

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown, Westlake Terrace

Personal Experience

O. H. 870

MR. AND MRS. CLARETT

Interviewed

by

Joseph G. Rochette

on

October 31, 1985

BLANCHE IRENE CLARETT

Blanch Irene Clarett was born on July 8, 1910 in Franklin, Pennsylvania, the daughter of Floyd and Bessie Burke. The Burkes came to the Youngstown area where Mrs. Clarett's father worked as a letter carrier on the east side. She graduated from East High School. After the death of her first husband, she married Samuel J. Clarett on March 14, 1940.

Along with her husband, Mrs. Clarett was one of the initial residents of the Westlake Terrace Housing project, the first of its kind under the Housing Act of 1937. Located in Youngstown, Ohio, this project served the needs of many low income families who were unable to find adequate housing during the Depression of the 1930's and the war years of the 1940's. Like her husband, Mrs. Clarett is interested in music. She is one of the charter members of the Youngstown Symphonic Choir.

Mrs. Clarett lives on Kimmel Street in Youngstown with her husband Samuel. They have five children: Hyland and Richard Burton, Shirley, Doana, and Dorothy. Mrs. Clarett retired in 1974 from Mahoning County Sheriff's Department where she served as dispatcher from 1965 to 1974. Mrs. Clarett is a member of the Price Memorial Methodist Church.

## SAMUEL JONES CLARETT

Samuel Jones Clarett was born on October 3, 1913 in Alabama, the son of Henry Leon and Laura Clarett. The Clarett family eventually made its way to Youngstown where Samuel was raised and educated. He graduated from East High School where he pursued his fervent interest in music. After graduation Mr. Clarett worked for the WPA, constructing roads and sidewalks. He also played in a WPA band for beneficial causes such as nursing homes, and hospitals.

Mr. Clarett, along with his family, was one of the initial residents of the Westlake Terrace Housing project, the first of its kind in the United States under the Housing Act of 1937. Located in Youngstown, Ohio, this project served the needs of many low income families who were unable to find adequate housing during the Depression of the 1930's and the war years of the 1940's. The Clarett's resided at Westlake for approximately ten years, from 1940 to 1950.

During the war Mr. Clarett worked at the Ravenna arsenal. In 1948 he went to work for the Wilkoff Company where he remained for thirty years, retiring in 1978.

Mr. Clarett lives on Kimmel Street in Youngstown with his wife Blanche who he married on March 14, 1940. They have five children: Hyland and Richard Burton, Shirley,

Doana, and Dorothy. Mr. Clarett is a member of Price Memorial Methodist Church and he sights fishing as one of his favorite pastimes.

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INTERVIEWEE: MR. AND MRS. CLARETT

INTERVIEWER: Joseph G. Rochette

SUBJECT: Youngstown, WPA, the Depression, low income housing

DATE: October 31, 1985

R: This is an interview with Blanche and Samuel Clarett for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Westlake Terrace, by Joe Rochette, on October 31, 1985, at 2107 Kimmel Street, Youngstown, Ohio, at approximately 1:00 p.m.

Tell me a little bit about yourself, where you were born and brought up and all that kind of stuff.

BC: I was born in Franklin, Pennsylvania, but I was raised here in Youngstown, Ohio. I went to school here. I married here and raised my family here.

R: Where did you live when you first moved out here?

BC: I lived right in the same neighborhood at 2125 Stewart Avenue. That was where I was raised. I think I was about eleven years old when we moved there. That was my mother and father's home.

R: When you were younger and growin' up, what do you remember about the area in Youngstown during the period of what it was like?

BC: All over?

R: Yes, in the neighborhood where you lived and even if you remember going into the city downtown or whatever, just some of the things that may strike you as being different from the way it is today.

BC: Where we lived at on Stewart Avenue, we had a streetcar service that ran up Stewart Avenue. Some of the cars ran clear to Sharon, but mostly they had cars that stopped at intervals along the way toward Sharon and then out through the area. At that time it was called Sharon Line. We were the only black family at that time in that vicinity. My father was a mail carrier in the city here. That was where we went to school at, the area schools here.

R: During those days was it a big thing to go downtown on weekends or whenever?

BC: Yes. If we had to go to the library or anything, we had to go by streetcar although my dad had a car. That was the same streetcar line that passed through this area. At that time the fare was 7¢ one way.

SC: 5¢.

R: You said your father was a mail carrier. Did he deliver mail in this area?

BC: Not right in this area, over on Oak Street area. At that time the substation was on North Forest Avenue which is on the east side of town. It was not like it is here down in the plaza at the present. Before that you had to mail your letters just wherever you could. Now they have substations throughout the city that take their mail down to the main post office. It is collected and taken down to the main post office which is downtown on the east end of Youngstown.

R: In the neighborhood when you grew up and from what you remember, was it a mixed group as far as people's ethnic backgrounds and things like that?

BC: The area where we lived there the house still stands on 2125 Stewart. We were the only black family in that area at the time when we moved there. That home that we moved into belonged to a very reputable attorney who was W. R. Stewart. He was well-noted for his works in law here. It was purchased by my father from him.

R: Being the only black family in that neighborhood was there any problem or anything like that? Did you notice?

BC: No, not to my knowledge. That was when we first moved there. Eventually other blacks did move in. We did

eventually have a black family. The first one who moved in beside ourselves was right next door to us. That house has since been torn down, but the house where I lived is still standing. It is occupied.

R: What do you remember during the 1930's, during the Depression, in the area? Did you see things like people in the streets and soup lines and things like that in this area?

BC: I married in 1929, but I do remember the Depression and the soup lines and the people going to welfare. Myself, I eventually had to be on welfare too.

R: How did you first find out about Westlake complex, about it being built or the idea?

BC: It was much publicized. Everybody knew about it. It was headed by Mr. Paul Strait. He was the first one to handle the Westlake Terrace homes. It was through him and attorney Robinson that we got our apartment. We were one of the first who were interviewed.

R: What was that procedure to get an apartment that you had to go through?

BC: I don't remember now what the requirements were. You had to have no place of residence.

SC: Low income.

BC: Low incomes, yes. When we first moved in, our rent was \$20 a month.

SC: \$17.50.

BC: \$17.50 a month.

SC: That included utilities.

BC: Refrigerator.

SC: Refrigerator and stove.

BC: Use of a laundry where they had washers and dryers at certain areas in the project.

R: When you first moved in, did you notice if it was mostly families like husbands and wives?

BC: Yes, mostly families.

SC: Everything was based on the number of children you had. Just a husband and wife could probably have three rooms. If you had children, it was probably four, and then I think some were five rooms. There wasn't any grass planted or anything around there when we first moved in. In fact when we moved, it was raining that evening when we finished. We backed the truck into the mud and got stuff. Eventually, they planted grass and did all of the things that weren't complete when we moved in. All in all we were thankful for it because we couldn't buy a lot to build a house on. In fact, they weren't selling black people lots like these around where we live now. We were fortunate enough that her father owned the lot in the back of his house.

After living there ten years we had a meeting at the YMCA (Young Men's Christian Association) for the Brace and Hill Company. They were not building the basement with these houses. They eventually wanted to build a group of houses. Nobody had a lot to build on, and they couldn't find a place for the black people. They agreed to build our house on a single lot for an example so that people might be interested in them. They built us a house right in back of her father's and mother's house there. Different ones came to see how the house was built.

BC: It was more or less an experimental kind of thing. Not only did the people have lots at that time, but just black people did not have money to build. We built this little house on Dean Street which runs off of Stewart Avenue. It was basementless, but it met the need at the time there. Before we left the projects we had twin girls. We already had three children, an older girl and two boys. That made us have five children, and they were fifteen months old I think when we moved out of the project and into this house on Dean Street.

R: What do you remember about your apartment itself at Westlake, about the rooms?

BC: They were just rooms, nothing fancy like this. They were just rooms and a bathroom. They had closets in them. In the kitchen they had this cupboard area and refrigerator and a stove all on one wall. There was a floor covering on the kitchen.

SC: We had four rooms. We should have had five because the



children that we had grew up they should have been separated. We had two boys and one girl. Soon after that the oldest boy went into the service. During the time we were in there. We stayed there until 1950 and then we had this house built over here on Dean Street. We moved from project in 1950. When he came out of the service, he came to this house here that we had built.

They went to East High School. In fact we all went to East High. During the Depression she was going to school and I was too.

R: Maybe just to backtrack a little bit, let's get where you were born.

SC: I was born in Alabama. I started school over in Farrell, Pennsylvania. We moved to different places. My father was working the mill there. He went to Warren and worked in a mill. Then he came back to Farrell. Then he went to Detroit and worked up there. Then again he came back to Farrell. Most of our family was in Farrell, my mother's and father's people. Then we moved from Farrell to Pittsburgh then came to Youngstown in 1926. That was when I started school at East High School. That was when they first opened East High. East High and Chaney, I think were opened the same year. They were the two new schools in Youngstown.

After I left school I played music. That was during the Depression. We both worked on WPA (Works Progress Administration). My first wife was dead and her first husband was dead. I worked on WPA during some of the time we lived in the project. I worked at Ravenna arsenal during the war. Before the war started I worked with construction there with the company named Honk and Conky who built the arsenal. After the arsenal was built and they started operation there I worked with Atlas Powder Company. I worked there and she got a job at Lordstown Depot where they just supplied tools and things like that and shipped them out to the different servicemen and things. We worked there until the war was over. Then I got a job down at the Wilkoff Company after that. I worked there for thirty years, and that is where I retired from. I retired in 1978.

R: When you were working for the WPA back in the Depression days, what kinds of things were they doing?

SC: They had different things. I started out there as a laborer. We were surfacing streets. In fact some

streets are still up that the WPA put down. We replaced sidewalks and so forth and so on like that. I worked in that department, and then I worked driving a truck to haul this blacktop from Standard Slag to different areas and things like that. I also worked on the recreation department and so did she. They had a WPA band. We used to rehearse at the YMCA on West Federal everyday. We played for different community centers and rest homes and churches. That was back in 1937 when I did that. I went to Automechanics school to a class that was taught from 3:00 until 9:00 in the evening. I went there until WPA folded up. Then I found a job at Ravenna arsenal. I started work there in the winter of 1940.

R: So you were a musician too.

SC: Yes, I played trumpet for quite a number of years.

R: I suppose in Youngstown during those years that is another thing that is different as far as the types of entertainment and the things that people could do back in those days. It was a lot more and a lot different. Now things are just so empty down there on these parts as far as things to do.

SC: Yes. I have a picture in mind of Federal Street. I think sometime ago they showed a picture in the Vindicator how Federal Street looked back in those days.

BC: It is pitiful down there now.

SC: There is no. . . You could go down to Federal Street. They didn't have plazas or anything down there then. They had shoe stores and clothing and what have you. Everything was downtown. Now you go down there, you are careful of getting a parking ticket. It is pitiful. Right now the stores that were down there have branches out in the plazas and the malls. You go to the mall and you have all free parking space, so therefore you don't need to go downtown. The doctors have moved out in the areas. They probably think they can go to the malls and get what they want without going downtown and being in some kind of traffic congestion and so forth and so on.

R: During the time too there were a lot of theaters in Youngstown.

SC: Yes. The fare was only 10¢ or 15¢. I remember when the Palace Theater was down there. We looked forward to going when they had special programs there. They had

special programs there. They had vaudeville and the fare was only 15¢.

BC: Strand and the Regent Theater.

SC: Then the Strand. They had those cowboy pictures. There were also the State Theater, the Paramount, and the Warner.

BC: And before that the Hippodrome.

SC: Yes, the Hippodrome.

BC: Which was located right where the arcade is. It used to be the bus arcade; that was what they used to call it.

R: There were certain ones that could show both movies and live shows, right?

SC: Yes, that was the Palace Theater. They called it the Keith-Albee. Of course, there was that other theater on Champion Street.

BC: Liberty?

SC: Park Theater.

BC: The Park Theater, yes, that was way back there.

SC: They had vaudeville and movies. You say those were the good old days, but I don't know. At least we lived through it anyway.

R: A lot of times people say that back in those days you didn't have to lock your doors.

BC: Right.

SC: You could go out and leave the door standing open. You could come back and things would be just right. Now you have to put two by four's over like the Indians did back in their days. Most of the time we leave here one at a time, not so much during the day in this neighborhood here. There is a group trying to get a crime watch. It is needed. The fellow on the corner had his car stolen during the summer.

R: When you were at Westlake, was there any kind of social group or any kind of thing to do there other than just living there or anything like that?

SC: We had a group that we used to entertain. We used to play bridge and things like that.

BC: They were just friends.

SC: Just friends, yes.

R: Were those people who you knew there?

BC: Some of them were.

SC: Yes, some of them were. Are you talking about organized groups?

R: Yes, or anything. Was there anything?

SC: Not as I can remember.

BC: Nothing except for the men over at the YMCA there.

SC: He is speaking within the project just like how they have the north side group around here. They didn't have anything like that. In fact, no; but I do know some of the tenants there belonged to the Robinson Libertaing Club. That was a group that discussed different things.

BC: That was just a men's group though.

SC: Yes.

R: But the YMCA had programs.

SC: Yes, they had programs. Before they built the YMCA they had what they called Booker T. Washington settlement. I played in the band there. It was a small group which was conducted by C. F. Brown, Charles Brown. I was a little boy. I have the only picture that was run in the Vindicator. It was the year before last when they were trying to save the YMCA. I have the only picture around here. They ran that picture in the Vindicator. I think it was only about twelve or fifteen boys. I was seventeen or eighteen years old. I was still going to school.

We used to have meetings with different speakers over there and everything. Of course, the YMCA band always played for those events and things like that. It was something.

That project served its purpose. Housing was very much

needed, and we didn't have places to go to raise our family. It was a blessing; I will say that.

BC: Yes, to many families because at that time there were no rentals. There was no place to rent anything decent.

SC: You weren't making any money. The amount of money you had to pay to live there you could do it and still breath Each year we would take our report of our income. If you had an increase of pay or something like that, they would increase your rent a little bit. It never went out of hand. They knew that you still had to eat.

BC: Compared to what it is today when people rent apartments, you are lucky to get a place under \$300 a month today, a decent place to live.

SC: Those places were nice and clean. It was a good place to raise a family. As the years went by, things got worse and worse as far as keeping kids under control.

R: In those early days were they strict as far as maintenance and things like that?

SC: Yes. They would come in and paint your walls every so often and do things like that. They required you to keep that place clean, and cut the grass.

The only trouble we had was that they had this paper chute right under our kitchen window where certain groups would bring their garbage and put it down in there. That created what have you. So when we would report it, they would come and spray and clean it up.

BC: They had to deal with people who were not clean too. That was a problem because we had a family next door to us who just seemed to live with roaches. We didn't have them so much then. I didn't know that they had them so badly until I borrowed the lady's curtain stretchers. We leaned them up against the railing in the back, and they fell before I could take them in the house to use them. We didn't have enough feet to step on the roaches, so I never did use them. We took them back. I think that was just before Dorothy and Donna were born that we found roaches in the bathtub. I was upset because I was getting ready to have these babies and we had these roaches. I called Mrs. Knauf and she asked me to go somewhere to stay while they would take care of it.

SC: They came and put steel wool around the places where pipes were. The parents instead of wrapping their garbage and not sending it by a kid or telling him how to put it in, they would come there and just throw it at the chute.

BC: They would sling it.

SC: Some would fall outside. We would go there and we would pick it up and put it in. Lose garbage is a no-no. All in all it was. . .

BC: We weren't there too long after that because the babies were fifteen months old when we left there.

SC: Yes, they were born in 1949; we left there in 1950. They were born in February, and we stayed there all of 1949.

BC: We moved in July of 1950.

SC: July of 1950, yes, that is about right.

R: Did they managers who were there like everyday and would be maybe at the office or something or would be walking around or something like that?

BC: Yes.

SC: I don't know whether they walked around or not. They had maintenance men going around and stuff like that repairing anything. Every once in a while I think the managers went through the place, didn't they?

BC: Yes, they did if they had to go inspect. I remember seeing Mr. Strait going around, but I think it was maybe he was just going to view something somewhere. The maintenance men probably had a report at the office or something if something was broken; then they sent them. If they made a tour, it was some special occasion because they maintained an office up on the other side of where it is now at the YMCA building.

SC: That is the same place now right on the corner there.

BC: More or less, like we said, it met the needs of many people where at the same time it was congested. It was like living under the same roof even though it was divided apartments. Everybody knew everybody's business and seeing everything there was to see, but it was a blessing at that time.

SC: Yes, it was a blessing.

R: Did you notice because of that reason if people were always moving in and out, or did people seem to stay there? Did you get to know your neighbors for awhile?

BC: Yes.

SC: Yes, it wasn't that they were moving in and out. We had a group. After we moved out here we had a little barbecue outing. We had a yard out there which we didn't have in the project. We barbecued and what have you.

BC: We sort of had a reunion.

SC: Yes, and everybody was talking about having another one. It never did come by. Some of them have passed away.

BC: Now the people in our particular buildings there, most all of them moved out and got their own homes.

SC: Yes, all of them.

BC: They didn't necessarily build a home. We built two; this is our second home we built, but they eventually moved out and got their own homes. We were there ten years. There is Alonzo Wilson who is an ex-policeman and Billy Black.

SC: And the Williams'.

BC: Jack William. They live up on St. Louis Street.

SC: And the Smith's.

BC: The Grandberry's. Mrs. Grandberry is dead, but her two daughters are living. They weren't the type of people who had a set way of living like that. You find some people who live in a set way of life; they never progress. I dare say that there are some people who are still living there.

R: There is a lady by the name of Agnus Brown. She has lived there since 1945, and she is still living there.

SC: About how old is she?

R: I'm not sure, but I think she is in her late seventies. I think she is the longest, continuous living resident. She has been there for forty years now.

BC: Now the people who are in there, some of them--I won't say all of them--if you compare them to Kimmel Brook over here. . .

SC: It is just as bad.

BC: Yes.

SC: You hear the reports about other places.

BC: The calibre of people, the kind of people. . . Over here at Kimmel Brook, I can't say all of them, but the general run of them they are something else over there.

SC: When we moved in there. . . Things have changed so much now with the kids. If one of our children went to school and they had trouble in school, we punished them at home. We didn't go back up to the school and say, "My kid didn't do this or didn't do that or something." It is different now.

R: I suppose during the war there were a lot of servicemen's wives who had lived there also, who lived at Westlake too.

SC: Yes. Most of the ones we knew didn't go to the service.

BC: No. They were older people. They had this camp over here.

SC: This Camp Reynolds was over here in. . .

BC: Pennsylvania.

SC: In Sharon or Greenville, I think. Soldiers on their weekend passes used to come to the YMCA there. My oldest son used to go over there with his little box and shine their shoes and all that kind of stuff. He was eleven or twelve years old.

BC: They would go over there. His brother and him would go shine shoes down at Strouss and over there too.

SC: Right now I can't think of anybody who left his wife at home.

R: Things like washing and things like that. . . Was there a laundry in each building, or would it be beside the building?



BC: I think there were a certain number of buildings, those on Federal Street and those in the court, that were assigned to one laundry here that was near us. Then there were a certain number further down on Federal and the court that was assigned to another one down there. I don't know how many laundries served the buildings.

SC: I think there were four. All of us had a schedule. We had certain days and certain hours to wash. They did furnish the washer.

BC: Of course, I was permitted after the babies were born to wash anytime. We used cloth diapers and they had to be washed. With me having twins sometimes I washed twice a day.

R: For women with babies and things like that, were there any kind of nursery services or anything?

BC: There was a clinic that we took our babies to over in the YMCA. Another neighbor of mine would come over and help me dress the babies and go with me to the YMCA and help me undress them and redress them over there so the doctors could look at them.

SC: That wasn't a nursery. You are talking about for baby sitting or somethig.

R: Whatever, any place where you could take your baby.

SC: I can't remember. There was just the doctor who came over.

BC: On a certain day a week they had the clinic over there.

SC: They checked the babies; that's all.

R: Did you do anything in connection with the settlement house, the one that was up on Lexington Avenue?

SC: No. They had different programs and things up there. Most of my things I did down at the YMCA. I was never active in any kind of a program that they had here. I devoted a lot of my time blowing my horn, and that was limited because the walls weren't sound proof in the projects. It was something.

R: That was one thing. Could you hear neighbors and anything?

SC: Yes.

BC: That is why I said that it was the same as living under one roof almost.

SC: When I raised my voice at her and things like that, they could hear it on either side.

BC: Or when Shirley was practicing her piano, they could hear.

SC: Yes. We had good neighbors; I'll say. Some of us are very close now. We keep in contact with each other. There are so many of them who have passed away.

BC: Florence Madison and Ralph Madison and Mable Head were all neighbors of ours.

R: Yes, they mentioned that barbecue that you were talking about saying that after living there you people had gotten together even years after.

SC: That proved just how close the friends were.

R: Even to this day.

SC: It was something. That kind of thing doesn't exist now in the neighborhood there in the project.

There were some people who lived on the corner, Clare and Walter. They lived in an apartment that was in the court but was down. . .

BC: Further toward the town.

SC: Yes. They had parking lots for the cars. Those who lived down below had to walk past our place. We were only three doors from the YMCA, and the parking lot was right in back of the YMCA. We could see them going to their cars. Of course, some of those people moved out of town. The Williams' moved to Cleveland. Mr. and Mrs. McGinis moved to Cleveland too. Some of them moved to the south side like Tommy Bell and Vera and Alonzo Wilson and his wife Mary and Ruth and Jack Williams.

R: Things really have changed when you look over there now. It seems like the people we have been talking to like Mr. and Mrs. Madison thought that the project was more family oriented.

SC: It was.

BC: Yes.

SC: The children got along well. We didn't have things like this. To raise kids who go out and steal and things like that. During that time the car was in the parking lot. Sometimes you didn't even lock your car. Right now in that parking lot I bet they have to either chain their car to the poles or something there. It is terrible.

The woman two doors from us has had her car stolen three times. Somebody hit her in the head and snatched her pocketbook and then left. Things have changed.

BC: Getting back to the project it certainly was a blessing at the time.

SC: It was a blessing; I'll say that. When we built this house out here, Mr. Strait came out and Mrs. Knauf to look at the house. We were satisfied at the time although it was built on a slab.

BC: We were grateful for that.

SC: Yes, we were grateful for that, a new house and everything.

BC: Then we sold that house and built this one.

SC: Another thing I was going to tell you about the project is that whether it was intentionally done or not, there was a segregated group here.

BC: Yes, definitely.

SC: All of those above Madison Avenue were white, and those down below Madison were black.

BC: It was much discussed.

SC: It was discussed, but I do know now things have changed so much in that respect. They are all mixed up now. I guess whether they did it intentionally or thinking that it might cause friction or something like that is the reason why they did it, it was very noticeable. It was mentioned and discussed and so forth and so on why a government project would be segregated. Of course, we

would respect that in public places just like with the theaters.

BC: You have to remember too that was before the Civil Rights Act. Had that happened in the 1960's, it probably wouldn't have materialized.

SC: I'm saying this because of the change which has come about. I was going to speak about the theaters. In some theaters all of the blacks had to sit in the balcony; they couldn't sit down below. That was back during. . .

BC: That was before civil rights.

SC: Yes. Civil rights brought a change.

R: I'd like to thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW