

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Niles Police Department

Personal Experience

O. H. 643

LUCILLE PONTE

Interviewed

by

Stephen Papalas

on

July 12, 1982

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Niles Police Department

INTERVIEWEE: LUCILLE PONTE

INTERVIEWER: Stephen Papalas

SUBJECT: Vincent LaPolla, politics, discrimination,
Ku Klux Klan, Warner Bros. Theater, Mason St.

DATE: July 12, 1982

PA: This is an interview with Lucille Ponte for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program dealing with the Niles Police Department. The interview is given by Stephen G. Papalas at Mrs. Ponte's home at 1348 Robbins Avenue in Niles, Ohio on July 12, 1982 at 8:00 p.m.

The reason I want to interview you for this paper is because I have understood from reading in newspaper articles in the Niles Times that your father, Vincent LaPolla, was about the first Niles Italian to be elected as city councilman. Is this true?

PO: This is true?

PA: Before I get into the aspect of Niles city politics and maybe something about the police department that you can remember, I would like to ask you what you remember about your earliest childhood and before that even. Where did your parents come from? Were you born in Niles? What year? When?

PO: We were all born here. My mother was born here. My father came at the age of five.

PA: From where?

PO: From Torsi, Italy. His sister had sent for him because his father had died. His sister was already here.

PA: What about high school? Where did you go?

PO: Niles McKinley.

PA: What year did you graduate?

PO: 1943.

PA: What was your favorite course? What were you interested in at that time?

PO: Languages, history.

PA: You went on to teach languages later, didn't you?

PO: Yes.

PA: Do you remember anything about the students in your class? Any close friends that you had that might still be around?

PO: No. We were a closely knit family. I just stayed with my own family.

PA: You were more family oriented?

PO: Yes.

PA: Where were you raised at? What street?

PO: Mason Street.

PA: Can you give me an approximate area?

PO: Do you know where Gilbert Avenue is?

PA: Yes.

PO: That end.

PA: Right near Gilbert Street?

PO: Yes. At least my childhood anyhow. Then we built this house.

PA: What was your childhood like? What do you remember about your family?

PO: A very happy one.

PA: You said it was a close-knit family?

PO: Yes. We would go on Sundays with my father on picnics and different things like that. Being on the council we had passes for the movies. We went twice a week with my mother and the whole family and neighborhood. We would pack the car with the kids in the neighborhood. We did. All of the neighborhood kids would get in the car and they

would count us when we got out. We had a good time.

PA: What movie house did you go to?

PO: Warner Theater.

PA: What was it like inside? I have never been able to ask anybody or read about it?

PO: It was one of those up and coming theaters in those days. It had nice interior. The decor was very beautiful. The old man Warner lived upstairs. He was the father of the Warner Brothers. He was a friend of my father. The boys went to Hollywood and started the Warner Brothers. My father had the barbershop right next door.

PA: He had a barbershop?

PO: Yes.

PA: This would give him a pretty good foundation for knowing people.

PO: People came in and that is how it happened, I think. He knew everybody.

PA: That would probably be the 1930's that you were going to the movie house and so on. What was Niles like at that time? What can you remember about businesses?

PO: It was a nice, little community. You would go on Saturday and meet everybody on the corner near that Dollar Bank. All of the friends in town would meet there and then they would go to have their sodas and their sundaes and then go into the theater. You would come back on the streetcar and go home with my brother and the whole gang. I'm glad I wasn't there. We had stopped at the bus stop. The streetcar stopped in front of Wagstaff's. I listened to a lot of people talk and they fascinated me. I didn't know that they had left. We had an automobile right after that. I remember that very clearly.

PA: What were some of the names of the places that you could buy the sodas? Who were some of the merchants? Did you know them downtown? What type of people were they?

PO: They were a mixture of people. Rosasko's, Pritchard's was there. Jenson's was down there. Law Brothers was there in the 1920's. The Robbins Theater was built not long after that. Hoffman's was there.

PA: Could you tell me anything from your memories what you can remember of any policemen? Do you remember any of them?

There was Dickey Neiss and different police chiefs?

PO: The only one who I remember is the one who owned the men's shop and was the bank president. They moved out of town not too long ago. He got hurt in the war.

PA: Berline?

PO: Berline. That is the one I can remember.

PA: He was a police chief too for a time.

PO: Yes.

PA: What type of person was he?

PO: He was a wonderful person. He had a good sense of humor. He knew all of us kids. He talked to everybody. He was really nice. He was really a nice person.

PA: Honest?

PO: Honest. He was a real nice man. He was well-liked. I remember Berline. I heard my father talk about a Chief Rounds in conversations of the past.

PA: That was Lincoln Rounds.

PO: Yes. We was very well-liked too. He and my father were close friends. Then he moved to California.

PA: Rounds?

PO: Yes. I think he did. I could be wrong.

PA: Do you know anything about his retirement?

PO: Whose retirement?

PA: Rounds.

PO: All I remember is what I heard. You know how it is when your parents sit down and talk.

PA: Did you ever hear of Dickey Neiss?

PO: I have heard of him but I don't know him.

PA: He was shot once up on Robbins Avenue somewhere.

PO: I don't know that either.

PA: I am trying to find out when that happened. I know the

story.

PO: Is there anything in the paper down there. I never knew. Who shot him?

PA: I only know that the person who shot him lives on Robbins Avenue today, but I can't find out who it was.

PO: There are a lot of things that I don't know because I have my own interests. You know how kids are. My father was always out with meetings and talking to people. Kids have their own friends, and go to school and then go to college. I didn't even know until after you told me what you said. So that is true. He filled me in on it.

PA: I want to get to that too. Did your dad ever reminisce about people, such as former mayors like Charles Crow?

PO: I remember Charles Crow was a wonderful guy. He and Charles Crow were close friends. I think they used to go to the fights together in Boston and other places.

PA: Your dad and Charles Crow?

PO: Yes, I think so. They were very close from what I can gather. I think one of his daughters graduated with my brother, Duke. I don't remember.

PA: I want to get back to Charles Crow.

PO: All I know is that he was a wonderful guy from what I heard my father talk about.

PA: It won't be the mayor personally. It will be an era of the Ku Klux Klan and the movement.

PO: Was he in then?

PA: Well, they helped to beat him from what I understand. There is a possibility that they were . . .

PO: Was he mayor when we had the Klan?

PA: No. He refused, as a matter of fact, to give them a permit to march from what I understand. They organized with some of the bootleggers in their own different parties and participated in his defeat. After Crow, there was a Mayor Kistler. Do you remember him?

PO: I don't know too much about Kistler.

PA: George Marshall, 1928 to 1932?

PO: I don't know too much about him either.

PA: Ferguson?

PO: I knew a little bit about Ferguson.

PA: Anything specific?

PO: Didn't he have a drugstore?

PA: I don't know.

PO: I think he owned a drugstore.

PA: Fred Williams, did you ever hear of that man? He was mayor from 1936 to 1937.

PO: One year?

PA: Well, two years. Well, that is one year isn't it?

PO: Yes.

PA: That will be interesting to find out why. Carney?

PO: I heard it mentioned, but I wouldn't know about Carney.

PA: Elmer Fisher?

PO: I heard my father talk about Elmer Fisher from the south side.

PA: Yes.

PO: Name some more.

PA: Hubbard, Lennie.

PO: Mayor Hubbard was nice. I remember my father and Mayor Hubbard were close friends. They got along in council very well. They were very close.

PA: Your father was still on council at that time?

PO: Yes. My father was on council over forty years. He was on council and council-at-large.

PA: That has got to be a record.

PO: My father was on a long time.

PA: That has got to be a record then.

- PO: I think the last time my father was on council was when the war broke out. He went down to the munitions things and worked for the war effort in the office. After the war was over, then he got a job up in the courthouse. He was there a long time. That is why we all stayed on Mason Street because he was council of the ward. Then he got council-at-large and moved up here. He wouldn't leave while he was representing the ward.
- PA: I want to ask you a little bit about your neighborhood. What were the people like? I have read where in the 1930's and 1940's that the east end more toward Delmont, Fenton, and Mason and down there . . .
- PO: More toward Russell. You want to know about that end?
- PA: Yes, I do.
- PO: I don't know because we have stayed on our own end.
- PA: Can you tell me anything that you heard, what it was like at that time?
- PO: We all just were a mixed group up where I lived. It was Germans, English, and we were all just one, big family. There was never any prejudice.
- PA: What about the bootleggers? I'm trying to get . . .
- PO: I don't remember too much about that. It was then all over the country at that time. Remember?
- PA: Yes.
- PO: I don't remember too much about that. That is why they repealed Prohibition, because it was stupid.
- PA: I think Prohibition opened a way for organized crime.
- PO: And a lot of things. Right now we have cocaine and all of that stuff. The trouble our country has is that money is a sign of one's status and prestige. You go to Europe and it is what you are. You can be broke, but if you came from a good family, you are still held up in high reverence and great honor. It is a funny thing. I go to Italy and they will call me Professoressa. Quite honored. Here, you are nothing. What do they make the foreigners in this country realize? You have to have money. What did Bernard Baruch say, the big bank advisor of most presidents. He said, "I can advise them, but they never invited me to their homes." He said that they would never accept him socially. He advised I forget how many presidents and moved in their political circles.

Katherine and I were on the ship coming home one time. We were coming back to the States. We noticed this elderly woman all dressed in black. We always traveled tourist class. We never went high class. She was with another lady. The second day out the captain comes down to her table. The next thing you know he had taken her and this other lady away. The captain used to go to mass on board ship every morning. This own women was always there. At mass one day, they started talking. She and Katherine sat outside the chapel and talked. Katherine found out that she was from Austria.

PA: Really?

PO: Yes. She had just come from Rome to see about the beatification of her husband because of all that he had done for the people of Austria before the Nazis came in. Her son had preceeded her to the States and she was going to meet him. She didn't have anything. Everything was confiscated when the Nazis came in. The woman told Katherine she tried to go incognito. She said they didn't have money because they lost everything. She didn't want anyone to know, but the captain recognized her. He said whether she had money or not, it was not fitting for her position to stay down there, so he put her up in the first class. She gave Kathy a little prayer book. There she had nothing, but she still had that respect for the position and everything else. In this country, you could be the lowest of the low and if you have money, you count. I think society itself is to blame for these foreigners, so-called, and stuff. You find that it is the only thing they could have to still be respected. It is a shame. It really is. Money is our goal.

PA: I want to ask you about your dad, Vincent. He became a councilman first in the early part of the century, in the teens? How did he do it? How can you account for the fact that Niles, although it was approximately 60% immigrant at the time, he was the only person to be elected from not just the Italian nationality . . .

PO: There were a lot of English and German in that ward. I think it was his contact in the barbershop and his ability. Everybody used to go to him just for help no matter what their nationality. They always called my father. When we went to the show, we had everybody with us. He was just that type of man. He would meet all of these people in the barbershop. He was a bright fellow. He was self-educated and very bright.

PA: How did he survive in politics for so many years?

PO: He was respected. They respected my father. They knew

they could trust my father.

PA: Don't you find that unusual, that he was not only able to survive politics from his own ward, but to move outside of his ward into areas that were . . .

PO: He became councilman-at-large.

PA: How can you explain that, that he got votes actually from people who were considered WASPS, people who had been settled for a long, long time now?

PO: Because of what he did on council. Constituents were very important to my father. My father never got on for prestige or status. He got on there to help the people. During Depression years there were a lot of English people and anything else and he fought for everything for them.

PA: What can you tell me about the Depression?

PO: I don't remember too much myself because I was just coming out of those Depression years.

PA: What have you heard about your father's activities at the time? How did he interact with them?

PO: He worked with the community services and stuff, and he made sure that the people that had children and the so-called foreigners that had a lot of children got what was due them. He himself would go into these organizations and make sure they were doing it equally and not being prejudice.

PA: Was he assigned to that from somebody?

PO: I don't know. On council I guess he was put on certain committees, or he did it himself to represent the people. He would go and be on any committee. My father would just go because he knew everybody. He knew all of the people's positions. They respected my father because they knew my father was honest and he was sincere.

PA: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

PO: My brother Duke and my brother Anthony are my only two brothers and Annette has died. Katherine was killed. My mother raised two of her sister's. Her sister died early. My mother took care of the boy and the girl.

Anthony was remembering quite a few things. He was telling me about the consulate and how he worked with the Cunard Lines. He got in with Cunard Lines. They

used him as a representative so they would bring these immigrants to the United States. I didn't know that until Anthony told me last night. He was telling me a lot of things last night.

PA: What about 1924? There was a confrontation with the Italian-Catholic group; the Knights of the Flaming Circle met the Ku Klux Klan.

PO: I think they just organized that night.

PA: To stop the Klan?

PO: They organized that night.

PA: Did your father ever tell you about that?

PO: Yes. That was quite a topic for years. That has been talked about for years and years. We have all talked about it. I remember when the trainman would say, "That was a Ku Klux Klan town." We are the only town north of the Mason-Dixon Line that had a Klan riot.

PA: That is right. I never thought of that. You are right.

PO: That was a tough conversation for years. It wasn't so long ago that someone mentioned it.

PA: What was your father's role?

PO: He was on council so he went with the mayor. They went to Alliance and got the National Guard to stop them coming down North Road. They got news that they were coming down North Road. They got news that they were coming down with machine guns from Cleveland. They got wind of it so he and they mayor went down and got the National Guard out to stop them. Before they had a chance, some Klans in town, not the ones coming from Cleveland, they had organized all around. They were going to march as a group from Mahoning County and down from there, and coming in from Cleveland. A few townspeople, I think Klan, somehow got into the churches and desecrated the altar at Mt. Carmel and St. Stephens. That is what roused everybody. This St. Stephens' gang and the Mt. Carmel gang got together, the Italians, and formed the Knights of the Round Circle. They had big tires and put gasoline up on them and hung them in the trees in the park. They organized. They went out to battle the Ku Klux Klan coming down North Road with the Grand Kleagle and their hoods. I don't know how they were coming down North Road onto Main Street.

PA: You mean Niles Road? They came down from Niles Road.

PO: Was it North Road?

PA: Niles Road out of Warren. They met them at Federal Street and Niles Road.

PO: With the National Guard?

PA: I think it was a little late.

PO: I think the Guard came in in the evening.

PA: Yes. After the fight they got there.

PO: They didn't shoot anything though. I can remember my mother talking about a man who was shot. I am not positive about that now. He wasn't killed or anything; he was shot at.

PA: Were there other shots fired? Do you remember?

PO: I can't remember. A lot of them that were out there to fight became citizens. The county gave them citizenship just on that because they fought for their country. They fought for God and right. They gave them citizenship papers. It was quite an era.

PA: It sure was. Do you remember anything else about the riot?

PO: I remember we were under martial law. We used to have a storm porch. Each house had to make sure they had heat and stuff so they stayed in our little porch and my father had a heater for them.

PA: Who did?

PO: The National Guard.

PA: The soldiers stayed in your house?

PO: Yes. You know how kids are. We would flirt with them and tease them. We were just little, tiny kids. You weren't supposed to meet, only two at a time. We got three at a time. They laughed at us. That is all that I remember. That is about it.

PA: Who were some of your favorite public servants that might have served with your dad?

PO: Don't ask me.

PA: Did your dad ever talk more about politics?

PO: In the house?

PA: Yes.

PO: No. He never talked about politics.

PA: I am fascinated that he was able to survive for forty years in Niles politics. It is unbelievable.

PO: That was because he was trusted by all people. He left on his own accord.

PA: He left on his own?

PO: Yes. I think the last public thing was when he ran for mayor. Remember, I told you?

PA: That is right.

PO: He ran for mayor. He didn't say anything about that though.

PA: About what year did your father run for mayor? Do you remember?

PO: It must have been 1944 or 1945. It was just before the war was over. It was one of those years. I can't remember.

PA: How do you account for the fact that he lost the election?

PO: He would have won the election if all of the ballots had been accounted for. Someone tipped my father off that there were a lot of ballots over in the field on the other side of Mason Street. I imagine it would be down that way. He and my sister took the car and went down, and sure enough they found hundreds and hundreds of ballots where the poll workers had thrown them.

PA: It was a political vendetta?

PO: They knew if my father was elected that he wouldn't make any deal with anybody. He would be an honest and straight mayor.

PA: Would you say, in other words, that there were certain people in town who were trying to . . .

PO: Keep him from being mayor.

PA: Because he wouldn't cooperate with their plans?

PO: Because he wouldn't cooperate with their plans.

PA: Do you think this would have anything to do with what was going on down on the Park Avenue, Grant Street, Pratt

Street area and some of the activity?

PO: I don't know.

PA: After your dad's attempt to become mayor of the city of Niles, what did he do? Did he get back into politics as a councilman then? I think he did.

PO: Yes.

PA: If he left the office voluntarily in the mid 1950's, then he was still a councilman. He must have run again and won.

PO: Yes. He must have come back in then. He would know more about that on the record.

PA: Forty years, sure.

What year did your father pass away?

PO: 1965. I am not good at dates. When certain events happen, I just block them out. I think he died in 1965.

PA: What did he do in his retirement years?

PO: He was only retired one year. He had a stroke while he was working.

PA: At the barbershop?

PO: No. He was up in the courthouse.

PA: How old was he when he passed away, Mrs. Ponte?

PO: I think he was in his seventies. He was always active. He never really retired actually. He had a stroke and then he went back to work. Then he had a second stroke up in the office and that was it. He had to leave. They retired him then. He stayed home and was recuperating. He finally got to where he had to stay upstairs. It was two or three months. He would limp. People would come to see him and he would make Katherine type the procuress form and all of that stuff. He was active up until the week before he died.

PA: In closing, do you have anything to say about your dad's personality and how he may have influenced the people around him?

PO: He was very sympathetic and kind. He loved people. He would help anybody who needed help. He must have been a good man if he got the term "Little Jesus" during the

Depression years. Even after that people still called him "Little Jesus." I remember "Little Jesus".

PA: That was his nickname?

PO: Yes, that is right. He was a very, very kind person. If you were here and were running for politics and came in here and asked my father for help he would not only help you, but guide you. If he said he was going to do something, my father did it. It wasn't just a promise. He would do it. He would mean it sincerely. If they would come in the house and we were at the table, they had to sit down. That was common courtesy. If they hadn't eaten, he made us move around and get chairs and make them eat. Most of them had just come in because they would try to catch him. If they didn't want to eat, it was just a cup of coffee or something. He was good. My father was a good, saintly man. I am not saying that because he was my father, but because it was true. There wasn't a soul who came here that asked for help and he didn't give it. He would help. He looked for jobs for you if you were interested in politics. He educated that whole third ward. He educated all of those boys who were up in politics. They all learned from my father. They would come up here and my father would tell them what to do. For this fight on council it was always good people, always.

PO: Thank you.

PA: He didn't die a rich man. He would give it. He always gave. My father did not die a wealthy man.

END OF INTERVIEW