

YONGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Farrell, PA

Personal Experiences

O.H. 1981

Ben Chmielewski
Interviewed

By

John Kasich

On

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Youngstown State University

Oral History Program

Farrell, PA

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Interviewee: BEN CHMIELEWSKI

Interviewer: John Kasich

Subject: Farrell, PA

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JK: This is an interview with Ben Chmielewski for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on the history of 900 and 1000 blocks of Fruit, Hamilton, and Emerson Avenue in Farrell, Pennsylvania by John Kasich at Farrell, Pennsylvania. At May 10th in the year 2000 at seven o'clock pm. What's your name?

BC: Ben Chmielewski.

JK: What do you remember about your parents and family, when you were a child or growing up?

BC: Oh gee whiz I have a lot of memories about mom and dad, childhood, I imagine just growing up on Hamilton.

JK: Do you know why your parents moved into that neighborhood on Hamilton Avenue?

BC: Well, the only thing I think it was our first home. My family was renting before. When things were bad and dad finally got a job and we bought that house in thirty-six, 1936 we moved there.

JK: So, you've lived until you moved out of the neighborhood you lived there practically all your life?

BC: Fifty-eight years I lived down there.

JK: When did you leave?

BC: I left there in '94 I think, yeah April of '94. But there was nothing wrong it was a good neighborhood, a lot of friends. A lot of good neighbors, mixed neighbors: Italians, Pollock's, Croatians, Serbians, we had them all on the block.

JK: What was the primary nationality, if you had to pick one or two out that were most of the neighbors?

BC: It would be pretty close John, because there's like three or four families of Italians, maybe more, but the 1000 block was pretty well mixed. I think the 900 block was mostly Italians. 900 block of Hamilton was Italians, 1000 block was mostly mixed with Pollock's and the Slovak's, and the Croatians, and all of them. Any nationality they had in there.

JK: What school did you go to, grade school and so on?

BC: I went to Catholic school, St. Albert's Catholic School for eight years and then I went to Farrell High School. I graduated from Farrell High School and then I went down to the mill.

JK: What year did you graduate?

BC: From High School?

JK: Yeah.

BC: 1948.

JK: Okay and then where did you start, did you start at Sharon Steel right after there?

BC: No, I worked at General American, I worked at General American PI, and then I went down to Sharon Steel.

JK: Do you know when you started down at Sharon Steel?

BC: I think it was 1949, I think.

JK: And how long did you work there?

BC: Thirty-eight years.

JK: Long time.

BC: Yeah. Which was nice I didn't have to look for a job. I just went down got the job and stood there for thirty-eight years. It was nice steady work.

JK: Did your parents, where they born in this country or did they come from Poland, what do you know about that?

BC: Both of them came from Poland, but they came at an early age. My dad came here when he was six years old. My mother came here when she was three years old.

JK: They were both very young.

BC: Yeah they were young when they came here. That was in I think dad came here in 1904 and my came here in 1909 I think some thing like that.

JK: Do you know why like on both sides of the family like why your grandparents came here to this country?

BC: Well, I think they came here to find work according to mom and dad, because where they were. I know that the men came first on my mothers side, my grandfather came first he found work and then sent for the family and then they followed him. They landed over there in New York on that island over there.

JK: Elise Island?

BC: They landed there and I imagine they went to a few places but they ended up here in Farrell. Found work here at the Malleable and they stopped here.

JK: What do you remember about your childhood, say when you were about five to ten years old or teenager on that block on Hamilton is there certain thing you remember, were there certain friends you had?

BC: I had a lot of friends all the neighbors, all we had then were kids on the block. All the families had children I played with them all. There was not much to do, but we still went out and played in the streets and set and monkey around and I had a good childhood.

JK: Do you remember some of the kids?

BC: There was Bill Paszul, Henry Fill, Eddy Dill, Bobby Laslow, Patsy Peligreeno, Joe Yasvc, Chris Halter, there were probably more then I can remember I forget who they were. Laslow was there, Petrillo, McDonald's. A lot of fun growing up. No worries wait for the time to come and then you could go out and play. (The transcriber is unfamiliar with these last names if you could correct the spelling and fill in the others it would be greatly appreciated. Thank you.)

JK: What, did a lot of the neighbors have gardens back then?

BC: Oh yeah, the gardens and chickens and whatever they could raise back then. Most of them had chicken coops and they always had chickens for Sunday, you would see one would be missing during the week. You know darn well they were eating chicken on Sunday. They had rabbit coops and whatever they could raise. That was then things were bad it was tough I guess no work for the older people, we were just getting out of the depression back then. It was about '36 or '38 back then and things were just starting to look a little better.

JK: As far as the gardens go do you remember what was planted, what kind of vegetables and things?

BC: Anything you could think of was in there: onions, peppers, garlic, potatoes, some had potatoes. Mostly basic stuff like: lettuce, onions, tomatoes, spinach, and carrots.

JK: Were there a lot of cars, like when you were a kid?

BC: No, not that many. There were in the early forties there weren't that many on the street. And then during the war they weren't even making any cars. But none at that time.

JK: How about this, do you remember who was the first person to have a car on the ten hundred block of Hamilton.

BC: Boy that would be hard. Because there were a couple that had the cars. Cagno had a car I think and Polcha had a car, there wasn't too many thought. In fact you could run up and down the street without hitting a car in them days. But then latter on they got more cars. (Please fill in names, thank you).

JK: So you could just play in the street.

BC: Oh that's all we done we always played in the streets. Baseball, football or just throwing the ball around or something.

JK: So, all those garages on the block they came later, the people built them after they got their car and that.

BC: Yeah, all that came later that's when the gardens went out. Some of the gardens went out and put garages to keep their cars in to keep them off the street. Those were nice days.

JK: What about grocery stores where did people shop back then?

BC: They had stores almost on every corner, neighborhood grocery stores. We had Ackerman's on one corner, Klein's on another corner, Green's on another corner down on nine hundred block. There were grocery stores on all corners. That was our main avenue for food there running down to the grocery store all the time.

JK: Were the neighbors real close, I mean everybody as a whole?

BC: Oh yeah, the doors were open people just walked up to each other and just sat on the porch and talked for hours. Real friendly, real nice neighborhood, when there wasn't work they would just sit on the porch and play cards. Never locked doors in them days. Your neighborhood would watch if you weren't home the neighborhood would be watching. If somebody came up the steps they wanted to know who the heck they was.

JK: Where about in the neighborhood with all the different nationalities could smell people cooking different things?

BC: Mostly Sunday's, mostly Sunday mornings you could if you walked by you could smell someone cooking macaroni's and making sauce, then you would smell some sauerkraut and kielbasa cooking, then the other ones you could smell lamb; they would cook lamb on Sundays. Mostly you could tell who was living in the house you could tell when you went by the house you'd know who they were or what nationality they were anyhow.

JK: All these houses, as you can first recall what did they look like? What were they, I know they were all company homes, but?

BC: To me anyhow they just looked like a neighborhood, just a row of houses on each side on each side of the street. It went clean down from Wheatland all the way up from when they laid the city out. Most of the homes were the same, 90% were the same and then there were some that were changed a little bit. Some homes were a little bit different than others, but mostly they were all the same home. If you'd go into one you'd go into another home basically they would be the same. You'd have your two or three bedroom homes and five or six rooms only and the cellar. Mostly all made the same.

JK: Originally was there a bathroom in these homes?

BC: No, god no. The only thing they had in there were commodes and you'd have to put some improvements in, then you put the shower in if you wanted a shower down in the cellar. Of course the cellars were dirt at first then later on we used to concrete our cellar to make it better. I imagine a lot of people did theirs. It wasn't that bad.

JK: How about the exterior, was there aluminum siding way back do you remember?

BC: No, all wood. All wood, everyone was all wood and slate roofs nothing but slate roofs. Wood, you had to paint every four or five years it depended on the weather. Mostly every four or five years we would be painting the house. That was one or two weeks a year you had to get together with everybody and the whole family helped paint. And then later on they just put the siding on, which was a big blessing for a lot of people. We wouldn't have to paint the siding.

JK: Before the siding your earliest memories what, where all the houses painted different colors or how was it that you could remember?

BC: They were a lot of colors, brown, whites; they didn't have that many colors in them days, but most of them as different as they could get. Everyone wanted a little different than neighbors, so they'd find something different to put on. Some made banisters on their porches, which we never had, and they put them on. They closed some of the porches later on. No they were as far as the color of the homes and the paint all the people tried to be a little different. They weren't bad but they were nice. You had to be

careful with what you painted anyhow, with the steel mills anyhow with all the dirt that got on the homes. If you had a light colored home you'd probably have to paint that. It was pretty good.

JK: When did the people as far as you can remember start to put siding on, I know that came later, but roughly?

BC: Probably in the late '40's maybe early '50's then they start siding their homes. It got to the point where it wasn't expensive first and then later on they were making it so that you could afford it. It was expensive but mostly they put it on. They had seen a way that it would be cheaper and easier to put that on than the paint.

JK: How about this do you remember when you were younger up at the peak of each house up at the gable end was there gingerbread? How many houses had that if you can remember?

BC: I think everyone had that stuff up there that was just a symbol up there and they had that stuff up there. Gave it a little color it made the house look nice, which you don't see anymore you don't see all the extra stuff put on a home. That was something all of them had it on their gables up there.

JK: Were there a lot of trees on the street?

BC: The streets were all lined with trees and it seemed like every other house had a tree planted. Some were oak some were maple, sycamore and it was nice because when they were just getting big it shaded the areas, blocked some of the wind and then later on they just cut some of them down. Just before I left down there they were cutting most of them trees down. Of course they were big and old.

JK: Do you remember anything about the insides of some of these houses? They were all identical like you were saying they were all company homes?

BC: Well, like I was saying they were three rooms upstairs in most of them all bedrooms upstairs, like one large and one small, and one medium bedrooms. Downstairs you had the kitchen, living rooms, and dining room. But they were mostly all the same there were little something different in different homes. But basically they were all the same company homes. Not too much difference.

JK: From your parents or anybody else the older generation do you know when they were built?

BC: I think they started about 1908 -1910, 1912 somewhere around there in the early nineteen hundreds. They were old homes.

JK: What about I mentioned grocery stores, but how about any other businesses on Idaho Street like with the corners of Fruit and Hamilton and Emerson on Idaho Street on those corners?

BC: Idaho street was our main business down there; there was everything on each corner. On the whole Idaho Street and down to Broadway was nothing but stores, furniture stores, grocery stores, shoe stores, drug stores, paint stores, flower shops, dress shops, they had a lot. Everything was there you could always buy something in Farrell there. I mean Idaho Street was our main business on Idaho Street. In the early days I hear that Broadway was our main business along Broadway was where our main business was and then it moved up into Idaho.

JK: So, you mentioned that most people way back didn't have cars so is that they just shopped down on the corners and everything?

BC: They would just walk down to Broadway and buy what they wanted. Then when people started moving up on the hill what they called the hill then Idaho opened up and it was nothing to go walk that to buy something. But as far as groceries there was almost every corner had a grocery store and candy stores. There was always something on every corner. You'd have Jewish stores, Polish stores, Italian stores, all your ethnic people had their own stores and whatever it was they were getting all the business, everyone got business. It was good and nice run at that time.

JK: If somebody had to travel where ever to Sharon or Youngstown mentioning that most of the people didn't have cars how did they get around farther traveling?

BC: Well, they used to have trolley cars in the city you'd go down and get on the trolley car and go from one end of the city to the next. Or if you had to go to Butler or Hubbard or Youngstown or something they had the trolley to get you there. I don't remember too much about that, but I remember in the valley you'd get one on Emerson it would start on Emerson ten hundred block and then run through Farrell and Broadway and come back up.

JK: Do you remember any social clubs or anything? There were some unparticular that were in that part of the neighborhood?

BC: All around there it was just like the grocery stores your ethnic people would open their own clubs up. You would have a Polish home, you'd have a German home, you'd have an Italian home, you had Serbian Home, Croatian Home and most of them when they came here that's where they would get together and meet their people and pass time. Farrell that area was filled with clubs and churches. Churches were the some way all the ethnic people had their own churches to go to.

JK: As far as Sharon Steel and lot of the industries did a lot of the mills have sports teams and things?

BC: They had their softball team that they sponsored and bowling teams, and basketball teams. Then they had the intramural and they played in between the departments that they had in the mills that they had some ball games going. In the mills there was a lot of work down there and a lot of people working there. I think at Sharon Steel at one time, when I worked there for sure I know there was I think 2900 and I am sure that was more then that before. At one time they had 29 employees down there during the war I don't know how many employees they had down there. That's when the women had to go in there and work where the men used to. All mills they all closed, of course we all put up with strikes and all. Each mill always had their strikes they wanted better benefits and they had to strike for them. The company wasn't going to give you nothing. So, when I worked we had about five or six strikes.

JK: Do you remember some of the years roughly?

BC: Roughly the year I think one was 121 days in the early '50's and the other one lasted about three months too that could have been in the mid '50's. And I am sure there were more, but that's the only two that I could think of now. As far as I was concerned until I worked and then I retired in '86. The mills closed down and went bankrupt and hurt everybody.

JK: What year did Sharon Steel close down?

BC: Sharon Steel closed I believe they filed bankruptcy in 1986 or 1987. Another company tried to come in and make a go of it and couldn't do it. They closed up again and the people it was hard here and there was no work. The other plants were closing down so that's why most of the people left there was just nothing here. There's no work, they were just trying to get something back.

JK: Well, you said there was a defining impact on the closing of the mills on the neighborhood.

BC: Sure yes. A lot of them if the mills were still here a lot of the younger ones would still be here working instead of moving somewhere and finding work somewhere else. They had to move somewhere to get work.

JK: Different type question here. Do you remember when you were younger did a lot of the different ethnic men make homemade wine or anything.

BC: I think a little before my time there was a lot of bootlegging going on. They were all were making their wine. They couldn't afford it they weren't working. They made their wines and their beer even. I am sure they all did. When grape season came in and everything was blooming you could smell that stuff. That was when things were booming here. When Sharon Steel opened up and all the mills were going pretty good that was when they built Farrell and built the homes cause they need places for them to stay.

JK: Is there anything else that you want to add to this interview anything of significance about your growing up there, living there, people you remember, anything else about Hamilton Avenue?

BC: The only thing I could say about Hamilton was where I lived I imagine everyone felt the same way, it was just super people. I couldn't say anything wrong all the people I knew were super. They were just good people I had a lot of fun with them, enjoyed being with them and they were just all my life the same people. You knew everybody you walked out you had to speak to everybody sitting on their porch. You couldn't have knocked that they were all good people.

JK: Okay Ben thanks for this interview.