

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Idora Park

Personal Experience

O. H. 1398

RICK SHALE

Interviewed

by

Scott Smith

on

October 22, 1990

DR. RICHARD SHALE

Dr. Richard Shale was born on January 9, 1947 in Youngstown, Ohio to Don and Virginia Shale. Richard Shale has lived in the Youngstown area all his life. Dr. Shale received all twelve years of his primary education in the Boardman School system including graduation from Boardman High School. Professor Shale received his Bachelor of Arts Degree in Humanities from Ohio Wesleyan University in 1969. Dr. Shale received both his master's degree and his doctorate in American Culture from the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor.

Richard Shale has been employed at Youngstown State University since 1976. Professor Shale spent his first three years at Youngstown State as a limited service faculty employee in both the English and the Speech Departments. Since 1979, Dr. Shale has been employed full time in the YSU English Department. Dr. Shale's field of expertise is film study, and while he teaches the freshman composition courses, he also teaches all levels of film studies, including graduate level. Shale finds particular interest in the field of animation, especially the works of the Disney Studios. Richard Shale has published a book on that studio titled Donald Duck Joins Up: The Walt Disney Studio During World War II (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1982). Dr. Shale also has considerable interest in the Oscars and has published Academy Awards: An Ungar Reference Index (NY: Frederick Ungar, 1978, 1982) which is now in its second edition.

Throughout his academic career, Dr. Richard Shale has received numerous honors including election to Phi Beta Kappa and

Phi Kappa Phi and receipt of YSU's Distinguished Professor Award for the 1982-83 school year. Shale is married and is a member of the First Christian Church of Youngstown. Shale is active in several organizations including University Film and Video Association, Society for Animation Studies and the Popular Culture Association.

Dr. Shale is currently working on a new book dealing with the history of Idora Park which was founded in Youngstown, Ohio in 1899 and operated until the Fall of 1984. Shale counts travel, reading, movies, and amusement parks as hobbies.

-Scott Smith

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Idora Park

INTERVIEWEE: RICK SHALE
INTERVIEWER: Scott Smith
SUBJECT: Wildcat, Jack Rabbit, American Coaster
Enthusiasts
DATE: October 22, 1990

This is an interview with Dr. Richard Shale, for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Idora Park, by Scott Smith, at DeBartolo Hall, on October 22, 1990 at 2:10 p.m.

SS: If possible, could you please tell us about yourself and your personal background?

RS: I was born and raised in Boardman. I've lived here in the Youngstown area all my life except for about ten years, when I was away at college and graduate school. I have an undergraduate Bachelor of Arts degree in Humanities from Ohio Wesleyan University and I have a Masters and a Ph.D in American Culture from the University of Michigan. So that is my educational background. I have been at the University since 1976. I spent three years on the limited service faculty both in the English Department and in the Speech Department and since 1979, I have been full-time faculty in the English Department.

SS: What is your field of expertise?

RS: My main area of expertise is film study. I teach, as all of us do in this department, composition courses. I also teach some literature courses. But my primary area is film study, and I teach it all the way from our

introductory sophomore level film course to our graduate level film course. Within film study, I have a number of particular areas of interest. Animation--particularly the Disney studio--has been an area of interest for me and I published a book called Donald Duck Joins Up: The Walt Disney Studio during World War II. I am also interested in the Academy Awards. I've written a book called The Academy Awards: An Ungar Reference Index, which has gone through two editions; as the title implies, it is a reference book where you can look up things about the Oscars. I am currently preparing a third edition of that book, which I hope will be out next year. I would like to interest someone in doing a revised version of the Disney Book.

SS: I noticed that the National Archives just did another ten movies, where they are not allowed to colorize them....

RS: I haven't seen the latest round of those. I know they started out with twenty-five. I haven't seen the second one.

SS: I know they did "All Quiet on the Western Front", and "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre", and there are a few more.

SS: With your personal background, did you go to Idora Park when you were young?

RS: Yes. I wouldn't say frequently but I certainly went as a child. My guess is that I first went to Idora Park as part of a company picnic. Company picnics were a major part of Idora's business, historically. Since both of my grandfathers worked for Youngstown Sheet & Tube Company, my guess is that it was at a Sheet & Tube Company picnic (the occasion of my first visit to Idora). I went as a child and then I really rediscovered the park, I would say, when I was in college because it was at this time and beyond, I got interested all over again in rollercoasters and amusement parks, and having one marvelous example in my own backyard prompted me to rediscover Idora.

SS: As a child, what are the memories you have of Idora Park? I know in past interviews, some people told me that they were amazed by the pig and hippopotamus that sucked up paper, or some people had a constant love with the french fry stand.

RS: A lot of people tell me that too about the french fry stand. I remember that too. It is hard for me to separate. I don't know whether my memory is just poor, but I have trouble remembering. After all, even my college days were awhile back now. We're talking about

twenty years for that. Certainly some of the memories I have as a child though are of riding the Jack Rabbit. I don't remember ever riding the Wildcat because I suspect none of my parents or grandparents would go on the Wildcat with me. I remember what we always called the Tunnel of Love, which in the last years was called the Lost River ride, where you would go through the dark--in the amusement industry it is called a dark ride--which ended up, as everyone knows, with a little chain lift and you would splash down into the rapids. I remember that when I was very young. I remember one of my favorite concessions on the midway was when you would get a little fishing pole and a hook and the water would rotate around and you would get that hook down there and fish out a prize.

SS: As you said, when you came back from college and you became reacquainted with Idora Park, what drew you back to the park?

RS: Well, actually Cedar Point did. Because going to school in central Ohio, we (a group of college friends) would make excursions up to Sandusky to Cedar Point, and that is where I started getting interested in rollercoasters again. That continued through graduate school. From my interest in Cedar Point, I visited on occasion, a few other parks. Ohio is very rich in amusement parks, both historically and currently. Cedar Point, Geauga Lake, and King's Island, certainly are still considered major parks. So I had a chance, by visiting them, to kind of just associate that with an enjoyable time. Coming back to Youngstown (at that time, I was not living in Youngstown) was an opportunity to visit Idora Park again. This time, the major attraction for me was certainly the Wildcat, which is one of the best coasters in the country. I think that is how it grew. I was initially just interested in rollercoasters and ultimately joined the American Coaster Enthusiasts, which was formed in the late 1970's. I had gone to a conference, actually a semi-academic conference on rollercoasters that was held at Cedar Point in connection with their opening of Gemini, which I think was 1979. It was called "Coastermania" and was co-sponsored by Cedar Point and the Popular Culture Department at Bowling Green State University. It was an interesting experience because a lot of people came and spoke just as at any kind of academic conference. There were psychologists speaking on the psychology of coaster riding, architects speaking about coaster design and amusement park layout design, and historians there talking about the history. This opened up my eyes. I got real interested in the historical end because I am interested in historical research. I do a lot of it in terms of film study. So even though I was never a history major, I like that

area. Idora Park was a perfect place to start to dig into the history of it. I kind of evolved from just visiting parks to starting to think about them as more than just frivolous entertainment. From there I began to focus more specifically on Idora Park. Instead of just focusing on coasters, I branched out--I got pretty interested in carousels, which have a whole history and lore of their own, and even just amusement parks in general. With Idora Park in my backyard, that became the most logical one to study in depth.

SS: I think I was reading in past Vindicators, you traveled around, or members of the organization would travel around the country and ride different rides?

RS: Yes. The ACE is now quite a large organization. I think they're approaching something like 3,000 members. There are international members all over the world. Even now they have international conferences. I am no longer very active in the organization, but I am still a member. They have numerous conferences each year, generally one major summer conference where people converge at a park or in some cases, they try to have it in an area that has more than one amusement park at close distance. It's a lot of fun. They have people who show movies about coasters and people talk again about history. The park generally will cooperate so that ACE gets exclusive ride time on the rides at periods when the park is not open to the public. People go pretty much just to have a vacation about it. It's not real serious. I've gone to a few of those national conferences. There was one held at Kennywood in Pittsburgh, which was a lot of fun and then at Crystal Beach, Ontario. It was a wonderful park which closed last year or the year before. So there was an opportunity within the group to get together either on a national or regional basis for frequent conferences and sharing the fun of riding coasters.

Also a very excellent magazine was put out called Rollercoaster. A newsletter is put out even more frequently with updates on which coasters are being constructed, which coasters are being torn down, which parks, or coasters are in danger, profiles about the people who designed rollercoasters, as well as historical information. So it is a very interesting organization. With my particular interest in popular culture, in general, it just fit right in.

SS: I know in the early 1980's, the carousel was placed as the national archive....

RS: It was placed on the National Register of Historic Landmarks. I think that was done in the 1970's. I can't remember the specific date. That, of course,

does not guarantee its existence. It simply indicates that it has historic value and should not be...I don't know what the rules are for the national register, but theoretically, they couldn't have altered it materially without permission to do so. Of course, that did not prevent them from selling it or possibly dismantling it.

SS: In 1984 when the Wildcat burned down, I think the Wildcat and Jack Rabbit were both ranked in the top ten as far as coasters.

RS: The Wildcat was. That is the other thing that the American Coaster Enthusiasts do is rank. Of course one person's ranking might be different than others. People tend to separate wooden coasters from steel coasters as well. The Wildcat consistently ranked in the top 10 coasters in the country. Now, of course, you ask what criteria were used to establish that ranking and that is impossible to answer because one person's idea of a good coaster ride might not conform to another person's. I know when the ACE people held their conference at Kennywood Park (I forget the date but it was prior to 1984) Pat Duffy welcomed any people traveling to Pittsburgh for that conference to stop by in Youngstown and ride the Idora Park Wildcat. A lot of people took advantage of that and made the trip up here and enjoyed it and had nothing but good things to say about the Wildcat. That may have contributed to the enthusiasm of members for ranking it that highly. Now I can suggest to you my criteria for a good coaster ride. The reason I rank the Wildcat among certainly the top three or four coasters...First of all, I like a traditional wooden coaster. I don't care a whole lot for these steel coasters, the Corkscrews and the loops and so on. I like a fairly rough ride. Some of the newer coasters are smoothed out so much for the "family trade" that they're pretty tame. You like to at least have that illusion of danger and wildness to a coaster. So I like a fairly rough ride. The Wildcat was what you'd call a twister. It looped around and up and it slammed you from side to side. You look for a coaster that has height. The Wildcat was built in the fall of 1929. It opened in the summer of 1930. I don't know where at that time it ranked in terms of the height of the hill. I can't even honestly tell you how high the first hill of the Wildcat was. In the 1980's there has been escalation...First one park will build a new coaster and say it is the tallest one in the world and another coaster will be built and that record will be eclipsed. Right now, the Magnum XL200 at Cedar Point is the tallest rollercoaster in the world. I suspect that will be eclipsed at some point. So even though the Wildcat was nowhere near being the tallest coaster, you do look for a good first hill (I do). Those are

some of the things that people tend to rank the coasters on. I always felt that the Beast at King's Island was the best coaster ride I've ever had. I also am particularly fond of the Thunderbolt at Kennywood. The Cyclone at Coney Island, which is probably the most famous coaster in the United States, and certainly the Wildcat would rank in my top four or five. Often when I went to these national conferences, we would be wearing name tags and I would have Youngstown, Ohio on mine, and utter strangers would come up and say, "How's the Wildcat running this season?" or they would want to know my opinion on it or just hear about Idora Park. So the Wildcat really did enjoy a national reputation. The other major coaster at Idora was the Jack Rabbit. I don't know if it ranked in the top 10 (those rankings would change year to year depending on who was responding to the surveys) but the Jack Rabbit had great historic importance. When Idora Park closed in 1984, the Jack Rabbit was the second oldest operating roller-coaster in the United States. It had been built in 1910 by the T.M. Harton Company out of Pittsburgh. It had been extensively remodeled. I am trying to find a little more historical information about the Jack Rabbit. Apparently it was called the Dips or the Dip-the-Dips in its early years and anyone who ever rode it probably remembers the back stretch; it had a series of rather short hills. I suspect that is where the term The Dips comes from. Another reason that suggests that might have been the original name is that the same people that built the Jack Rabbit (T.M. Harton Company) owned and operated a park in Pittsburgh called Westview Park, which had a famous coaster called The Dips. So I suspect maybe some similarity of design prompted it. I don't know when it started to be called the Jack Rabbit. We do know that in the final season, they put the cars on the tracks backwards and renamed it the Back Wabbit. That, to me, was a cheap gimmick. Idora was not alone in using that. King's Island, for instance, has its Racer down there. It is a double coaster where they have one (at least at the time I was there) track with the coaster going forwards and one with it going backwards. You could choose which way you wanted to ride. I don't find it a particularly enjoyable ride going backwards, but it was a gimmick and people who might have said, "Well, I've ridden the Jack Rabbit enough; I know what it's like," would be enticed one more time to see what the new sensation was. That seemed to me, just something they were trying to play with to see if they could interest a few more people on the ride.

SS: Do you feel with the advent of the new parks, the Cedar Points, the King's Islands (the "antiseptic" parks); do you think a lot of the romance of the original parks (Idora Park) is gone? Do you think they have lost a

lot by being so technologically sound?

RS: Well, that is hard to answer because one person's idea of romance is different than another. The new parks, which are generally backed with corporation money, can do so much more. They can have bigger and better rides. I think by and large, the big theme parks now are better. They are certainly safer; they have more rides, so I suppose you get more value for your admission ticket. I don't know that anything has necessarily been lost. Idora Park was a trolley park. By that, I mean it was started by a trolley company, as were many amusement parks in America. There were hundreds, if not thousands of parks begun by trolley companies around the turn of the century. They tended to be very similar in design to Idora Park. Not terribly large, though some of them were able to expand. Kennywood in Pittsburgh, started as a trolley park. So did Euclid Beach Park up in Cleveland. So Idora lasted longer than some trolley parks though a few are still going. Idora typified the small, local park. There was no way it could compete with parks that drew a national or regional audience. For those people who like small, intimate surroundings, Idora certainly had its appeal. Part of the appeal for me, because I got interested in the history of parks is that Idora was like a walk back in time. It had such a nostalgic feel because of the design of the rides and the design of the park. The park went back to a time that was long gone. The amazing thing was that Idora Park lasted as long as it did. It had its appeal. It is sometimes fun to go to a local, more intimate park.

SS: How significant do you think it was towards the Youngstown community?

RS: I think it had tremendous influence. This is one of the things I didn't know before I started to research. Again, I suspect that what I found true about Idora is true about a number of communities across the country. Idora Park is clearly linked in very specific ways to the economic growth of the south side of Youngstown. When the Youngstown Park and Falls Street Railway Company began Idora Park in the summer of 1899, the south side of the community was by all accounts pretty rural and not at all settled. By building the park out at that time in a fairly rural area, it gave people a reason to visit that area. One of the fellows involved with the creation of Idora Park (a man who has always fascinated me) is something of a mystery. His name was Willis H. Park. He may or may not have been the "Park" for whom the company named it the Youngstown Park and Falls Street Railway Company. I have been told that that name does not refer to a park and a falls, like Mill Creak Park, or Lanterman's Falls, but two people

named Park and Falls. I haven't been able to verify if Willis H. Park is in fact the Park of that name, but I have discovered that Willis H. Park was a director of the streetcar company, so he was certainly involved in the decision to create an amusement park. He also formed ultimately three separate real estate companies, land companies that sold property along the streetcar line. On top of that, he became partners in a lumber company that sold lumber to people building houses. So when I started to look at the large picture here, we have a streetcar company that is giving people a reason in their leisure time to ride out to the undeveloped south side of Youngstown, then we have the same man (in some cases, the same officers of that streetcar company) selling people land along the streetcar line and then selling them the lumber to build the houses. This Willis H. Park seems not to have missed a trick here. He was covering in a very entrepreneurial way, all bases of development. I'm sure that is not the only reason Youngstown expanded to the south side, but it certainly is one of them. Now none of this expansion really could take place until the Market Street Bridge was created. There used to be a low bridge and when they finally built the high bridge, that enabled those street cars to go from the downtown, what used to be called the Diamond, out to the south side. I should point out too, that the Youngstown Park and Falls Street Railway Company was only one of many. I think there were four or five street car companies in Youngstown. They were chartered to handle specific areas. The Park and Falls line covered the south side.

SS: In 1984 when the Wildcat burned down and the Lost River burned down and they almost lost the carousel, what were your feelings when that happened?

RS: Of course it was a tragedy. I remember exactly where I was when I heard the news. I was down in the courthouse and I listened to the news on the radio and drove out there later that day to see the ruins. You mentioned the damage that the fire caused. For me being interested in historical research, the real tragedy was that not only did the rides get burned up, the park office burned to the ground and with it, all of the historical records and documents about Idora Park. That was a real tragedy. I had talked to Pat Duffy prior to that fire, and we had hoped to sit down at some point and really do an in-depth interview. I didn't do that and not only did I not do it prior to the fire, but then six months after Idora Park closed, Pat Duffy died of a heart attack, and I still had not sat down to do an interview with him. So I lost a golden opportunity and certainly any historical documents that he might have had were burned up in the fire.

As far as my feelings, I think my feelings were identical to what everybody in Youngstown felt. This was a community tragedy because although it wasn't as tragic as it might be for a church or a school to burn down, or a company to burn down, Idora Park touched everybody. It would be very rare to run across someone who grew up in Youngstown who had not been to Idora Park. I think rare, also that if a person had visited the park, he or she would not have come away with good memories. So here is an object of affection among the community and suddenly its existence is jeopardized by that fire. So I think everybody felt like they had lost a piece of their own childhood when the fire broke out.

Now, of course, Idora Park operated the summer of 1984, but they lost a good deal of money and had been for the previous two or three seasons. The slide into economic decline for Idora Park had begun prior to the fire. They had tried to put it on the market and had not been able to find a buyer for the park and of course, after the Wildcat burned down as well as the Lost River ride, those were two of the major attractions and that just about eliminated any prospective buyer's interest in the park. I have often been asked if I thought that fire was either arson or perhaps set to claim insurance money. That to me seems absolutely unfounded. It certainly wasn't arson because it started while workmen were doing some repairs on the Wildcat, and I don't think any of them were interested in burning down the park. So you can rule out vandalism, arson, or any of that. As far as was it perhaps set on purpose to collect insurance money, I find that a ludicrous theory because the park owners lost a great deal of money from that fire. They didn't have insurance to cover rebuilding those rides, they lost a great deal of revenue because fewer people came that final season, and they were not stupid people. So it seems to me crazy to suggest somebody might have set it on fire to collect insurance money. It had just the opposite effect. It cost the owners a great deal financially, as well as just the pain and anguish of seeing something that they had spent their lives working for, damaged that way.

SS: Do you think there would be any chance of Idora Park reopening? I know there are some things still up there.

RS: I don't think there is a chance in the world. Not only do I think there is no chance of it ever operating as an amusement park, I have just about convinced myself that even if there had been no fire, Idora Park would be closed today. Now we're talking six years after the fire. I look at the direction that Idora Park was headed in the mid-1980's. It had been losing money.

One assumes that good businessmen would not continue in a venture that was continuing to lose money season after season. I also look at what the insurance liability rates did in the last half of the 1980's, and I cannot imagine the owners being able to pay the insurance. Of course, every amusement park has to carry huge liability in case of any injury from those rides, so I think those two reasons are important to predict whether Idora Park could have still existed or not. The other thing that changed in the 1980's, which made Idora kind of a victim of the times, is that the big parks like Cedar Point and Kennywood and Geauga Lake expanded their advertising area. Years ago, those parks were not really considered competition for Idora, but in the 1980's it became very commonplace for those parks to be advertised on Youngstown television and radio. So what that means was that they were drawing away potential customers from Idora to the other parks. That would indicate the drop in revenue for the local park. So I don't think the owners of Idora had the capital to counter that advertising media blitz by the big parks, which again, generally were backed by corporations. So the combination of losing customers through that, having to pay higher insurance rates, people have mentioned the economic decline particularly in the late 1970's, early 1980's; people in the Youngstown area had less discretionary income and generally if you have a choice of going to an amusement park or putting food on the table for the kids, how's the money going to be spent? If it were that alone, they (the Idora owners) could ride out that economic downturn as the valley began to prosper again. I think people might have come back. But the final problem was that I think kids today have other ways to spend their leisure time. Historically, Idora Park was a place where the whole family went. I think by the 1970's and 1980's, it was pretty much a place where kids went. Kids have so many other things to do now, other ways to spend their money--video arcades, and who knows what--that it became much tougher to entice them to come out to Idora, and if they did, I'm not sure if they would go regularly enough. I suppose you could label as sociological change just how kids decide how to spend their time. That too worked against Idora Park. So all of those factors combined, I would predict that the park would have had to close for economic reasons even if there had never been a fire.

SS: In closing, are there any final comments or remarks that you would like to make concerning Idora Park?

RS: Well, I helped the Arms Museum a few summers ago put together an exhibit on Idora and from that came a series of slides I have. I borrowed for the most part postcards from local collectors and that turns out to

be one of the best sources of visual material about the early days of the park. I have gotten myself unwittingly onto the lecture circuit in Youngstown. I frequently give an Idora Park slide lecture to groups around town, frequently with Senior Citizen groups. It's a great delight to talk to those people because they have grown up with Idora. What I have learned from my experience of giving this talk is that there continues to be tremendous affection for Idora Park. There is nothing surprising about that because again, that is a place we associate with good memories. I have always found people extremely interested in anything I had to say about Idora, pictures I had to show. They like to be taken on a little nostalgia trip to remember when Idora was strong.

From the research I have done, my feeling about Idora is that most trolley parks that began around the turn of the century, as Idora did, didn't last past World War I. The golden age of the trolley park was from about 1895 to 1917 or 1920. Only the better parks survived World War I. Then when you got to the Depression, hundreds of other parks closed around the country and once again, it was only the best managed parks, the ones that knew how to attract a crowd that survived. There were owners in the 1920's and 1930's, Charlie Deibel and Rex Billings, who must be given a great deal of credit. These are people (particularly Rex Billings) prominent on a national level among amusement park owners. I think the good management, the way they ran the park in those days, enabled it to weather the Depression. So again, Idora Park, even though it is gone now, outlasted probably 90% of those trolley parks that were started. Even big ones, as I mentioned earlier, such as Euclid Beach Park in Cleveland, which closed in 1969. Idora Park lasted a long time. So in some ways, rather than grieving about its departure or premature closing because of that fire, we might instead celebrate that we did have it for 86 years.

One final note I would make, people frequently ask me what am I doing with the Idora Park research. For some years I did not have an answer. There was a fellow down in Pittsburgh who is currently the head of the National Carousel Association. His name is Charles Jacques, Jr. He had been talking about doing a book on Idora Park. He has published books on Kennywood Park and Westview Park in Pittsburgh. Because he had already done a great deal of work, I deferred to him and assumed that at some point he'd publish a book on Idora which I would be happy to run out and buy. Just recently (September 1990) we agreed to collaborate on a book. I am now working as a coauthor with Charlie Jacques to put together a book on Idora. I will try to handle most of the text, and he is going to supply a

number of pictures. We hope by the fall of 1991 to have some kind of book in which people are still interested; they can buy the book and learn some of the factual material that I have researched and also have some pictures to look at to help them remember the history of the park.

SS: Okay. Thank you very much.

RS: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW