

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

History of Niles, Ohio Project

Life Experiences

O. H. 635

VERNYS JOHN

Interviewed

by

Beth Kantor

on

December 3, 1983

VERNYS COWDERY JOHN

Vernys Cowdery John was born on January 20, 1912 in Niles, Ohio. She was the daughter of Frank R. and Catherine L. Cowdery. She attended the Niles public schools and graduated from Niles McKinley High School in 1930. She furthered her education and went to Youngstown State University. Here she received her B.S. in Education. She also went on to attend Westminster College where she was honored with an M.A. in Education. She taught school in the Niles city school system from 1960 until 1981 when she retired.

She married Ralph W. John in June, 1933. They had two children, Adrian M., who is thirty-nine years old and Joyce Gail who is forty-nine years old. Mrs. John is a member of the D. A. R., Delta Kappa Gamma, D. A. C., Eastern Star, and the Niles Historical Society. She was honored with the Freedom Foundation Grant Award, which was given to her school, Washington Jr. High School in Niles. Her special interests include "everything".

Beth M. Kantor

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INTERVIEWEE: VERNYS JOHN

INTERVIEWER: Beth Kantor

SUBJECT: Hoffman's Department Store, streetcars, picnics,
historical society

DATE: December 3, 1983

K: This is an interview with Mrs. Vernys John for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on Niles, Ohio, by Beth Kantor, on December 3, 1983, at 9:00 p.m.

First of all, tell me when you were born and a little bit about your childhood and your past?

J: I was born January 20, 1912 at 32 Lincoln Avenue, Niles Ohio. I was the daughter of Frank R. Cowdery, an attorney, and Catherine L. Cowdery, my mother. He was of English-French descent and she was of Welsh descent. I had a very happy childhood. I lived through the depressed eras and I graduated in 1930 from Niles McKinley High School at a time when there was no employment and the banks were failing and families were having problems. My father said that I would not be permitted to work for anyone else even if I were able because he was an overprotective father, and he wanted to further my education himself. I went into his office to work for him which was his law office. I was his legal secretary.

K: What was Niles like during your childhood?

J: Niles was a beautiful city, busy, industrial. The lighting on Robbins Avenue was particularly beautiful. It was a little round town with a typical around the doughnut type city with spherical buildings on State Street and newer, more modern buildings on Main Street. We had a post office; we had a very successful banking system in Niles, and our banks were the most beautiful buildings with the exception of the Niles McKinley Memorial, which has been there since 1921.

My parents and grandparents have been patrons of the Memorial. It was then and is today one of our most beautiful buildings.

K: What did you do for fun in high school? What was the activity to do in Niles?

J: Actually, the walking back and forth to school was probably the thing that I enjoyed the most because it was through walking back and forth to school that you met your friends and talked and so forth. When we walked with our friends, it was good for us. We walked down and back a mile each way four times a day. If there was something going on in the evening, we would walk back down again to attend whatever that function might be. Certainly, there were Glee Clubs and the singing and the drama and the things that went on in school, and I took part in most of them.

K: What was the Drama Club like? Would they do a lot of plays?

J: By the stages of that day I suppose it was very good. I recall "Penny Buns" and "Roses" which were put on at Washington in which I took part. That was exciting. That was the first time any of us had ever worn an evening gown. From that point on I took part in the literary aspects of the writing and so forth for the most part.

K: What change did you see in Niles when the Depression came?

J: I saw my mother and father deeply worried. I learned from my father that you never turn anyone away from your home without offering him a meal. Whatever we had was served to whomever came, whether they were clients of my father's or friends of my father's--and many of them were. Many of them were unemployed, and it was a very dreadful time. Young people were without a chance at that time. Many of the boys went to CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps) and government programs that came about later. They left and traveled around the nation on foot. I was an overprotected daughter, and I wasn't allowed to do many of the things that were done. I stayed at home, and I worked in my father's office. I learned values from my mother and my father. I am most grateful to the both of them.

K: Did you have any brothers or sisters?

J: I had one older sister. That sister was older than I and had been married and gone from our home. I was raised more or less as an only child because she was so much older.

K: After you got out of high school, did you go right to

college or didn't you go for a while?

J: No, I didn't. I worked for my father and then I married my husband and I had a daughter, a child. It wasn't until much later that I went to Youngstown State University and started my college education.

K: How old were you when you went to Youngstown?

J: I don't wish to say that.

K: That's alright. When World War II came, what effect did it have on the city?

J: When World War II came, my husband was employed at the steel company in McDonald. Things were bustling and busy. It was at that time that my husband made a change of employment, and he worked for Jennings Manufacturing Company. It was a young company. They asked my husband and we went over to Masury, and he helped begin that company with my brother-in-law, which was Jennings Manufacturing Steel Company. They became very involved in war work.

Since gasoline had been in ration then . . . We knew we would come back to Niles and continue our friendships. All of our friends were busy doing the same things we were. We kept in touch as best as we were able, but when you move, it makes a difference in your life. You lose friendships and you lose connection, and we did. But we would retain many old friends, of course.

K: Coming out of the Depression going almost right into World War II did the city lose commerce? What happened to the downtown area? Did it change yet?

J: I believe that the steel mills were thriving and busy and bustling, and certainly our banking was good. Niles was a busy town. I expect during those four years that our population increased to approximately 25,000. Many people came up to work in the steel mills at that time. Most people who came came to work in the steel mills; those people came from Southern Ohio and Kentucky and West Virginia. Our population increased and our ethnic groups changed too. Our schools were very busy. Enrollment was very high. Homes were built; construction was good in this entire valley.

K: You mentioned ethnic groups changed. Did it go from Welsh to what, or what did it go to?

J: During the victorian years, of course, it was Welsh and English. During the war years, World War II, people came

up from Southern Ohio, West Virginia, Kentucky. There were many families in Niles. The Tabor family was a highly respected family. They were the black family I knew best. Mr. Louis Tabor was a college educated man and a very respected person and principal of the school in Niles. His children were lovely children. I taught some of his children; they were always respectful to me. I like them, and we are friends.

K: After the war is that when you came back to Niles from Masury?

J: Yes. My parents had passed away. Our situation changed in Masury, and we went to Florida for a year. We reevaluated our life, what we were doing and why we were doing it and what we should be doing, and we did. That year in Florida did a lot for my husband and myself. We grew considerably through the reevaluation. We came back to Niles. He had lost his father also and his mother had to be cared for. I wanted my son to be educated. My daughter was married, but my son had to be educated. When we came back to Niles, his mother had a large, old house and she lived alone and she had to be cared for. She asked us to stay with her, which we didn't really want. We wanted a home of our own, but nevertheless, the job had to be done by someone. We were the ones who were available, and so yes, I took a job teaching in Niles city schools. My son attended McKinley High School, and he made new friends, and he enjoyed his life in Niles, and I enjoyed my teaching in Niles. My husband started work with Republic Steel in Warren. So the one year that we agreed to soon became four years, and then Ralph's mother had to go into a nursing home. This house belonged to Mr. and Mrs. William Thomas, and they were friends of my mother and father. They built this little house as a retirement home, and it had many lovely features. Mr. Thomas passed away, and their son who was a friend of our's, Bill Thomas, sold this house to us. Mother would have wanted me to have this house. I wanted to see to our needs, and we have been here ever since.

K: When you came back from Florida, had there been a big change in Niles? Were there a lot of people working after the war?

J: Yes, there had been many changes in Niles. The steel mills were not the bustling, thriving steel mills they had been, but the steel employment was good. There had been a strike in that 1959-1960 year. When we came back, my husband was employed by the Republic Steel, and they were very busy. We can honestly say that probably productively the next ten years were the best ten years that we have ever had. We made more money, and our money went further. We were able to save quite a bit of money

in those years, and we bought this small house. It was close to my employment; it was on the side of town where I had been born and raised, and it met our needs and it was adequate for us. Perhaps it wasn't the home we would liked to have built, but today looking back at it in retrospect we find we have all we need right here. Who needs more?

K: After the war did the downtown area change storewide?

J: Perhaps the burning down of the Hoffman Company made the greatest change down there.

K: When did that happen?

J: 1963 or 1964 approximately. I'm not sure of that date. That made the biggest change in our downtown shopping district probably because the Hoffman Company was a well-established department store. It had been here as long as I remember, of course. With the burning down of that building and the loss of that block downtown and the death that occurred there . . . The Pritchard Clothing Company which was there . . . Mr. William Draper who was an older resident had owned some of those buildings. The drugstores changed; the old soda fountains disappeared. The quick sandwich type places came in.

K: Was there a change from people selling to promoting to this kind of 'I will find a salesperson to help you'? Was there a change in that?

J: Oh, yes, a great change. Perhaps the greatest change was in the hardware stores.

K: Why?

J: This change in times, I guess. The hardware stores who could service to construction homes and that sort of thing changed. You didn't know your hardware man anymore. Morton's that had been here and Jensen's that was here disappeared. McKinley Mall housed the Stambaugh Company. You went there, and when you asked for something you were pointed to a corner and were told that it was over there. You walked over and you found it, if you could, and you went to a cashier. You got very little help; you were on your own.

The grocery stores no longer delivered. The small, little grocers disappeared. Enoch Jones who was my husband's grandfather and his grandmother had a little mom and pop store on South Street, and it disappeared as they did; they were older, and the store closed. Duck's store, Freck's Meat Market--where the Macali boys made their beginning--

disappeared. You didn't go down and buy your meat over the counter anymore; you went to a larger store, more diversified. Packages were already prepared. You bought not what you needed, but what was in the package, and you brought it home. Refrigeration, of course, had changed also and freezers and that sort of thing.

K: What effect did the mall have on the area?

J: It became an exciting part of Niles, I think. Certainly, people enjoyed the shopping in the mall. It brought a good kind of luxury to Niles. We loved that. The Strouss store we thought was magnificent; it gave us an opportunity to buy things that hadn't been available unless we would have gone to Youngstown or Warren, which we did.

When I was young, of course, the streetcars were still running. I did go to Youngstown and to Warren with my mother. We went down through Avon Park for a little picnic. We went to Packard Park for little picnics and so forth, and we did that by going on the streetcars. Those were in my earlier years.

The Mahoning River, of course, which in its historical days was a part of the canal system, it is now a dirty river and no longer fished or used for recreation or much else. It had been polluted by the industries. The children who lived on the east side of town would swim in the river. The children on this side of town went into Mosquito Creek down by Federal Street.

K: So then the mall was good because it gave you convenience, but yet it took away the last little bit of person to person communication with the store.

J: Definitely. It did away with the small-town close relationship of over-the-counter type of communication and service; it did away with that. The times were changing. People were moving faster. Everybody had a car. You were no longer dependent upon the streetcars and the fact that they weren't available. A lot of people called a taxicab if they needed it.

K: When did the streetcars disappear?

J: I can't give you the year without looking that up.

K: That's okay. I wondered in perspective to when the automobile really came to be the main transportation. After the war?

J: After the war. Everybody had a car more or less; it was necessary to have a car to get to work. Everyone had cars, but not always the latest cars or the best ones either.

My husband had a beautiful, little car. He was always employed but not full-time, but he was employed. He had bought a 1930 Chevrolet. It was the envy of the younger people because it had a rumble seat and wire wheels. He was very proud of that car, and I was very proud of him. Our friends were too. We had many good times in that car. We would go out to what was then the old Frech Farm which soon became a part of the Mahoning Valley Water Supply, which my father had helped to promote. We would ride out there. That blue bridge over the Meander Lake then was a favorite meeting spot of young people at that time. That was just about as much gasoline that you had and about as much money you had to buy the gasoline. We would go over there. We had hot dogs and things like that and we would sing. It was pretty much typical of the time.

K: Now when did you start teaching in the schools in Niles?

J: 1960. I had taught at Brookfield and I had taught in Florida prior to that.

K: How has the student changed because you taught until 1981? You must have seen some.

J: Young people change with the times and with their peer groups. Whatever their peer groups are doing, that's what they do. More people did change and the war years had a lot to do with that, I'm sure. Divorces among parents, women voting, all these things made changes, and the young people changed with their home environment. Young people are always nice young people. I have loved my teaching. I hated giving it up. I loved them, and they loved me. I think we had a happy relationship. I like to feel that I helped them a lot with history, and I like to feel that we had close times with each other over and beyond school.

K: What grade did you teach?

J: I taught almost every grade except first grade. I never taught first grade, but I taught almost every other grade. I taught most years in sixth grade. I loved those children because they are energetic and enthusiastic and they have ideas and they work with their teachers. I loved them, and we had some wonderful years. They weren't free of problems. Problems always existed; they are always there, but I learned that I was able to counsel my children. I tried to pass on the values that had been passed on to me. I tried to tell some historical values. I think that I did that fairly well. Some of my students still come back to see me quite frequently. I am delighted to see them, and those students who are happy to see me have kept in touch with me. They have always been good to me.

My students were always good to me, always.

K: So the respect . . .

J: Oh, definitely.

K: Do you think that was because of you in the classroom or because in sixth grade you haven't really become a high school student trying to be a popular pupil?

J: Definitely I feel the age group has something to do with that, certainly. I certainly do, and I think that we have rapport with each other too. There were a few problems, of course. There were always children who were difficult to teach. There were children who didn't have the same values toward education. I gave them whatever they needed to keep them interested and innovative; I feel that I was able to do that because I was with so many boys and girls who otherwise might have fallen by the wayside, but I always found something that they were interested in. I played on that, and we did it together. I hated to give it up.

K: What was Niles like in the 1950's? We said that it was still prosperous. When did it start, I guess, falling, not apart, but declining?

J: I suppose labor problems, the demand for fringe benefits and increased wages . . . I think that people and governments became greedy.

K: So that in turn was very bad for all the small. . .

J: People. I think that labor unions were very, very necessary, and certainly I have always been pro-labor, pro-feminist. I think that sometimes they have exceeded in their demands but I think it has cost us something.

K: It has cost us the intimacy of a downtown area that's losing it, wouldn't you say?

J: That and a lot of work situations too, yes. Perhaps in industry we will remember that part of group so and so. It cost us a great deal. It provided us with health benefits and insurances and things like that which are good. It also caused the family doctor to disappear. Our hospital costs have soared. Now that we are older we wonder how families can afford the health that they need for themselves and their children. It also cost an increase in taxes and a great deal of worry, I'm sure, to a lot of people of all ages.

K: Do you think Niles will come back from where it is right now?

J: Niles has always come back. Niles is a great, little city. There are wonderful people in Niles, always have been. They are workers and not freeloaders; they want to work. Niles is a busy town. We are either on the top or we're down at the bottom. We always have been. We have had highs and lows. We have been down before, and we'll come back again.

END OF INTERVIEW