

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

History of Lowellville Project

Resident of Lowellville

O. H. 617

ARTHUR A. KROECK

Interviewed

by

Tom Kirker

on

August 6, 1985

ARTHUR A. KROECK

Art Kroeck and his wife, Imbi Palomaki Kroeck, live at 5354 New Castle Road, Lowellville, Ohio. Like many other Lowellville residents, Art, born January 27, 1910, was born and remained in Lowellville. The son of a shopkeeper, Andrew Kroeck, gave Art the knowledge and incentive to own and operate his own business, Kroeck's Hardware. Up until 1976 Kroeck's Hardware was located at 219 East Wood Street, Lowellville.

Since retiring Art keeps busy by doing needlework, old-fashioned needlepoint, and hooking rugs. He is also a member of Sulgrave Lodge, Youngstown, and Mahoning Presbyterian Church, in Lawrence County, Pennsylvania.

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INTERVIEWEE: ARTHUR KROECK

INTERVIEWER: Thomas Kirker

SUBJECT: Kroeck's Hardware, Kroeck's Auto, buildings,
childhood, police, fire, World War II, Depression

DATE: August 6, 1985

KI: This is an interview with Arthur A. Kroek for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on Lowellville, Ohio, by Tom Kirker, on August 6, 1985, at 4:30 p.m.

You were born and raised in Lowellville?

KR: Yes.

KI: What year were you born?

KR: I was born 1910.

KI: Did you have any brothers and sisters?

KR: Just a sister.

KI: Is she still alive?

KR: Yes, she lives in Florida.

KI: The drugstore on Water Street in Lowellville burned down in 1950. What do you remember about the drugstore when you were growing up?

KR: When I was a kid that is where we went to get ice cream. That is where we went and got our books for school.

KI: What is setting there today where the drugstore was?

KR: All empty lot.

KI: Where was your hardware store at?

KR: On Wood Street, 219 East Wood Street. It is still there. A fellow by the name of Giovanni is running it now.

KI: When did you go into business? When did you start your hardware business?

KR: During the war.

KI: About 1944, 1945?

KR: Yes, World War II.

KI: What type of goods did you sell in your store?

KR: I sold everything: nails, screws, housewares. It was a general, old-fashioned hardware store.

KI: Did a lot of people buy their Christmas presents there?

KR: Yes.

KI: Was there a hardware store before your's?

KR: Yes, there was another one down on Water Street. Of course, my dad ran a hardware and grocery store both. Then he went into the automobile business, a Ford dealership.

KI: How did he get ahold of that?

KR: I guess he just asked for it. Before he built that building there was an old blacksmith shop on First Street. He rented that and started in the automobile business in that shop and still ran the store. After he built the garage on Wood Street then about a year after, 1920, he sold out the business, but he still owned the building when it burned down. It was a three story building on Water Street.

KI: What was upstairs?

KR: At one time there was a dance floor. They had a lodge on the third floor. The second floor was used for storage.

KI: When you were kids, you and your sister, did you work in the store?

KR: No, I never worked in the store. I used to go down there. One thing I'll never forget is the 1913 flood. I went down there and opened the door and looked down in the cellar; everything in the cellar was floating. I did work in the garage though. I started in there when I was in seventh grade in high school. I went down at noon so my dad could go to lunch. I would eat and then go back to school. I would go home then and change my clothes and go

down there and stay there until 9:00 at night. Later on in years I learned to be an automobile mechanic. My dad was an old-timer; he didn't want anybody loafing. I had to go down there and sweep out and wipe the cars off.

KI: Where was your house?

KR: My folks lived on West Grant Street in Lowellville. I was born on Liberty Street though. I was born in 1910 in the house. The house is still standing.

That block where our store was, the garage burned down and there were only two houses left on that block. In that block there was a streetcar station, livery stable, bowling alley, and jewelry store. There were two churches, the Presyterian church and Methodist church.

KI: When you were growing up, what did you do in the town when you weren't working?

KR: My buddies used to tell me that what made Lowellville so popular was that it was a town of transportation. When he first came here he said you could get a streetcar or train out of Lowellville every fifteen minutes. There was also a powder company.

KI: Where was that?

KR: At the state line on E. Wood Street, just as you got over the Pennsylvania line.

KI: Did you have any friends who worked at the blast furnace?

KR: I knew a lot of fellows that worked there. Most of the fellows who were my age, when they went to work they went to work for the Sharon Steel Hoop above the blast furnace. The Hoop finally bought the blast furnace later. Fellows my age either worked at the Hoop or for Ohio Edison at the power plant.

KI: When you were younger did you ride the trains a lot?

KR: No, not a lot. I rode some though. People didn't travel as much then. I rode the trains, but not a whole lot. The streetcar was the thing that we used mostly for transportation going into Youngstown. If we wanted to go to a show we went to Youngstown, or if we wanted to buy good clothes. There was Strouss', McKelvey's, and Hartzell's.

KI: Could you buy clothes in Lowellville?

KR: Yes. It was more or less working clothes. You couldn't buy

a suit though. In later years there was a fellow who started a tailor shop who made clothes, Joe Donofrio, also Sam Simon. They kept shirts, socks, and shoes, and if you wanted anything better you had to go to Youngstown or New Castle to get it.

KI: Would you go into town on a Saturday?

KR: I went into town mostly at night, not so much in the daytime. I went to see the shows more than anything else. I think the stores would stay open late one night a week so the people could all come to town.

KI: Do you remember who you used to hang around with, who your friends were?

KR: Yes, there was Bill Maurice, Harry Niggle, Harry Watson, and Lyle Mantzer. All of us were about the same age, went to school together, and lived within two blocks of one another. Those were the ones that I spent most of my time with.

KI: What did you do? What kind of mischief did you get into?

KR: We used to play ducky on the rock mostly at night, and hide-and-go-seek, tag, baseball, run sheep run. My dad had a barn and we put hoops up there where the hay went. Two of the boys that I mentioned played basketball for Lowellville High School. We played football. We would go swimming at the Erskine Quarries, or Coffee Run.

KI: Did you sled ride?

KR: Yes. One boy got killed coming down Cemetery Hill. There was a manhole cover that he hit.

KI: Did you ever do anything in the Mahoning River, like fish or swim?

KR: It wasn't very good. They used to swim by the powerhouse. I would swim at a creek, Pine Hollow. It starts in Lowellville and runs into the river. We swam where the creek went into the river, and that always kept the river pretty clean. My dad told me that when he came to Lowellville they would skate from Lowellville up to Sheet & Tube on the other side of Struthers Bridge. That was about three miles. This was when it was clean. After that he said it was too thin to skate.

KI: When the United States went into the Great Depression did it hit your father's business really hard?

KR: Everybody was hit hard. We made a living. My dad used to keep two mechanics, and he had a couple of salesmen.

During the Depression it got down to just him and I. He sold them and I fixed them.

Where the old Presbyterian church stood, that is where the Lowellville Library is today. They cleaned the Presbyterian church out and during the Depression the country township welfare went out in the country and found farmers that would let them cut wood. They would saw down trees and haul them in. These guys would saw them and put them in piles. They paid them a dollar a day and gave them the wood to burn. They used our place for government flour. The township trustees would issue an order. We had the room and we weren't doing too much business. We stored it on the second floor. People would come there with an order and whatever the order was for we would give it to them.

KI: How did people pay, was there a lot of credit?

KR: At that time most of the merchants carried as much as they possibly could. They made people cut down, but they would carry them. At that time the township helped the people. They gave people orders and the township paid the grocers. That was all controlled by the Poland Township trustees at that time. The man that took care of Lowellville mostly was a man by the name of Ralph Nixon. He was a trustee and took care of the people in Lowellville.

At that time Struthers was still under the township. There was Lowellville, Poland, and Struthers all in Poland Township. Struthers was the first to get out of it. Each town then got out of the township.

KI: Were there a lot of hobos and bums at that time?

KR: Yes. They rode the freight cars. Most of them were pretty smart people. One fellow came into my place one time and I was trying to fix a radiator on a car. I was not any good at soldering upside down. The tank was leaking and you had to reach up and put all the solder this way. A hobo came in to get warm and he said, "Let me show you how that is done." I never saw anyone so slick. He took that soldering arm and in one whack he had it fixed. Most of the men that came through were men of trades, but they had nothing to do. The biggest majority that I ran into were honest.

Going back to my dad's Ford dealership, when my dad got Model T Fords they came six in a boxcar. On one end of the boxcar was the engine and frame. On the other end was the body. They would slide the chassis out and put the wheels on it. Next the body would be set on them. If we could start them then we would run them from the Pennsylvania Railroad Station over to the garage; if we couldn't we would hitch them onto another

one. There was a motor, transmission, rear end, and a frame.

KI: This was in the middle 1920's?

KR: Yes, 1922. Then dad took Chevrolet on. After Chevrolet he took on Plymouth.

KI: Didn't McBride have a dealership?

KR: Yes, they were a Chevrolet dealer when they went out of business. At one time there were four automobile dealers in Lowellville. One fellow by the name of Petrie had a Dodge agency. Sonnenliter had the Chrysler agency, and McBride's first had Oberlins. When my dad gave up Chevrolet they took that on. Dad took on Plymouth and DeSoto. Along with that he sold Chryslers and Maxwells. He sold cars from Cleveland to Pittsburgh.

KI: Did anyone sell Bantam's? I know they were made in Butler, Pennsylvania.

KR: Not that I know of.

KI: What was the first car that you owned?

KR: It was a Model T, but I didn't really own it. The first car I owned was a Dodge.

KI: During the war were there a lot of trains going through Lowellville?

KR: Yes, but not a lot of war equipment that you could see. Most of the war equipment went down through East Palestine.

KI: Did a lot of the men from Lowellville go to the war?

KR: Yes. I don't know how many, but there were a lot of them. I was drafted, but when they saw my leg they told me to go home. I hurt my leg when I was seven years old.

KI: Did Lowellville have tin drives and plant victory gardens and that type of thing?

KR: Most everybody had gardens. Back in the old days an awful lot of people kept chickens. The Italians kept goats and hogs on the hillside.

KI: From the 1920's to the 1940's did you listen to the radio a lot?

KR: The first radio was a Philco. We had it in the garage. When the World Series came sometimes there would be as high

as fifty fellows in the showroom listening to the ballgame.

KI: How old were you?

KR: I imagine eighteen or nineteen.

KI: During the 1930's when Roosevelt was President, did you listen to fireside chats?

KR: Yes.

KI: Did people have a lot of confidence in him?

KR: Yes, outside of Jack Kennedy I don't think there was ever a president that was isolated like Roosevelt was. Roosevelt did a lot for this country though. This country was in bad shape. He brought beer back. When they broke Prohibition that is what started to bring us out of the Depression. From then on things just started to get better and better. Roosevelt would say everyone would have two chickens in the pot and two cars in the garage, and by gosh that is how it turned out.

KI: At the end of the war when the people were coming home, was there a big parade and celebrations in Lowellville?

KR: No. Youngstown had that. They didn't come home all at once though.

KI: How did you meet your wife?

KR: Her brother-in-law and I were friends before he was married. He wanted me to come down and see his new baby, and I went down and that is the first time I met her. I knew who she was. I went out to get some ice cream and she went along with me, and from then on.

KI: How long have you been married?

KR: Fifty-two years.

KI: During the Depression was it tough being married so young?

KR: No. If we wanted to have a party we would all throw our change together and buy hamburgers and buns and things.

KI: Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you want to bring up?

KR: Not that I can think of.

KI: How has Lowellville changed? Has it really changed a lot?

KR: Yes. It was a good business town. There is no business here to speak of now, and only one grocery store left. At one time there were four grocery stores and four garages. There is one garage left now. There are two restaurants, two saloons. Lowellville is a dead town now. Everybody made a good living here before. They weren't wealthy, but they lived well and raised good families. After World War II there was no place for anybody to build too. Now a lot of people build up on the hill.

KI: Was there somebody who sold ice, or a man that bought rags and things like that?

KR: Yes, we had an ice house in Lowellville. I don't know whether he bought it and stored it there or made it himself. There also used to be rag man that came around; he bought rags and iron too.

KI: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW