

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Westlake Terrace Project

Resident Experience

O. H. 713

RACHEL PELLESCI

Interviewed

by

Joseph Rochette

on

November 25, 1985

RACHEL DOROTHY PELLESCHI

Rachel Dorothy Pelleschi was born on October 22, 1912 in Italy, the daughter of Paul and Delphine Rossi. She was raised in Girard, where she attended grade school. In an effort to find work during the turbulent years of the Great Depression, Miss Rossi went to live in Rochester where she met and married her husband, Benedict Lewis Pelleschi, on April 4, 1934. The Pelleschi's eventually moved back to the Youngstown area to find work and to live.

Mr. and Mrs. Pelleschi were two of the original tenants of the Westlake Terrace housing development, the first of its kind in the United States under the Wagner Steagell Housing Act of 1937. As part of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal program, Westlake attempted to serve the needs of low income families who did not have the moeny to build or pay for their own houses.

Mrs. Pelleschi presently lives on Fifth Avenue in Youngstown with her son, Max. Mr. Pelleschi is deceased. Mrs. Pelleschi has four other children besides her son: Delphine, Shirley, Patricia, and Rachel. She retired from St. Elizabeth Hospital in april of 1973 where she began working in July 1957. She received the five year service pin and is presently a member of the Senior Citizens Club. Mrs. Pelleschi enjoys crocheting, reading, and her grandchildren. She is a member of St. Anthony's Church.

Joseph G. Rochette

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INTERVIEWEE: RACHEL PELLESCI

INTERVIEWER: Joseph Rochette

SUBJECT: downtown Youngstown, shops, stores, life at  
Westlake, low income housing

DATE: November 25, 1985

R: This is an interview with Rachel Pelleschi for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Westlake Terrace, by Joe Rochette, on November 25, 1985, at 1621 Fifth Avenue, in Youngstown, at approximately 2:00 p.m.

Tell me a little bit about yourself, where you're from, when you were born.

P: I was raised in Girard, Ohio, and I went to school there in Girard. When I was about nineteen years old, I went to Rochester, New York, where I met my husband. After I was there about four years we came back to this area. At that time things weren't so good. He got a job out here. We have been here ever since. I lived in an apartment on Broadway before we moved to the housing project. That was in 1937 when we came here from Rochester and we moved into the project around the end of January in 1940.

R: What school did you go to?

P: I went to St. Rose and then I went to Maple Avenue School. Then I went to the junior high school.

R: What are some of your memories from that period while you were going to school on what Girard was like or things that you used to do as a little kid, that kind of thing, about your family and your parents?

P: There weren't too many doings like there are today. We had no radios or television or anything like that. We

used to play games like baseball and Hide-and-Seek, tell stories, go to the movies. Girard hasn't changed too much, except for a few buildings and people who have gone out into the suburbs. As far as Girard is concerned there is not a very big change in it. We used to go to the movies. We weren't allowed to be too active or anything like that. Our parents kept us kind of strict. They also used to have summer classes where we would learn how to embroider and things like that right at the school. I believe it was at Maple Avenue School where we used to go. We used to take walks, and that's about it.

R: Were there any kinds of church-related activities, things that you used to do?

P: There might have been. I went to church and all that, but we never were active in anything at the time.

R: At that time in Girard would you say there were strong ethnic communities as far as different areas that would be populated by a particular . . . for example, Irish-Americans or Italian-Americans?

P: We lived on Morris Avenue. When we first moved there, my parents came from Europe. The people felt kind of funny that we were Italians, but after awhile they were all nice. I really can't say if there were groups like you say; I really don't know. I guess we always stayed in our own class. I don't remember anything like that.

R: What kind of work did your father do?

P: My father used to work in Standard Textile. It was right on Federal Street coming toward town. They have the meat packing place over there since. He used to work in the shipping department.

R: Would he get to work by bus?

P: He used to walk most of the time, yes.

R: That meant on a winter morning, especially back in those days, getting up pretty early.

P: Yes, getting up early and walking. He used to have steel things put on his rubbers so that he wouldn't fall on the ice. Yes, most of the time he walked. It probably was a good half hour, forty-five minute walk.

R: When you had gone to Rochester and met your husband, was that a really big change for you as far as going from here to there?

- P: Yes, it was. I had never been away from home. My sister was married and lived out there. I thought maybe that if I went to a bigger city, that I would be able to get a job. That was impossible at that time. It was a big change, but I kind of liked it in a way because I wasn't kept so strict.
- R: About how many years did you stay there?
- P: I went in 1932, and we came back in 1937.
- R: When you came back to Youngstown in 1937, was that for a promise of work?
- P: Yes, it was for a promise of work. Then my husband got a job in the machine shop off of Mahoning Avenue up there. It was on a side street. He worked there for a while.
- R: When do you first remember either reading or hearing anything about them building or the idea of that Westlake home?
- P: Our apartment that we had was close by. One morning we woke up and heard all of this noise and stuff. They were moving houses. There were houses down there. There weren't too many. There was all of this noise with the tractors, and we found out they were building apartments down there. I thought it was very nice because we were living in a house with an apartment, and I thought we would have our own place. The apartments were very nice. People were very nice at the time when we moved in there.
- R: What did you have to go through to apply and what were the requirements?
- P: They had an office in a trailer. They had set their dates for when people could do down. You had to bring your marriage license. They wanted to make sure you were married. You also had to bring your children's birth certificates, your insurance, if you had any money in the bank, stuff like that.
- R: At that time were there any apartments finished being built by the time when you moved?
- P: They were working on them. We moved into our apartment when just part of them were finished. Then they finished the rest while we were there and also the Lexington settlement house.
- R: Yes, the Lexington.
- P: I don't remember if they had started on it or if they

started after we moved there to build it.

R: When they had apartments finished, were you prospective residents? Could you go and get a tour to see what they looked like inside?

P: No.

R: So they just put your name on a list.

P: Yes, they just sent us a letter to go down to the office. When we went down there, they assigned us our apartment, where we were going to live.

R: At that time were they strict as far as giving you rules and regulations to follow?

P: Yes, very strict, very strict. For one thing, we weren't allowed to have any kind of animals at all. You weren't allowed anybody living with you except your own family. If you had company, that was fine if they were staying for a few days, but that was it.

R: Did they ever have any kinds of inspections or would anybody come by to check up?

P: Not after we moved in they didn't. After you moved in, somebody would come in to see if you were settled and that was it.

R: What if you wanted or if there had to be any painting done or anything like that?

P: At first they did the painting for you. Then as the years went by they decided that if you wanted to paint, you could. They furnished the paint and the ladders. You could do your own painting, but it had to be the color that they wanted. They had a certain color like an off-white or beige. All the rooms were painted the same way, and you weren't allowed to paper them or paint them a different color or anything. That was the color that they wanted.

R: What do you remember about your apartment itself as far as what the rooms were like and things like that?

P: We had a four room apartment. They were up and down. They had all cement floors. They furnished the refrigerator and stove. The cupboards were very nice, but they weren't wood; they were like . . .

R: Like an aluminum kind of stuff?

- P: Yes, aluminum. We had a nice size kitchen and living room. Upstairs we had two bedrooms and a bath. The bath was a nice size, and there was a nice, little square hall. The bedrooms were a little smaller than our rooms downstairs. There were closets in each room. There were cupboards for your towels and things in the hall. They were very nice.
- R: Were there any problems with neighbors or whoever would be living next to you? Could you hear back and forth?
- P: We didn't have too much trouble with that, but I imagine you could hear. The neighbors at the time tried to have consideration for one another.
- R: Were you responsible for any outside work like grass or anything like that?
- P: At first they did it, but later on they wanted everybody to take turns. We did, but our court pitched in and we all gave so much money. Then one of the maintenance men working there would cut our lawn for us. In the laundry room we all had a turn to go down and clean it. It didn't come very often, but we all had to go down and wash and sweep the laundry room.
- R: Things like that were organized by a group.
- P: Not really. Each family took care of their own at the time that they had to do it, but like the grass, yes, it was the group. But the laundry . . . If it was my turn, I went down and I scrubbed it and washed it. Most of the time the people kept their things in order and picked up after them. It was just like hosing it down.
- They had two rooms there. You had your own washer. Three people or four people at a time could wash. Then we had our day. Some had morning schedules; some had afternoon schedules, and some had evening schedules. You had to be out of there by a certain time. They had another room where it was like a drying room. Each one had their own gate. They had them fenced in. They had big blowers. All you had to do was push the button and the blower would go on. In about an hour or so your clothes were dried.
- R: As far as your schedule when you washed, did that stay relatively the same all the time you were there?
- P: Yes. If you wanted it changed, like my family grew while I was there, and I needed more than one wash schedule, I would call down at the office, and they would arrange it for me. Everybody knew their schedule. Some ladies like to get up early in the morning like at 6:00, and they would go

- down and wash. Some would rather go down a little later in the afternoon like around 12:00. Then some went down at about 6:00. If we were through before our time, they could go down.
- R: Let's say you wanted to have a little flower box or something outside one of your windows or whatever, like plant anything, were you allowed to?
- P: We planted flowers, but we didn't have any flower boxes. They left a space for us if we wanted to plant flowers in the front. In the back they had bricked the back part. They had a walk and then they bricked so far. They left a space where you could plant flowers if you wanted to.
- R: Would people do that?
- P: Yes, we all did. I lived in one of the buildings that had four families right on Lexington. We all took care of our own little flowers. We put them in maybe together. You would have to divide them, but it really didn't make any difference. Our neighbors were very nice. Most of those people who moved there at that time were young couples who probably lived with their parents after they married because they couldn't afford to go out on their own. This gave them a chance to be on their own because the rent was cheap.
- R: People at the time really had a pride in what they were . . .
- P: Yes, right. We never had any problems with anybody. Even the children were pretty nice.
- R: As you were raising a family with kids like that, as your kids were born or when they were young or anything, were there any kinds of services to help if they were sick? Was there anything there?
- P: Yes. Not if they got sick. They had a well baby clinic at the settlement house where you could take your baby there and the doctor looked at it and gave it the shots and all of that.
- R: Other than just living there in your apartment were there any kinds of activities? Did the people have groups and those kinds of things?
- P: There were a lot of activities at the settlement. A bunch of us ladies formed a club there. We used to hold our meetings at the settlement house. They had a living room, kitchen, and we could bring our goodies or whatever and make our coffee there. They had a nice, big room with furniture in it and everything that we used. We had this club, and I belonged to it for a good many years. There was a nursery in the afternoon. They



- had activities for the kids after school. They had basketball and other activities for the older boys. They had a scout troop. There were a lot of activities going on. They had parties for Halloween. At Christmastime they would take care of the poor kids. There were a lot of doings there.
- R: Really for kids and for older people the settlement house gave you something to do.
- P: Right. In fact, they had bought sewing machines from Singer at the time for the settlement house. They got a group of us ladies to go down to Singer's and we took sewing lessons free because they bought all of those sewing machines.
- R: With that settlement house did it have a separate manager or director?
- P: Yes, it was separate. There was a man who took care of it. He didn't live there, but there were some people who could live there and run it. Mr. Weikart was his name. He was a very nice fellow. He was the head, like a director I would say. Then they had this older woman. Her name was Mrs. Anderson.
- R: So the director of the settlement house would take care of activities and manage it.
- P: Yes, and he used to have workers. My husband was very active at the time with the settlement house. He used to have basketball and scout troops and stuff like that there.
- R: During the war years during World War II, did they ever have anything like air raid drills?
- P: Yes, they did. We all used to run down into the laundry room and stay there until it was all clear. That was about the only thing we did that I remember from our court.
- R: During that time during that same period during the war, were there a lot of women who lived there whose husbands would be overseas?
- P: Yes.
- R: Do you know anything about how maybe they would . . . With their husbands away as far as paying their rent or anything, how would they?
- P: I really don't know that. I guess their husbands sent them their pay. They used to pay them in the service. It was so much for their wives and so much for themselves. I think that is how they got along. I'm not sure.

- R: As far as where the office was at down there on Federal Street, whenever your rent was due or anything, would you go down there?
- P: We walked down, yes, to pay it.
- R: Do you remember anybody there, a manager or anybody?
- P: I just remember the director of the place who was there in the beginning. His name was Mr. Paul Strait. Then he was there for quite a few years. Then I think he retired, and then there was a lady who took over. Her name was Mrs. Bartholomows, I think. Then there was someone else who took over when we moved out, but I don't remember her name.
- R: Anytime while you were there did it seem like people would be moving in or out, or did it seem like it was stable as far as families staying?
- P: A lot of people stayed, but there were a lot of people who moved in and didn't like it and moved out.
- R: Even after the project was first built, was there always probably that list that whenever an apartment would be empty that maybe there would always be somebody probably to go right in?
- P: Yes, I don't think they had any problems renting them out at that time.
- R: As far as the community itself, not only Westlake but outside of it looking upon Westlake, was it looked at as a positive thing do you think as far as helping people and whatever? Now today people in Youngstown look down on Westlake.
- P: Yes, that is right.
- R: At that time it was probably . . .
- P: The only thing they called it was low rent housing. I imagine there were a lot of people that looked down on Westlake. While we were there, we had no complaints. We went about our lives like we do today. I raised my family there, and I raised a good family. I'm really happy that they are all good.
- R: Who were some of the good friends that you made while you were there?
- P: My neighbors, Mrs. David Davies, Mrs. Haddox, Mrs. Knight, Mrs. Adams, and a lot of names that I have forgotten over the years were the closest ones to me. If I would see some of the people, I would remember them. In fact I wasn't one to go here and there. They were right around in my own court. They used to call each section a court. I mostly mingled

with them, the people around there.

R: Did you keep in contact with a lot of these people even after you had moved?

P: Yes, I did, but as the years go by, you lose track of one another, but there for awhile I did.

R: While you were at Westlake, whenever you would do any shopping or anything like that, were there stores like grocery stores or whatever in the immediate area where you could go to at all?

P: There was just a little grocery store. It was a neighborhood store right on the corner of Lexington and Wirt Streets. If we needed anything, we would go there. Then there was a store up on Parmelee. It was about halfway from Griffith to Belmont. There was a grocery store there. I forget the people who ran the store at that time. Then there was the A & P that we used to go to. At that time we used to go downtown a lot. They had a lot of meat markets downtown. We used to go do some of our shopping there.

R: During that period did your husband do some of the work that his father did? You said that he was a lather for the floor.

P: No, he never did that kind of work. He was a jack-of-all-trades. He used to work on construction. He was a mailman around the housing project during the war. He worked in a mill; he did all different things.

R: That was a period too when you pretty much took work wherever you could get it. It wasn't like people had steady jobs like today for twenty, thirty, or forty years. You had to go from one place to another.

P: Some people in the mills stayed; they worked and they spent their lifetime there, but my husband hated the mills. He didn't like mill work.

R: Even in that area you were pretty close to the mills. Did you have any of that problem with the soot and smoke?

P: Yes, a lot of soot and smoke. The soot would get on your windowsills. You had to dust them every day.

R: So there was a lot of cleaning and stuff like that as far as that goes.

P: Yes.

R: On weekends or whatever would you ever go into Youngstown itself, into town at all?

- P: Oh, yes, we used to go to the movies downtown. I used to go shopping. I used to go downtown about two or three times a week in those days.
- R: Was it a trolley back in those days?
- P: It was a regular bus like they have now. They had a bus stop at every corner, and it was only 10¢ fare. A lot of times we were so close that sometimes the neighbors and I would walk.
- R: In those days it wasn't like today where you could pretty much walk downtown.
- P: You could walk anywhere in those days. No one bothered you. We used to go to a show at night and come home late like at 11:30 or 12:00 at night and walk home from the bus stop. Nobody ever stopped you or did anything. It was different than it is today.
- R: With your house itself did you have to lock your doors like you do today?
- P: No, we never locked our doors. Nobody ever bothered us.
- R: When you would go downtown, for example, like going to the movies, in those days what were some of the theaters you could go to?
- P: There was the State Theater, the Paramount, the Palace Theater, the Warner Brothers. There was a theater right up at the square. They have changed it now. It was in the corner. I forget what they called it. I think it was the Strand. There were a lot of movie houses.
- R: So there was never a shortage.
- P: No. If you didn't like the movie at one movie house, you went to another. That was about all we had in those days really.
- R: In those days too when you went to a movie was it crowded?
- P: Yes, very. Sometimes we had to stand in line to get in.
- R: That is something else that is different from today. When you think of Youngstown comparing it today to back in those days, was it crowded?
- P: Yes, people were always on the sidewalk. I don't see that crowd anymore, maybe at the malls. You know how it is at the malls. Well, that was how the streets would be downtown, and you would have to wait sometimes for a bus. Maybe you

couldn't get on a bus the first time when you were waiting for it. You would have to wait for the next bus because there were so many people who would have to get on the bus. A lot of people took buses in those days. They had cars too, but a lot of people didn't have cars, so they took the buses. But there were a lot of people. When I go downtown today, it really turns my stomach because of the way it looks. The stores are all getting broken down. Every store downtown was filled. I mean they really looked nice on the outside and inside. There used to be a lot of restaurants downtown too.

R: As far as the stores there were some of the same ones like Strouss.

P: Yes. There were Strouss and McKelvey's. In those days Higbee's was McKelvey's, and the big department stores. They had about two or three five and dimes like Woolworth's and Murphy's and Kreske's. They had a lot of dress shops and hats. They had a lot of hat shops because in those days we used to wear hats. There were jewelry stores, everything. Those buildings were all filled in down there; J C Penney's was also downtown.

R: So you had a lot of little shops that would just specialize in shoes and things like that?

P: Yes, right, shoe stores. Baker's was down there too at that time.

R: As far as restaurants and things were concerned would people, just to go out, go down there?

P: They had nice restaurants to go to like if you wanted to go out to eat and take in a movie after, yes.

R: So you could in those days go downtown and spend an evening and get everything?

P: Yes, and nobody ever bothered you down there. There were always people on the streets. When we used to wait for the buses . . . That last bus down there was about 12:30, I think. There were still people on the streets. It was nice.

R: As far as markets and things like that during that period were there any there in the town?

P: Market places?

R: Places to buy vegetables or any kinds of . . .

P: Yes, there was a market. The name of it was Ole's Market. Ole's Market had everything, anything that you wanted to buy.

You could enter the market right from Federal Street. There was a drugstore. Right across the street from Strouss at the corner there, was a five and dime at one time. Right next door to it there was a five and dime at one time. Right next door to it there was a drugstore. Then you would go into the drugstore and walk down a little ramp; you would go right into Ole's Market. They had everything down there, anything that you wanted to buy. It was big. I couldn't tell you how big it was; it was a really big place.

R: As far as tomatoes or anything that you needed . . .

P: Everything was there. They had all kinds of fresh vegetables, baked goods, meat, poultry; anything that you wanted was there.

R: I suppose being one of the places like that downtown that was probably always busy too.

P: Yes, it was. They had a lot of workers down there. Of course, they had markets like Pyatt Street Market that was there. Then at one time they used to have a market down on Westlake where the tracks were.

R: They called that Westlake Crossing.

P: Yes. Across the street there was a big market place there too.

R: In those days if you would cross the bridge there and go up on Market Street, were there more stores and things like that?

P: Yes, Market Street was almost like a town in itself.

R: Back in those days, aside from that it was safer and looked better, it was still almost the way it is today with stores and probably restaurants and things like that.

P: Yes, the stores. Some of the stores, of course, they knocked down, but it is just about like that. There were stores right along all the way up Market Street as far as the Southern Park Mall.

R: While you were living at Westlake, where did your kids go to school and everything like that?

P: They went to St. Ann's School. A lot of the kids from Westlake went to St. Ann's. They had from first to eighth. After that they had to go to Rayen or Ursuline.

R: Didn't St. Ann's have a church too at that time?

P: Yes, they tore it down when they fixed West Federal.

R: Was that a big church?

P: Yes, it was big and it was an old church; it was a beautiful church.

R: Would that probably service a lot of the people who lived down in Brier Hill and that whole area there?

P: Yes. Well, a lot of people further down went to St. Anthony's. The people up around this end, north side, went to St. Ann's. Most of the people in the projects and their kids went to St. Ann's. St. Ann's was not a rich parish; it was a poor parish. When the project was built, it kind of built it up a little bit.

R: Was it an old church? Had it been there for awhile?

P: Yes, real old. It celebrated seventy-five years a good many years back. It must have been about one hundred or more years old when they tore it down.

R: I suppose probably after they tore it down, by that time maybe there probably weren't that many people. The parish probably maybe wasn't as big as it had been previously.

P: Right. The people were moving away. They were supposed to build another St. Ann's, but they never did.

R: In the time when you were ready to move what changes did you notice like from when you first moved and came in?

P: They started to mix the white and the black. In the beginning they had the blacks on one side and the whites on another side. They started to mix the whites and the blacks. They figured whether we liked it or not that was the way it was going to be. It was still pretty nice when we moved. That was the only thing I remember that they were doing. It was just the beginning when we moved out. We lived there from 1940 until 1945. We lived there for fourteen years.

R: In those years probably more and more people were starting to move out?

P: Yes, the war was over. People saved money. After the war they all started buying homes.

R: Building homes of their own?

P: Yes.

R: Now when you look back on it and maybe at the time after you moved out, that time then, what are your overall feelings about the time you lived there?

- P: I was very happy to be lucky enough to have an apartment there when we first moved there. I wasn't dissatisfied or anything while we lived there. I always wanted my own home. Somehow or other it seemed like the years were going by and we weren't getting anywhere. I don't regret my years living in the housing project. I'm not ashamed of it because at the time that was about what we could afford.
- R: A lot of people who we have talked to have said that at that time it served its purpose.
- P: Right.
- R: Thank you very much. You have been a big help.

END OF INTERVIEW