When do we go back on?" So we immediately went on it again. This is the person she had to practically drag, kicking and screaming I will never forget that comment, you can see the University from here

S Did you ever ride in the back or the front of the cars?

D Only on the Jack Rabbit, I never got adventurous enough to do that on the Wild Cat, I always tried to pick up the middle

S It always gave you that feeling that you were going to ride right off the coaster or you got whipped around if you were in the back Do you remember the Tunnel Of Love or The Lost River?

D Yes, that was pretty popular ride We used to go there when I was in eighth grade, I remember going for our class picnic I liked getting wet when it was 95 degrees, that really did give you a rush

S Did you even go to any social functions there as far as to listen to bands or dances?

D I remember going to see Bobby Sherman, I go back a ways, I must of been sixteen or seventeen Dick Clark was there and some of the rock groups from the seventies were out there to

S Were the turn outs pretty good?

D Yes, they were crowded They could get so many thousands in that ballroom It was the largest dance floor in the country

S They played in the ballroom?

D Yes

S As you got older and went to college and everything, did you continue to go to Idora Park?

D Not as often, obviously I was not in town We started going to Geauga Lake and Cedar Point, too. But I lived in Kent when I was in my graduate program, so Geauga Lake was a short trip for us to go up there

S How important do you think it was socially?

D Very important, everybody used to go there Even before my time it was the social place to go A long time ago in the thirties and forties, they had movies. It was a pretty cheap

date to go to Idora Park because you could just walk around, you did not have to pay anything if you did not want to. Then they had all the bands, and it was really a wonderful place to go.

S Do you think that the park was that significant to Youngstown?

D I think so. A lot of people have many fond memories of the place. Almost anybody I have spoken to or known, relatives, family, and some of my parent's friends, they all went. My mom said she used to go as a kid. They picked up the trolley or the bus and then went out to the park.

S I know they were called trolley parks and from what I have researched, Idora Park is the longest lasting trolley park in the United States. Kennywood was at one time a trolley park in Pennsylvania. Why do you think it lasted so long? What do you think made it so unique that it lasted for as long as it did?

D I do not know if it was the longest, there is one over in Allentown, Pennsylvania. I think they have a roller coaster over there. I do not know how it stood the Depression, a lot of parks closed. Maybe because it was the only park in the area, like in Cleveland, they put Beechwood through some rough times though they made it to the sixties. There were so many other parks, I do not know how Idora did it, maybe because there really was not anything else around. That could be it. It was cheap to go there and it was relatively inexpensive to up keep compared to some of these bigger parks now.

S With your own personal background, when did you return to the Youngstown area on a full time basis?

D 1982

S So in 1984 when the Wild Cat burned down, you were in Youngstown. Did you have any opinion about that?

D I was depressed for about a week, I felt really bad.

S Felt like you kind of lost a best friend.

D You do. It is part of your childhood and youth and it is now gone. It makes me feel ancient. It makes me feel sad because something that I really looked forward to going to is now gone, especially the beautiful Carousal, good thing it was not destroyed but it is gone now.

S It is kind of sad now to go to the park because a lot of the stuff is still there like the concession stands. It is like watching one of those Western movies where you see the

deserted town

D Yes, you will see a little of Idora here too We got the sign that was at the Parkview entrance, the small sign not the big one, the one that was on the other side of the park, Ohio Historical has retained it and we are going to be using that

S Do you come in contact with the subject of Idora Park or Idora Park memorabilia?

D We have some I would like to see more of it, that it is not our primary collecting goal It was real interesting, for example, we have these working models of finishing mills and the Sheet and Tube always held there company picnics out there too, so did the Union later on, the Steel Workers Union, well a lot of unions did I was reading in the Youngstown Sheet and Tube Bulletin from 1939, an article on there picnic that they have there on Labor Day I do not know if you saw it, but there was a photo from the Labor Day in 1939 In the article they were talking about this model of the 1979 Hot Strip Mill which was in Campbell We are not talking just sitting on the table, this thing was 31 feet long, and weighed about four tons They have that thing out at Idora Park on display I thought it was in the ballroom but it was not It was in the midway It is really huge

S Is out of metal?

D Yes, well it was out of lead A piece of steel goes through the hot strip and comes out as a sheet in the end, maybe an inch to scale Anyway, they brought this thing with them to Idora Park to show all their employees there neat technology that they had

S Did a lot of the unions and the steel mills make a lot of use out of Idora Park?

D They held their company picnics there every year I remember going with friends of mine whose fathers belonged to the Steel Worker's Union and he was free

S Socially, you feel that Idora Park was very important to the Youngstown community Do you think there was any chance that Idora Park could have stayed open after the Wild Cat burned down?

D No, that was depression The thing with the Carousel was they would have had to rebuild that thing It would have taken millions of dollars to rebuild the Wild Cat, that is a shame that it was gone. The park is not in a great location, I do not necessarily mean the neighborhood. It was not near a major highway You need to be accessible in order to market it I think it was a little too difficult to find from one of the Interstates for people from out of town, not so much people in town I think that was a problem for them

S I know in 1983 they put the park up for sale When we talk about the park going up for sale and its closing and everything, do you think a lot of the reason the park fell on

economic hard times was due to the hard times experienced by the whole Mahoning County with the Steel Mills?

- D Yes, I think that is true, but they are also getting more competition from Geauga Lake, Kennywood, King's Island, Cedar Point, and Disney World you know I rode the Magnum 2000, the metal roller coaster and it was alright, but the real roller coasters are made out of wood And if you look at it in this sense, places are much larger and they have been cleaned up too Idora was very much a traditional trolley park You could not eat off the floor like you can at Disney World There is something very antiseptic and yes it is nice and it has this high tech stuff and they would charge you \$30 to get in there whatever it is and of course you cannot see everything in one day so you spend \$100 so you can go for four days just so you can see everything They were clean and that was nice, and they are very wholesome. They just do not have that flavor of the old like the Coney Island type of park, or some of those other parks I think Conneaut is about as close as you can get That is an old park too, that goes back to the turn of the century
- S I was at Conneaut last summer, it was easy to draw a parallel between Idora and Conneaut When I interviewed George Nelson, he would like to see a section of Idora Park reopen, but not the whole park. For a section of the park to be set aside and maybe a monument or something built to commemorate Idora Park and significance since it was built in 1898, to almost celebrate the significance of Idora Park in the Youngstown area What is your opinion on that?
- D It would be a nice idea if you could do it I do not know what you would do with it I do not know if he has been out there lately Nothing is in real good shape The thing to save would be the Jack Rabbit It has been going on six years now since it has been used
- S It is probably real brittle
- D It has not been taken care of in six years I think it is a nice idea, but you would almost have to rebuild the ride just to make it safe I am not too sure I would want to ride that thing, even after they refurbished it I noticed when I was over taking the sign, probably in April, it was not in great shape You could see wood missing and it was real heart breaking to go out there It is a nice idea if they could do it
- S I think the last time I was there was when WHOT was having there half off sale and I was just shocked It is really different to go in there like I said You would go in there You could almost close your eyes and see everything and the sounds
- D The same ride smell was there It still had a musty, greasy smell
- S What did you think when you saw the park all closed up?

D You are right, though. If you close your eyes and if you have a good imagination, you could picture it still hearing the sounds and the ride smells. It is very sad especially when you are a Historian by trade. It gives you a weird sense of history to see it like that. I have a feeling it is going to be overgrown in a couple of years and there will be archeologists digging it up in other centuries saying, "Oh, I wonder what was here?"

S What made the park special to you?

D It was familiar and it was a place where you could have a good time. You could go there and forget everything else, it was just a lot of fun to be there.

S What ride, event, or concession, do you remember the most?

D: That is tough. I was always fond of both of the two good roller coasters and the Carousel was just so beautiful, just gorgeous especially since they refurbished it in 1975. It is real tough to say. Of course, you cannot miss the French Fries. It is no trip to Idora Park unless you got those incredibly greasy French Fries with lots of vinegar on them, and nobody has ever been able to recreate those things.

S I do not know if this is true or not, but someone told me in one of my interviews that Idora Park made the first French Fries ever. I do not know if that was true or not, that person also told me that was where they made the first ice cream cone.

D: Do not believe everything you hear. That was St. Louis. The Louisiana Purchase Expedition in 1903, I think it was there.

S Also, he told me some story about some guy trying to rob Idora Park who had fallen off a cliff is still living.

D There are no cliffs.

S He was running through the park and he fell off of a cliff and lived.

D There are not a whole lot of cliffs in that park, as I can recall. Maybe the top of the Wild Cat, but of course you probably got all those stories about how many people died on the rides. Actually, they had a good reputation. Most amusement parks, surprisingly, have a good record. They are very conscious about safety and they have to be to keep their insurance rates down. If I am not mistaken, the only people that have died on the Wild Cat were those idiots who stand up. You should have figured, if you are stupid enough to do that despite all the warnings, perhaps you got exactly what you deserved, not that I would wish that on anyone. Parks like that have a remarkable safety record and I do not think people really appreciate what they go through. It was a reputable place for people to come as long as they were and it had to be. People are not going to come. You get a bad

reputation and people will not come and they came and came and came

S I think the only two accidents I have heard so far was somebody drowning when they used to have their swimming pool and then they had the big airplane thing on the tables, one of those broke off and went into the park

D I knew about the drowning It was two girls and they were from the Hollow It was about in 1945 that they drown They used that as an excuse to close the pool

S Why do you think they closed the pool?

D Racism Blacks were coming back from WWII saying, "Hey, we fought and died for this country," and they were pretty demanding to use the facility They were right about that They were tax paying citizens and they had every right to use it Apparently, too many were blacks were going to the management saying they did not like it and this is all hearsay, I have no proof That could be some of it I do not want to say management was horrible and they were racist and everything, but that maybe some of it That is what people have said and I am just repeating what I have heard

S Another opinion that has been offered to me as far as a racial issue, was one of the people that I interviewed thought that about the idea that the downfall with Idora Park came when they changed their attitude with letting people in the park It used to be you paid for the rides and everything, you could pay the price for a really cheap ticket and could stay there all day And the attitude was that they brought in a lower class group of people that went to the park and hung out all day and scared everybody else Do you think there could be any truth in that?

D That is why they started doing that You could just go and hang out at the park for free That is what I have heard Also, that was the trend in the seventies, like Geauga Lake and Cedar Point, you paid one price and stayed all day, that was a trend. At any rate, I pretty much understand that that was pretty much a change in policy of other parks too, like I say it is hearsay, I do not know, that is what I heard as to why they started doing that

S Do you think with the changing in policies, that is the same reason that they changed their Jack Rabbit to the Back Rabbit?

D Yes, anything to make a buck. Trying to do something different, I think that was part of it A part of the problem I think was with the Duffey Family Mr Duffey was not well He had a bad heart and of course he passed away a few years ago of a heart attack I do not think he was in it to really market that place, fix it up and market it like it could have been Also, you need money to do that I had no idea what the financial situation was, and that is kind of a shame Someone who had the money and the energy could really have done a lot with it

S So that was probably the biggest problem. The park would have closed regardless of the Wild Cat burning down?

D I do not know. Like I said, I have not seen their books. If they were losing money, yes I think they would have closed it down anyway.

S It was up for sale two years before that happened.

D Yes, for a million dollars, you could buy an amusement park, and that is pretty cheap. It was always fairly well kept. It was not dirty. It was not perfect, but it was not filthy. The rides were always well maintained. I think that was the most important thing, to keep them up, try to keep the park nice as best they could. It is just a shame that what had to happen, happened.

S Before we close this interview, are there any other comments you would like to make or anything else you would like to say about Idora Park or the Youngstown area and its association with Idora Park?

D No, not really. I think that you could talk to a lot of people that have gone there, that went there longer than I went there, they could tell you about the earlier days that I did not know about.

S They used to have chimps.

D Monkeys. They did not have chimps. Yes, they kept them in a cage by the bumping cars. That was always a good ride to have your teeth jarred out of you. Those were before my time. The pool was before my time. By the time I was a kid, we had Kiddie Land, so it was long gone.

S Did they have beer gardens when you were there, where they served the beer or maybe it is under a different name?

D Yes, they kept changing the name. They always had a place like that. They apparently had a liquor license. Most amusement parks serve beer nowadays. I do not think that changed a whole lot. They did have a theater there at one time, but that was long gone. They had Lillian Desmond back in the twenties. She was a stage actress, she came here and did a lot at the theater in the park and apparently she and some doctor were an item as they say back in that period, he hid his girlfriend so to speak. She came here frequently to perform and that is why. And if you look there are some newspaper articles about Ms Desmond, like in the late twenties when she appeared. A lot of people have mentioned her too when I have talked to them.

S Did you run into any sports activities?

D I remember there being softball games and of course they had all kinds of other games when people had their company picnics I think they did hold some of that softball stuff out there

S That is a big story right now, I guess they still use the field

D Oh, they still use it?

S Yes, I think it is where the Jack Rabbit is?

D Yes, it is right next to it It has always been there as far as I can remember

S Well, I thank you very much

End of Interview