

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Idora Park

Personal Experience

O H 1396

GEORGE NELSON

Interviewed

by

Scott Smith

on

October 16, 1990

GEORGE NELSON

George Nelson was born February 24, 1964 at St Elizabeth Hospital in Youngstown, Ohio. George's parents, Richard and Joan, had been life long residents of Youngstown. George has spent his whole life in the Youngstown area. George is the youngest member of a family of six. Mr Nelson attended both St Patrick's School (grades 1 through 8) and Cardinal Mooney High School (grades 9 through 12) for his primary education. George received his Bachelor of Arts degree from the Youngstown State University in Journalism in August of 1988. While at Youngstown State University, George was actively involved with both the Jambar (the school newspaper) and the Neon (the school yearbook).

While in school George worked at Youngstown's Idora Park. George worked seasonally at the park from the summer before his senior year in high school up until the summer of 1983. George mainly worked at the game stand found in the park. The one game that George worked at the most was the dart game found near the carousel. After the closing of the park at the end of the summer of 1984, George took particular interest in the park's history. Mr Nelson wrote several feature articles for the school newspaper, the Jambar, concerning the park and its historic importance to the Youngstown community. Included in these articles was one of the last interviews with former Idora Park president, Patrick Duffy.

Today George Nelson works as the Associate Editor of the Youngstown Warren Business Journal. George also assists in editing The Columbiana County Business Journal. Mr Nelson's job requires him to edit the work of the journal's employees. George also does a great deal of reporting himself. George specializes in the fields of

economic and new business development in the Mahoning and Trumbull Counties. Mr Nelson enjoys his work, he finds it both challenging and interesting

George Nelson is presently single He is a member of Saint Patrick's church. Mr Nelson is involved with several local organizations including the Western Reserve Public Relations Society and the Youngstown Press Club For hobbies, George cites reading, attending the theater, art and photography.

S This is an interview with George Nelson for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Idora Park, by Scott Smith, at YSU Student Government Office, on October 16, 1990, at 5 30 p m

Mr. Nelson, first of all, would you like to give us a little background history on yourself, your education background and what you are doing today, presently

N My name is George M Nelson I am a native Youngstown I was born here, I grew up here, I am 26 years old Currently, I am an associate editor at the Youngstown-Warren Business Journal, published by the Youngstown Publishing Company I also help edit the Columbiana County Business Journal Basically, what I do is normal editorial tasks, as far as overseeing other reporters' work, and I also do a fair amount of writing myself, primarily in the area of economic development and new business development in the area. I graduated from Youngstown State University in 1988 after going here for about six years, part of that part time Prior to that, I graduated from Cardinal Mooney High School, class of 1982 and St Patrick's Elementary School I come from a family of six children I still remain fairly close with my parents and my immediate family

S So you were around during a lot of Idora Park's heyday You were around when Idora Park was still really in full operation Do you have a lot of memories from your childhood of Idora Park?

N Oh, yes The best memories of Idora Park. Every year the Catholic School System used to have what they called Parochial School Day It was usually the last day of classes for the Parochial Schools and we used to buy admittance tickets in advance through the school Basically, it was kind of a final fling for all the kids that went to school together because a lot of the students did not see each other during the summer I know I did not have much contact with most of the people in my classes that were from my grade school over the summer, other than the people who served as altar boys, or occasionally running into people

S So do you remember all the rides and the concession stands? What kind of memories do you have, as far as the rides when you were young? Were there rides that you were afraid of? Were there certain concessions that you would like to buy? Were there certain games that you would like to play?

N I remember, this was pretty early, I was afraid of the Wildcat, initially I did not really care much for the Wildcat, but after the first time I rode it, I had a good time, you could not get me off I remember my first Parochial School Day as a student My family was real tight with the school that I went to I got to know a lot of the teachers there So my first grade teacher and I ended up spending a lot of time together that day It was fun riding some of the rides with her before we left for the summer

- S Do you have memories of other rides? From my own memories, they had the cars and you could drive and you would actually feel like you were driving a car. When I was a little kid, that was great.
- N The race cars. I loved those race cars. Are we talking about those ones in Kiddie Land?
- S Yes.
- N Yes. I used to like those a lot, and the Mini Kiddie Jackrabbit, the miniature roller coaster they had. I used to like riding that a lot.
- S I know that was probably one of my personal favorites. I also liked the fun house and things like that. Were there foods? Some people are french fry nuts.
- N I am one of them. I loved Idora Park's french fries. This is more prominently in later years. There will never be french fries like those. Though, the ones they are serving downtown at the hamburger stand in the Phar Mor Center now, that makes fries the same way, kind of greasy. I will usually grab a bag of those a couple times a week.
- S As you got older, what other memories did you develop as you went up through high school, even seventh and eighth grade? Did you go to Idora Park more when you got older?
- N Not until I started working there, actually. Because still even in high school, the summer after my first year of high school was really the only opportunity I had to go there with my high school buddies, but not as an employee. Since I went to a Catholic high school, we all talked about getting together for Parochial Day then, too. A bunch of us got together, as teenagers do, and ran around the whole park. Most of the fun was just being together and goofing off, rather than when you are younger, going on the rides.
- S So Parochial Day ran from first grade to twelfth grade? Was that an all-encompassing day for Idora Park? Or was that just for certain age groups?
- N I would say it probably fell off once you got into tenth grade. The freshmen from high school were still so used to going, then I think after that, you tend to fall off. Keep in mind that a lot of the kids were probably taking younger brothers and sisters, too.
- S So you think that even at a younger age, Idora Park could have been said to have been very influential to the younger generation?
- N Absolutely. I do not know if I would say influential, but it set a pattern and I think

it was a nice pattern that you would just go and have a good time. There were not that many incidences of trouble. You did not have any real rival between the grade schools. I do not think they really much cared.

S You said that you worked there. What type of work did you do?

N I worked in games. I ran one of the games on the upper end of the park, right across from the french fry stand, which was very convenient.

S You did not plan that, did you?

N No. Originally they put me at a dart game lower in the mid-way my first year.

S I know a lot of the times, the carnivals that travel around, were the games fixed?

N No, they were on the up and up.

S Did you do any other games besides the darts?

N Well, I was moved up, within a couple of weeks, to a game over by the french fry stand. Actually right next to the hot dog on a stick booth. This was a game set up, originally, it was called, "Catch Speedy Gonzales". What they did was, they had an array of cup cake tins and in probably one in every seven or eight, they had one of the tins colored with a red or black dot. What you tried to do was toss these waffle balls so that they would land in the colored hole and you would get a prize. I worked there, pretty much, for the rest of the time I was at Idora Park.

S That was the job you worked at, even into college?

N Yes.

S I know from speaking to another person who worked at Idora Park, he said that you guys had the run of the park. It was like one big happy family. Would you like to comment on that?

N I think very much there was a spirit of family there. I think the best example of that is how Mr. Duffy, on weekends, usually after Sunday night, after we were closed -- the park was not opened on Monday's so there was not a real problem with staying up late -- a lot of the times, he would turn on the lights in the ball field and we would get up baseball games under the lights.

S So there was a real sense of comradery there.

N Yes. Absolutely.

- S How about with W-HOT, it was called the Wild Thing?
- N I do not know W-HOT had a couple things over the years, and I think that kind of died down in later years
- S I know after the problem came up in 1984, when the Wildcat burned down, W-HOT still had their "Wild thing," but things just never seemed to catch on after that Even afterwards, W-HOT used to have the sales down in the ballroom and it was just kind of sad to drive past and not to see anything What are your fondest memories of working there? The people you have met?
- N I met people that I still see There is a kinship there That sense of family that I talked about before There are a couple guys I know that used to run the Wildcat, and every once in a while when I am out at night, I will run into them and we will just kick back and talk about old times at the park
- S. What made the park so special as you got older? What events, or type of things, made the park so special? I know with myself, I was always amazed -- it did not matter how old I was -- at the hippo and it sucked up paper
- N The hippo and the pig
- S Yes They sucked up paper I did not care. I was in college and I could go to Idora Park and the hippo would suck up paper and I just thought it was the neatest thing What do you remember as you got older?
- N I remember there were really slow days When I originally worked there when I first started, we worked from Tuesday through Sunday Tuesday and Wednesday, to be kind, were pretty weak days for the park There was nothing to do No one was coming around, let alone people coming up spending money to play games I would say, probably, we took slightly longer breaks than we were supposed to, either riding the bumper cars or the Wildcat The Wildcat was always a big draw On days off, employees were allowed to come and use the park facilities, too They gave us this special pass The arcade, too, I do not even want to think about how much money of mine went into that arcade
- S How about that arcade they had in the white building Some of those machines had to have been about three hundred years old
- N You are thinking of the ones down in the Heidelberg
- S It was in a white building and they had the old, old games there They had the one machine, it was like a sheriffs badge and you could stamp messages on it
- N That was in the main arcade building That was not white building though You

are thinking of the other one over where the restaurant was

S Yes That is it

N They both had pretty old games

S They seemed to be stocked with old toys and old everything

N This gets a little off the subject This goes back to childhood memories I remember I played one of those games where the arm would knock something down, a hole, and once when I played it, I got this real old camera, like a box-type camera and one of those little guns that shoots a bang flag I thought this was just the greatest thing I was ecstatic

S Those are, I think, definitely the memories of Idora Park that you just cannot replace It is kind of sad I know, we will talk about a little later on, the things that you cannot replace with Idora Park.

N Getting back to the more current memories, there was this other kid, Russ Hardy, a guy I had gone to school with He was a year older than I was but we were both basically the two best video game players in the park So, every once in a while, we would have a little face off He was real hot on Asteroids and Centipede and those You could not beat me on Galaxian or Galaga The other guys that would gather around, we would start going at each other with the video games.

S Were you much into the rides?

N Oh, yes. In fact, since I was kind of off the mid-way there was not as much pressure on me to stay open late Unless it was a real big or busy day, I would usually close my stand about a half hour before the others They would come and take the money Those of us who got off early, we would run down to the Wildcat and just ride it until the end of the night

S Let me hit you with some names and see what thoughts you have How about the Lost River?

N The Lost River. I remember every once in a while the guys, if they knew someone who was coming through, they would rig something extra to scare them

S I know we used to do this where we would reach up and grab a piece of timber and stop your boat and wait for someone to hit you and stuff

N We never did that I remember once, the guy who I helped get a job there, he

was hired on my recommendation, when we were riding the Jackrabbit, he went and grabbed one of the flags and one of our bosses saw him and took away his ride privilege card. So we would still go and ride the rides. No one understands this, but I have always enjoyed the Spider from when I was a kid to when I was older.

S How about the Jackrabbit?

N The Jackrabbit was a slower version of the Wildcat. The Wildcat was okay, but the Jackrabbit was a little bit more uncertain. You would feel the bumps a little more. So it was fun in its own way.

S How about the big star of the whole group, the Wildcat?

N That was basically what most people came to do, what most people came to ride. The Hooterville Highway. That was another thing. At night we used to start those up, too, after work every once in a while.

S Did you have races?

N Well, it was tough to race those cars.

S Did you used to get behind people and bump them and stuff?

N No. What was bad was we used to get on the bumper cars and we would just sandwich people, or we would stop, we would lift our foot off the gas then intentionally get rammed.

S Did you ever play putt-putt on the golf course up there?

N Yes. Every once in a while we would get a game of miniature golf going in the afternoon.

S Do you know that they played minor league baseball there in the 1940's? They housed several different minor league teams in the 1940's.

N I think I heard that.

S It was other things that the park offered.

N Did you know that the ballroom was originally a skating rink?

S Oh, I did not know that.

N And where they had the Turtle area, there used to be a swimming pool.

- S Now the Turtles were by the Lost River Ride You talked about your ride being more the Spider ride, my ride was more the Turtle That was my favorite ride out of any of them. I could go on the Turtle continuously
- N What we used to do in high school, we would switch around on the seats which, of course, pissed off the ride operators because we were not supposed to be doing that I remember that real clear from high school
- S As we continue looking into Idora Park, as you got older, did you see the park start to decline, as far as the upkeep?
- N I felt maintenance was kept fairly consistent
- S: I know the park also changed the policy, as far as tickets
- N Well, that was before I started working there Though they still did sell some admission, just basic admission, and then you could buy ride tickets if you wanted them It was before I had started working there that they had gone to the ride pass
- S Did you think that was a good move or a bad move? Do you think it affected them?
- N I think, in considering how the rest of the theme parks got into the single ride pass for the day, I think you almost had to
- S. I know, because people who I have talked to have pointed to as a problem, they said that it would bring in a crowd of undesirables who would just hang out in the park all day long Do you think by changing that policy and letting in the "undesirables" that affected the amount of people that went to the park?
- N It might have. I think there was probably more of a problem when they cut the all day ride admission on Thursday and Friday, and then I think there was more of a problem with having people just coming in and hanging out and getting into trouble, and causing problems
- S Do you think, if the park was still open, would it have been able to compete with the Cedar Points, the Sea Worlds, parks like that?
- N You mean with the Wildcat in tact?
- S Yes
- N I think it probably would have been able to somehow I am not sure under that ownership I think you would have had to have had a more extensive capitol

infusion I think the problem Idora had at the time was that it really could not expand because it was centered right by Mill Creek Park The park was not going to sell its property. Over towards Canfield Road, it is very residential and it is a nice neighborhood and people liked living there. It is tough to say I would like to believe that it would have, that you could still get people to come within the area just because of the uniqueness and the history of the park

S Along with that, do you know where you were when the Wildcat burned down?

N When I found out, I was in the Jambar Office.

S I remember What was your reaction?

N I could not believe it People told me and I was in shock. I remember working on the paper that day and I found out over the radio.

S What were your emotions? What did you think?

N I do not know It was almost like hearing that a friend of yours got hurt really badly I am not going to sit here and equate the burning down of the Wildcat to anyone's death, but it was still a shock because the Wildcat was always there when I was growing up and you just never think about what would happen

S Yes. I remember your reaction. I remember your writing in the paper after

N I got harassed pretty bad around the offices, especially by my friend Chris Shirley, her name is now She was getting sick of reading about Idora Park. I said, "Too bad, I am doing the feature article" So I devoted my next available feature page on Idora park I remember going out to the park that next weekend and doing some photos

S What did you think the first time you saw the Wildcat all burned down? What did you think? What kind of thoughts entered your mind?

N It was really hard to say. I guess I was just kind of awestruck But even more so, I remember even more clearly the amount of other people coming People making pilgrimages, almost like they were going to calling hours at a funeral home They just could not believe it I remember I did two stories that next issue about the park Then I wrote a commentary, then, later on, after the park closed I guess it was ironic and appropriate at the same time that Pat Duffy, the principal owner, died I did an editorial on that That was the toughest piece I think I have ever written I think I am surprised at how deep down I reached for that one, but it was the toughest thing I think I have ever done

S But you went and worked for them next year

N That was probably my story in the Neon. I just had a really lousy night and I came home and there was this card waiting for me from Mrs. Duffy, and Pat, Jr.'s wife and she had written how touch she was by the editorial and she was having copies made on plate and wood for each of her children. That really touched me. I guess that kind of reminded me why I decided to get into this business.

S What type of man was Mr. Duffy?

N As bosses go, he was pretty good. Obviously, he wanted you to be there and work. If we would get a little out of hand goofing off, he would let us know it. Let us face it. Any guy who is going to go to the expense of lighting up his ballpark in the back of the park, he is not making any money off of it, and we would stay there until like one and two o'clock in the morning playing ball and stuff. I think he tended to regard us as family as much as we regarded each other. As I got older, of course, a bunch of us would get together after work and knock down a couple brews and one of my buddies was in maintenance so we would go down to the shop at night, and Mr. Duffy would come down and join us a lot of the time for the old guard.

S Really, you can get a strong sense of the family just by talking to you and how you felt about the job. How do you feel Idora park affected the Youngstown community while open. How do you think economically, and even more so, on the social level, because I know they sponsored concerts and they sponsored a lot of events.

N Unfortunately, I think Idora park in later years suffered. I guess it fell into what I call New York Syndrome. You go to New York and there is the Empire State building and the Statue of Liberty, but how many New Yorkers are there that have not gone -- people who actually live in Manhattan -- to see any of the wonders that are available there. In later years, I think that probably became the case with a lot of people in Youngstown and Idora Park. They were just so used to it being there you would just kind of blow it off and say, "We could go anytime." It was no big deal. I think when it was open, people who used it really appreciated it. Yeah, it was not Cedar Point, but for one thing it was local. You did not have to drive an hour and a half- two hours to enjoy the rides and stuff.

S Do you think it made the Youngstown community really unique to have Idora Park?

N Yes. There were not that many. There are not now. The multi billion dollar theme parks have taken over. While I love being able to go on the Corkscrew and get into some really perilous rides, I think it is kind of a shame that we have gotten away from the smaller, more intimate, community parks.

S We have sort of technologically taken ourselves out of a lot of the things that

make America America

N I guess I thought about Idora Park a lot during the recent attempt to dissolve the Mill Creek Metropolitan park district because I had already been a first hand eye-witness to what can happen when a community asset falls into neglect by its community, as it is damaged, as Idora was by the fire; and the thought of potentially dismantling the park district I was envisioning late glacier estates, I guess There was no way in hell that I wanted to see that happen

S When the park closed, how do you think the closing affected the community since its close?

N I think, initially, it was like a sucker punch. You know, when you are walking out the door With the burning down of the Wildcat, people realized, "well, this is probably it," obviously because they stopped coming But once they heard it, that there was not going to be any more Idora Park, I think it had tremendous impact People realized, I think, that this was really it We will never be able to go to this park again There will be no turning back. That last day, we had tons of people there It was probably on par, content-wise, with Packard Electric Day You have to understand Idora used to rent itself out to various companies for their picnics We would have Packard Electric Day and Teamster Day, for example Teamster Day was a really big day It was usually the day before Labor Day We worked from about -- One Teamster Day -- from 9 00 in the morning until 10 30 at night because these people made tons of money and they were willing to blow it, they did not care. Boy, some of the offers I used to get for stuffed animals was unreal

S People would just offer you money for stuffed animals?

N Yes They did not want to win it I watched guys just toss down \$20's, "We are going to play this out " or they would say, "How much do you want for a stuffed animal?"

S What did you say?

N Every once in a while I would get tempted I turned down offers for \$100 for animals and on the other hand, with this one guy who had three children with him and he managed to win one -- you know what it is like around kids -- and I said, "Give me \$5 and here are two more Get outta here "

S How much did they pay for them?

N I do not know

S They could not have been that expensive

- N: No But what was funnier was, how should I say, the non-money offers I would always get
- S: You turned those down, too?
- N: There was some strange women down there Yes, I actually did turn those down I was pretty shy in those days Besides, you never knew where some of these girls had been
- S: Did you meet a lot of people, socially, coming to the park back then?
- N: Yes You would have your regulars who would come back and talk to you There were people who would be there every day I am not kidding you.
- S: Kids?
- N: Adults
- S: So the park gave them a place to go everyday, basically?
- N: Yes
- S: That is one of the things I look at the park as being I do not know if you feel the same way, but I felt that the park became a place where kids could go I think by losing the park, they lost a real good place for kids to go Do you think that affects the community as far as crime-wise?
- N: No that really is not I am not really of the school of social thought that "Well, every crime is because we have not done enough for our kids" You have to get down to social responsibility You have got to say, "Look, people are brought up, they know what choices they need to make in society". On the other hand, I think that not having things like Idora Park, you are taking opportunity away from them, which I think is regrettable I think that could be part of the problem That could be why we have had increasingly violent summers, or it could be a factor
- S: Do you think, economically, it brought in people to the community, do you think it has economically adversely affected the community?
- N: I think for the most part, it was Mahoning Valley people, it is amazing, in the last couple years have become more conscious of that It was mostly, I would probably say, 75% -- as conservative -- were from the Youngstown community Yes But you also had people from ACE (American Coaster Enthusiasts), that was what Rick Shale's organization was called They would come in from across the country just to ride the Wildcat and the Jackrabbit So you had people coming in like that

- S: Sort of like Mecca They went to Mecca
- N: Yes They made pilgrimages to Idora Park to ride the coasters, as they did the other coasters As you said before, these were two nationally ridden coasters Some of these rides were legitimate historical landmarks.
- S: Do you think that they could ever reopen the park? Maybe build a new Wildcat?
- N: It was possible to be done, but the Duffy's certainly did not have the money to do it, particularly in later years when attendance was going down. That was partially because of people going to Cedar Point, making difficult choices Then again, the early 1980's, we were in pretty bad financial straits in general If they would have been able to hang tough, somehow build the Wildcat back, I think by 1987 or 1988, they probably would have started to get a return because the economy had rebounded by then I was thinking again about some of the people I still run into frequently I will see Eileen and Kathy Duffy out every once in a while at the Park Inn That was one of our hang outs We would go to the Park Inn after we broke up at the park A real good buddy of mine, Rick Caglick, he was in maintenance, we used to pal around a lot together, he is a bar tender now over at the Upstairs Lounge He is graduating from YSU, I think, in December Strangely enough, his mother works under me at the Business journal
- S: That is kind of interesting So when you see these people and you have not seen them or a couple years or you keep in touch with them do you guys just start talking about Idora Park, the first thing?
- N: Well, the people that I have not seen regularly, Rick I will see every couple of weeks and we will just usually talk about ordinary stuff, and the same case with Sean Murphy He is a cook down at Inner Circle. I see him pretty frequently He used to be one of my partners when I worked at Idora But we do tend to start talking about old times and what we used to get away with
- S: What are your final memories of Idora Park?
- N: Remember, I was there when they closed the park, when we actually took stuff down and put it into boxes We spent about a day doing that I guess at the time, it was a big part of our lives that we were packing away in boxes I guess it was like any other stage in life Of course, I still have a bunch of park souvenirs at home I remember I bought a ton of these panda bears with the hearts and I used to give them out to girls I still have one of them
- S: You probably have a box at home
- N: No, believe it or not, I ran out I have my signs from my old game, my old apron It is funny how you hang on to that stuff I just dumped my closet looking for

some of the stuff and one of my old Idora Park ball caps

S What else can you see?

N I see the french fry stand That, and the pretzel booth was right across from me, too Of course, I had made friends with people at both so, obviously, I did not pay a lot for french fries all the time I remember riding the Wildcat at night just when it was starting to get cool, in the late summer And getting that chill when you were going down the hill

S Maybe thinking, we will not see Youngstown anymore It is kind of sad

N No I always get a little heartened when I hear someone talking about doing something with the park. It cannot work as an amusement park, I do not think, anymore. Its day is now passed, unfortunately On the other hand, I would like to see some type of community center down there, just to keep the memory alive I know Mayor Ungaro has talked about it every once in a while. He would like to buy the park property and maybe do something to preserve a part of what Idora Park was. I guess maybe some residential development around, it but just one little part set aside for the community to come to and look at

S Do they still have any standing structures in that area?

N Oh, yes In fact, I think, actually, the french fry stand may still be up I think the ballroom is still standing

S Just sitting there, waiting for somebody to open it up. Waiting for another spring Do you have anything else that you would like to say?

N I am trying to think, there were so many images I think of the hill, that was the big make out point

S That was where the train ran around

N Whenever you wanted to make out, you would go up on the hill That was the big catch phrase of the park "Jim, going up on the hill during lunch?" On your breaks we would always just walk down the mid-way and say "hi" to everyone You know, getting caught up It was kind of weird to watch the personal relationships that developed. When someone was dating one of the girls who worked at the puppet show or, I remember I had this one partner, Dean, he was a Cubs fan I guess you have got to respect anyone who is that devoted I could never understand being a Cubs fan, especially as a Pirates fan He was head over heels in love with this one girl who worked a ride. Sandy Every time she would go by he would go, "Ahhhh " We would always be talking about her She and the Cubs were about all he did talk about

S. So you saw a lot of those kinds of relationships pop up and go away?

N. Yes.

S. Well, I thank you very much. It was a pleasure talking with you.

N. Good talking with you, too, Scott.

End of Interview