

YONGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Farrell, PA

Personal Experiences

O.H. 1979

Wally Wachter  
Interviewed

By

John Kasich

On

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Youngstown State University

Oral History Program

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Interviewee: WALLY WACHTER

Interviewer: John Kasich

Subject: Farrell, PA

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JK: This is an interview with Wally Wachter for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on the history of the nine and ten hundred blocks of Fruit, Hamilton, and Emerson Avenues in Farrell, Pennsylvania. By John Kasich at 3300 Rosemary Lane, Hermitage Pennsylvania on May 17 in the year 2000 at 10:30am. As far as you know do you know why your family moved to the neighborhood on Fruit Avenue?

WW: Well, I was about five or six years old when they moved. They originally lived on Emerson Avenue in the 700 block. I think as far as I can remember or as far as I know, they came over here in the early 1900's and that's probably where they settled, because as long as I can remember they talked about that place on Emerson Ave. We moved into the 900 block of Fruit Ave when I was about five years old. And that was the first time we'd seen electricity. The house had electricity and we were a big family and it was a little bit too small for us anyway. We had eleven children in the family. It was small, but we made it do. And then later on several years later we moved to a bigger house up the street. That was more suitable to us at that time we'd had all grown up and most of us went away to the service. In those days it was something new, because I think the block Emerson Ave and Fruit Ave that was the hub of Farrell. That was right in the middle of Farrell. That was really a unique place in Farrell. They were all company houses, houses that we could have bought. We were renting. I forget what the rent was, but we were able for about 2900 dollars buy the home. Up the street where we moved to later was a bit more expensive than that.

JK: Do you know why your family came to Farrell or your parents?

WW: My father came from Transylvania, and my mother too. He came over because he heard that this was a land of milk and honey and they had steel mills here. He came over here to find a job, as a young man. My mother apparently followed him over. And they were married in this country and they had fourteen children, three of them died when they were babies, but eleven of us were raised.

JK: As a child what can you remember about the neighborhood, your earliest memories? Emerson, Fruit Avenue, when you were a young kid?

WW: It was a very, very close neighborhood. Everybody on that street had kids our age. Everybody had large families and we seemed to fit into age a category where we became friends with somebody else up the street. That was the selling point of the whole area. We became very close friends. We formed baseball and softball teams, every block had it's own team. We used to play sometimes three doubleheaders a day. I remember the Hamilton Ave. group we played. They had a pitcher (who was later killed in the war) and he was one of the best softball pitchers I ever saw. So, it was a big social thing, we were always out playing in the alley's and playing on the streets. And we had a lot more lots to play in then they have today, because everything is taken up now. It was a great childhood.

JK: Do you remember a lot of the families or the children that you chummed around with? Can you name a few different ones?

WW: Well, next door to us were the Davis Art and Bud. I think they are both gone. And Betty who married Larry Kerins. Across the street from us was the preacher's home. Our church was right there on the corner it folded last week. We just had the last service in one hundred years. The preacher lived next door. It was a neighborhood where people would move in and move out and you met a lot of different people. Two doors up the street from me was Chuck Bowman, we used to be very close friends. Billy Soose and his family lived about four doors up the street from us. Billy of course become World's middleweight boxing champion. At that time I could have gone up and down a list of everyone on the street, but right now I try to remember them.

JK: No problem. As far as the neighborhood as early back as you can remember what did the houses look like? I mean did they have aluminum siding on them back then?

WW: No. They were all wood sided homes, very close together, with a real narrow walk between them. And I'll never forget, I don't know if you know Pinky Routh, who was Billy Soose's trainer, used to have a stable up on Wallis Ave, next to Lincoln school. He was a painter contractor. We used to go up to the stable and watch the boxers and he'd chase us away all the time. He wouldn't let us near. The one day he was painting a house on Fruit Ave and he was up on the latter and the paint fell down and spilled all over him and all over that little walk. So, I helped him clean it up and from then I was a welcomed guest at his place. It's funny I didn't become a boxer or something.

JK: Well, as far as the home, one last question, what colors were they painted?

WW: Most of them I think were all the same. I think they were mostly all whitish. And I can't remember any vivid colors on any of the homes. I think most of them were all the same. I think they had a land company. The Carnegie Land Company was right on the alley behind Fruit Ave 900 block. They used to fix the homes. If something was wrong

they were there. They had a garage there that did all the repairs. It was a good neighborhood.

JK: Again back with this neighborhood, what types of nationalities were there? Was there predominantly any one group?

WW: No. At the time we moved there, there wasn't. We had Welshmen beside us and of course Sebastions and Soose's family were Hungarian. We had English we had German. There were three or four German families that I can remember. And there were Italians. The Italians were on the upper end of the block. Our fathers were all working in the steel mill and all nationalities moved into these homes. A lot of these homes were vacant until then. They had their conveniences they had electricity. We played with the light switches two hours every day. We used to have gas mantles, because the lighting in the old house was gas.

JK: How about, did a lot of the neighbors have gardens?

WW: Everyone had one. Everyone had a garden. They raised their own vegetables and there was always, a wooden fence, between the property lines.

JK: How about porches? Neighbors at that time?

WW: Front porches after dinner in the evenings that were the places. There were screens on the porches the women used to sit out there and talk with the neighbor ladies. Sometimes they would even yell three and four houses down the way, but they'd all get into a conversation. That was a nightly ritual. The kids would be on the porch playing jacks or we'd be out in the street playing football; touch football, on the brick paved streets and never worried about any cars going by, because there were very few cars.

JK: Do you remember who some of the early people in Farrell, particularly in this block or in Farrell as a whole, who had cars? Or anyone that comes to mind any of the families?

WW: Not in this particular block, I don't think there were too many cars on that block when we first moved there. But I remember we had an old minister at our church who moved to Canada he had a brand new sparkling Oakland car. He used to park it, and once parked it while he was visiting we kids were all over it. We were fascinated by it. Very seldom did we ever see a new car. We had a cousin that had a car. It was open family car. During the rainy season they put up glass windows.

JK: As far as you starting school, which schools did you attend?

WW: I started when we moved I was in first grade I started at the Pargny School. That's where we had been registered. I was there for two years and they made us switch, because we didn't live in this area. They made us go to the Lincoln building. The Lincoln building was up on Wallis Ave. and French Street. I went there through sixth grade. Then I went to the Washington building, which was on Spearman Ave. I went there for seventh

grade and then for eighth grade we moved up to the junior senior high school, which was on Fruit and Haywood Street at that time.

JK: How about the high school up on the upper end of Farrell where was that?

WW: That was built in 1939 I believe it was a WPA project. Most of the kids had to go up there I don't know what's at the old school site. I think there's a medical building. The last class was 1938 to graduate from that school I graduated in 1937.

JK: You graduated in 1937?

WW: Right.

JK: After you graduated from high school what did you do as far as working or college?

WW: Well, a funny thing, on my last day of school I played hooky. I had an interview with Kroger's. Kroger's had a store in Farrell and I got the job. But our commencement night they announced that I had missed one half day of school in twelve years and that was the day at Kroger's. The last day of school.

JK: Out of twelve years.

WW: Of twelve years. I started at Kroger's. I worked there; I had my application in at The Herald for a long time, before then. But they never had anything available. Kroger's used to have produce spoilage. Everyday all the produce they'd throw out. I had been working there a week and I told the manager we had an icebox. Why don't we get a big barrel and put a layer of ice on top of this and that. They tried it out and it was a huge success. The stuff was as fresh as it was when they brought it in. So, they gave me a bonus. They had the headquarters in Cleveland, I went up there and they gave me the bonus for fifty bucks and they adopted that into all of their stores. So, they wanted me to go to a manager's school. So, I went to a manager's school in Warren. But my heart wasn't in that line of work anyways. I went to manager's school and then they sent me out as vacation manager on various locations; in Warren, Salem, Alliance, and then they offered me a manager's job in Warren. But I would have had to drive back and forth or live over there and what they were paying me wasn't worth it. So just about that time was when The Herald opening came and I turned it down and my grocery stint was over. I started with The Herald full time I remember that when I started at The Herald I earned ten dollars a week. That was in September. Well, the first part of October this was in 1940, Wendell Wilkie was running for President and he made a whistle stop in Sharon at the railroad station. They built a platform up. The editor told me to go mingle around the crowd to see if I could get any human-interest stuff. So, I'd been there less than a month and I went down and I started talking to this Secret Service man who was standing where members of Wilkie's Party would come out of the train and onto the platform. I asked him if it was possible that I could talk to the candidate and he said "I doubt it, but I'll tell you what, Mrs. Wilkie is in train you can talk with her." So, I went in and was gabbing

with her when Wilkee and his gang got back on the train. So, I did that story and they doubled my pay.

JK: How did you happen to get into The Herald? Did you know anybody?

WW: I put an application in there when I was still in high school. There were two sports writers at the time for two papers at the time I worked for both covering high school games. They merged in '35 and that was about five years before I started at The Herald. I had an application in and I went in for an interview and the day after I was in the guy that interviewed me, who was the editor dropped dead. So, they had my name on file and as I said Neil had been working there part time and he was leaving so they said you can start. So, that's how I got started.

JK: Did you know Neil Russo very well from school?

WW: Oh real well, we chummed around together. We were only a block away.

JK: So, as far as when you were at The Herald how was your career, just how did it progress? Give me just a snap shot of it.

WW: Well, I started I cover the Farrell beat for about ten or twelve years. My whole beat was Farrell. That's was news and everything. Then they were going to promote me to county editor and I was handling all the county news I was in that job for several weeks. They sent another kid down to cover Farrell and he was making enemies with everybody down there so, the group down there, the mayor, Joe Franek who had been mayor, Bert Moss who owned the businesses down there and banker Sol Gully, sent a committee up to The Herald to get rid of this guy and they wanted me back. So, they came back to me and asked me if I'd like to go back to the beat and I asked how much more? So, they adjusted my pay and I went back for a couple of more years and then finally they promoted me to telegraph editor and then I became wire editor then I became city editor and then I became managing editor and that's what I retired as.

JK: Very good that was a very nice career.

WW: Of course my service was interrupted by the war and I went to Honolulu for four years edited the Star and Stripes. While I was there I went to the University for about three years of college in, never did get my degree.

JK: Very good, and those were tough years for coming out of the depression and going into the war. At that time a lot of people learned from hands of experiences.

WW: Things were so different when I got back. That was the biggest thing. Women were wearing slacks and women were working in mills.

JK: Now that was leading to my next question. What effect did World War II have on this neighborhood in Farrell, with the changes?

WW: Well, the changes became drastic for me because they most had been occurring little by little. For instance, camp Reynolds was up here. Camp Reynolds was put in after I left and it was gone when I came back. So, I never knew camp Reynolds. I've heard people talk about it. The guys would come out to Hawaii there telling me about this area here and camp Reynolds and what beautiful women they had back here.

JK: And you missed it.

WW: And I missed it all. So, it was a pretty drastic thing when I got back. I was used to the wide-open spaces out there. I couldn't imagine how they fit so many homes so close together and how people could live like that. It made me wonder. Well, I had been back for a couple years before I got married and moved out there.

JK: What year did you get married?

WW: In '48, 1948. We moved to Sharon.

JK: Yes.

WW: Lived there for a couple of years and then we built a home over in Sharpsville and we lived there until the 60's.

JK: Getting back to the neighborhood, do you remember a lot of corner mom and pop type grocery stores in this area.

WW: That was the thing; most of them, there were no stores that sold everything. There were women's stores, there were men's stores, there were grocery stores, there were drug stores, they sold the same things, they sold the one item and that was it. If you wanted a pair of shoes you went to a shoe store, there were no department stores to speak of. And I remember when I was a youngster, in high school yet, I won a contest. The Pittsburgh Post Gazette, which was a trip to Pittsburgh and they took us to the Heinz factory and everything and then they said they were going to take us to a store that sold everything. It was Kaufman's, it was the first department store that I had ever seen where they had all of these items, where you could buy anything from an automobile to a safety pin. Of course they grew up around suburbia and started to expand. Every Saturday was a shopping night and we had to do our own buying. We went to the shoe store if we needed to or if we needed cloths we'd go to a men's store or a women's store. Grocer's stores A&P and Kroger's which were always in the same block they were always almost right next to each other. And the butcher's shops they were aside from the grocery stores.

JK: Remember any of the families that had some of these stories and businesses?

WW: Well, I remember on a street right near us was Nathan's had a butcher's shop. I think Nathan's later opened a big variety store and the old man used to be, in those days when things were lean they used to carry books and you could charge things and pay for

them when you could and they were real good about that. I think they kept a lot of families were going when things were very tough. Then Kroger's and the A&P were separate stores, but they didn't have meat departments. You had to go to the meat market was always in between the grocery stores.

JK: Do you remember in the neighborhood DeBrakaleer's store?

WW: Oh yeah, they were related to me. Well, the old man that started the store his son was Roy, who was a councilman in Farrell; he was married to my first cousin. They had their store there for many, many years until just this last year when they sold the building. They used to have a playground in the back.

JK: How about up on Emerson Ave, do you remember the Russo grocery store? Or was that before your time?

WW: No, the Russo's had a grocery store there. I don't remember much about it, but I remember the store. They were right on the corner of Hamilton and Idaho. Russo's also had a building right across the street. One block over.

JK: Yeah on Emerson.

WW: Then that was vacant; it wasn't used as a grocery store for a long time. I don't know what it was used for whether it was a residence or what.

JK: It was a confectionary store. Then after that I think it was a pool hall if I remember.

WW: Then Marino's had a variety store it gathered junk. I can't remember exactly what street it was on.

JK: Also, up the street do remember the grocery store it was Saranac's, but it become the New Deal Club?

WW: Yeah I remember when the New Deal Club went up. When Roosevelt was first elected by a landslide, Farrell elected a Republican mayor.

JK: Is that right? I am surprised!

WW: Yeah Joe Franek was elected mayor and he was a Republican. And that was the last Republican that was ever seen in Farrell.

JK: Matter of fact years later, when I was a young child I believe he tried to run as a republican and couldn't made it and he switched to democrat. I am I right Wally?

WW: Before John Strizzi was in that that was a store DiStephano owned it. It was sort of like an Italian store, but Strizzi's took over and made a dairy store out of it.



JK: Since we are on the subject of grocery stores and food and everything. When you were young in this neighborhood could you smell any cooking of the ladies in the neighborhood?

WW: You used to smell it all. It used to be very, very tempting. I remember I think I did a column on that one time. On Sunday's coming from all the Italian homes, everybody that was Italian and on other nights they would have their own special time when they cooked the special food. But the Italian's always had spaghetti on Sunday.

JK: How about any of the other nationalities?

WW: Smell sauerkraut coming out of some homes. And some of the people used to take raw bacon and put it on the fires outside in the back yard and grill it. And eat it with onions.

JK: How about the movie theaters in town?

WW: Well, when I was a kid we had, in my early childhood we had four theaters. There was one on Broadway call the Strand, which played a lot of cowboy pictures. And then there was the Rex, which was on the corner of Market Avenue and Idaho Street. I don't remember much about it, I remember seeing some pictures in it. I remember the Capital and Colonial. The Colonial was at the corner of Idaho Street and Spearmint and the Capital was right off of Wallis Ave and Idaho Street. They played all the new run pictures. They had potato shows on Saturday. You brought a potato and they gave them out to needy families. Used to spend a lot of time in those theaters. They had vaudeville shows at the capital. They brought in different top entertainment. I remember seeing Perry Como with the Ted Weems orchestra at the Capital. Then Sharon had the Gable, the Nuluna, the Columbia, and the Liberty. There were four theaters in Sharon.

JK: Four in Farrell and four in Sharon, right?

WW: Right. But the Rex folded. On Sunday afternoon we spent most of it at the Strand where they had cowboy pictures and cereals and newsreels. They always had a comedy, a cartoon, a newsreel, and you always had a serial where you had to come back the next week to see what happened.

JK: As far as the neighborhood goes there, Emerson, Hamilton, Fruit Ave and that area. As far as you could remember were there any steel strikes over the years in that era?

WW: Nothing that I can remember. I think the last one was in 1919 and that was before my memory that was the year I was born. No never any, very few fights like you see in the neighborhoods in other places in the country. People got along; they got along real well, because they all had the same problems.

JK: How about then street fairs or festivals or carnival come to town?

WW: Well, they would have carnivals but they weren't in that particular area. Way down on the lower end of Emerson Ave was a fireman's ground where they used to have carnivals and then in the lot next to, there were a lot of hollows, Fruit had a bridge that divided a hollow off of Fruit Ave and off Wallis Ave on each side. We used to play in those hollows. We used to take bee-bee guns and shoot rats. And then there was another hollow between Wallis and Spearman where people used to dump their cans and their garbage and everything else, right where the old school used to be. They finally cleaned that thing up and they made a softball field out of it. I remember hitting a ball over and breaking a window on Wallis.

JK: Did you get in trouble for that?

WW: I had to pay I think seventy-five cents to have it repaired.

JK: Describe a typical day in your childhood in that neighborhood. What was it like as far as you can remember?

WW: Well, you'd look out in the street there was always a touch football game going on. Kids going down the street in scooters, which they made themselves out of two by fours and skate wheels and the girls were on the porches playing jacks or hopscotch on the sidewalks. This happened everyday or in the backyards the girls were making back dolls out of flowers they picked. Or somebody was playing ball in the alley. We were always looking for some way of getting out of work in the house and we were always outside. I remember we had an alleyway between Fruit and Wallis. There was one lady that every time we hit a ball in her yard she would keep it, she wouldn't give it up. So, we would have to find another one. So, one day as I said I had a little wagon I used to go to the grocery store and women used to buy too many groceries to carry I would take them home in my wagon. This one woman one day got me to come down to the house and she gave me a whole bushel basket full of balls that she had taken from us. We used to get even; we'd go in the evening and take tomatoes out of her yard. We had a good time. We'd go out berrying. We'd pick elderberries and black berries. We'd go out to Wheatland and pick baskets of berries. We always found something to do. It was never a dull moment. We never had to worry about having cars or on the corner smoking pot or anything like that.

JK: Generally would you say it was a happy life?

WW: It was it was a much happier life than there is today.

JK: And people didn't really have much did they?

WW: None of them had much. Mostly all workers one family and one man in the family was working. When the kids graduated from high school they might have gotten an odd job here, but very few went to college. It was a happy go lucky era. I guess the parents were the ones that did the worrying the kids didn't have to.

JK: As far as most of the men of the house where did they work at?

WW: Mostly steel mills, my dad worked for years down there. It wasn't a very healthy job, and then they worked shifts. We had to be quiet on the days the father's were sleeping.

JK: When they worked the midnight?

WW: That's one of the reasons we had to get out of the house.

JK: That makes sense. With the houses and neighbors being so close together the homes, it was apparently a very tight knit neighborhood and community.

WW: Yeah. Summer times we used to use blankets and make tents outside and sleep outdoors. We'd have telephone lines with tin cans strung from one house to the other in the mornings to go wherever we were going to go that day.

JK: What would you think of this whole neighborhood it was very unique?

WW: Unique, it wasn't unique for a steel town I don't think it was. It was unique compared to what it is today. Those homes are in the same place, but a lot of them have been torn down in between. One day I was at church and parking in front of my old house and this black woman came out and a young girl. I asked if she had come out of 906 and they said yes. I said I grew up in that house. She became real interested.

JK: Yeah, but you said it was just a nice childhood.

WW: Yeah. Kids today should have experienced that, because I don't think today kids know where they are going. And they don't know anything recreation except what is made for them. They can't think of things to do like we did.

JK: Well, it was a very nice interview. Thank you very much.

WW: Well, that's quite all right I hope that I helped you.