

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

YSU Idora Park Project

Idora Park

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VELMA THORNE

Interviewed

by

Scott Smith

on

October 30, 1991

## VELMA THORNE

Velma Thorne was born Velma Zimmer, raised in Girard, Ohio, where she spent her early life, lived many in New York City, until the death of her husband. She enjoyed growing up in the Girard community, even though in the Depression times were very tight and it was many times a struggle to get by. Velma felt that the close community, which was not very large, helped in taking care of each other. Her mother raised Velma because her father died when she was very young. Velma felt that as rough as times got, people still got by because they shared. When one person was down the rest of the neighborhood helped them out, and so on. Like her sister, Kathryn Rice, Velma also pointed to a simpler time in her youth when games were simple and so were the times. Velma noted that her mother running a boarding house was important [in] helping the family get by with money and food, by having boarders the family was always assured of having food and a place to live.

Velma, like the others in her family, attended Saint Rose School from grades one through eight. Grades nine through twelve were spent at Girard High School. Football games and dances were some of the major social events which kept Velma's life very interesting and fun while growing up. She met her husband, Charles, in Girard and the two eventually moved to New York due to his job. After Charles's death, Velma returned to Girard to be with her family and friends. She remains very active in her community, especially in the Saint Rose Church.

--Scott Smith

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S      This is an interview with Velma Thorne for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Idora Park Project, by Scott Smith, on October 30, 1991, at 937 Woodlong, Girard, Ohio, at 11 35 a m.

I'd like you to discuss yourself a little bit, about your own history How long have you been a resident of Girard, Ohio?

T      [I've lived in Girard] since I was born

S      So, you've lived in Girard your whole life?

T      I've lived in Girard all of my life. Well, not all of my life, because I left in about 1944 and I lived in New York until I came back in 1972

S      How did you like New York?

T: I loved it

S: Why did you come back?

T: I came back because my husband died and my family was here

S: You came back for your family

T: Yes. But otherwise, all of my growing up was done in Girard

S: How did you like the community growing up?

T: It was fine. [If it were] otherwise, I wouldn't be here. All of my family is here, and I had no family there, so I just decided to come back

S: What's your best memory of New York City?

T: Oh, my goodness. My best memory of New York City? I really don't know

S: What do you remember?

T: I lived and worked there for 30 years, so there's no one thing really. It's a very interesting place to live

S: There is a lot of hustle and bustle

T: It's a very interesting place to live

S: [There are] people coming and going

T: There is a lot of stimulation there

S: Growing up in Girard, what would you do for fun when you were growing up in the immediate community?

T: Everybody today will laugh about this. All the children today will laugh about this. What did we do? We went to the library. We went up to Liberty Park. We belonged to individual little club groups. I don't remember anything else we did. We all did what our imaginations let us do. That is about the size of it. That is about right. There was very little structure of entertainment of any kind for children. Boys had theirs--they would play baseball and football, but they were just pick-up games. You didn't have little league and things like that, as I remember. I don't remember any little boys doing that. What you did, you did on your own.

- S And they didn't have video games
- T No way (Laughter) We didn't even have radio much, during the early part [of childhood] So, they talk about people living out on the farms We were all farmers then.
- S This whole community was?
- T No, I don't mean that we were all farmers Now, you talk about living out where there's not a lot of video and this, that, and the other thing No one had it; we just didn't have those things, but we had a lot of fun I think we did a lot more active things on our own, like going walking and having picnics and things like that
- S How much have you seen Girard change?
- T It really hasn't changed all that much, I think. It doesn't seem to me that it has
- S So it's still basically the same type of community?
- T Yes, I think so
- S Did a lot of people stay in Girard, or did a lot of people move out of Girard?
- T I can't really tell you that Remember, I was gone for 30 years, so a lot of things happened that I know absolutely nothing about That's a long time to be away Personally, it doesn't seem that it has changed so much Of course, having been gone for 30 years, I don't know nearly as many people as I did growing up Then, I knew practically everyone in town. So, that's the only difference I noticed
- S We'll start talking about Idora Park and work our way up, from the earliest memories up until the most recent memories you have of Idora Park How far back can you remember Idora Park? Did you go there as a child?
- T I remember going to Idora Park for the first time on a school picnic I was small We must have gone by street car That's the only way I can think we could have gotten there If I remember correctly, they used to have a school day picnic out there. We went to that As I say, I was quite small I remember that I went in the swimming pool, and I thought I was in the ocean I don't remember exactly when that was Of course, I was fascinated with the midways and all that sort of thing It was a real exciting place to go when you are a child But I don't remember exactly when it was
- S Did you go on the rides?
- T Well, then, I'm sure we went on the Merry-go-round and those little things, because I was

really quite small and I probably didn't go. I never went there too much until I got into high school. Then, we were able to go more. So then, of course, you went. We had the Jack Rabbit. That was the biggest roller coaster. That was always one of the favorites.

Of course, as you got older, you went because of the dance bands. I think it was really a three cents day. We used to get coupons or something. With a coupon and three cents, you could go on the ride and do this, that, and the other thing. Of course, then they started bringing big bands there. We were in high school when quite a few bands came.

S What bands do you remember coming in and playing?

T Guy Lombardo was there. Enoch Light, for some reason I remember Enoch Light. I think Jan Garber was there one time. They were all popular bands of the time. Of course, Guy Lombardo was just getting started at the time. Actually, Sammy Kay was there, too. I remember having seen Sammy Kay. But, that was really the main reason for going once you got a little older. You could meet a lot of people.

S Was it basically like a big social event, or did people just come out to hear the bands?

T Oh, we would dance! We used to dance. When we danced, we danced on the big ballroom dance floors. We didn't have the little floors that most places have now. They were big dance floors. There are few big dance floors, I guess, that are still around. We went mostly just to get together, and we did it for the rides, too. We went once a year or twice a year, something like that. Of course, we would go if there was a band you particularly liked that would be coming down. I don't remember too much until I came back. Then we would go to the home show, or the flower show. There were no more big bands. (Laughter)

S What big bands did you like to go see the most? Was there anybody in particular?

T Guy Lombardo, I think, was everybody's favorite. There was another--I can't remember who it was--we used to go see them a lot. Well, not a lot, because they didn't come that often. They would come for maybe a few days every year. That's about all they would come. But then, there would be different ones that would be coming. They had a local band, I'm sure, between those times.

S Was this--today, kids go see rock concerts--along the same lines? If Guy Lombardo came in to play, would everybody get real excited about it a couple weeks before?

T No. I don't recall anything like that. We looked forward to it, but I don't recall anyone getting hysterical or anything about it. We just hoped that we got to go. At least, that's my impression. Of course, you were happy if you got to go, you know. You were never sure that you would [get to go]. You had to see how much money there was available to get down there, pay to get in, and maybe have a coke or something. It was never terribly expensive to do. I don't remember what the fees were. They had a lot of afternoon dancing down there.

Then, they weren't the big bands. Those were local bands. Whenever they had a picnic, they had local people playing That's about all I remember about that.

S What else would you do in this area when you were in high school? If you didn't go to Idora Park, what else would you do?

T We would go down to the local theater We would walk down to the theater and walk home (Laughter) Then we would stop by for a coke

S Was that when they used to do a bunch of movies in a row? Now, we just go see one movie and it costs you an arm and a leg.

T All they ever had was one movie [They had] a cartoon and a movie, a fox movie tone, a news reel. But it was just one movie.

S. Was there a theater in Girard?

i Yes At that time it was Mock's, and then it was Roman's I don't know what happened to it after that

S Is there anything else you would do in Girard? Did the school have dances or anything like that?

T Well, we had a freshman dance, and a sophomore dance I don't remember dances on a regular basis, but we always had a spring dance Of course, everybody loved the football games There were a lot of pep rallies in conjunction with the football games.

S Were there any big rivalries?

T Girard and Niles had a big rivalry Those are the ones I remember I would say that has gone by the board But at that time, it was Girard and Niles when I was going Of course, none of the kids had cars of their own or anything like that, so we went by streetcars, and later we had buses So, there weren't that many cars when I was in high school for kids to use

S Is that how you got out to Idora Park?

T Well, you take the street car downtown and change to the Idora Park street car (Laughter)

S How was the streetcar out to Idora Park? Was it just like a straight ride out to Idora Park? Did it make any stops?

- T I don't remember. It was marked "Idora Park", but I think it stopped other places. I don't remember.
- S It didn't just stop at Idora and turn around and come back to other places, just like a line back and forth?
- T I think it dropped people off, but I'm not sure about that. Maybe on special days, they would have special buses, but I don't remember. I think it was just a regular bus that line going out there, that's all. They had streetcar lines going out on all of the main streets.
- S How was the appearance of the park when you were in high school? How did the park look? I know it went under several different changes in the space of time that it was open.
- T I don't remember any big renovations.
- S Were there any games or anything that you would like to go play when you were there?
- T No. They had a ball field, but I don't remember ever going to any games at the ball field, except maybe if we were at a school picnic and they had one. Of course, they had games for the kids at the school picnics like they do now. They had all kinds of races and stuff at a specified time in the afternoon. Of course, there were usually games of chance. As I recall, when they had picnics, they had clowns and things. But if you went down just for the day when there wasn't a special picnic of some kind, they didn't have that. That really is about as much as I remember. People in Girard didn't get down there as frequently as people who were within walking distance or just a short hop from there. I'm sure that there were people who spent a lot more time down there. They would naturally remember more things.
- S I remember talking to some of the people who lived on the East Side. They would say, "We'd only get out there once or twice a year, because it was always a big walk."
- T That's right.
- S I talked to a person from Pennsylvania who used to come out once or twice a year.
- T I'm sure the people in the area remember a lot more things. They might remember what color some things were painted or something, but I don't because we weren't out there that often.
- S When you were in high school did you ever go in any of the game rooms where they had different games like pinball and stuff?
- T That was after my time. (Laughter)

S Did they have any restaurants there or anything like that?

T I don't recall any You could get hot dogs and things like that There was one, I'm sure, later on, but I don't remember it Didn't they get a beer license or something?

S Yes

T Before that, I don't remember them having food, except things like hot dogs and probably hamburgers We usually took picnic baskets We didn't buy too much food. Usually everyone went out and had a picnic. I don't remember any restaurants Heidelberg Gardens, I think, was the name of it. I think I may have been there once or twice later on, but I don't remember too much about it

S What was this area like when you were in high school? How would you describe it economically?

T It was bad We were just coming out of the Depression Some people were working and others were not We was just coming out of the Depression, so a lot of people were still out of work

S Money was pretty tight

T The mills hadn't really started up yet, to produce more material, but they were starting to pick up They were bad years around the time I was in high school

S When did you move out of the area to New York?

T This was after the war

S Was it 1947?

T No, I went in 1944

S How was the area during the war?

T The area was busy

S Was it busy with the mills?

T Yes Everybody was working I never went down to the park during that time

S Yes, I know In discussion with other people, they had to ration hours

T We did that. There was food rationing, shoe rationing, and gasoline rationing.

S How was it living in that time? Was everything really that tight? Was it that hard to get certain things?

T Oh, yes. But we did it, no big deal. We got through it.

S Do you think people were a lot closer then? Was the community closer at this time?

T I don't know.

S Today, it seems like everybody wants to go in their own direction, even in terms of family. People go their own way.

T Yes, but I still think if we had some kind of a big tragedy or something, people--when you go through something like a depression or a war--pull together, otherwise, they don't. That's about the size of it. There were a few people then, I'm sure, who took every advantage they could. There are people who take every advantage they can, regardless of the times. (Laughter) During a depression, or a war, or in [other] times of tragedy or hard times, people pull together.

S Did you work during the war?

T Yes, at the Niles Lamp Shop. I worked shifts. (Laughter) A man from Girard drove me up. We would fill his car, and that way, he could get a little extra gas for his car. If he went up only by himself, he would get only a certain amount. By taking us all up--of course, it saved us a little bit of time and money, too, because otherwise we took the bus up. If we took the bus up, we had to leave a little earlier and stand in the cold and wait for it to come, so it was much nicer for us, too. It was better all the way around that he drove us up. So, I would stand there inspecting lamps.

S How did you inspect lamps?

T You just stand there and just look at them to see if there are any flaws in them. That's all. So that's what I did. For three years, I worked there. It was almost three years. But, I think people are the same all of the time, regardless.

S Did you go to the park after you returned?

T I don't think I went through the park area at all since I've been back. Oh, yes I was. I went to the Wean picnic. Wean had a picnic there. It didn't look that different. They still had games for the kids in the ball park, or what used to be the ball park. There was a big field.

there We took our own picnics I don't know if there was a place to eat or not

S Was this a business or company picnic?

T Wean United had an annual picnic there one year Like all picnics, they had prizes for the kids I've been to a couple of home shows and a couple flower shows there, as well

S. What were the home shows like? What would they do at the home shows?

T People would come in and display home furnishings, and other things for the house They were more like commercial shows to promote sales of different products for the house

S Where would this be held?

T I think it was in what used to be the dance hall I think it used to be the dance hall. I'm sure that's where it was I can't think of any other building there that would be big enough for it. That's the only place I can think of.

S Were those pretty popular? Did a lot of people go see the home shows?

T Well, when I went, it seemed like there were a lot I really didn't pay attention to that I was not interested in how many people it drew, and how much profit or how much action it stirred up I just went to see what was there I was interested in the home stuff It seemed to me like they were well attended while I was there I don't know what would be considered a lot of people I think those were the only two times that I felt bad when I saw the burnt Wild Cat (Laughter) They have the little train that used to ride around out here at "Kennedy Square" I'm going to take that train ride one of these days (Laughter) When you go back like that, you go to see the one thing and that's all You don't pay too much attention For someone who might have loved the amusement park--there are some people who really love amusement parks--no matter where they go, they find an amusement park They might have gone more frequently than I and found more things, but I just went once in a while

S You mentioned when the Wild Cat burned What did you think about when you saw the Wild Cat?

T I felt bad because that was always my favorite ride

S What was it like riding the Wild Cat?

T Haven't you ever been on it?

S Oh, I was, but I was scared to death when I rode on the Wild Cat I don't know why I went on it and rode it and I kept getting on and on How do you remember riding the Wild Cat?

T I remember it in the same way You're half scared, but in another way, you're exhilarated

S It was a real bumpy ride

T You're half afraid, but deep down you know that it's most unlikely that anything desperate would happen to you I think you go just for the excitement

S How important do you think Idora Park was to the community?

T What do you mean by the community? It was a place of entertainment for those people who could go At the time, of course, people didn't have a lot of stuff brought into the home, so it was a change of scenery. It was some place exciting to go There weren't very many places or ways to do that The way kids now talk about Disneyland, Idora Park was our Disneyland If you got to go there once a year, well man, you had it made If you didn't go there this summer, well maybe you'll get there next summer That was about the size of it, really

S That's real interesting When I was little, we used to go to Idora Park all of the time We were able to walk there I guess maybe that's how it is with Cedar Point now, because I haven't been to Cedar Point for a long time It's interesting to see how much distance has changed in time, because now I get here in 15 minutes from Youngstown It was a bigger deal to make that drive

T Oh, yes You had to take slow public transportation, or even when you had the cars, your cars didn't go fast You didn't have the highways To do something was really an expedition You just didn't do things--unless it was close to home--on the spur of the moment, because it just took too long For us, going out to Idora Park was kind of a long trip out

S Were there any other parks in the area at that time?

T Do you mean amusement parks?

S Yes I know at one point, Lake Milton had a park, but it might have been a little bit later

T I was never at a Lake Milton park I don't know of any other amusement parks We had all kinds of little parks

S What were the little parks like?

T Well, in Girard we had Avon Park We could go picnicking and things like that They had a dance hall there, but I don't remember ever going there We used to hold our pep rallies

there sometimes before the Niles-Girard football games I think I did go there once or twice when they had community dances up there But they had no amusements, at least not very much I don't remember any amusements up there. I think New Castle always had a park, even at the time of Idora, but that was even farther away New Castle isn't very far now

S No That would have been a real big trip to go out to New Castle

T You couldn't bring any milk in your picnic basket It would be sour by the time you got there (Laughter) I don't remember any others.

S So, Idora was basically the number one entertainment place?

T If you wanted a big city or entertainment, that was about it

S. That was the big city entertainment? Was there only the bands, the rides, and the food?

T Yes

S Okay, just a couple real quick questions and then we'll be done With the way things have changed, especially the kids of today with their different interests like video games and stuff like that, do you think a small park like Idora Park could do business today? Do you think people would have an interest in going to a park like that?

T I doubt it

S Why do you feel this way?

T Well, because it would be fine for youngsters up until about ten years old But after that, youngsters want more That wouldn't satisfy them, because you see too much You can see Kings Island, or you can see Disneyland They stop up in Sandusky at the big park For small children it would be okay It would be great, but I'm sure their interests would change They wouldn't be interested in doing it once they got to be probably nine or 10 years old I'm sure by the time they were twelve they would think that was the most boring thing in the world I may be wrong, but I don't think so. I think the transportation is too easy to go to places that offer more

S I think that's how everybody feels

T Well, people just aren't satisfied They see too much other stuff on television So, I doubt it [could stay in business], except on a very small scale for young children

S Because of young children, it could probably stay in business

- T I really don't think they would be a financial success
- S I think we've already discussed about how important Idora Park was Do you think that it was the number one source of top rate, big city, entertainment in this area?
- T For that kind of entertainment, you could go to the movies. They had wonderful movie theaters down town if you wanted movies At Stambaugh Auditorium, they had wonderful dances At the movies you would see a movie At Stambaugh, you went to a dance or the Elms Ballroom, which is another dance hall where they would dance I would say the park had the biggest draw because of the variety of things you could do Outdoors you could do swimming, you could be walking and riding the rides, or you could be in the dance hall So I would say it was the most versatile It appealed to most people because there were such a variety of things to do at the same time If you stayed in town, you do the same things. As far as being the most entertaining, that depends For somebody who didn't like that kind of thing, no I thought that it was a definite asset at the time
- S If you could use one word to describe Idora Park, what would be the word?
- T Oh, it would depend on the age I was When I was a youngster, I would say, "Fantastic!"
- S How about in high school?
- T Well, it was a place to go to dance By that time, you still were looking to do different things It did not fulfill all of the different things that you wanted to do Maybe you wanted to go to more movies or to a lot of different places, so it did not serve that purpose, I think There was a time when you went to Idora and it was great We loved to go to Idora Park It was wonderful
- S Thank you very much
- T You are welcome

END OF INTERVIEW