

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Idora Park

Personal Experience

O.H. 1401

EDWARD STURGEON

Interviewed

by

Scott Smith

on

November 1, 1990

EDWARD STURGEON

Mr. Edward Sturgeon was born March 25, 1927 in Youngstown, Ohio. He is the son of Mr. Joseph E. Sturgeon and Mrs. Alice (Dixon) Sturgeon, both from the Youngstown area. Mr. Sturgeon lived on the east side of Youngstown throughout his childhood. Sturgeon graduated from East High School in 1945. While at East High School, Mr. Sturgeon met his future wife, Patricia Whaley.

During the summer of 1945, Edward Sturgeon enlisted into the United States Marine Corps. Mr. Sturgeon served in the Marine Corps for one full year until he was discharged in the Fall of 1946. Upon his return to the Youngstown area, Mr. Sturgeon returned to the east side where he began to look for employment. In October of 1946, Edward was hired by the Aeroquip Corporation, which was located on the east side of Youngstown. Edward Sturgeon would work at the Aeroquip Corporation for thirty two years until his retirement in the Summer of 1978.

Mr. Sturgeon currently resides in the Liberty area on Mansell Drive. He has four children, Attorney Edward Sturgeon, daughters, Patricia and Kelly Sturgeon and son Mark Sturgeon. Mr. Sturgeon has been active in the Liberty community, serving on the Liberty School Board from 1979 until 1989. He belongs to the Jewish Community Center and is a member of Saint Edward's Church. Mr. Sturgeon has no particular hobbies.

SS: This is an interview with Mr. Edward Sturgeon for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Idora Park, by Scott Smith, at 326 Mansell Drive, on November 1, 1990, at 10:05 a.m.

Mr. Sturgeon, what were some of your first memories about Idora park?

ES: One of my first memories concerning Idora Park is going there on street cars, probably when I was about twelve or thirteen, before the war. We would go there by streetcar and it was about a nickel a ride. You had quite a few big name bands that came to the dance hall. We used to buy tickets to get in. Many times Guy Lombardo was there, that was after the war. The trolleys were \$.05 or \$.10 to get there. You could really have a pretty good day at Idora Park.

After the war, they built a swimming pool and installed more modern rides. My main interest after the war though, was just going to the dance hall. I really did not have too much interest in the amusement end of it. They had different ethnic days and activity days. I think they had coupons in the paper that you could clip and you would pay so much and then ride all day. Refreshments were a big part of Idora Park, also. A lot of different industries would have their day at Idora. Republic Rubber used to have their yearly picnics there. They also rented out the Heidelberg Gardens for parties during the off-season.

SS: In your childhood, what was it like riding the trolley to the park?

ES: I remember the trolley used to come up Himrod to Wood Street. It crossed Wood Street and Albert. From there, you could ride all the way to the park, which was probably a fifteen or twenty minute ride from downtown. At the park, the trolley would change ends. The operator would just move to the rear, and that became the front of the trolley. I think there was a turn around for the buses, but for the streetcars, the operator would just go to the other end of the car. Later on, the trolleys had the big turn arounds.

SS: How developed was the South side at that time, the area around Idora Park? Was it as developed as it is now?

ES: Yes. There was quite a nice residential area all around the park. It was all older homes that were pretty well kept.

SS: I know the person who started Idora Park in 1989, Mr. Park, had bought all the real estate along the trolley line -- he was one of the owners of the trolley company -- and then opened up a lumber company there, so that he had the monopoly on everything. Basically if you wanted to buy real estate, you had to buy it off him, or if you wanted to buy lumber to build a house, you had to buy the lumber off him. So he had himself a little monopoly going in the area around the

south side.

ES: I did not know that.

SS: Yes. Idora Park was a trolley park when it first started, like Kenneywood in Pennsylvania. From all those trolley parks, Idora was one of the few that lasted as long as it did. I think that was a real good sign for Youngstown. What kind of rides did they have when you remember going there as a child?

ES: They had the carousel for the kids, they had the airplane ride, they had the Wildcat, the Jackrabbit. Of course, the fun house, that was the mainstay. That was always there. That was probably one of the original buildings. It was down around the Heidelberg Gardens, almost near the entrance to the park. After the war they built the swimming pool to the left. I think they had a tragic accident there one time a few years after they had built it. They closed it and cemented it over and had a little railroad ride for kids in that area..

Of course, they had the normal concessions, where you would pitch a ball and knock down milk bottles all along the main concourse of the park. They had a putt-putt golf course. Up on the hill, when you came through the main entrance, about where the airplane ride was, there was a slight hill and they had a large picnic area in there if you wanted to come with your family. Further on down, on the right hand side, was the Wildcat, and on the left hand side, near the dance hall, was the Jackrabbit.

SS: Did you go on the Wildcat?

ES: Oh, yes. The Wildcat was a real popular ride. The Jackrabbit was not quite as fast or as an efficient a ride as the Wildcat. The Wildcat was the main attraction.

SS: The Wildcat was the star of the park. Was the Tunnel of Love, or the Lost River, there?

ES: Yes. They did have that at that time. You went through there on a boat. I rode the ride once or twice.

SS: Also, did they have all the food stands, like the french fries and things like that?

ES: Oh, yes. Those were all over the park. Everybody liked the french fries.

SS: I remember when I went there as a little kid, I used to get the french fries and put ketchup and vinegar and salt all over them. They were great. I have talked to people before and they said there was a beer garden there.

ES: Yes. Heidelberg Gardens.

SS: People would just go up there and drink beer?

ES: Well, it was like a sit down place. I think they had a food concession stand in there but I do not recall that much about it.

SS: As a child, did you go to Idora Park a lot?

ES: Not a whole lot. That was more of a special thing to go to Idora Park in those days because there was not that much money around. Things, though, were very inexpensive at the park. I think you could buy a book of tickets with a value printed on the ticket. Then when you went on a ride, that was the value of the ride. For instance, two tickets would be a dime. You would get a pretty good discount by buying a book if you had the money, for maybe, \$1.

SS: Was Idora Park some place you went to with your family?

ES: A lot of people did that. They would take the kids out there. If you were eleven or twelve years old, though, a lot of kids went without their parents. There were not too many gangs that would carry on there, that is in the early days. Later on there may have been some of that. The older people mostly came in through the parking lot entrance which was around the back of the park. Also, there was a baseball field there, where they used to play many games. They used to also have semi-pro fights there, at one time. I think Tony Bibo, the Clerk of Courts, was involved when he was younger in amateur boxing. I think every year they would have one or two fight matches there, made up of a fight cart-- which was four or five different fights. That was pretty popular at that time.

SS: Were those held in the ballroom?

ES: I can recall going out to the baseball field. They would set up a ring in the baseball field and you would pay to get in to watch the fight.

SS: With baseball, did Youngstown have their own baseball team?

ES: Yes. Youngstown had a team that was called the Mid-Atlantic League. This was after the war, of course. Probably around the late 1940's or early 1950's that they had a Mid-Atlantic baseball team. It was called the Mid-Atlantic League.

SS: Were they pretty good?

ES: Oh, yes. Youngstown, back then, was quite popular for baseball, which it still is now, but at that time, there were many teams that would play at Idora Park. It was a big thing to play there. The baseball field and the big parking lot up there for the dance hall was near the main entrance. They used to rent the dance hall out. At one time, it was all open, then they boarded the sides of it up. They

would use it in the off season for different functions such as campaigns. At this time of the year, for example, they would have a caterer come in and they would have big crowds. It was quite popular before it closed.

SS: As you got older, did you start going more to dances and riding lots of the rides?

ES: Yes. A lot of very popular bands played out there. Guy Lombardo was one of the bands that came there quite a bit. I do not know if Dorsey ever came there or not. I know they used to go to the Palace. I do not remember if they ever were at Idora. They had many main bands that came there, though, mostly on the weekends.

SS: When you got older, did you go there with your friends to socialize and just hang out?

ES: Yes. We went mostly as couples. Later on, when I got married, we would go there to different functions. They would have the annual Ursuline Alumni dance there, and different other charity functions were held there where the proceeds would go to a certain cause.

SS: As far as the park is concerned, do you think it was fairly important, as far as a meeting place in the community? A place where people could go to?

ES: Oh, yes. Especially older people with the dance hall. They had parties that you could bring your own bottle and things of that nature. Things never really got too far out of hand. It was always pretty well controlled. As I said before, it was open in the summer time with rails all around it. You could even go down by the band stand and sit outside and listen to the music in the early evening. They always had something going on in there. I think they even had a lot of high school dances that they called Tri-Hi-Y or something like that.

SS: Did they continue to have sporting events at the park in the future?

ES: I do not think very much. Maybe some amateur baseball. It was not quite as popular as it was in the earlier days. I would say maybe after 1960, that end of it sort of faded out.

SS: They quit having the fight cards there then?

ES: Yes. Most of the amateur boxing was taken indoors because of the weather conditions and that. They would have them at different auditoriums. There was an auditorium and a skating rink down on Rayen Avenue. Rayen-Wood Auditorium. Most of the amateur fights and the other fights were moved there.

SS: They changed that from having the trolleys going there to having the buses drive there after the trolleys closed down? Was there a bus route to the park?

ES: Yes. They used to practically use the same routes. At first it was the streetcars, then they switched over to trolleys, then they switched over to buses.

SS: When you had kids, did you take them to Idora Park?

ES: Oh, yes. We used to go out there. Not a lot, but we would go out there when they would have different special days, like for family picnics or when they would have Isley Day or whatever. Quite a few people took their families there. It was a popular thing in those days.

SS: Did your children go to the park?

ES: Yes.

SS: I know when my father used to take me to the park, two of my favorite things were that they used to have the big hippo that used to suck up paper. Do you remember that?

ES: I think one of the most popular things for kids who were older was the fun house because you would go in, grab the rail and get shocked, the wind would blow you and you would go through the rolling barrel, things like that. My kids even went out there when they were older. They used to carry on at that fun house half of the day. The park was a lot of fun when it was meant to be an amusement park.

SS: As far as the park was concerned, how important do you think the park was to Youngstown, as you grew up, as you got older, and as your kids started going to the park?

ES: I think it was a place where our community could meet people from everywhere. You could keep in touch with people by meeting them because you know they would be there at certain functions if, for instance, Guy Lombardo was in town and there was a dance there. In the off season, when the main part would be closed, the dance hall would still be open to people that wanted to have some type of function. They would advertise it if there was going to be a main band there, mostly on Saturdays and Sundays. You would always see the same people there no matter what. I think it was a place for socializing when you did not see people for a couple months.

SS: You said there was not really any problems with any rivalries or gangs or anything like that at the park?

ES: Well, in the earlier years, I do not remember. Of course, in the later years, the

only place I used to go was the dance hall and different functions. As far as gangs roaming through the park and acting up, I do not know. I think there may have been some of that. I am not familiar with it. If I was, I guess I would not be out there.

SS: I know with my father, he said they would go there with their East jackets on for record hops. He said sometimes they used to do the Hokey Pokey and they would put their feet in and pull them out and they would be kicking each other.

ES: I think they did have quite a few of those record hops out there in the afternoons. I think it was probably a fun time more than it would be disruptive. During the war, when I was in high school, during those year, you had rationing. Things pretty much calmed down during the war just because things of that nature. Everybody was working so Idora Park would be the last thing you would want to do.

SS: Did they ever use the park during the war for buying war bonds, for campaigns or special events there during the war, to raise morale?

ES: They probably did. I cannot recall because I was young. I suppose during the war they had a lot of rallies out there.

SS: While you were growing up, the park was really important as far as people getting together.

ES: Yes. Idora Park was a very popular place for young and old people.

SS: As you got older, when you took your children there, did you notice anything different about the park as far as the people that were going there or the rides or things like that?

ES: They were constantly improving the rides and bringing in new rides. Basically they had the Wildcat and the Jackrabbit and I think they were more or less the main attractions for the kids.

SS: Have you ever gone to Cedar Point or the big amusement parks like that?

ES: Years ago, of course, they were too far of a travel to go to Cedar Point. You are talking about several hours unless you are going to stay there for a weekend or something like that, but that would be too far in those days. We did not even have the turnpike until the late 1950's.

SS: Did you ever go to the amusement park out at Lake Milton. I know there was an amusement park out there.

ES: Yes I did. There was an amusement park out there and when I was real young, I can remember people going out there for dog races. We went there on a couple different occasions. I do not think it was as popular because of where it was located.

SS: I know when I had talked to people about the amusement park and Idora Park, it seems like Lake Milton always comes up. In fact, up to about six years ago, the old arcade area was still up.

ES: There was a hotel there years ago. I believe it was a pretty popular place in the summertime. They also have one in New Castle.

SS: Do you think you could have small parks like Idora Park, the one in New Castle, the one out at Lake Milton at that time, just because there was a lot less travel? Do you think that was important?

ES: Yes. I think that was the main attraction of those parks. Amusement parks were very popular for that reason. There was an area at Lake Milton after which the amusement park there was named.

SS: Was it Craig's Beach?

ES: Yes. That is what it was.

SS: I know that is the little township inside of Lake Milton. I know in 1982, Idora was doing really poorly, financially. They put the property up for sale and it was slowly going down hill as far as making money and keeping itself afloat. What do you think led to Idora Park losing money, going down as a business?

ES: I think it was probably a general demise of the area, employment. I do not think that Idora Park could survive with just the dance hall and special feature things and that. That is probably what led to that. Also, other things became more interesting to people, like professional football. Of course, none of that went on during the summertime. Also, there became available more means of transportation to get to other places. With more means of transportation, there came a lot more freedom to go different and further places in the summertime.

SS: There were a lot more things to do.

ES: Yes.

SS: Also, the steel mills closing, it was about the same time.

ES: I think they had a big fire out there.

SS: Yes. In 1984, the Wildcat burned down.

ES: Yes.

SS: I know the park had been put up for sale in 1982 and then in 1984, the Wildcat burned down with the Lost River. They almost lost the carousel in that fire also.

ES: Were they going to have a church camp there?

SS: Yes. I understood that a church was going to buy the property. I cannot think of the name right off hand. I know I have tried to contact that person. I have not been able to get a hold of him. Also, I think there was a community type project that wanted to buy the park.

ES: I think the total demise of the area was the reason why people have not made the investment.

SS: Do you think they could reopen the park on a smaller scale and it would be successful today?

ES: Well, not with the way things are now days. There is high unemployment. I do not think it would be a success in Youngstown. There is just not enough money.

SS: Do you think a lot of it comes, too, that the population with money has moved out to the suburbs of Youngstown, Boardman, Poland, Canfield, and that those people would not be around to support the park? I know from talking to people, they claimed that the last couple of years when they changed their ticket policy and that they had a real poor group of people coming to the park, more like a gang type atmosphere who just looked for trouble. Do you think that was what the problem was?

ES: You know, I am pretty sure they did have an entrance fee to get into the park and that was all you would have to pay for the day. I do not remember going there when that was instituted.

SS: I know when the park was getting ready to close and I was there, you would have a less desirable group of people in the park. That started to stop a lot of my friends and myself from going there because the crowd was a lot worse. They still ran events there. I still remember a lot of the older bands coming in there, like Buddy Rich and people like that. They used to have a half off sale there in the Spring and they used to have the Spring Thing there for the kids. There used to be a lot of events like that. It seemed to me that the crowd of people who were there was not as much interested in riding the rides as they were causing trouble.

ES: You are talking about the late 1970's. I never really attended the park that much later on. I did not have any kids. I think the general demise of the park came right along with the demise of everything else; unemployment, things like that.

SS: Right now, the whole area of Idora Park is just sitting there. There are still a lot of concessions that are still there. I think the train ride is out in Hubbard now. Somebody bought that. Do you think they could use that area now, even to just use it for a picnic area?

ES: The first thing you would have to do is police it. I do not think the city is in a position to do that. I really could not tell you what it could be used for. I think it could be used for housing, but who is going to develop it? There is so much area in the city in general that you could use for housing and so much housing in the city that could be revitalized. Why get into something new when you have something that could be improved at a cheaper cost?

SS: You were lucky enough to see Idora Park in its heyday. When it closed in 1984, what were your feelings?

ES: I was sad. We had no main ballrooms to go to anymore. Outside of Idora Park there were none, really. That was one of the main attractions for Idora Park, the dance hall. One day I was taking something to a friend that lived near Idora Park and I got on the wrong road and went down into the parking lot area of Idora Park. I was amazed at how empty everything looked. It was a surprise. The dance hall is still there.

SS: I do not think it is used for anything now. I remember the first time I went to the park after it closed was when they had one of the half-off sales by WHOT.

ES: I was out there with my daughter several times when they had those sales.

SS: I walked around the midway and it just seemed so deserted. It was so different.

ES: It was exactly like a ghost town. That is about the most I can remember about Idora.

SS: Is there anything you would like to add about the park or any other memories that might come to mind?

ES: No, not particularly.

SS: Well, thank you very much.

ES: You are welcome.

End of Interview