

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Niles Fire Brick Company

Personal Experience

O H 1600

PHILLIP TOMLIN

Interviewed

by

James Allgren

on

August 8, 1994

PHILLIP TOMLIN

Phillip R Tomlin was born August 20, 1946 in Warren, Ohio, the son of Joseph and Dorothy Libert Tomlin. He is the descendant of one of the several families that migrated from Olive Hill, Kentucky at the turn of the century to work at the Niles Fire Brick Company, manufacturers of refractory linings for heavy industry. A 1965 graduate of Howland High School, Mr Tomlin served in the United States Navy from 1965 to 1969. Since his discharge he has been self employed as both an independent sub-contractor and short-haul truck driver. He presently resides in Niles and is the father of three children, Dorothy Jean, Jessica Rae, and Andrea Lynn.

-- James Allgren

A This is an interview with Phillip Tomlin for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Niles Fire Brick Company, by James Allgren, on March 8, 1994, at 1 30 p m

Mr Tomlin, I would like to thank you for coming out today Your father was employed by the Niles Fire Brick Company?

T Yes.

A When did he work there?

T. I am still trying to decide I think he started there in the real early 1940's.

A How long did he work there?

T. Until they actually shut down Thirty years So, as far as Niles Fire Brick, when ever he started until they closed, as Kaiser Refractories

A What was his job out there?

T His title was truck driver maintenance.

A So he was one of the truck drivers and maintenance men. So that would involve what sort of activities?

T. He was more a Jack of all trades. He would run the shovel to load the truck or drive the trucks, repair them He repaired all the tow motors Anything maintenance was his job He had his own maintenance shack that he worked out of, like with benches for repairs and things like that.

A While he was employed there, were there any other family members of yours that worked out there?

T. He had two brothers that worked there That was Fred Tomlin and Elmer

A Were they employed in similar work?

T No They worked piece work My dad was hourly He did not do any piece work

A So, your uncles were on piece work But your father, how did he feel about his work? Do you have any memories about anything he said about the job, particularly what he thought of the work or the company?

T Well, he knew he always had a place to work Whenever they would lay

off, Mr. Clingan always had work for him to do over at the big house there. It is a pretty big house, there is a lot of maintenance that he took care of. He said that he actually made more money when he was laid off than he did when he was working.

A: Was that an unusual case? Was your father fortunate in the fact that he was able to get that work, or did they try to do that for everyone?

T: It seemed like they tried to help everybody because there were people that all they would do was just work in the mill and clean up when they were laid off. They kept as many going as they possibly could. There were probably some that preferred to collect the unemployment.

A: Yes. I know people out of General Motors that will take their layoffs.

T: I do not blame them. Some of them were farmers, if they could get anytime off, they would take advantage of it.

A: As far as it goes, he was pretty satisfied with the job and the work?

T: Apparently, he put thirty years in.

A: Was he involved in the Union at all?

T: I believe he was treasurer at one time, AFL-CIO [American Federation of Labor - Congress of Industrial Organizations]. I think he was originally CIO, and they merged with the AFL - CIO. I think it was originally CIO.

A: So, he was Treasurer of the union for a spell?

T: I am pretty sure, Treasurer or Secretary. He might have been Secretary. Him and one of the Infante's -- I cannot remember -- Alex maybe. I am sure one of the Infante's, but I cannot remember which one. Two-gun, they called him.

A: Did he socialize a lot with the people from work?

T: We had one of the first TV's, a black and white Jewel. On Friday nights, a lot of people would come over and watch Friday night fights because we were the only ones that had a TV. My dad worked on cars, financial substitute. A lot of the people that worked with him would bring their cars over to our house. Yes, he was real friendly with most everybody there. Just like a little family.

A: We found a lot of that, there was a lot of closeness out at the plant.

- T A lot of closeness, him and Ralph Parrey were like brothers
- A. What can you tell me about Ralph? Do you remember much about Ralph?
- T I do not know too much about work. Him and my dad were real good friends, and they were at the house a lot I am not sure what he did I think he ran the shovel, him and Ross Atkins Those are just household names that I can remember
- A Outside of them coming over to watch the fights and things, what sort of things did they like to do in their leisure activities?
- T A lot of fishing A lot of my family was from Kentucky, and I remember the earlier years when I was the youngster. My grandmother lived in Kentucky She lived here six months out of the year and there six months out of the year Climate-wise, depending on this climate. Every weekend he would go to Kentucky, and there was always a car load from the brick yard who would go with him, because they all had family down there They would just go down to visit, they car pooled, more or less. So, he did not have to drive every weekend; it was always somebody that would drive every weekend, they would car pool
- A That is fascinating. So, a lot of the people had relatives down there?
- T There are a lot of Olive Hill people, Olive Hill, Kentucky There are a lot of brick yards down in that area, and like you had already explained, unions were non-existing in the early days I do not think they were there in the 1920's They may have been, but they were not as powerful as they felt The scale down south was much lower than the scale up here. So, they migrated up here There was more work, especially during the war, with the steel mills going full blast I do remember letters, when my dad was like seventeen, that somebody had written down to my grandmother and said that there is work up here, if anybody wants it there is plenty of work. If they come up here, expect to work.
- A So, there was almost a migration?
- T Absolutely There were times when we would go down, and somebody would say, "Is the brick yard hiring?" If they were, they would come right back with us and go to work. It was always with the understanding that they would have to work. They would have to do a good job, they just did not come up here, work three days and go home If they wanted to work, the work was there

A So, a lot of people wounded coming up?

T Yes

A That is fascinating

T They came up with the attitude to work, not the attitude to just get a job and collect a pay check

A How about anybody coming up for any of the other work that was around, because the mills were booming Did they necessarily come to work at the fire brick, or was it just a general attraction to the area?

T I kind of think they could have worked anywhere My beliefs are that the brick yard was probably the best place in Niles to work It was a little cleaner than the steel mills, and I am sure a lot easier to work for People did seem to get along well together. When I was a young kid and would go to work with my dad for something, you would not know the difference between the foremen and the workers. I saw no common difference If one of them would leave, somebody would mention that that was the foreman, but you did not know it

A A lot of cooperation.

T Yes If you did your job, there was not much they had to say.

A: So, it was a good relationship between the workers and the management?

T Yes. There was an understanding, though, you do your job . If you did not do your job, you did not work there But everybody did, that is why it got to be the best place to work Ifeverybodyy does their own job, it makes it easier for everybody else

A: Did you ever visit the plant yourself?

T All of the time.

A: What are some of the things you remember about visiting the plant?

T I remember putting the motor in the boss' car one day, right in the brick yard, because my dad did not have the facilities to pull the motor out Ed Silva -- I think the guys name was Ed Silva -- he was General Foreman. It might have been the company car It is confusing, because I was very small, but I do remember going there when he was putting the motor in

the car. It didn't seem like much work. He had a couple of beers, he had a pretty good time while he was doing it. It was off time; it was not during working hours, it was like after work. So that is why I thought it might have been the foreman's car. He was there quite often. Everybody would chip in and help with it, more or less.

A: I know where that garage is at, too. Over on Langley Street, I think it is

T: My dad's garage was right in the mill. In one of those pictures I can show you, it was a carpenter's shack, and my dad's shack was right here. Across Langley Street is the real old brick yard.

A: There was the carpenter's shop

T: Yes, there were shops over there. But during my time, he did not work across the street, he always worked over in the old part.

A: I think I know exactly where you mean. I believe that your dad's shop is still standing.

T: I think it is, too. It is either that or the carpenter's shop.

A: Both are still standing, actually. The carpenter's shop and your dad's

T: I drive by there all the time, and I look, but I do not see

A: That Mike Patrone is living in the old office building, which is right next to the old shop, which is next to the carpenter's.

T: The Three Step Program.

A: The bachelor's home is where the carpenter's shop used to be. They turned into a boarding house. Now as far as it goes, during this time, were you living in Niles while your dad was working there?

T: My dad bought this property on Valley Boulevard. It is in Howland Township. He bought that when he first came to Niles. I still live there, not in the original house, but on the same property.

A: Do you remember when he acquired the property? Did he have a hard time getting it?

T: He paid cash for it, a hundred and fifty dollars an acre. That was a lot of money back then. I used to tease him, I would say, "A hundred and fifty dollars?" He said, "Son, a hundred and fifty dollars, it took me two months

to save that much " He said, "And I had to feed all you kids "

A The money was good then

T Well, it was never good But he knew what it would be there You could count on what you were going to make You could budget yourself on what you were going to make The money was never terrific there When he left there, he went to Wean United, and they paid him three times as much money he made doing the same job.

A He went to work at Wean United?

T Yes. That was with just the credentials he had at the brick yard

A He was doing the same kind of work at Wean?

T Yes, maintenance.

A I am going to have to ask my dad if he knew your dad

T North River Road is where my father worked

A My dad was down on Phelps Street.

T Youngstown

A Yes

T I have hauled out of there

A Yes.

T Yes, I used to drive a truck. I hauled for scrap companies and steel companies We hauled everything

A Your dad went to work at Wean United after the brick yard had already closed down. As far as it goes, up until it closed

T He was completely retired from Kaiser Refractors, and that was after even they were closed

A: When the change over occurred between, well, when I went from the Clingan's to Mexico Refractories, and then Kaiser, was there any kind of a change in the way they ran the place? Or did the corporations that bought them out pretty much leave them on their own?

T There was quite a change when the Mexico Refractories had it. In fact, they were talking about closing it down at that time, right after Mexico Refractories. I remember my mom was real concerned about the fact that you just never knew if the doors were going to be opened the next day or not because they did not have the security they had with like the original owners. They were honest enough to let them know they were in trouble. Whereas the big corporations, they want to keep everything QT.

A. So it was not as personalized?

T Right. They just did not know whether the security was there or not. They had no idea, but with the original owners, they would know. Maybe they would have to work a little harder. I do not know what they did, I am just saying that they always knew. And they did piece work, so maybe they would have to say, "Well, we better get some more hours, we are in a jam." I do not know how they did it, but it seemed to me like that is the way they worked.

A Now, your uncles were on piece work the whole time they were there, though?

T Pretty much so, I think.

A Yes. We got some records of piece work, and it is kind of unusual for piece work to continue after the 1930's, that is why I was wondering.

T: I know they had piece work in the 1950's because they would toss the brick. I used to watch them do that; it was amazing.

A Tell me about it.

T They would have like four -- you know how a brick is.

A Right.

T What would they be, eight inches?

A Eight, nine inches.

T Well, they would have four of them. The guys had hands like claws, and they would pick these bricks up, toss them to the next guy altogether, they are not binded or anything. But that grit, if you hold them right, toss them right, they stick right together. They catch them like that, and they stack them on pallets. They palletize them. They take them out to cool,

palletize them, and then pick them up and stock them So, the more bricks they get out per day, the more tunnage -- they call it piece work -- the more money they make That was suppose to be the best paying jobs, I think, was piece work, but it was the hardest job, all day long

A. Maybe that had a lot to do with everybody wanting to do the work, because it relied on man

T Absolutely Health, and like you said, ambition to do it.

A They never had much trouble with strikes or anything out there, though?

T I do not remember any strikes. Maybe AFL-CIO, but I do not think they ever recognized any of the steel strikes, because they did not have to Actually, them having a strike on their own, I do not recall. If they did, it was short lived.

A So, everybody was pretty happy out there then?

T Seemed to me they were. If I am not mistaken, it seemed like they had company picnics every now and then I do not have total recall of it, it sure seems like it I remember them saying company picnics I might have been real little, because I do not remember If I would have known you were going to interview me, I would have asked my older sisters -- my three older sisters.

A Maybe we could get in touch with them sometime Speaking of your sisters and all, we are trying to get a lot of community background information as well What was it like growing up in the area? Do you have any particular memories about what it was like being a kid?

T Well, where I lived, I went to Howland School At that time, my dad had a pretty tough job keeping up with the Jones', on his wages The people who went to Howland School when I first started there, they seemed to be more well to do than we were They had clothes! I did not even know Lord Chesterfield's existed. They made fun of the clothes I wore to school that day They said, "He is a little different " But he (the dad) seemed to manage to do it. There were seven kids in my family We may not have dressed as well as everybody, but we held our own. Kept up with the times, styles and all that stuff My mom and dad did a pretty good job in that area

A Your mom did not work, she was just a homemaker?

T Right She had her hands full with just the kids

A Seven, that is quite a few

T She did not even have her driver's license

A As far as it goes, when you got seven kids around, you got a lot of help
(LAUGHTER)

T Yes Usually

A So, you had how many brothers and sisters?

T I have six sisters Three older and three younger

A Six sisters, and you are stuck in the middle. (LAUGHTER) What was that like for you, having a house full of women?

T I do not know, different I guess I had my own room, that is all I know, that was nice. They had to share rooms, I did not have to I always had my own room

A That is nice

T It had its advantages and disadvantages Now that I am older, and they are older, we all get along great. I am like the baby now, even to my younger sisters They baby me, because I took care of them whenever they got in trouble

A What sort of things did you used to do for kicks when you were a kid?

T I had everything to do Do you know where Fairhaven Heights is?

A No. I do not

T Do you know where the mall is?

A Right

T Well, that used to be a golf course, right on 422 There was a roller rink, there was Howland Drive-in, there was an ice cream stand right at the end of the road Where Fairhaven Heights is, was a farm, Durig's Farm Mosquito Creek was behind us, and at that time, the creek was clean, because there was no sewage going into it Fairhaven was all farm land, so we could go back there and swim and fish all we wanted to We would camp out, we did not have to worry about getting in any trouble

A Things to do

T We did not need much guidance. We would just say that we were going to go fishing all night or whatever, Dad would just say, "See you tomorrow," because he knew that we knew enough about the creek, and the do's and do not's. He taught us when we were little about jumping in water over your head, and things like that, unless you knew how to swim.

A That is all common sense.

T Yes. But they trusted us. Nowadays you would not want a kid to walk up town by himself.

A No way. I know exactly what you mean. I live on the North side of town.

T I was ten, eleven years old. I was staying out all night by myself, but kind of controlled. They knew where I was at, they knew where I camped to fish. There was plenty to do.

A So, it was all kind of nice in a lot of ways?

T: Yes. It is still a good area, because I still have property. I golf in my backyard. I mean we got one hole, but it is good practice. I got two, one up and one back.

A Still a golfer then?

T: Yes. Not much of one, but I try. I am fair.

A As far as the brick yard goes, is there anything else that comes to mind when you think about it? What kind of images do you have? What comes to mind the most when you think about the brick yard?

T: Well, it would not pertain to anything historically, but when I was not in school during the summer, I would walk to the brick yard from my house. I could get a ride home with my dad, because he always let me drive when we got to the top of Fairhaven Heights. On the back roads I got to drive home, and I was like twelve years old when I started driving. I was sitting on his lap at first. I had to sit on his lap to learn to steer first, and then it progressed from there.

A Once your feet could hit the peddles.

T Well, I had my drivers license the day after my birthday, or week after,

whatever, because I knew how to drive I have to tell you story about Clingan.

A Sure, please do.

T. When my dad was laid off, and he did work at Clingan's home, well, he paid my dad in cash money. If I was with him, and if I would even take a small package of papers out and burn them, he would give me a five dollar bill. He always carried brand new money in a roll with a rubber band on like this, and the next day he would go to the bank and get new money He had tens, twenties, fives, fifties, whatever Nothing smaller than fives, no ones He would never take change If he bought something that was twelve dollars, he would give them fifteen, and he would walk away He would not take any change, and he always used brand new money. Every morning he would go to the bank and get his new money

A So he never had old money

T. Never had used money in his pocket I did not know him that well My dad used to talk about that, because they were so crisp. He would come home from work -- if he would work for Mr. Clingan -- that is how he would pay, with crisp (bills) I remember my dad would always talk about that

A That is actually very significant stuff. So, Mr Clingan was a very generous man

T Seemed to me I will tell you what he seemed like To me, he seemed like a tight wad He wanted to a tight wad image, but he was a very generous man. He had a 1957 Chevrolet, that came with a six cylinder, that he drove back and forth to the brick yard everyday He also had a brand new Cadillac limousine, and he had various cars I do not know if the garage is still over there, but he had a four car garage.

A It is still over there.

T He had a car in every stall My dad maintained all of his cars But he would drive around in the old Chevrolet all of the time, a six cylinder Chevy, stick shift He wore suits, but they looked like they were from Five and Ten stores.

A Off of the rack

T He was conservative, but generous

A Generous with reason; he was not flashy with his money

T Right, he was definitely not flashy

A That is great That is exactly the kind of things we want to know

T I can remember about the new money, though. Everytime we made a trip out to his house, if I made two trips, that would be another five dollars each

A So, everytime you even flinched for the guy, you got five bucks

T Well, he did not have anything lower He felt like if you did a job, he should pay you for it

A So, this was the late 1950's when this was happening

T: Around 1957

A Five dollars is a lot of money

T It might have been 1958, but I remember a 1957 Chevy Yes, that was big money

A: That is a lot of money.

T I always went with my dad if he let me, but he would not let me all of the time, because he said I was a pest, and he did not like Mr Clingan giving me money Well, I would do the same thing with my kids. I do not know if I was, apparently I was

A I know the feeling, because I had an old uncle that used to cough up some money every once and a while He would give you a silly job to do. My God, we painted his porch once, and he paid us twenty bucks

T Well, I have to admit that Clingan did create jobs. Like if he did not have anything else to do, he would have my dad paint the flag pole, or something I think he paid over five hundred dollars to have the flag pole painted, if I am not mistaken, which is big buku money.

A Was there any other things you remember about going to the house? I believe that Mr Clingan was married What was his wife like?

T I do not remember ever seeing her I do remember a maid. They had a maid that wore a uniform I have never seen a maid in a uniform before

They had a maid there, I remember that. They had a chauffer for that Cadillac. But I do not know if they were full time. The maid must have been. The maid was there, I recall, quite often. Now the driver, I do not remember seeing him all of the time but, on occasions, I remember seeing him.

A: Is there anything else that comes to mind for you?

T: Not right off the top of my head. I will think about it a little bit. I did not realize you were going to interview.

A: Do you want to take a break?

T: No. I do not know what else there is to say.

A: If you think of anything, you can let us know.

T: I will look to see if I have anything else.

A: Was the slow down pretty gradual?

T: Yes, gradual. It seemed like for ten years they were closing down. They were always under the impression that they did not know if they were going to be working next year. Kaiser was always like that, I remember. In fact, they talked about my dad going to work at Kaiser.

A: Colombiana.

T: Yes, Colombiana. He did not want to go unless he had to. He had enough seniority that he did not have to, because he never did go. He retired from there.

A: So, he finished up at Wean?

T: No, Howland Schools is where he retired from the second time. Wean closed down. He went to work at Howland Schools.

A: Right.

T: He was getting a complex, he said, "I tell you, everywhere I go is closing down." So, he went to work at the school as a custodian. He loved it there.

A: Really?

T Absolutely It was not big money, but he had something to do everyday
He had hospitalization, also

A Especially if they have benefits, and it is important to keep busy too

T Keep busy. My dad did not like to sit When he finally did retire, he was
sixty-nine years old when he died, so that tells you when he was retired
completely

A Well, you brought us plenty of great information today. I would like to
thank you

T. Well, thanks for your time

A Well, thank you very much for your time

End of Interview