

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Niles Police Department

Personal Experience

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RUSSELL WESTENFIELD

Interviewed

by

Stephen Papalas

on

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P This is an interview with Russel C Westenfield for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the Niles Police Department, by Stephen Papalas, on November 22, 1983

Were you born here in Niles?

W Yes In 1903

P Your parents were?

W No Neither one was born here.

P Briefly, what is their history?

W My mother was a farmer's daughter down in Harrison County, my father was a doctor's up in Lucas County. He was orphaned at the age of eleven Later on, he became a sheet metal worker, carpenter, and general skills tradesman

P What brought him here to Niles? The industries?

W: The car works He was a car builder over there on Erie Street where they then built the street cars In fact, after he came to Niles, his entire employment was with the Niles Car Company I believe it was subsequently taken over by the Mahoning Valley Transit Company or something of a similar name

P What year did you graduate from Niles McKinley?

W 1921.

P What could you tell me about the high school itself? Who was your favorite teacher? What were the classes like? Do you remember?

W That has been well in excess of fifty years I can remember a history teacher by the name of Mr Threhkeld who kind of inspired the students and interested them in his subject I remember a math teacher named Miss Sallster who was of the school who wore high button shoes and long dresses long after they passed out of style She taught geometry and algebra and was considered a very good and strict teacher Geometry seemed particularly to be a study at which I had some aptitude. I recall that distinctly I liked her very much The principal, I think, was a man called Pop Zellers. The superintendent was W C Campbell at that time
The school, of course, is now Edison Junior High School, although I recall before going there that I attended classes at the old central, particularly manual training classes seem to be down there The teacher was a man who seemed to

be very formidable. His name was Boyer. On the first day that the students appeared in his class, he picked up a mouse and shook it in his hand as he said, "I want you to look at this because if any of you get out of line and do not do what you are told, I am going to throw this and hit you right between the eyes."

All in all, I enjoyed the high school. I was sort of a bookish fellow. I did quite well in studies. I was on the debate team. I guess I was about one hundred and ten pounds at the greatest and my height of about five foot four did not make me much of a football or basketball player. I never did get into those things. Tennis was the only game that I played, but they did not have tennis in high school in those days.

P Do you remember Kenneth Weber?

W Kenny Weber? You mean the track coach?

P Yes

W He, of course, came from Columbus. He was on the faculty. Later on, I was also on the faculty at Niles McKinley High School. I remember him quite well. In fact, I frequently see him.

P I interviewed him also. He is a pretty impressive person.

W Yes, he is full of events which he recalls. I think that he has a more retentive memory than perhaps I do. His career in Niles does not start until long after I got out of high school and was teaching. He came here in the 1920's. You probably know when.

P What are your earliest recollections of any members of the police department? Do you remember any of the old-timers like Officer Neiss? Chief Round or any of those gentlemen?

W I recall both Neiss and Round being on the force and becoming Chief of police. As a youngster at that time, I recall nothing else about effectiveness of the force or their own activities. I do not recall any rumors or stories about them. In fact, I suppose that my attention to the events of the law enforcement character in Niles goes back to the 1920's. Then only in the 1920's, rumors and reports in the papers and things that even youngsters would have heard.

P Can you remember any of the rumors and the reports that you read?

W I do not recall anything before the prohibition era, which began in 1919 and lasted until 1933, I believe, of any significance, except some of the officers used

to wear those Derby hats and were always in charge of parades, or in some respect connected to parades. President Roosevelt made it an early order of his administration to have the 18th Amendment repealed. Of course, I do recall that prior to the prohibition era, State Street, Main Street, and Park Avenue, all in Niles, had saloons. In fact, probably at one time, there were twelve or fourteen saloons. I recall as a boy, when you went past them, the sour smell of whatever the drink was that gave off the smell made you aware that you were passing a saloon.

They had swinging doors. In the summer, the doors were closed so that you could look over them and under them, but a person of average stature could not otherwise see what was going on. On some of the floors you could see saw dust. I recall on one occasion a fellow was hustled out by the bouncer or the proprietor and nearly tumbled over the carriage in which my mother was pushing my younger sister. These saloons in those days were frequented by men only, except there may have been in a few of the nicer ones a side door and a back room in which ladies might go and enjoy the liquor that was served there.

When prohibition came, these all went out. I suppose it was not more than one or two years before we began to hear rumors of speakeasies existing around the city here and there. To my recollection, however, none of them were in the old doughnut in the downtown area. There were more on the outlying parts of town. On the east side there was one building which became known as the leading speakeasy in town. There were others, I believe, on Mason and Fendon Street. There were stories within a year or two of prohibition's enactment that people were manufacturing beer and wine and whiskey in their cellars. I suppose there were some household sales of it, but I do not recall any instances particularly of that.

The only significant event that I recall in the prohibition era was that finally, after Judge Berol sentenced Jim Jennings to the penitentiary. I guess it was for violation of the liquor act. I do not recall the year of it. I do not know whether it was that violation alone or whether it was a violation involving bribery or attempted bribery of the police. I do not clearly recall it. I do remember that Jim Hennings was finally sentenced and sent to one of the state correctional facilities. I further recall that a petition was prepared and signed by numbers, numerous citizens asking that the governor paroled him. If I am not mistaken, he was finally paroled before the expiration of his sentence. The more that comes back to me a little, I do not think he would have been sentenced for running a speakeasy. I think it must have involved bribery or attempted bribery of a law enforcement officer.

- P· The policemen were not sentenced any jail term, but Jennings was? His family maintains that he was sentenced politically until after the election at least. They wanted to get him out of the area so that he could not affect the election as he had in previous times, especially with the sheriff in Trumbull County?

- W It certainly was true that Jim Jennings could swing a lot of votes in the city and more particularly in what was then the Third Ward. I suppose his influence was great enough to change the outcome of an election if it was at all close.
- P. Jennings took credit for having the best liquor in the area during prohibition. They felt that they had quite a thing going there and they kept it a privately owned affair. The Black Hand was kept out of it, although the Black Hand did try to take over a couple of times. There was a bombing there at least once. There were some fights. There were some shootings. A member of the Black Hand was shot on Wood Street. Do you remember any of this?
- W I do not know whether you have reference to the fight between Chippy Mango and Marty Flask that took place. I do not recall the year. It was while I was teaching at McKinley High School. Everyone was more or less acquainted by sight with Marty Flask. He had a canary colored automobile of an expensive type. He was frequently seen driving around town and often called at the high school at the close of the day to pick up students and, not excluding girls, whom he would apparently drive home. He was generally regarded as a smart alec. We recall somehow that he and Chippy Mango, who were either employed by or frequenters of Jennings' establishment, who fell out. I guess Marty Flask beat Chippy up pretty badly with knuckles. I guess Chippy got a shotgun and came back and "blew him away" as the saying goes. I recall then the principal of the high school that this is the best thing that has happened. He had it coming for a long time.
- Chippy disappeared, as everyone knows. He was not discovered for many years, when somehow or another, they found him up in New England, perhaps in the vicinity of Boston. He was brought back for trial. He was defended by George Bookwalder, who is the leading criminal trial lawyer in Trumbull County. George got him acquitted. It is recalled that one of George's telling arguments and his plea to the jury was that he had a pair of brass knuckles on his own hand and after describing what was administered to Chippy Mango by Marty Flask, he said, "How would you like something like that?" With all of his force, he slammed the brass knuckles down on the lawyer's counsel's table or railing in front of the jury. IT was so hard that it dented the oak woodwork. At any rate, after having been in hiding for many years, Chippy came back and was acquitted by the jury. I do not think many tears were shed because he was acquitted.
- P Many people have told me that story. It is a fascinating story and everybody remembers it so well. You probably have told it the best by description of Bookwalder and the courtroom. What have you heard about the Ku Klux Klan Riot of 1924?

W The one in Niles must have been in 1924 I was in college at the time Like the average college student, I was engrossed with studying and extra curricular activities and the usual college activities. Perhaps I did not pay too much attention I did not come back to Niles during the episode I do recall that reports were that two or three different people were shot and killed or shot and wounded. I do not recall that any bodies were ever found of persons who were shot and killed

However, the Klan at that time enlisted many, many people in Niles who would not ordinarily be members of such a thing Everyone knows that it was a reaction against the tremendous increase in immigration following World War I Immigration reached the proportion of a million people a year. Many of them, coming particularly from the Mediterranean area, were not skilled workers and did not want to farm They came in tremendous numbers to the Mahoning Valley They came to Youngstown, Warren and Niles Niles was then a big industrial center for the manufacture of steel We had a blast furnace and four or five rolling mills for sheet iron purposes In fact, the employers, particularly the steel companies, encouraged the immigration, and even sent agents to various countries, especially Italy They encouraged the migration of many men who would come without their families, and then send for them later, after they had accumulated some earnings at the mills

P Were these immigrants invited to the area because they worked for cheap labor and cheap wages?

W Undoubtedly During World War I, with men in the army, wages went up quite high and inflation took place The year 1921 was a year of unemployment and readjustment The readjustment came rapidly and the national inflation renewed itself It even went on to greater heights

However, before World War I and after, it was not unknown that the various employers in the steel industry encouraged immigration to have a bountiful labor supply at cheaper wages In fact, we always understood that Vincent Mango, who was possibly one of the earliest outstanding Italians in Niles, was the Padrone of the Italians who could not speak English when they came There were numerous incidents where they were probably not very literate in any tongue He was the Padrone for these people and it is understood that he went to Italy and recruited for the steel companies Recruitment was not limited to Italy, although it was possibly the place from which most came

I recall working in the Thomas Mill in the early 1920's after World War I. There were barracks for many of these new immigrants who lived right on the mill property These were rolling mills right on the mill property. It resembled a good bit the barracks that soldiers lived in during the service They lived there and they ate at the mess on the mill property. I suppose the mill deducted from their pay the cost of their barrack residents and possibly other items they

purchased at the company store. There were several of these barracks over at the McDonald mills, which were built during World War I. I recall working in what was called the black warehouse because that is where the black sheet steel was stacked after it had been rolled out and sheered and piled up. It was there for shipment on freight cars. I recall working there with a crew that included Greeks as well as Italians and even a Turk.

During and after World War I and in the early 1920's, there was a tremendous incursion of foreign folks and the Mahoning Valley as a steel center. We got an awful lot of them. This frightened the descendants of the early American folks who included people who had come, like the Welsh. The Welsh came around the Civil War days, and the Germans and English and those who we simply call Americans because they had no close connection of any foreign country after two or three generations. They became frightened because they were fearful, first of all, that they would lose their jobs to cheaper labor. They also felt that folks were coming in faster than they could be assimilated.

For instance, I recall that Saturday night was the night in town. People on Saturday night went downtown to the stores and to the movies. The sidewalks were jammed with people so much so that as youngsters, we frequently had to walk out on the street to get around the press of people. Among these people were a tremendous number of people not talking English. They were talking Italian or other foreign languages. Their dress, as well as a foreign tongue, was different. It was frequently the case where you would see the man striding along in front and his wife coming along four or five paces behind with a scarf over her head and dressed differently than was the fashion of American dress.

There was a feeling that the number coming could not be assimilated and that American democracy was endangered a little bit by a great influx of people faster than they could become acquainted with American ways. This was coupled with the fact that the 1920 speakeasies were run by people like Jim Jennings, whose last name was really Gennaro.

P DiGennaro

W Then it must not be overlooked and must be stated that all of these folks, except possibly the Greeks and Turks, were of the Roman Catholic faith. The great influx of the Roman Catholic faith was used in an argument in many parts of the country that Catholic power and the power of the pope was going to be so great in this country that we would be ruled practically by the ideals of a foreign church. I would say that this was an added fear along with employment wages, and possibly the uncertainty of the survival of American ways.

The very fact that Jim Jennings, for example, could cast a vote for a large part of the Third Ward seemed to fortify in the minds of some people that democracy was somewhat endangered by this tremendously rapid influx. In fact, if I recall the statistics, first generation Nilesites, together with their parentage

that came from abroad, was pretty much near fifty percent of the city's population. I do not recall the exact figure, but they are easy to get. We published it in the Niles history of 1934. All of that lay back of the unfortunate Klan incident of 1924 and, not only were many of the Niles people involved in the Klan, but some of the pastors tacitly encouraged it. Not all, because I recall the pastor of our church denounced it as an Unchristian body and he was quite bitterly criticized by some of his own congregation.

P Who was that minister?

W His name was Reverend Wilford H. McClain. It is interesting, from that day to this, the First Christian Church has sort of been in the forefront of the later ecumenical movement, which Tom Murphey and the present pastor, Verner Dokes, initiated some years ago.

P He was from the First Christian Church?

W Yes.

P What about this ecumenical movement?

W It is the movement in Niles which began before Tom Murphey died. It has probably been running ten or twelve years now. Several of the Protestant and the Roman Catholic Church meet annually for a banquet. One year it will be a speaker from the one faith and the next year from another. The point of it is that the bitterness that lingered long after the Klan episode has now given way to a very friendly feeling of Christian unity among the major churches of Niles, both Catholic and Protestant.

P This was founded partly by McLain?

W No, not by McLain. It was by Verner Dokes and Tom Murphey. McLain's influence was merely that he kind of set a pattern of refusing to be prejudice by matters like intolerance and Klan movement.

Going back to the prohibition era, I do recall that in addition to the fight leading to the killing of Marty Flask, I cannot think of his name, but another man was found murdered near a well-known speakeasy on the east side, but Jennings was not connected with it in any way. His murder was not only not solved, but not given much attention. There is not much doubt that at that time, his murder was connected in some way with the illegal sales of liquor. I do not recall his name, but he was not an Italian. It was a name of who was well known in the city.

After prohibition came and was defeated in 1932 or 1933 by the repeal of

the 18th Amendment, gambling became the successor of the speakeasy. In fact, I suppose it existed along with the speakeasy, but pretty much replaced them since good liquor could be purchased after the repeal of the 18th Amendment. The Jennings building was believed to be a very considerable gambling center. There were other places. Some of them were right down in the old doughnut area, which did engage in various gambling practices. The number racket was a big thing at one time. The taking of bets on horses and sporting events came to the attention of everybody in Niles. Rarely were they the subject of police action.

P Going back just a little bit, do you remember Charles Crow?

W Yes, I recall Charles Crow. I was then a boy in the early teens. Charles Crow was a tall and very congenial man. He had an outgoing manner. He was the proprietor of a saloon, I believe on Main Street, at one time.

P. Was it a saloon or a shoe store?

W Both, I think. I think earlier a saloon and then possibly later, a shoe store. He became mayor of Niles in his day. I do not recall when he was elected. He was a very popular mayor. He personally assisted families who were unemployed and in need, and headed charity moves for them.

P Do you know who might have been political enemies?

W No, I do not recall the Crow Administration to know even who ran against him. In fact, I do not know if he was Republican or Democrat. Which was he, do you know?

P He was Republican. He staged dozens and dozens every year on speakeasies.

W. Is that a fact?

P. Yes. He also fired several police officers for corruption. He was an extremely honest person who would not tolerate any deviation from the rules.

W What was the period of his mayoralty?

P 1918 to about 1924. It would be 1916 to 1924. The people, like the bootleggers, were very upset with him. They helped to do him in, along with the Ku Klux Klan. The Klan wanted to march and he would not give them a parade permit. It was right at election time in 1924. Both groups got together and pushed him out. I am very impressed by the things that he did. He was a tremendous man. I am

surprised that we do not have streets named after him or anything like that. There are no boulevards like we see at the mall for other people. He was a very substantial leader in the community. I just cannot get over it.

W His son is still a resident of Niles.

P I have interviewed him.

W Perhaps it should be checked out whether or not, prior to becoming mayor, whether he was owner or manager of a saloon. I do not know for sure. It runs in my memory that he was, but so what. So were lots of other folks. It was a legal business up to prohibition.

P Whatever, he was a very successful business man.

W Yes, he was.

P. He was quite an athlete. After Crow left office, Kistler came in. There have been rumors that he was very closely associated with the Ku Klux Klan. Later on during his second term, he began to stage some raids on speakeasies. As a threat, the bootleggers blew up O O Hewitt's home on South Street. He was the service director at the time. Do you remember that incident? It was probably 1927.

W No, I do not recall it. If you had not interviewed Carl Kistler, he might be able to give you some close details. He is not a son, but I believe a nephew.

P What about Jennings' establishment during the 1930's and 1940's? It changed from Jim Jennings' to Joe Jennings' and became known as Jennings' Night Club. People have told me that they recall it being one of the leading dance halls in the area. They had famous musicians and personalities there, as well as gambling. It was maybe a haunt for some of the leading racketeers in the area at times. Do you remember it as being a favorite spot for several years in Niles?

W It was a popular spot. I was temporarily away from Niles beginning in 1935. I really did not get back until 1946. My residence was here, but I was practically away all of the time. I would not have been familiar with those things in any detail. After World War II, at least, it was known to be the center of bingo for Blue Star Mothers, for a long time. This was, of course, perfectly legal under the Ohio Law.

P After World War II, between now and World War II, who is the mayor that sticks out in your mind as being one of the most effective leaders in the community?

Let us say your favorite person?

W After World War II, there is not any doubt that Mayor Lennie was an effective mayor. He was a great political leader. He was a very popular man, unlike what you have said about Charles Crow and Harvey Kistler. I do not recall that there was any police action to amount to anything, against the rather obvious gambling activities around town. He did succeed in getting through our interceptive sewer system. Many other improvements. However, I suppose we would have to say that Carmen DiChristafaro was a very outstanding mayor. He had the support of the Democrats as well as the Republicans. I think his mayoralty was free of any rumors of kick back or other illegal activities. I cannot say that was always the case. I have personally known of attempted efforts on the part of some city officials to obtain money, usually in the form of a campaign contribution, for matters like the extension of water lines and similar things. I do not think any of that took place in the administration of Mayor DiChristafaro.

Bill Thorpe was a very credible mayor and tried to run a business-like administration. The truth of the matter is, if I had to choose between the mayors and the city's councils over the period of the 1950's and 1960's, and on into the 1970's, with all their weaknesses, I think that the mayors as a whole maybe did a better job in their field of administration than the council did. Until quite recently. Our present mayor, I think, is free of any taint of illegality of any kind.

P What can you tell me about police chiefs?

W That is not easy. My recollection of them is quite faint. It was always thought that Chief Berline was a rather strong chief, although the plain fact was that at least gambling activities were unabated in his day. Who was the chief prior to Berline? Do you recall?

P No. Nicholas?

W Nicholas was a chief whom I remember, but I do not recall anything about him. Most of those were in there during my years of absence from the city.

I recall when Chief Ross became Chief of Police. There was a little bit of a hassle over that because he was not the highest on the promotion examination conducted by the Civil Service Commission. I think he was perhaps second. The loser retained legal counsel and attempted to have the appointment vacated when Chief Ross was appointed. It failed in the common pleas court that took action. This was a little surprise, if I remember correctly. On a promotional examination that is not a matter of picking among the first three, but they are supposed to go with the person with the highest grade on the promotional examination if he is a suitable and fit person. Rumor had it that political leaders had wanted Chief Ross as a chief and possibly they had valid reasons for so.

desiring One must say in recent years, I think the police force has become much more professional, perhaps, than it was in the earlier period of police appointments in the city of Niles. Now there are men who specialize in detective work, juvenile work, and traffic work. I think this occurred during Chief Ross' period as Chief of Police and certainly he deserves some credit for it

P. Do you think some of this might be more because we have some progressive mayors?

W. I do not know where the impetus for it originated Whether the suggestion was made by the mayor or where it came from, but at least the force is somewhat more professional

P For what reason?

W. Because we have men specializing in detective work and juvenile work, and traffic work. They seem to be doing a pretty fair job of finding out who the typical juvenile and some of the adult offenders are in the city and seem to have done a fair job, except, of course, for burglaries which are so numerous that it would be almost impossible for anybody to keep up with them

P. During all your years in law here in Niles, what criminal case did you find most interesting that you had in our courts or you may have had an experience with the police department?

W I have not engaged in the defense of criminal defendants to any appreciable degree at all I have avoided that because I have been so busy with other fields and then in these later years, into the 1960's, I pretty much confined myself to office practice for the reason, I do not catch every word I do not hear so well in a large court room I have no business there anymore. You have got to hear every word if you are engaged in that

My acquaintance with the police of Niles in police work is pretty much limited to when I was city solicitor in the 1950's Judge Gippen was the judge at that time I do not think we lost very many criminal cases The police, when they filed charges and made an arrest, were pretty regularly able to substantiate their charges

I suppose the most significant case was the murder of a little old lady up on the corner of Hogarth and You'll I do not even remember her name now. It has been twenty-five or thirty years The police unraveled that in fairly short time I believe it was her grandson There was a matter of demanding money and losing his head and striking the old lady with a very heavy object that caused her death The police soon found out who did it He was bound over, tried, and convicted. He was sent to the penitentiary.

P Have we had any murderers from Niles that were ever executed?

W No, I do not recall any

P Thank you for your time.

End of Interview