

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Democratic Party of Trumbull County

Personal Experience

O.H. 978

CLARE O'BRIEN

Interviewed

by

Mark D. Dittmer

on

May 23, 1977

CLARE O'BRIEN

Clare O'Brien, the present county recorder in Trumbull County, illustrates the woman's role in Democratic politics. Having served within the party for nearly 30 years and being a native of Niles, Ohio, Miss O'Brien was geared to the Democratic Party by her family, but was the first to take an active role.

Miss O'Brien was influenced into politics by a neighbor, James Griffin. He motivated her to help campaign for Edward Kehley, who later held the position of county recorder in 1947. She was offered a position in the recorders office as a typist and later became a Chief Deputy. In 1952, Miss O'Brien left the recorders office having a negative attitude and was fed up with Trumbull County politics.

Miss O'Brien proceeded to take a position at the Syro Steel in Niles and worked towards a B.S., B.A. degree in business and accounting from Youngstown State University. After receiving her degree in 1970 and the recorder's position to be vacated, Miss O'Brien decided to run for the position and is still in active term.

Miss O'Brien has received various awards and recognitions over the years. She has served on the Central and Executive Committees of the Democratic Party, was elected "Woman of the Year" by Warren Business and Professional Woman's Club in 1975, and is presently the Vice President of Ohio Recorders Associa-

tion, 1977. She is a member of the Niles Historical Society, Warren Niles Zonta Club, Jeffersonian Club, Niles Federated Womens' Democratic Club, and served on the Niles-Bicentennial Organization of White House Ladies.

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INTERVIEWEE: CLARE O'BRIEN

INTERVIEWER: Mark D. Dittmer

SUBJECT: Democratic Party of Trumbull County, women
in politics, county recorder role, future
of Democratic Party (national and state)

DATE: May 23, 1977

D: This is an interview with Miss Clare O'Brien for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on the history of the Democratic Party of Trumbull County, by Mark Dittmer, in Warren, Ohio, on May 23, 1977, at 3:00 p.m.

First, Miss O'Brien, I'd like to ask you to give a description of your family and political background and relate what or who has motivated you to proceed into the field of politics?

O: Well, I have been involved in politics since 1941, if I were to give a specific date. I became involved in it the day I started working in the recorder's office in 1941. My family had always voted the Democratic ticket, but none of them had ever been active in the Party. My involvement started with a neighbor, who told me that Edward Kehley had been elected County Recorder in Trumbull County. He had campaigned vigorously for him, and that I had a job starting to work there on January 1.

D: Who was your neighbor?

O: Mr. James Griffin.

D: Could you give a summary of your years of service and what the role of the County Recorder is?

O: Well, that's very easy. But anyway, I worked in the Recorder's office for 12 years, doing all the different jobs, starting as a typist and ending up as a Chief Deputy after 12 years. I left when Ed Kehley was not reelected in 1952. I decided that I had enough of politics and I didn't want anymore, so I quit and went into industry.

The recorder's office is involved with various legal documents pertaining to real estate, deeds, mortgages, leases, agreements, practically any transfer of property since that time, or anyone in Trumbull County has bought or sold property, or if they have borrowed money or if they have leased, we have a record of it in the office, I'm sure. In fact, the records go back to the records of the sale of land to the Connecticut Land Company by the state of Connecticut and that involves the land that is now Trumbull County. The record of that sale and all the transactions that went with it are preserved in the safe in their original form. Any transaction since that date, approximately 1795, is on record somewhere in the office. Of course, when you record it you have to index it carefully so that if someone is looking for it, they will be able to find it. That does not involve all the functions of the office, but it gives you a general idea of what is done.

D: What are the high points and low points of being county recorder?

O: Well, it is a job that is particularly appealing to me. It is a job that I know all the aspects of, and I know that I am qualified to carry them out, therefore, it is particularly appealing to me. There is nothing that happens in the office that you can't find solutions for. Everything is cut and dry. Everything you do is set up by state legislature. There is no room for maneuvering. You file a paper, you charge a certain fee, period. There is very little policy making. It's almost all administrative. If it is a job in which you've had 12 years experience, then you'd feel. . . .

As far as highlights of it are concerned, I suppose being appointed and elected to it would be the highlight of it. It is a very interesting and a very entertaining job. You could write a book almost every-day on the things that happen.

D: What kinds of things?

O: Well, this morning a gentleman came to the counter. He was, of course, a voter entitled to attention, very irate, very upset. In fact, he was accompanied by the clerk of the county commissioner and he was out there because I had refused to record a paper for him, a deed. Well, there's no way that we would ever refuse to record a deed that had been transferred by the auditor's office, which is natural procedure. But he was too irate to tell that to, so I said, "Well, where's the paper I refused to record?" And he said, "I don't have it. The attorney has it." I said, "Who's the attorney?" So he gave me the attorney's name, and I called the attorney and talked to him and found out, of course, that I could not record it until it had been transferred, and the auditor could not transfer it until it had been approved by the planning commission, and it was the planning commission that would not approve it, not the recorder. This fellow was being taken. There's no question about it, but not by this office.

In fact, the poor man had sold this property to some people on land contract, so the people had paid for it, fulfilled the terms of their land contract, yet he wasn't able to give them a deed. That's just a little thing.

D: Can you please give an analysis of your main political philosophies and creeds and how you apply them into practice?

O: Well, no. I don't believe that I can exactly do that. If you had given me that question on Friday, I could. I think that--and this, I know, doesn't answer your question--I know that the job of the recorder is to serve the citizens and help every citizen regardless of their political affiliation and no matter how uneducated or helpless they may seem, that they're certainly all entitled to any help of consideration that you can give them. And politically, I think that the Democratic Party, for the most part, represents the grassroots people. It represents the ordinary working class of people of which I certainly am, and which my family are working class. They always have been. I think that party best represents the interest of those people. Naturally, very often, when you are serving people, you are serving the ordinary working class of people.

D: When do you think the Trumbull County Democratic Party was at its peak of existence and a particular decade?

O: Well, that depends on what you consider the peak. There were many high points, very interesting high points, but I don't really believe that I can answer that. Except, I do think that the present leadership

of the Democratic Party is of high caliber, and that it has actually reached its peak under the present leadership. I don't think the present leadership has been the most exciting leadership. I can recall various chairmen, county chairmen. I do think--I don't know him, but I did remember hearing much about him--W.B. Kilpatrick was the chairman at one time, and then Frank Tocelli, and then I believe there was someone in between.

D: Can you recall any persons in the Democratic Party that stick out in your mind, and why?

O: Definitely, just for their leadership. I think Dr. Timmins would stick out, would be considered a down-the-line, hard core Democrat. I think Mitch Shaker is an extremely intelligent leader and a good leader. Frank Tocelli worked hard. He worked very hard at accomplishing the purposes that he wanted to accomplish, and spent a lot of time in it. I remember hearing some very interesting tales about Kilpatrick. I remember hearing some interesting tales about the Marso. I believe it was Marso that was chairman prior even to Kilpatrick. There were some very interesting women in the women Democratic organizations.

I do remember some women in the club who were fantastic. The other night I met an Ann Caparelli at a women's meeting who was a candidate about a month ago, and I can remember her activities clear back to 1941. She is handicapped by a stroke, yet she's very active and has always been extremely interesting. Bard DiGiacomo, who was President of the Young Women's Democratic Club for many years . . . there wasn't a woman in the club under 50. (Laughter)

I think about the most interesting person and most entertaining person I would have to say was Frank Tocelli. I'd have to say he provided the most humor and the most interest.

D: Having accounted for its highest point, can you speculate upon its lowest ebb?

O: In Trumbull County?

D: In Trumbull County.

O: Oh yes, sure. I don't care to go into it too much. The lowest ebb would probably have been the time the chairman was involved in the sewage scandal in Warren. I would say that that was perhaps its lowest ebb in my memory.

- D: Are there other internal problems that are within the Party itself?
- O: Right at the present time you're speaking of?
- D: Yes.
- O: There always are some. I don't know of any in the Party internally right at this moment, but there are always some. There are how many precinct committeemen? Two hundred and eighty of them or something, but you never get them all to agree and you always have some with ideas of their own that are going to try to upset the apple cart.
- D: About the woman's role, where is the woman's place in Trumbull County as far as the Democratic Party, and is the League of Women Voters a good source of indicating changes in the Party?
- O: Even though they say they are nonpartisan, if I were to classify them, I would classify them as Republican. But they do an excellent job, and excellent job. I belong to it. They send out literature and it's excellent. I mean, if someone asks me for a description of the functions of the various offices in Trumbull County, I'd go to the League of Women Voters because they have it. And it's a lot of trouble to sit down, for example, and write the duties of the treasurer, and the duties of the auditor, and the duties of the various offices, but they've got it, even the city offices, any governmental office. They'll describe the qualifications of any officer in government, how they are elected, when they are elected, [and] what their duties are. They are a source of excellent information. Moreover, at election time, they put on a candidate's night and offer the candidates opportunities to express their views, or to meet on the platform and speak for maybe five or 10 minutes. They have an excellent platform and an excellent program at any election year. I think they do good work.
- D: Speculating upon Trumbull County itself, is there a place for women in the Democratic Party in Trumbull County?
- O: Oh, definitely. I don't think there has ever been any problem about that as far as the Democratic Party is concerned. I think in the Democratic Party, and the organization of the 280 odd precinct committee people who function, at least 50 percent are women. There is a woman who is treasurer of the party, Evaline Verbot-sky, and I'm sure that there are some women vice presidents--I think they call them vice presidents. They have women in the Executive Committee. I think that

they have always recognized the role of women. The fact that you've got two women officials in Trumbull County now, shows that there's certainly no prejudice against us. I think they do something for the party. I think women have a lot of integrity, and that they give the party a little bit of class, that they might not have if women weren't involved in it.

D: Speaking on the internal structure of the party now, is there a great significance in the precinct committeemen and the Executive Committee and the Central Committee? What is their significance based on the structure of the Party?

O: Well you know, it's set up by state legislature, that the precinct committeemen, who form the central committee of the Party, elect the chairman, elect the various officers of the Democratic Party, and that they fill various vacancies when they occur. The vacancy in the Recorder's Office, they filled that; the vacancy in the Treasurer's Office, they filled that. There are various officers that are vacated. They meet, maybe three or four times a year. This is the Central Committee, and of course, they always have to meet right after their election in order to name the chairman.

The Executive Committee does have functions. They do meet occasionally. They don't always agree. I made a point, early in the game, to get elected to the Executive Committee. When you're on the Executive Committee . . . first of all, you run for precinct committeeman, and I campaigned for that and had the President of the Democratic Club of Niles running against me. After I got elected precinct committeeman, I campaigned among the precinct committeemen in my ward to get elected to the Executive Committee. So, they do have a function. It isn't ideal and it isn't utopia, but they do make decisions and they do vote on them. The elections are in every sense of the word "legal." But, by the same token, even though the majority of the precinct committeemen favor a certain candidate, it still doesn't insure that candidate's election. Even that doesn't swing an election. I don't know what does. But I'm thinking in particular of the fact that about a year ago, two years ago, the precinct committeemen, Central Committee, met and elected Paul Baron County Treasurer. Paul Baron served until the first general election, at which time, he was ousted and someone else was elected to that post. You wouldn't think this would happen when the majority of the precinct committeemen voted in his favor. So actually, the ordinary precinct committeeman does have some power, even though there's no pay connected with it. You have to be nuts to want it.

- D: Changing the subject a little, is labor now influencing the Democratic party as it did back in the 1940s and 1930s?
- O: In Trumbull County?
- D: In Trumbull County.
- O: In my opinion, there is a little bit of friction between labor and the Trumbull County Democratic party. I'm not sure what it is.
- D: Is this just temporarily?
- O: No, I don't think so. I think it's sort of a power struggle. I have observed it recently and I'm not sure how long it has existed.
- D: Can the two function without each other?
- O: Under present day circumstances, I don't believe they can.
- D: Presently, if you were ordained Chairman of the Democratic Party in Trumbull County, what type of platform would you run, and what type of changes would you like to see come about?
- O: I've never thought of that. In the first place, I would be not in the least interested in being Chairman of Trumbull County, of the Democrats. And so therefore, if I were, I can't honestly make any recommendations. I personally am satisfied with the leadership that we have.
- D: But you wouldn't want to see any changes come about as far as platform?
- O: What platform?
- D: There basically isn't a platform, but as far as ideologies of the party and the way it runs. Do you see anything wrong with it presently or anything you'd like to have changed?
- O: I think it functions fairly smoothly. There are many fights within the Party, but I think that any elections that are held within the Party, be either the Executive Committee or the Central Committee, are held fairly.
- D: What future, in broad perspectives, do you see for the Democratic Party in Trumbull County?
- O: Well, I don't know what you mean by that, except that you would naturally wonder--and I'm not sure it would

be a good idea--if we're as successful and powerful as the Democratic Party in Trumbull County has been, how any Republicans could ever get elected. (Laughter) Truthfully, and yet they have. I for one feel that it's good that there is a two-party system, and that there is competition between them, because then I think one party can't get too much power or too much in control, and that one is going to watch over the other. And I think that's pretty good to do.

D: Where's the youth vote in Trumbull County? Have you seen it?

O: No, not even an influence.

D: And what's the problem?

O: I don't know what the problem is. I think if there is a problem, it rests with the youths. I don't think that there's anything that the Democratic leadership could do, speaking of the chairman, or the secretary, or the Executive Committee. If the youths were to get registered, were to campaign in each precinct for a precinct committeeman's job, I think that it is very possible that they would be elected. And I don't think there's any question, would the youths be organized and willing and anxious enough to do the hard work that is required on the lower level, that there is no one . . . in fact, there are some young people, young fellows, who are active in the party. There are some young fellows who are running for officer and young precinct committeemen. And really, if they do their homework and work at it, they'd take over the Party. And sooner or later, they will.

D: Essentially the problem which exists is that in the late 1960s, you had your student movements, and the 1970 generation appears to be a little bit apathetic towards politics. Do you think that this is the main issue?

O: This might be. I think for them to become active depends upon them. I mean, I don't think anyone can say to them . . . in fact, I don't even think you could interest them. I don't think I could go to somebody and say, "You should become active. You should get your buddies to be active." Of course, the structure in college might do it, might get a certain group of students active for awhile. Of course, there are some isolated cases where youths have been elected to various offices. Mayors in some college towns, and I say more power to them. And I think, when they do vote, I think you're going to see a change in the complexion. And I think it's going to come.

- D: As far as voter apathy, do you think this exists in Trumbull County?
- O: Oh yes, definitely.
- D: Even though in the past presidential election, Trumbull County was the second highest county in the nation that voted for a president?
- O: I didn't know that.
- D: I think as much as 92 percent.
- O: I wasn't aware of that.
- D: But, as far as voter apathy, are there problems which exist?
- O: Oh, I'm sure that there are. And I think at this point, an officeholder, they call them politicians--and I don't like the word. The image is at the lowest ebb that it has ever been at. Really, everybody thinks that every officeholder is a crook. And in Trumbull County they are practically convinced of it. And the attitude of people then is: "What difference does it make who I vote for? This crook or that crook?" I think that's part of the problem. People think that their vote doesn't count. And yet, even in Trumbull County in the last few years, I would venture to say that there have been five, at least, elections that were determined by a toss of a coin. So really, every person's vote does count. And I think the same trouble there is with the labor unions. The ordinary person in a labor union thinks . . . they won't even bother to go to the meetings.
- D: So you'd say there's a lack of education towards your party?
- O: Yes.
- D: Okay, changing to the national scene again, do you see any Mayor Daley's anymore?
- O: No, you don't. I think they're a thing of the past, but they certainly existed for awhile. I really think the Mayor Daley's are a thing of the past; don't think you'll find them again.
- D: Do you agree with his philosophies of controlling the area, or you don't think he did a good job?
- O: Well, I shouldn't say he didn't do a good job, but I think it's a mistake for any one person to try to control. I think he made a mistake for not planning

for a--well, that wouldn't exactly be right--but not grooming people to take over, not finding responsibility, just trying to hang onto everything. I think that was a mistake. I think that anyone should groom other people to assume responsibilities, which he obviously did not do. I don't think he was a crook. I think he tried to gather too much power.

I would like to tell you about the most interesting Democrat I've ever met. This is a story I've told very many times. He was the neighbor who interested me in the job in the first place, Mr. James Griffin. He's the fellow who lived next door, who came to me in 1941 and said, "There's a job if you're interested in it." He was unemployed a good bit of the time, and his profession was dog catcher. And yet, he was an excellent politician. He taught me probably everything I know about politics and was very active at all levels. And I think, really, he taught me many political techniques or the facts of life regarding politics. He's now retired and living in Florida, probably.

D: What were some of these tactics?

O: Not tactics, but just political know-how. It might be interesting to put this in right now. When I left the courthouse in 1952 and decided that politics were rotten, that was about the time of the sewer scandal. Prior to the time of that, I wouldn't have anything more to do with it, and went into industry.

D: What industry was it?

O: Syro Steel Company, a small fabricating company in Girard. I worked there for 15 years. I went to night school at Youngstown State while I was working there, graduated with a degree in accounting in 1970. One month later, the gal who was recorder . . . I knew I wanted to be appointed to the job, but I knew that it wasn't enough to think, "Well, I'm qualified. I deserve it," or anything like this. I knew that the only way that I could get appointed to that job was to personally contact every one of the 280 precinct committeemen of the Democratic Party, which I did by phone and letter. This is part of political know-how, and this is part of what I learned from the man next door. That's one of the things that he taught you. In other words, you don't just sit back and expect it to come to you. If you want something, you go out and you contact people and you ask them. You don't just sit back and write advertisements or expect something to come. You go out and work for it.

D: Changing to the national theme, what future do you see for the national Democratic Party, its role, and Mr. Carter?

O: I am waiting to see, frankly, what happens. I hope that the idealism that Mr. Carter is trying to spread is sincere, and that it will accomplish what is best for the people. I hope that. I think that only time will tell.

D: Have you seen a change, overall, in the mood of the country towards the presidency?

O: I think people are still waiting, they're still dubious.

D: Think it's still the honeymoon?

O: I think the honeymoon is over. I don't think there's a honeymoon. I think people are just waiting to see whether Mr. Carter is going to prove what he has promised to prove, or whether his term is going to be a disappointment. He's an idealist, and he presents these ideals sincerely, and I think people are trusting him.

That was a low ebb, Nixon. Frankly--going back again to 1941--part of the reasoning in 1941 when I left politics was, if politics on a national scale is as rotten as it is on the local scale, what Washington must be like!

D: I have one more question. Did Joe McCarthy have any influence in this area as far as tempting the Democratic Party?

D: Tempting it?

O: Not tempting it, but maneuvering it or making people more wise of what they were doing.

D: Joe McCarthy?

D: Yes.

O: I don't think so.

D: As far as shaking up? The Democrats back in the late 1940s were social Democrats, and this was frowned upon.

O: I think that Joe McCarthy really was--and I know this doesn't sound like a Democrat--a martyr. I mean, I think Joe McCarthy was sincere. I think he did a lot of good, real good for the country, and I still don't think this scare about communism is a scare. I still

think it's a threat to the country. Despite how Joe was maligned and, as I say, he was practically a martyr, I couldn't see his influence in this area. He caused influence on a national scale, but I couldn't see his influence in this area, which brings me to Mike Kerwin.

He was certainly a very well known political figure. Mike Kerwin was congressman--and Carney replaced him--of this particular district. He was one of the most powerful congressmen in the country, and he was, frankly, a steelworker. He really had absolutely no background, no education, but he was chairman of some of the most powerful committees in the Congress.

D: What year was this?

O: Oh, not too long ago. He died within the last seven years.

D: So, this was back in the mid 1950s?

O: Yes, 1950s and 1960s. I just picked up a book yesterday which was put out, I think, by Carney. It's a book I got as a precinct committeeman, and it's a whole book of eulogies about Mike Kerwin. A printed volume of eulogies that were in the congressional record about Mike Kerwin. I'm surprised you haven't heard about him. He was a real leader, fantastic politician. Mike was a fantastic character and was active in politics, I would say, for at least 30 years. Of course, primarily I would say Mahoning County, because he lived there. His secretary was one of the more well-known, I think, powerful women in Washington. She died not too long ago.

D: Do you think that the Trumbull County Democratic party is run any differently than Mahoning County or Cuyahoga County?

O: Yes.

D: In what way?

O: It's run differently from Mahoning County because I know--now, I think the complexion in Mahoning County is changing a little right now--but, I know someone who was interested in running for the job of recorder in Mahoning County, who told me that just in order to run she'd have to get about 3,000 and some signatures or some fantastic figure. It's harder to break the machine, I think, it's a much more powerful machine than they have in Trumbull County. I think the Mahoning County machine is breaking up a little bit right now. I don't think it's as powerful. It isn't nearly as

powerful the last three or four years as it was previously. But in Trumbull County, anyone who wants to run for an office puts their name on it, and if they work hard, has a good a chance as the next fellow [has] to make it.

D: As far as Northeastern Ohio politics, is Trumbull County in itself a separate entity than the other areas?

O: I would say so. I don't know of any other county that operates quite the same. I think Cuyahoga County is more machine controlled, and I think Trumbull County might have been in the past a little more so than it has been recently. Then the counties with the smaller population are altogether different. However, Trumbull and Mahoning are pretty close in population.

D: Do you think Chuck Carney is a good representative of Trumbull County?

O: The best! (Laughter)

D: And why?

O: One thing that Chuck Carney does do, he does make an effort to help the people. If any person from this area has a problem in social security, if they have a problem with employment, if they have service related problems, if they have a problem in an area in which he can help them, he and his staff are at their disposal. In that regard I would say, "Yes," that he certainly stays close to the people and makes an effort to represent them. I know that. I had occasion many years ago when I was still in Girard to write to him, to ask him to help some handicapped child get into a school, a state school, and he was extremely helpful. I think because of his own affliction he's a little soft hearted in that regard. But I do think that he does make an effort and that he is close to the people and that the people can ask him for favors. I don't think he's anywhere nearly as powerful as Mike Kerwin was, but I don't think Kerwin was as close to the people as Carney.

D: Well, this is all the questions that I have to ask. Is there anything that you think I haven't covered that you think should have been covered?

O: No, I can't think of it, but I can think that there are some other interesting characters. John McKloskey, who was definitely a very interesting and very active campaigner. Gary Thompson, who was an excellent. . . .

D: These are both commissioners, right?

O: [They] were excellent campaigners, excellent politicians. I think that Gary, if he were to put half as much effort into a business as he put into politics, he'd be an overwhelming success. They were just interesting, active, busy characters. And I think that there are a lot of people that would be interesting to interview. As I say, this dog catcher, this neighbor of mine is certainly very, very well versed in the history of politics.

Has anyone ever told you--speaking of the elections of the county chairman--about the time that they had an election of a county chairman and someone grabbed the ballot box and ran off with it?

D: No. (Laughter)

O: How about that?

D: That happened here?

O: In Trumbull County. And this was prior to 1941, but they held an election with all the precinct committee people there, an election of the county chairmen, Democrat County Chairman, and somebody grabbed the ballot box and ran downstairs, ran off with it.

D: You don't remember the chairman?

O: No, I don't remember. Again, these are tales that I've just heard the oldtimers tell about.

But I do think the Democratic Party does a better job than its competitor in getting people interested in politics and getting people to run at the grassroots level, run for precinct committeeman. There are always competitions for the job in the Democratic Party. In the other party, you can't even talk them into running for precinct committeeman. It's the party of the people. It's the only party I can think of belonging to, although I do think that there are some good Republicans. (Laughter)

END OF INTERVIEW