

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Mill Creek Park

Personal Experience

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JOHN HOLZBACH

Interviewed

by

Raymond Novotny

on

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N This is an interview with John Holzbach for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on Mill Creek Park History, by Raymond Novotny, on November 29, 1988

I was wondering if you could tell me a little about your early days

H I had a great interest in the outdoors. I guess a good bit of that came from my grandfather. I used to go on walks with him. He knew a fair amount about nature and some of it rubbed off on me. Apparently, a fair amount of it rubbed off on my mother as well. She was always great on feeding the birds at home. Pretty early on, being out of doors and being exposed to books and nature, began to take its toll. As far as Mill Creek goes, I spend a lot of time walking in there. I would meet some other kids and we would go over there on a Saturday or a Sunday and we would walk around Lake Newport. We would sometimes walk from the dam along the creek over to the Old Mill. I cannot recall ever going much further than the Old Mill. That always seemed to be the stopping place. I was always reasonably familiar with the Old Mill even with the people that came around.

N Did you live close to the park or was it a long walk?

H Probably a mile and a half I would suppose. When you are a teenager, it does not seem very far. I always liked walking. In fact, there were days when I worked at the Old Mill that I would walk to work.

N How did you become associated and work at the mill? How did that work out?

H Like a lot of interesting things in life, it was purely by accident. I spent a lot of Saturdays in the park. It was in 1959 that I walked over to the park on three consecutive Saturdays and took my usual trip up the gorge to the Old Mill and discovered that it was closed. The sign on the door said it was temporarily closed. At the time, Dad was very close friends with one of the Park Board Members. My initial question to my dad was, "Why don't you ask this fellow why the Old Mill is closed?" So my dad called him and he told him that the man who ran it, Bill, was drafted into the Army and before the conversation was over, I was essentially offered the job. I remember the next Saturday morning, I went down to the Park Office to see Mr. Davis, the superintendent. I do not remember talking to him very long, maybe ten minutes. At any rate, I walked out of his office with the key to the Old Mill in my hand and that is how it all happened.

N Were you friends with Bill Whitehouse, the man you replaced?

H I vaguely knew him by seeing him in the Old Mill. I doubt that he knew my name. I was probably just another warm body that came in on a Saturday to stand by the stove for a while and get warm. No, I did not know him. As I reflect on it now as a distance of thirty years, at least during the years that I was there, it was not a very effective arrangement as a stand point of interpretation.

My leading supervisor was Walter Scholl. I had no real contact with Walter, who was a Naturalist. There was no direction for anyone on staff that was a Naturalist themselves. I think it was probably five or six months before I finally talked to them. I had never met him, and here I was, supposedly working as his assistant at the Old Mill and I had no contact with him whatsoever.

As I reflect on it now, it was a very different situation. When Linley had been at the Old Mill, the extensive reference collection was there to use. People would come in and sought the identification of something. That had apparently left the Mill when Linley moved his office to the Park Office building. Bill Whitehouse, my predecessor, apparently had a small collection in which he took them home for safe keeping. There is no question that my couple of years at the Old Mill had an impact and probably had a part to play on me being a book collector. Certainly I realized after a month or so of being down there, I was able to put a little collection of resources of my own together to use to help answer some of the questions. I think it is safe to say that I would probably not be in the park business today if it were not for those couple of years.

N Now this is after high school and before college or during college?

H This is during college. I was probably in my junior year at Kent, I was a Biology major. It certainly fit in with my routine right now. It was a weekend job during the school year and then a full time job during the summer. It was ideal for me and it was an amazing experience. Again, I am more inclined to fall back on some of the teaching staff at Kent that I was close to when I needed some help rather than going to anybody locally. I did not know anybody at YSU, my first contact was minimal. If I had a problem or a question or something unidentified, I would take it back to Kent with me and get some help with it.

N So you were a Biology major way before this then?

H Yes. It was kind of hardened in stone.

N Do you remember why you selected that major?

H Again, it was a result of my life in the outdoors. I can remember when I was still in high school, I made the statement that I might want to be a Zoologist. Some family members asked why I would want to do that and they said I would not want to be cleaning out animal cages at the zoo. They always thought of a Zoologist as somebody who worked at the zoo, so I had to correct that misconception.

The Old Mill was an interesting place in the sense that I do not know how it is today with it being an operating Grist Mill. During Spring, Summer, and Fall during the days when it was a museum, it attracted about two or three hundred people a day. Most of them came, I think, just to see the building and walk through it, and to take a look at the Two Headed Calf, one of the two famous oddities that were there. A majority of the material is on display. You could tell by the speed of which they walked down the aisles, that they were

interested. The readings were pretty small, so anyone with less than perfect eye sight probably could not read very much of the labels on much of the stuff that was there. It was a tradition in my life, it was something that you did, apparently in the Spring. It was a particularly effective way of teaching situations and learning. It was highly visible and people would stop at the Old Mill. Even counting the mice that came through was done to keep the head count up.

N Do you remember what your duties were?

H Well, they were probably all pretty inclusive. During the nine months of the year, I not only attended the store, but also kept the store clean. Most of the time when I was there, we usually had animals that were just outside of the museum, so there were cages that needed cleaned. In the summertime I had some help doing the cleaning. A typical day in the winter, there were maybe five or ten people that came in the whole day. And if it was very cold, you would not see anyone all day except for the Park Police who would come in and eat their lunch.

N Did you do any hikes with school kids or with the public?

H In the Spring and in the Summer. And again, I was limited in the Spring because I was at school and I was not available during school days for school groups. I was available for some of the church groups and scout groups on Saturdays. During the summertime, I was highly available because I was out of school and there was someone else there at the museum. It seems to me there were a lot of vacation bible schools and that sort of thing. I remember spending almost a whole week down at Pioneer Pavilion with a church group. So I did do some of them. Again, that was my major contact with Linley because he would send me the overflow.

N Can you remember what you did when a group showed up at the Mill?

H Generally, I would simply take them for a walk. Even today, people are extremely vague. They just want you to take their group out for a half hour or an hour. They did not care what you did or where you went with them. It was kind of a disappointment to me. They were never very demanding as far as what they wanted. I cannot ever remember a group specifically saying they wanted to see a certain thing or hike through this area. It was simply a telephone call or a written request and we would take them out. I suspect that it has not changed much during the years. That sort of request is not very inspiring. If you have skills in some areas, you would like to use them but people never really request for you to use them. After a while it is disheartening.

N Did your camp professors ever utilize the park?

H Dr. Dexter was certainly good at using these sorts of resources. We had known both Linley

and his father. I cannot recall why I was there, whether it was anything specific for a project. Dr. Dexter was probably the faculty member that I liked the best because his courses were the best, something that I could not get enough of. I know either Kent or Youngstown has a part of his plant collection.

N Did you have any regular guests that stopped in?

H Yes. There was Johnny Angel who lived a couple blocks away and was a regular. I was only there for two years. Bill was there much longer, so I am sure he was more conscious of the regulars. Most of these kids that were regulars would be regulars for a year or two and then they would get a car or some other interest and drop out of sight. There was another boy that lived in an apartment next to the Dairy Queen almost to the corner of Canfield Road and Glenwood Avenue, Billy Jones, he was a regular. These were the two boys that I remember the most because I could count on them showing up almost every weekend. Most of these youngsters that showed up regularly always wanted to know if they could get a job there. There was the one fellow that worked with me most of the two years that I was there. His name was Mike Kosak.

The most common sorts of things people would bring in were insects and snakes. The insects arrived in good condition, they were usually alive in a container. The snakes normally arrived dead, having been beaten to death with a sledgehammer or a rock. Most snakes were normally Coral Snakes. Sometimes it was hard to make sure what they were because there was not much left to identify. I suppose there were some birds or mammals that were brought in to be identified. The distance of thirty years, it seems to me that most of them were identified as snakes and insects. I do not recall seeing a single snake come in alive. They were always assumed to be poisonous. I do not recall anyone bringing in a poisonous snake.

N Were you answering the phone?

H Oh yes. The most common phone call was asking if we were open or not. We would also get a couple of parents asking if their children were there. In my weaker moments I can remember taking on a family of wild raccoons and a family of possums. For five or six weeks I would take them back and forth.

N Did you work with the exhibits at all or were they pretty much left alone during your time?

H As I recall, there was one of the bigger glass cases that I emptied out and dusted everything inside. About all you could do down there as far as cleaning is rearrange the dust. And as far as the exhibits, you did about the same thing. I cannot recall anything in particular, a fossil was sometimes brought in. I can recall kids lugging in big huge pieces of stone. It was amazing that they did not hurt themselves carrying it in. I would put it next to the stove and they would tell me that they thought I would want it, that they thought it was valuable. I

guess I felt that I was a caretaker in so many ways

I did not feel that it was an effective operation, no communication between myself and the Naturalists. The displays were obviously old fashioned and out of date. Labeling was poor. I think even then I realized it left a lot to be desired. It was probably a good trail side museum back in its day. There was nothing going on there except the people walking around there. There were no programs or scheduled activities of any kind. In fact, this was at a time when there were no scheduled activities at the park at all. The only activities were if a school called then you took them out. If someone brought something in to be identified then you tried to do that for them. I would have to think that as far as the Nature Program at Mill Creek, it is at the lowest that it has ever been. I did not feel, or I was never lead to feel that the administration was especially supportive. I think it was down on the list of priorities.

N Your boss was Walter Scholl?

H Yes

N What was his involvement with the Mill back then?

H He was a rare individual. Certainly one of the best people I have ever had the opportunity to know. I am not sure if people appreciated Walter. His title was Recreation Director and he was also Police Chief. He did just about everything. He was down at Pioneer Pavilion on a Saturday night, if the place needed cleaned up, he was truly a jack of all trades, but he was not a Naturalist.

Basically, as far as the Old Mill was concerned, he was coming by and picking up my time card and asking if there was anything that I needed, a new mop or something. Again, there was no sense of direction. It was just a caretaker situation. I think one thing that I did get accomplished was when we had animals out in the other room. When I arrived there, the two doors in the museum were solid wood doors and we could not see out of the museum and into the other room. So one of the things that I requested and did get was, they removed those two doors and put in two storm doors. At least you had a view into the other rooms. Sometimes kids would play out in the other room and you could not even see what was going on.

The other replacement was the replacement of the gas heater next to the desk. That was it. I supposed in the two years I was there, we spent maybe a couple hundred dollars. My impression was the facility was tired and out of date and the people that came there, came there simply to file through the building more then to learn anything. It was an interesting two years. When I was done down there, I was convinced that I wanted to be a Naturalist and that is what I did.

N What happened, did Bill just come back and then you were booted out?

H Yes. I was not booted out entirely. I was booted out of the Old Mill. The next year I

supervised high schools, Kirkmire and Volney, both places had tennis courts and playgrounds

N You had about four years with the park?

H Yes In fact, one of these years I am going to have to find out how many years I spent there

N Was it hard to give the job up back to Bill?

H I recognized it, but Bill was entitled to have his job back There again, I cannot tell you when I thought to know Bill reasonably well I know that I did not know him before he left for the Army, and even when he came back, it took a while for me to get to know him Eventually, the time came when we went out together I was told one weekend that it was my last weekend and Bill would be back next weekend So I gathered up my books and departed I think the fact that Bill was called upon is a reflection of the administration

N I know the falls were right there behind you Were there any problems with the people going in the falls?

H I think once or twice kids were swimming in the falls. I think the greatest thing that I remember about the falls was the park policeman He must of brought a can of sardines every day and when he was done eating his sardines he would throw the empty can out the window into the pool Rumor had it that if Bob stayed on the Park Police Force long enough, there would no longer be a pool there, it would be Bob's sardine cans That was one of the little frustrations, the park would be real clean Sunday night and then you would come to work and the next Saturday and there would be a mess to clean, the remains of lunch and things like that

N Any final thoughts on your years there?

H I think probably the two years there did more for me then it did for the park I decided that I wanted to be a Naturalist I feel that the time there left much more of a mark on me then I did on the park I feel that under the circumstances, I was just another caretaker that minded the area, and I accomplished that much I enjoyed the opportunity I had

N Would you do it over again?

H Yes, I would do it over again It was the days that I did not have a car We only had one car in the family Dad had first claim to that I either walked to work or rode my motor scooter I remember going on some snowy winter roads that I would be afraid to ride on today, that was only way to get there and get back home That was my transportation, roads were so thin and such a maze back then Now I know it like the back of my hand at this point My grandfather loved Mill Creek, he just could not stay in it He would be going along and next

thing you knew, he took a wrong turn and was out of the park and on a city street That was a terrible frustration to him and I have heard many other people say that too It had an impact on my years I would like to be able to did it on different circumstances, but I enjoyed it

End of Interview