

YONGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Farrell, PA

Personal Experiences

O.H. 1984

Edward Nicastro

Interviewed By

John Kasich

On

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Interviewee: EDWARD NICASTRO

Interviewer: John Kasich

Subject: Farrell, PA

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JK: This is an interview with Edward Nicastro for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on the History of the 900 and 1000 block of Fruit, Hamilton, and Emerson Avenues in Farrell, Pennsylvania. By John Kasich at Farrell, Pennsylvania on May 1st, 2000 at three o'clock pm. What can you tell me about your childhood anything that you remember? Where did your family live when you were a young kid like five or ten years old?

EN: Well, most of that would be when we moved from Sharon when I was in the third grade to the Farrell School. That was on Spearman Avenue that would be the J.A. Farrell School. From there we went to the Junior High School and then to the Senior High School. We lived on 904 Fruit Avenue, 930 Fruit Avenue, and that's where we moved and branched out when the kids got married and everything. Actually I would say about when I was say nine years old I've been in this location between Fruit, Hamilton, Emerson for about sixty-three to sixty-four years. Sixty-four years I've been here.

JK: What can you remember like when you were a kid in the neighborhood, what was it like? Can you explain some of what you remember the neighborhood and the neighbors, what was it like?

EN: Well, everybody was friendly possible because of the reason that everybody needed everybody. Everybody was close when somebody passed away the first thing the knock on the door was the neighbors you don't wash no cloths we'll do that. The food the other neighbor would take care of that. And those day it lasted three days and they had them mostly in the homes in the early nineteen forties up to forty-one and forty-two. And when my father passed away in 1942 at 46 we were home for three day. We had Jewish people, Polish people, German people; all different nationalities all volunteered their help the difference of then and now. Growing up is not as easy as people thought it was. Today when a young kid gets in a problem the first thing the lawyer and judges say is he had a rough life. Well, me and my mother got a long real good and she used to make me laugh all the time. I am a little kid eight or nine years old and I'd say, "Hey ma my stomach

hurts its making a noise” and she would say “no worry tomorrow it won’t make no noise” because I aint getting no more to eat that day. And rough we had nothing, we had nothing, but everything that we did get we appreciated it, we respected out parents, friends, it was a different ball game then today. Farrell at one time I would say would go down as possible as one of the nicest cities in the state of Pennsylvania. It just was a different, how do you say when everybody gets a long, close.

JK: Close knit, it was a close-knit neighborhood.

EN: And in them days there was no such thing as your white, I am black, you this or that, if the people treated you good you treated the people that treated you good. And everybody helped everybody I think that is the way they survived. Everybody had gardens and when it came certain times to plant you didn’t see anybody. If you wanted to see them go in the backyard, when it came time to pick it you saw everybody in the backyard that wanted to help you pick it out of the backyard. As tough and rough as it was I would rather do that again then what’s coming down the road right now.

JK: So in other words people were happier then?

EN: They appreciated everything they got.

JK: Most of the neighbors and people that lived in Farrell and particularly in this block area, where did they work, most of the men?

EN: Well, in them days they either got a job in one of the mills, furniture movers, anything that they could get a hold of the feed the family. The mill was what they primarily came here for. When their relatives wrote a letter to Italy they said come on over we got a job for you in the mill. And that’s what made these mills, these people like you take the Italians they brought them over and they ended up mostly in mills, the Croatians, the Serbians they ended up in the mills, Polish mills and coalminers. And that’s the kind of people they were hard working people. That’s why this country got to be what it was, what it is rather on account of them kind of people. They’d get any kind of a job possible to put food on the table.

JK: At that time as far as transportation did a lot of people have cars? I mean way back when you were a kid?

EN: No. We used to play in the street and we never had to disrupt our game on account of a car coming down the street. And there was always one or two that had a car and when a relative died out of town the man took turns taking people to the wake and most of their relatives around here are and the Italians were in Niles, Struthers, Girard, and Youngstown, Brier Hill and you had to get a ride. So, you had to catch somebody that had a car to give you a ride if you wanted to go see anybody.

JK: As far as like the women at the time did they work in the gardens too?

EN: The women were in the garden all the time. On incident I will never forget if I live to be 100 years old the snow was ten foot deep outside its wintertime, my mothers going out the back door, I said, "where are you going?" There's all this snow out there, she said "never mind" lift up the cardboard and the stray and kicked the snow got the winter endive and we ate greens and bean for three days. That tastes real good, you can't buy that stuff today. The women I would say, the men went to the mills and did what they had to, but none of them would have survive if it wasn't for the women. How they had to live just stay home and just work, work, and work. The things them people did their aren't no young kids doing it today, not too many of them if there is.

JK: What kind of things did they cook? Like if you would walk down the street would you smell all these different things?

EN: Yeah, like I said there were a lot of different nationalities, the German next door you could smell the sauerkraut. The Jewish were mostly bakers they made the baking I smelled that all the time. Then you had the Italians that made the sauce with the windows open it was I would say on a good hot summer day if you didn't get nothing to eat the smell would keep you going for awhile.

JK: As far as the neighborhoods were there a lot of ethnic clubs or where did the guys hangout some of the time?

EN: Well, this down here at one time was in Ripley's Believe It or Not more churches and clubs and poolrooms for the size of this town anywhere in the United States. There was a church next to each club and the evidence is still here. The Serbian Home their church is fifty yards away. Down there on the other corner where there is the Eagles across the street is the church. The Italian Home their church is on the lot that is still there now where was over there. The German's they had a club their church wasn't too far away. Every club had their church was in a stones throw, because that was their section. Each ethnic group had their own section in Farrell. Croatians, Italians, Slovak's, and them builds most are still there we've lost quite a few, we lost two Polish clubs, a Romanian club, a Bulgarian club, a Greek club, about seven or eight clubs. Now the part about it now is all these ethnic clubs are in the ghetto area. The people that run these ethnic clubs and stuff when time went by they moved out and now it's just a ghetto area.

JK: A lot of the younger kids lost interest in a lot of that.

EN: The clubs they don't even want to know about. The ethnic background they don't want to hear about.

JK: As far as the New Deal Club here do you have a brief history of what you understood from what people told you and what you remember how it developed?

EN: Well, when I was nine years old my father was president of the New Deal Club and he brought us up after everybody came out of church all clubs that's the kids would sit down on the chairs or the benches, while the men were talking or whatever. To watch

them on a Sunday afternoon they had a game they played a lot in them days and it was bocce. It wasn't on courts like they are today it was in the alley's. And they had the clunkers from all the furnace and everybody had to throw it in the air cause you couldn't roll it. And yet you'd seen these guys sweating everything out everyday how to make a buck to feed the family and when they got out there you'd seem them arguing, calling each other names, but when they went inside to have that one drink you would have thought they were all related. That was a lot of just letting things out. Every ethnic club in Farrell, if you went in there are eleven o'clock mass or the early mass they were there. When they came from the later mass they were there with their kids. And then the time I first asked, he comes a guy in he has a white flower in his lapel the next guy came in he had a red and these are working guys, and I said "hey how come you have that flower?" and he said "this is to show that my mother has passed away". They had a reason for everything they did in them days today they don't even know I don't think most people remember mothers day. Unless it's commercial I mean mother's day they used to go to the house, sit down and eat and talk with them and everything. Today they go up to the stores and go to the cemeteries and there aren't too many fresh flowers on the mother's graves. People forget that's the problem people forgot.

JK: Getting back with the New Deal Club, you were saying that you were about nine years old and you remember?

EN: Well, when your nine years old you still can listen. Every time they were talking they were talking politics, the democratic party, look at what this guy done, look at what this guy done for the poor, and the reason of the club was on the account that Franklin Delano Roosevelt said we're going to start a New Deal. That was his speech and he did what he said maybe everything he did wasn't right, but he saved the nation from starving. Ever since that time in 1933 this club has still honored his birthday and went by the rules he made a lot of them. What he did for the workingman and everything and that's why there is still a democratic club left in the country.

JK: You said at one time how many New Deal Clubs were in the '30's?

EN: Over 200 and something like 250-260 in that neighborhood. There was three left about fifteen to twenty years ago, Florida, Philadelphia and Farrell. This is the only one left today.

JK: Getting back with what you heard the initial organizing of the club, didn't you say some guys got together across the street?

EN: In a garage there was about thirteen fourteen of them and they were talking about they wanted to open a club. So, they going to go for a charter to Mercer and the guy said what are we going to name this club? So, they said we'll name it the Bagnoli club and the answer was our Pisano's in Niles got a Bagnoli club and we don't want to have the same name. So, they thought this guy that walked in must of stole this newspaper cause nobody was buying them in them day's. And it said the headline was FDR Starts the New Deal

and the guy say's that's the name. And that's how they named the club the New Deal Club.

JK: So, then in the beginning or even up till now has it still been a lot of Italian people by nationality that organized it and our members?

EN: I would say eighty percent that organized it were Italians that organized this club.

JK: And out of that group of Italians were most of them Bagnolese?

EN: Most of them were all Bagnolese. All of them first president Mr. Pizarro was the first president and then my uncle was the second president, then my relative was the third president, my dad was the seventh or eighth president and it goes right down the line. I would say yeah if it wasn't for them there wouldn't have been a New Deal Club today.

JK: So, as you understand it where was the first building or where did they move from?

EN: The first one was right over then on 1101 Hamilton Avenue and then they went to Beachwood Avenue I would say 700 or 800 block and then they moved into the current 1059 Emerson. It was Cervanok's Grocery Store. It was empty so they bought it and they went in there and they started from one to the other and its still there and that was in the '40's.

JK: In the '40's okay. Then as far as you know with bocce was that always part of the New Deal Club or did that come a little bit later?

EN: That came later. I would say, you mean like courts and stuff?

JK: Yeah.

EN: That came later, because they only played it in alleys because they had no courts and then later on when things got a little bit better each club built their own courts and everything, which there are plenty around yet today. And it's another way of getting together on a Saturday and Sunday and playing and laughing, and joking and telling a lot of stories.

JK: And enjoying life and having a good time.

EN: I mean what the hell there are different ways that people are satisfied, but being a parent with nine kids, if you see them out in the bocce court playing you know their not somewhere else in trouble.

JK: Good point that's right. How was it that you got involved with the New Deal Club?

EN: Well, I was always brought up here by my dad and as years went by I went into the service, the Merchant Marine and then to the Army and one day the guy that was the only

bartender that the New Deal Club ever had, Mr. Chieffo, asked me I am getting a little bit slow how about you helping me out. I'd all right you want some help I'll help you. And that's how I became, and then a regular member and so on. When all the old times left, gone, they asked me to take it over in 1963-64 and I've been here ever since.

JK: That's about 37-38 years that's a long time. So, you've seen a lot of the people come and go.

EN: Yeah, some of the good and bad ones, more good ones. Stories that I don't even know how to tell them, incidents that happened you'd have to understand the reasoning, I used to shake my head and say these are guy's that came from old country with only two years of schooling? These guys should be all lawyers and doctors.

JK: A lot of intelligent people and a lot of common sense. Today it's tough you might have people with a lot of education.

EN: Brains but no common sense.

JK: Exactly and if you've got both then I think your...

EN: In good shape. I used to hear an old timer say if you want your kids to be smart when he gets out of the school you make him hang out on the street for three years and then you send him to the army for three years when he comes out he's going to be a good man. Know how to take care of himself, knows how the other side, he just see everything that's going on. They always tell me that experience is the best teacher in the world.

JK: How about recently are there a lot of younger people coming around?

EN: The younger ones that do come around they are not interested in ethnic, they come around cause they know Joe, Pete that's however it here. As far as the democratic club you have to drive it into them. It seems to me they don't know what's happening politically or anything, but they know the score of the ball game, rock bands and stuff like that. They are not interested in the right things and I think outside shows that.

JK: So, you try to encourage voting?

EN: That's what we're here for. Right and I sit there, you know where I sit and I sit there and I tell them guys you've got to get out there and vote. Ah it won't help, it won't help, with that attitude we're in trouble you have to go out and vote for somebody that say's he's going to do some good for you and for the working people that's the main thing.

JK: What impact that you could see on the neighborhood or even the New Deal Club when all the mills started closing down, Westinghouse and Malleable, Sharon Steel...

EN: General American, the impact of it you can see it yet today. Very, very bad. It just that you can't believe that it's the same town you cannot believe that it is the same town.

The older people you don't even see them they go in their homes and don't come out and probably most of them aren't able to and the other ones.

JK: So, then all the members were members of the Democratic Party correct?

EN: Yes, you have to be.

JK: As far as membership goes, the hype of the New Deal Club what was the membership?

EN: I would say it was about 3500.

JK: And that was roughly in what decade?

EN: I would say from the time they started in '33 up until the '60's '70's and going into the '70's they were at the top. Then in the '80's things started going the other way the problems in Farrell what we have didn't happen over the weekend it took about thirty some years to make it go down like this. But the democratic party in this town at one time everybody would come here when they were running for election, because they knew your talking at in them times five or six thousand votes that were all democrats. And one thing about it when you're a democrat in Farrell you're a democrat nobody even runs on the general, because there aren't no republican's left.

JK: So, population wise probably 90% plus your democrats.

EN: I think at one time when democrats had the most I'd ever have was 500.

JK: Republican's?

EN: Republican's the most I can remember. The democrats at one time like I said if you weren't a democrat in Farrell, we had republicans changing their party just so that they would get elected cause they couldn't get elected on the Republican Party.

JK: Did, like you said a lot of the influential democrats would come here, did they help people get jobs?

EN: That was their goal to make sure that they got people in these mills and when your helping the democrat the democrat will help you. They did a hell of a job they got a lot of people jobs. You see like Larry Basil railroad superintendent democrat one of the trustee's here for twenty-four years he must of got a hundred people jobs down at that mill at least a hundred people got jobs at that mill. That's the kind of people that was here and they would help their own out at getting jobs. Not only down at Sharon Steel, Westinghouse, Wheatland Tube, all of them, they all helped the democratic members they had.

JK: You mentioned Larry Basil, who are some of the other just to throw out names that were pretty good members of the club in your years gone by that you know of?

EN: Well, there's Mr. Bettua, Sam Chieffo, Sam Reda, and all them guys. You talk about against the union or against a democrat and they were possible all the nicest guys you wanted to meet, but they'd fight with you if you talked about anyone of those. There was the names could go on and on there were so many guys here that were good and they had the interest of the club and the people in town and everything that was good. I guess that's why they did what they did all them years. Our problem now is the younger ones that I don't think they are thinking about anything but who's going to win an election. They don't even care. Remember a group of four or five young kids came in Roosevelt's picture a top the bar and one the kid said who is that I said that's Giroski he was born in Farrell and he thought that was John Giroski, but John didn't look like Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

JK: Another question here, do you remember all the years being in the neighborhood a lot of the old timers did they make their own wine?

EN: That was their pride and joy all you heard was bragging rights every time they tapped it and who had the best and then they sampled all each others and they all got loaded. That was their pride and joy making homemade wine.

JK: How about even today, do some people still make it?

EN: Not quite as many not even close I guess I am rubbing off I make my own now. Not the way they did it, but I make it it's good. There's were better maybe their grapes were better, maybe what they did was better, but their wine when they called it Diego red they didn't call it on account of the color of the wine, because you drank enough of it all you say was red. You understand it was good wine. They loved it, they couldn't wait for the grapes, hey Tony grapes come in yet, yeah and then they were gone. I think every guy that was a member here made his own wine good wine too. You know what a guy said one time; there was a black guy in South Africa or something I guess he was a brain, a hell of a nice guy in science and stuff and he died. And the guy that wrote the article said another library closed today. When them people with the brains go you never replace them that easy.

JK: That's for sure. Back in the old days in the neighborhood was there any organized crime or anything going on?

EN: Well, to tell you that there wasn't wouldn't be telling the truth. I guess every town in the United States of America had the ones that don't want to work and the ones that want to grab everything from everybody. Usually the ones in that business didn't get big they didn't get big I don't know if it was that they didn't know how, which I think they did, I think the people in this town were a little bit tough then most towns. When they started demanding money the answer came back as no. And there was a lot a lot of trouble when they came out of that mill they got paid in cash and they wanted five dollars. Well, it only

lasted a little cause a couple of noise and they gave them the message that they weren't getting no more fives and they didn't. And by the way all them guys happened to be Bagnolese that put the stop on it in Farrell.

JK: As far as the New Deal Club goes you mentioned this is the last one in the United States do you have any plans to preserve that heritage and that democratic principle?

EN: Well, we are thinking about how that we can put more of this type of an organization the New Deal Club maybe through out the state to see what happens and maybe the country to get these kids interested in the Democratic Party.

JK: That's a very good plan you know to keep it going for political reasons and historic reasons even the New Deal Club, like you said younger kids today don't follow up or don't fully understand.

EN: What they are missing.

JK: Absolutely. Well, one other thing like getting back with the neighborhoods and things the block area around here all the houses especially on Hamilton Avenue and Fruit they are all identical practically.

EN: They call them company houses. Years back the mill built them homes for the workers. I remember the first one that we knew about on Wallis Avenue 900 block, Mr. ____; he bought the house for \$1200 from the company where they lived. When my dad bought it on Fruit Avenue it was \$1900 they kept going up a little bit. But the first one I remember was old man ____ for \$1200 he bought they called them company homes. Then up on the Boulevard, which is called them homes were all the bosses.

JK: That was the richer people.

EN: Yeah the richer people, down here we were all the working class people and the houses were that close and they left enough property in the back so they could grow something to eat, without that they were dead. But people don't want to talk about that stuff, but they don't want people to know all the money they got they did that also. Nobody wants to admit where they came from. I am not ashamed of where I came from, that probably taught me a lot. First of all living in Farrell you have to be on guard at all times, now especially. In them days I used to sleep on the front porch, wake up in the summer morning, if I went to sleep on the front porch where I live on 930 Fruit Avenue they would have my pants, my shoes, their wouldn't be no glider in the first place they would have stole that, but the difference in times. They are too busy of thinking of other things and nobody is actually interested in the people that make our laws in this country and that's what they should be interested in.

JK: One thing that came to my mind years ago I even remember as a young kid on the block in between Fruit and Hamilton on Idaho Street there were a few businesses there.

EN: A lot were there. We had furniture stores, restaurants, five and ten, three of the best restaurants I could remember they had good food, we had it's hard to believe. Maybe it's because nobody had a car and they had to walk to the grocery store, they walked to the furniture store, they walked to the movie, everything was within walking distance. It made everybody; you could walk the streets at any time of day or night. Then when everybody got smart made money everybody flew the coupe and look what we've got. Not only Farrell I am not only talking about Farrell it's any town. Now when these guys come from Italy or German, Poland wherever they come from with average two years of school and they made the best country in the world then they didn't want their kids to go through what they went through so they educated them and that might have been a big mistake. Look at it now everybody has a different idea about everything. One kid had eight years of Catholic school, four years of public, and then I am over here in West Compton and each place I went on any one item I had three different versions, he said they were driving me crazy I don't know who was right or who was wrong. When the kids get too smart supposedly we ain't had nothing but problems. I think there's no crime in being smart, but most people don't use common sense. They don't know what it means; it's a shame when I see good kids and good families good everything and they end up all messed up. It can't be bringing up like everybody say's what makes a kid bad. These people come from the nicest families I've known all my life. I mean nice respectable people their kids dying thirty-three or thirty four years old that's a sin. Now if you educate people against that you have shot, if you don't, but I think the trouble with today is there is only one thing they are interested in money. They don't care as long as it doesn't happen to them they don't care what happens. But getting back to politics we have to do something to get these younger kids to go out and vote. Do you realize the number of people that voted last election in Farrell; we had the mayor of the town only got 1100 votes out of 3500. That's all that voted. And they lost by 400 for county commissioner, no if they would get some kind of program to get these guys out to vote that are registered he wins. So, there differently is a need for organizations like this.

JK: Oh one other thing I remember I was here about ten or eleven years ago, you had like an Anniversary party here and you had all the politicians here. So, you've done that over the years?

EN: Well, we have we usually have on every Roosevelt's birthday about 300 pounds of sausage, beer, some cheeses and stuff all in remembrance of his birthday. The last one that you were talking about the _ that was about '93 or '94 and it was the oldest living charter member. So, what we did was combined Roosevelt's Birthday and his and you say who was here, every politician in the valley was here.

JK: Yeah, the place was full it was jammed pack here.

EN: And all taken care of by the New Deal Club trying to promote this, but we are not being successful with the younger one's. Nobody is being successful with the younger one's. Well we hope to change that. I think a good idea is putting more places like this in more cities and towns.

JK: Very good idea I agree and that way it will promote getting younger people involved and active with the political system. Today there is too much apathy like you were saying, younger people not all of them, but a lot of them just don't care.

EN: A big majority so we have to work to correct that.

JK: As far as you mentioned how it was years ago in this neighborhood, if you had a choice would you want to go back to how it was before or how the people were or how the things were?

EN: I'd go back. But I think by going back I would possible find the two words that are missing today, morals and respect. The younger ones don't know what them two words are. If you think that I am wrong take a look at what you see on TV, the killings, the shootings, and this and that. You have to have moral or respect or your done. That was the first two words I was taught when I was young.

JK: Well, thank you very much for this interview.

EN: My pleasure.