

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Idora Park

Personal Experience

O. H. 1400

FRANK A. SMITH

Interviewed

by

Scott Smith

on

October 25, 1990

FRANK SMITH

Frank Smith was born on December 12, 1935 in Youngstown, Ohio. Frank's parents, Arthur and Edith Smith, had lived in the Youngstown community all of their lives. Mr. Smith grew up on the East side of Youngstown and graduated from East High School in 1955. From 1957 to 1977, Frank worked at the Aeroquip corporation on the East side of Youngstown. Smith was greatly involved in the union and had served as Aeroquip's union vice president.

In 1977, Mr. Smith received a severe back injury while at work. This injury was so severe that Frank had the bottom vertebrae in his back fused together and was placed on permanent disability. Due to the immense amount of free time, Mr. Smith had become involved in several area organizations. The Mahoning County Chapter of Big Brothers/Big Sisters particularly drew Smith's attention. Since 1977 Frank has been greatly involved in this philanthropy helping fill the void for three separate fatherless youths. Frank Smith had served 15 years as the Big Brothers/Big Sisters Mahoning county chapters, Two terms as the President from 1984 until 1989. In 1988, Frank received the regional Big Brother of the Year Award, an honor that was topped in 1988 with the National Big Brothers Award. Today, Mr. Smith is less active in the Big Brothers organization. Frank is now serving as a section leader for the United Way with a special interest in fund raising.

Frank is married to Virginia Smith, a teacher at Saint Rose School in Girard. Frank and Virginia have been married for 15

years with no children. Frank has four children from his first marriage, Mark a staff sergeant in the U.S. Air Force, Kim a housewife who lives in Cortland, Ohio, Dr. Jamie Carney, a Professor at Ohio State University and Scott who is currently pursuing his master's degree in history at Youngstown State University. Frank lists his special interests as volunteering especially in organizations that are active in working with children.

-Scott Smith

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Idora Park

INTERVIEWEE: FRANK A. SMITH
INTERVIEWER: Scott Smith
SUBJECT: East High School, House of David, Record Hops
DATE: October 25, 1990

SS: This is an interview with Frank Smith for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Idora Park, by Scott Smith, at 173 1/2 Upland on October 25, 1990, at 4:15 p.m.

Okay, Mr. Smith, would you like to tell me a little bit about your own personal background as far as your growing up and your education and your employment?

FS: I grew up on the East side of Youngstown. I attended Lincoln School from grades 1st to 8th, and I finished grades 8 to 12 at East High School on the East side. I took some classes at Youngstown State University. I worked at the Aeroquip Corporation, the old Republic Rubber Plant, on Albert Street on the East side of Youngstown. I worked there for 20 years. Most of my time was involved with union work. I was vice president of the union and compensation and pension director.

SS: So you've lived in the Youngstown area all of your life?

FS: Most of it. I spent two or three years in California and different places, but most of my time has been in the Youngstown area.

SS: When you were growing up, were you familiar with Idora Park?

FS: Yes. I have fond memories as a child with Idora Park. Thinking back on it, I look at the rides out there. The one thing I think of right away that jumps into my mind is the fishing pond. No matter which fish you caught you always won a prize. That was probably one of my favorite things out there, growing up as a child.

SS: Do you have a lot of memories of the rides when you were young?

FS: They had two sections out there. One section was an adult section, one section was a children's section. The carousel, the air plane ride. I really enjoyed the air planes. There were four or five large air planes on cables that went around. Out of all the times I went to Idora Park, that had to be my favorite ride out there. Idora Park was something that I wish kids had today to enjoy.

SS: Do you remember the Lost River or the Wildcat or the Jackrabbit while you were growing up. Did you ride those?

FS: No. I wasn't into the Jackrabbit and the Wildcat. I remember the ride over the falls and those different things, but the Wildcat was not my ride. I probably enjoyed the games out there more than anything else as I got to be a teenager. The thing I was thinking about was that I remember the record hops out there. Those were always enjoyable. Going to Idora Park and coming home was always a lot of fun because we would walk from the East side, large groups of us, over to Idora Park and we'd walk home and it was always a lot of fun, a lot of laughter, just a good, enjoyable time.

SS: What were the record hops like?

FS: They would get pretty rowdy. I remember the first year I went out for football. We all bought jerseys with the East side golden bear on it, so everybody from East wore their jerseys there and every other high school in the area also had jerseys. There were a couple dances where you would put your right foot in and your right foot out. When your right foot went in, it was kicking and moving a little bit.

SS: Did you ever see any singers at Idora Park, any big bands or groups?

FS: No. I probably went to Idora Park in the 1950's. The big bands were pretty well over I think by then.

- SS: Did you ever see any groups come in?
- FS: No, I never saw too many groups at Idora Park. They did have some great baseball teams out there, though. There were some great teams coming to the Youngstown area and Idora Park, at one time, had a very nice ball field there. I have heard stories of Sachel Page pitching out there and different people. I remember the putt-putt course. They had a real nice putt-putt golf course out there. I think that was one of the last things that closed out there.
- SS: Going back to baseball, did you ever see any of the games when they were playing baseball?
- FS: Yes. I saw the House of David. There were several teams that came in. The House of David, they all had the big beards and everything. Baseball was a big thing in Youngstown at one time. There were a lot of great teams that came into the area and played. Idora was one of the places they came into. Later on in life, I did a couple fund raisers and I used that ball field out there and it brought back some nice memories.
- SS: Did Youngstown have their own minor league team playing out at Idora Park?
- FS: That is way before my time.
- SS: So they would come in and round up a group of all stars to come in and play them, or a tour going like Sachel Page, Bob Feller, or what?
- FS: These were organized teams that came in. You have to remember that Youngstown at one time, had some great ball teams around here. I think like when the King and his Court came in, I'm not sure if they ever played out there or not, but they would pick all star teams from our teams to play them. Now Sachel Page, I believe he played in the Negro League. They would come in and play, not necessarily the Negro league here, but they would play all star teams here.
- SS: That is real interesting because I know from interviewing Dr. Shale from the English Department at YSU, he has a great deal of interest in Idora Park, as far as the teams coming in and playing. Any other activities still pertaining to Idora Park?
- FS: I can remember one time getting on one of the rides out there and they had to stop it. My stomach was bothering me so bad that I told them they better stop this ride or they were going to have a great problem. They had to stop the ride and get me off it. That was somewhat embarrassing at the time. It was a necessity

though. What I remember probably more than anything else was walking the midways out there. There was everybody that you knew. It was sort of like downtown Youngstown growing up. Everybody you knew was down there. When you went to Idora, you knew people out there, it was a nice place to go. I never remember having any trouble out there, except at the dances when we got to kicking a little bit and swinging our arms a little bit and everything. That was just in good fun as much as anything.

SS: As far as the midway, do you remember playing a lot of games and stuff?

FS: Oh, yes. They had the typical games. Throwing the baseballs and shooting the basketballs. That basically was it. Every so often, you'd see someone coming up through the midway with a large stuffed animal and everybody was like, wow, why can't I do that?

SS: What did you think about the french fries? They french fries, so far was one of the big topics.

FS: Youngstown, Ohio, I don't know if people realize this: the first french fries ever served in the United States were served at Idora Park. That is something I don't think people realize. My wife really loves the french fries out there. She talks about them an awful lot.

As we got older after high school, we would go down to the beer stein and then go drink some beers. That was pretty well gone when I got to the stage where we were old enough to go drinking. During our youth, we'd walk by and there was always the beer place where they had the beer. Idora Park drew large crowds from all over. The great thing about Idora Park, if I had to say one thing, would be that there was no big trouble at Idora Park. People went out there, they enjoyed themselves, families came out there, dates went out there, and there was no big trouble. There didn't have to be a policeman on every corner or anything like that. I remember there was one old colored policeman out there and I think he was out there since the day Idora Park opened. All the time we grew up as kids, he was there. He was a nice fellow but you didn't want to get him mad at you.

SS: Also, with your youth, you walked all the way from the East side? You couldn't catch a bus or a trolley or anything like that, or was it just the fun of walking to Idora Park?

FS: When we were kids, there was a great bus service in Youngstown, Ohio. When we were kids, up until our senior year in high school, one of us had a car.

People didn't have cars back then. They walked or they took the buses. So on Friday night, if you went on a date, you walked downtown and you walked home because there were several movie theaters in downtown Youngstown. Going to Idora Park, it was nothing for a group of us to walk over there but it wasn't a very big deal to walk. Every place you went, you walked. So I don't think we ever gave it too much thought.

SS: At that time did you buy tickets for rides or did you have to pay to get in the park?

FS: I believe it was always tickets. They used to have the ticket booths spread throughout the park and you would go up and buy your tickets. I don't think we rode a lot of rides. We didn't have the money. I think that's what it came down to. I think that is why it was a social place to go to. You didn't have \$10 or \$20 in your pocket. If you went to Idora Park with \$1, you were probably one of the more wealthier kids going. So Idora Park to us was a social place more than a place to go ride the rides.

SS: So you didn't go on the Wildcat and the Jackrabbit though?

FS: No. Even if I could have, I don't think I would have gone on it. I think one time or once or twice, I may have rode it but they weren't my thing.

SS: As you got older and got married and had kids, did you still have much contact with Idora Park?

FS: No. I think Idora was pretty well done then. I do remember that there was a young girl I dated on the South side of Youngstown. Her father was on the air plane ride when one of the cables snapped and went out into the park. I think he had broke his neck. I'm not sure how many people were on the ride. I don't think anybody was killed.

SS: The cables snapped?

FS: Yes and this airplane went out into the park, just flew right out into the park. There were several people hurt and everything. Her father was one of the people that were on that ride.

SS: Do you remember any other accidents happening like that?

FS: No. I just remember them talking about that when I'd go to her house. I think that may have happened in the 1930's or 1940's. I'm not even sure of when it happened.

SS: When your kids got older, did you take your kids to the park at all? Do you have any memories about taking your kids to the park?

FS: Not too much. I think at that time, other parks started developing and Idora Park started declining. I wish Idora Park was still around. Locally, I think it was great. Now if you want to go to a park, you've got to get in the car and drive two or three hours. It was really nice having Mill Creek Park. I drove by not too long ago. I was up that way and turned down a wrong road and realized what street I was on. I drove down the back entrance where Idora Park was. It brought back some fond memories.

SS: Let's play a little game. I'll give you the name of something and just tell me what you think. How about the Lost River (The Tunnel of Love)?

FS: Now the Tunnel of Love I remember. If I had \$1 in my pocket and we were going to buy tickets, it probably would have been for the Tunnel of Love. I remember going through and people jumping out and things jumping out at you, trying to scare you and you would be in the boats or gondolas, whatever you wanted to call them. It was a tunnel of love. There is no other way to describe it. I don't think too many people went on it for the adventure of going through to be scared. I think many people went on it to hold hands, etc, etc.

SS: When I interviewed people, one of the things that would always amaze me when I went to Idora Park was the pig and hippopotamus that sucked up paper.

FS: Oh, yes.

SS: That is one of the things that people talk about. They remember the pig and the hippo that sucked up paper.

FS: Well, if you remember Idora Park, there were the popcorn things, there were the french fries, there were the different sandwiches, stuff like that, but you didn't see paper laying all over. Maybe the hippo and the pig were part of the fun of it because you would take them over and throw them in and they'd suck them in. They were throughout the park.

SS: How about the carousel?

FS: The carousel was beautiful. Recently, I was down in Mansfield. There is a place down there that restores carousels. It is the only place in the United States that builds carousels and restores them. When they took the carousel down at Idora Park, I was curious

about trying to buy one of the horses. I remember the whole thing went out to California and they broke it down and sold...

SS: It's in storage in New York City.

FS: Is it really?

SS: The company that bought it, the last piece of information I got, went bankrupt. Everything they bought from Idora Park is sitting in storage in New York City.

FS: My understanding was that they were going to break it up and restore all the pieces. We went down to Mansfield for the day and at the time, they had one of the old carousels from New York in and they were restoring it. The horses just looked a little bit different than when you looked at them as a kid. When you look at them now, they are not as big, and maybe not as pretty, the colors weren't as what you remembered them to be. I think if I was to name the most popular ride out there, I would say it would probably be the carousel. Because you could get on with the kids, you could get on it yourself. Also, the bumper cars. I'll never forget the bumper cars. I got on the bumper cars one time and mine stuck and wouldn't move and during this entire thing, there was nothing I could do but just sit there and everybody was banging into me and everything. I'll never forget that ride on the bumper cars.

SS: Do you remember the train that used to ride around the park?

FS: The train is now out in Hubbard I believe. I was just out there the other day, to a place out there for lunch. They've got a little restaurant out there now. I guess at Christmas time, they run the train out there and you could still ride it. I think that's nice that some people in this area took some of the rides and did this with them. As a little kid, I don't remember the train that much but the train was always there. They had the tracks that went down through the park.

SS: Did you ever go to the fun house?

FS: Not that much. No. I never went to the fun house that much. Like I said, most of our things were walking around the midways and socializing. Maybe if you went out on a date, you'd spend a couple dollars and that's probably when the tunnel came in more than the fun house.

SS: What other memories of Idora Park do you have as far as when you were growing up or stories that you may have

heard and things like that? I remember once you were talking about someone trying to steal money or something?

FS: Oh, Honest Al. Honest Al the card dealer. Honest Al, and some of his friends tried to hold Idora Park up. (Honest Al, of course, wasn't his real name) This is just second hand, so don't quote me. It was the 4th of July. They had this all figured out that when the rides would close down the old colored cop, I talked about, and the manager from the office, which was about in the middle of the park, they would leave the office, walk through the park, it would be dark and they would get in their car and go downtown and make a deposit. Well the story goes that Honest Al and about two or three of his friends were in the park hiding and up through the park came the policeman and the manager and the two, three or four of them jumped out with their guns and said, "This is a stick up, give us the money!"

I guess the policeman started pulling out his gun, no one knew who was going to shoot. They stood there looking at each other. He gets his gun out, he starts shooting, they start running through the park, the lights go on in the park, Honest Al tells the story as he's running down through Mill Creek Park, sees these headlights coming, dashes into the woods and goes off a 40 foot cliff and they found him the next morning with a broken leg. Now that is the story I was told. I don't know if the story was true. I think some of it might be fiction. I know they did try to hold up Idora Park and I think Honest Al was involved in that. But he tells the story that he turned to go into the woods to get off the road and he went off a 40 foot cliff and that is where they found him the next morning. I guess it could be true.

SS: Being a life long resident of Youngstown, what important role do you think Idora Park played in Youngstown as far as community wise?

FS: As a teenager, I think it gave us a chance to go somewhere to be able to meet other kids from other parts of town and be able to communicate and socialize and everything else like that on a basis of fun. Overall, I think people were able to meet there and socialize there. I think we grew up there. From grade school to high school, the same group of people and later on, probably married and worked together and everything else and I think a lot of it goes back to Idora Park.

SS: Do you think Idora Park would be useful in a day and age of the 1990's to maybe, keep kids out of trouble?

FS: No. I think Idora Park today, if we had Idora Park, I think you would probably have fourteen different people trying to get Idora Park closed. I think Idora Park today, with the way society is today and everything, I think it would be a haven for drugs, crime, and many other things. I wish I wouldn't think of it as that, but in my honest opinion, I think that is what would be going on at Idora Park, today.

SS: I know when talking to other people about it, they said that is what actually started to hurt Idora Park. They were changing their policies as far as letting people in but they were finding much more crime. There was much more of a likelihood of crime because of the quality of people coming to Idora Park after a while, was going down, much the same as the area around Idora Park was going downhill.

FS: It is an inner city. I hate to say it that way but it is the truth. Idora Park was a place where a man could take his family and have a good time and not worry about it. I think if you look at the inner city today, not too long ago, take downtown, for example, with the Octoberfest, or whichever one it was, there was all that violence down there with the street fights and everything else like that. I think Idora Park would be a battle ground. I really believe you would have the four sections of Youngstown, out to the east side and the north side and the south side and the west side, but I think there would be gangs. I don't think it would be a place that I as a family man, would want to take my kids today, or my wife. I think it would be a place for a lot of violence, a lot of meeting, a lot of organized crime. I just don't think it would be the place that I remember growing up in, the same as the city of Youngstown. I don't think a kid today or a bunch of kids today would be allowed by their parents to walk from the east side of Youngstown to Idora Park, or worse yet, let them walk home. That is kind of a shame.

I grew up and I look at Youngstown. Growing up, Youngstown was a great place to be as a teenager. I have a lot of fond memories of Lincoln Park, going to football games, East High School; great memories. I also look at the inner city now. Not too long ago, I was doing some work for the United Way and I had to go to Campbell. I went up through the East side, I went up Albert Street and up Oak Street and it's not the same as I remember when I was a kid. It is just not the same.

SS: Do you think now days, Idora Park has been replaced by video arcades and those kinds of places?

FS: They did have a penny arcade out there. I just thought of it when you said that. They had a penny arcade with the old cranks. You'd put a penny in and you'd crank and the movies went around. They had the crane that would come down and you would try to operate. I don't think anybody ever won at the crane. The crane was a rip off. It was quite large and it was a popular place to go.

SS: It was my favorite place in the whole park. I liked the arcade because there was a lot of games and you could win, usually, unless it was the crane, but in one of my past interviews, George Nelson won several things at the crane.

FS: He won at the crane?

SS: He won a lot. I don't know whether to believe him.

FS: His father probably owned it.

SS: So basically, you feel if someone wanted to reopen Idora Park anyway, it wouldn't happen?

FS: Not in the inner city of Youngstown. You can have an Idora Park today, but it couldn't be in the inner city of Youngstown. It would have to be out, away from the city. It would have to be out at Lake Milton, for example, close to highways where people could get in and out. You couldn't build something like that today in the inner city. There is just no way. That is the truth.

SS: Are you old enough to remember the Lake Milton amusement park?

FS: Oh, yes. I remember going out to Lake Milton. When we were in our 20's, there used to be a bar called the Wave, right over the bridge and they used to have these big schooners of beer. Across the street was the beach and you'd swim out there. Down the road, there was the park and there was swimming across from that. We didn't go there that much as teenagers because of transportation. We probably went there more in our 20's when somebody had a car and you could drive.

SS: You've been to Cedar Point and places like that, the high tech amusement parks. How would you compare Idora Park to those kinds of parks?

FS: It's hard to say. Idora Park was a much smaller park, a different era. Today could Idora Park as we knew it, could it even exist? I don't think it could because of the different things they have now. The rollercoasters now have got to be twelve stories high and have 90

degree drops. Idora Park didn't have those types of things.

SS: Do you think Idora Park was a lot homier?

FS: It was the times. In the 1950's, it was a great time for families growing up. Families did things together as families. I don't think they do that today. Idora Park was there for them. I don't think today, families would go to Idora Park if it was there. It is just a different time. I think probably 30 or 40 years from now and your son will be sitting here interviewing you and he'll be asking you, "What do you think about that?" You'll say, when I grew up in my times, it was the best time. Your time is another time. We all have those memories.

SS: Do you remember 1984, when the Wildcat burned down?

FS: I wasn't around. I don't remember the Wildcat burning down. If I do, it didn't mean that much to me. I might have cheered. I might have went out there and thrown some wood on it to help it burn. That was not my favorite ride.

SS: That was definitely the star of the park, though.

FS: Every park, take Cedar Point, any park you go to. The star ride is that, the thrill, that sudden drop or that sudden climb and the anticipation.

SS: At the time of it burning down, it was in the top 10 rated rollercoasters, including the Cyclone and everything else across the United States. It was one of the top 5 rollercoasters. At the time of Idora Park's closing, the Jackrabbit was the second longest, continuous riding rollercoaster in the United States.

FS: Some people think that that was what finished Idora Park. I don't know. At that point, I wasn't that much involved with Idora Park or even going to Idora Park. I think once in a great while, we might have went out there and used the putt-putt or like I say, I did some fund-raisers out there and used the ball field. I used to put some baseball games on as fund-raisers.

SS: Do you think that Youngstown misses Idora Park?

FS: No. I think if you mention Idora Park to young people, they wouldn't even know what you were talking about. If you mentioned it to the older people, people back in the 1950's used Idora Park a lot.

SS: I remember going there a lot in the 1970's.

FS: Each period of time, they probably thought it was the best. I look at the 1950's and the 1960's and we used Idora Park most then. After that, I think I kind of faded away from it.

SS: I know in the past interview, the idea was brought up to reopen the park. The area is all there, even as far as the french fry stand and a lot of the games and things like that. They are all still there. Someone brought up the idea in one of the past interviews that it would be nice to open the park up to the community. Maybe make it into a big picnic ground. And in one little section of the park, make an Idora Park memorial. George Nelson, who writes for the Youngstown and Columbiana County Business Journals said that it would be nice to put something up in memory of Idora Park. What is your opinion of that?

FS: Put a tombstone up. No. I say that in sarcasm. Doing anything, building anything of an amusement park or a place where you would want families to gather, you would have a hard time to find anybody putting money into having it done in the inner city of Youngstown, Ohio, or any inner city, for that matter. I think if you built something on a smaller scale, open the stands up and have a couple of rides there, I think one person could make a profit on it, but I think there would be a lot of trouble.

SS: Look at the features that they are able to offer: I think the ballroom is considered to be one of the largest ballrooms in the state of Ohio. The putt-putt course is still there. I think Mr. Nelson was saying that there is still an opportunity there that we could reopen the putt-putt course. I know after the park closed, WHOT used to hold every spring a big sale there of stereos and things that were offered at 50%, 60% and 70% off. That was used. I think Mr. Nelson also said there is the entire picnic area that could be used.

FS: Maybe for the inner city people. The families in the inner cities, it may be a great idea, but I can't see people from Poland, Boardman, Canfield and things like that, bringing their families to come on a picnic and come into Idora Park to hold their picnics. Look at Mill Creek Park in itself. It is one of the most beautiful parks in the world. How many families on a Sunday afternoon drive through that park and how many families do you see there using it for picnic grounds? Very very few. Most of them that are the people from the city.

SS: So your opinion is due to not just the economic situation in Youngstown, but also due to basically the way the area around Mill Creek has gone downhill.

FS: If I really think about it, if it was me investing some money in it, I don't think I would do it, but on the other hand, it maybe a great thing for the inner city, on a very small scale, that you could come and spend some time. Look at when they put the track around Wick Park. People walk down there every morning and everybody is having a good time, everybody is talking. Who knows, maybe something like this could happen. Maybe it would be a great experiment to see if it could be done and for the people in the inner city, it might be a great thing for the kids and the families as well. Like I said, it would be a big gamble, but I think on the other hand, it may be a great asset to the city of Youngstown.

SS: In concluding the interview, I know I can close my eyes and I could see things at Idora Park. I could close my eyes right now and I could see the Lost River. If you were just to close your eyes, what kind of memories come back? What do you think of? What do you see?

FS: I can see myself walking in through the gates, walking down through the midway, maybe even stopping and shooting some basketball or throwing some baseballs or something like that. I could see the end of the park being towards the dance hall and the record hops and everything. I think that is where we always ended up. The record hops were always a big thing. Something tells me that I think it was Dan Ryan who started the record hops out there. I'm not sure. I can also see the walks home. Coming from Idora Park, walking home and sharing and laughing and just having some fun. Idora Park was just a nice place to go. It was a place you could go to have fun. You could walk out of there feeling good. As a kid growing up, I remember my father taking us out there as a family and we got to ride a ride or two and maybe got a bag of popcorn or whatever he bought us.

I remember Idora Park as being like downtown Youngstown at Christmas time. Everybody you knew was down there. The city was decorated, and everybody as talking and shaking hands and wishing everybody else a Merry Christmas. It was a good feeling. When I think about Idora Park, I get that same feeling.

SS: Well, thank you very much.

FS: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW