

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Niles, Ohio Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 646

JOSEPH JACOLA

Interviewed

by

Stephen Papalas

on

August 18, 1983

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Niles, Ohio Project

INTERVIEWEE: JOSEPH JACOLA

INTERVIEWER: Stephen Papalas

SUBJECT: Ku Klux Klan Riot of 1924, World War II,  
Flask murder, police department, Fenton Street,  
Italy, speakeasies

DATE: August 18, 1983

P: This is an interview with Joseph Jacola at Carnegie Avenue in Niles, Ohio. The interview is for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program. The topic deals with the development of Niles and its police department. I'm going to focus on the Ku Klux Klan riot in 1924 later in the interview.

Mr. Jacola, can you tell me when and where you were born first of all?

J: I was born on Fenton Street, March 18, 1917, in Niles.

P: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

J: Two brothers and four sisters.

P: Did you live on Fenton Street all your life?

J: No, I lived on Fenton Street for several years and then my dad built a home on Heaton Avenue and we lived there for several years and then we left there and went to Youngstown.

P: Where is Heaton Avenue?

J: That's Federal Street now.

P: Can you tell me how it came to be that an Italian family at that time lived on Federal Street when most of the Italians lived on the east end?

- J: Well, my dad wanted to move. We sold our home on Federal Street, and he bought these two lots on Heaton Avenue which was Federal Street and he built a home. We had no problems. They were nice people. Nice neighborhood. We had a Jewish neighbor and several other, but they weren't Italian. But they were nice neighbors.
- P: Did you go to Niles High School?
- J: Yes.
- P: Who were some of your friends there? Do you remember who you ran around with?
- J: Let me think here. There used to be a council.
- P: How long ago?
- J: Years and years ago. Boy, I'll tell you, I have problems with names.
- P: Are any of them still around, any of the guys?
- J: Oh, yes.
- P: Who were some of the teachers you liked?
- J: Well, I never had any problems in school. All the teachers were okay; I did real well in school. As a matter of fact, when I first started at Roosevelt School, I never made the fifth grade. I went from the fourth to the sixth. So I never had any problems in school. I did real well, and the teachers were fine, all of them.
- P: When did you graduate from school?
- J: I quit in the eleventh grade and then about a year later I went to the Board of Education on Wood Street in Youngstown and took a special exam and graduated. This was way back in, I think, 1938.
- P: Through the years that you were in high school, or even younger than that, how did your father raise six children? Six or seven of you?
- J: Seven.
- P: During the Depression, what did he do?
- J: Well, my dad was a boiler engineer at the Youngstown Sheet & Tube. We had a big garden and we raised our food. If we had meat once a week, it was a delicacy. Mostly out of the

garden we ate. My brother and I used to come home from school and carry water to water the plants. There were no hoses, too much money; we couldn't buy a hose. So we carried water by the buckets full and we got along fine. We never had to ask anybody for anything. My dad, when everybody got laid off from the mill, he worked one or two days a week, but he didn't get paid, he got script to go to the Sheet & Tube Store and we bought our staples there.

P: After you got out of high school you took your test and you graduated with a diploma in 1938, what did you do?

J: There weren't any jobs, so I got a job selling house to house with Houghts Products. It wasn't very lucrative, but I made about seven, eight, ten dollars a week which was big money. Then my brother and I would go down to Mosquito Creek to trap muskrats, skin them, put them over a board and salt them down. We would get a dollar a piece for them. There used to be a place on Main Street called King's Grocery. We used to go down and catch frogs and take the legs off and sell them to King's Grocery. He in turn sold them to someone else.

P: What's at that place now where King's Grocery was?

J: Nothing.

P: What's near it?

J: It's on Main Street, not very far up, but I don't think there is anything there now.

P: Just an empty lot?

J: No, it's an empty building.

P: What happened up to the point of the war years, what did you do then?

J: I went to work for Sheet & Tube in the hot gang which was the labor and we used to clean the flues. They make you get down on your knees. I worked there for some time and I got laid off. I made \$3.76 a day.

P: It's not very much by today's standards.

J: No, but it was appreciated, I will tell you.

P: What happened then?

J: Then my brother and I . . . we painted a dairy in Girard. We painted the whole interior, a big dairy. It's not there

anymore. We didn't get paid; they gave us free milk for two months. In other words, what we were trying to do was just make it on our own. We didn't do too bad. We ate well, vegetables, you know very little meat. We ate well, and we lived well, considering.

P: What did you do when the war started?

J: When the war started, December 7, when they bombed Pearl Harbor, December 8, I went down to the post office and enlisted. I went back home and told my mom, "I'm leaving at 1:30."

P: How did she take it?

J: She didn't like it. I didn't tell her anything. It was a shock. Anyway, I went down to Columbus. I forget the name of the place where they swore me in. Then I went to radio school in Scottfield, Illinois. When I graduated from there I had volunteered for what at that time was called an X mission. I went overseas in New Guinea. We carried on these bombing raids for several months. One day I had a hemorrhage of the stomach. They flew me in to Brisbane, Australia, took one look at me, and kept me there for a couple of weeks. They said I was going home. They sent me back to the States to Letterman General Hospital in San Francisco. They asked me if I would be willing to go to officer's training since I had combat experience. I said yes. They held some conferences and stuff, and they said, "No, we can't do it; you can't make it. No, you can't be in the service." So they discharged me. They sent me home and that was it. They sent me home telling me that I couldn't work and I had a big ten percent disability. I never questioned it. I was home three or four months and I got real sick. I hemorrhaged again so they sent me back to the hospital at Crile Veteran's Hospital in Cleveland. They decided I needed an operation. They took ninety percent of my stomach out and then they sent me home with one hundred percent disability, which at that time was \$138 a month. A short time later they cut me to sixty. I never questioned it. Then they cut me to forty. I still never questioned it because I was working. I don't mind telling you that I am very, very disappointed. I may be 66 but I'm capable of working and I'm in demand in the automobile business. But I can't work because of this thing, with the complications that have set in. I applied for an increase in compensation. I waited fifteen months and they turned me down. Needless to say, you know how I feel about the United States government's obligation to the veterans.

P: When you were in New Guinea, what was it like? How much time did you spend there?

J: About a year?

P: Hot?

J: Hot, very hot. You would get sudden showers out of a big sunny sky. All of a sudden it would cloud up and you would get showers. Suddenly it would stop, and the sun would come out and the steam would rise. Boy, it was steaming hot.

P: Did you go on the bombing missions?

J: Oh, yes. I made every bombing mission and I never begged off one. Some of the fellows had an ache here and an ache there but everyone that was scheduled for me I went on.

P: Where did you go to? Where did they hit?

J: Pardon?

P: What areas did you bomb?

J: Mostly Buna Bay. We used to bomb every day at noon. With a B25 you were a sitting duck if you went up at night because they could see the exhaust. All our bombing missions were in daylight and we tried to cross our target at noon every day. If I'm not mistaken, I made 26 or 27 bombing missions. I could be wrong; it could have been more than that, but that's being conservative.

P: Where is Buna Bay?

J: In New Guinea.

P: I see. I want to go back a little bit to your childhood. Do you remember the Ku Klux Klan Riot of 1924?

J: Yes.

P: What do you remember about it? How did you see it? What were the circumstances?

J: I was very young. I would imagine I was about fourteen. As I recall the Ku Klux Klan was going to march through Niles. Niles said okay but they weren't allowed to wear their hoods. They insisted on wearing hoods. There was an outfit in Niles called the Flaming Circle. They were bound and determined they were not going to march through Niles with their hoods. It got to be pretty rough. As a matter of fact we had martial law. I remember one incident over in front of Jennings on Mason Street. They shot three of them dead right there in the middle of the street. Some-

body did, I don't know who.

P: Did you see it?

J: No, I didn't see it but I remember it. I also remember when I lived on Heaton Avenue; I was just a kid; I was out playing in my wagon. You know how you put your one knee in the wagon and you go? Well, there was a place called Crook's Gas Station. That's where the insurance company is now. I was going up the sidewalk and somebody came along and started shooting right over my head in to the Crook's Gas Station.

P: Into the gas station?

J: Yes; needless to say, I got out of there in a hurry.

P: Was he a Klanner?

J: No, I don't know. I think the shots were misdirected. I don't think they had any reason to shoot there. It was just one of those things.

P: What else did you see?

J: I saw tires that must have been soaked in gasoline or something and set on fire and rolled out on Robbins Avenue. Every once in a while you would see a flaming cross. Somebody would set a cross up and set it on fire. This went on for several days.

P: Before the riot?

J: Yes. Then the National Guard came in and put Niles under martial law. After that things were pretty quiet.

P: Did you see the riot itself?

J: Yes and no, I don't know. I saw quite a bit of it. Whether I saw it all or not I don't know.

P: What was it like? What did you see?

J: There was a young fellow from Niles who was home on leave from the Navy who had a Model A with one of those trunks on it. He took the deck off the door and mounted a machine gun and he went around shooting up everything.

P: You saw that?

J: Oh, yes.

P: How did he get a machine gun?

J: I don't know how he got it, but he got it.

P: That's who it was. I've heard that but I couldn't find out who it was.

J: I don't know who the fellow was, just a young fellow, home from the Navy.

P: Do you remember anything more about this person with the machine gun?

J: I don't really remember him, but I remember some of the things that were done. They were running around Niles with this machine gun. I don't know really whether they were the ones that shot those three Ku Klux Klans in front of Jennings or not. Somebody shot them. It might have been them, I don't know.

P: What else did you see?

J: That's about it, except the National Guard moving in and you had to be off the street at dark.

P: How many people were at that intersection that day of the riot?

J: I don't know. I don't really know.

P: Did you happen to see any attempts by the Klan as they tried to break through the intersection to go in to town?

J: No. I think they were pretty well convinced they weren't going to make it. See when they came in here, in all fairness Niles did not object to them coming into Niles. But they did object to them wearing their hoods and of course the Klan insisted that they wear their hoods. This is what caused all the trouble.

P: Did you know any of these people in the Klan?

J: No. No, I didn't know any of them.

P: Who were some of the leaders of the Flaming Circle?

J: I'll tell you that's a good question. I don't remember. You know it's been 50 years ago. I honestly don't remember. Some of the old families from Niles. Niles has always been a very close-knit town, and some of the people were against this thing. They felt very, very strongly about it. But I don't remember who they were. I was just a kid.

P: Did part of it deal with the church?



J: Pardon?

P: The church, did it have an influence on the people? I mean did the priest go out and wave a flag? Did the religion of the people, with the strong belief and so forth, associate religiously in the cross burning?

J: I don't remember anything that the church had done to try to influence.

P: That's not what I'm getting at though. Let me ask it this way; when the people saw the crosses that were burning, did they associate the burning of the crosses with their church, as an attack on the church?

J: Well, they probably did, but as far as the church was concerned I don't ever remember them saying anything as a public objection or anything. I belonged to Mount Carmel. I was baptized there, confirmed there; I made my First Communion there. I have been a member of Mount Carmel for many years and I don't remember one incident where they came out and condemned anybody. But I'm sure that the people resented the burning of the crosses and stuff. They more or less took it upon themselves to take care of it. They were going to stop it.

P: What affect did the riot have on Niles afterwards?

J: After it was all over and martial law was taken out, I don't think anything. I think Niles settled down real well after they [Klan] were out of here. I don't think that there were any repercussions. There might have been some talk. Naturally there would be talk, what happened and everything. I think that Niles settled down real well.

P: Is this a situation which people talked about a lot afterwards or did they try and forget it?

J: I would imagine then they talked about it considerably for a while and then it just faded out. It just faded out, and was completely forgotten.

P: I want to move to another topic, and that is the bootlegging era. When did you go to Youngstown?

J: I think 1938.

P: Do you remember anything about bootlegging or anything like this as a kid? Did you ever see or hear anything about it?

J: I remember saloons, speakeasies, and of course never having gone into one I wouldn't know much about it. But there were

some speakeasies. I guess that is what you would call them.

P: Did you ever hear of some of the names associated with it?

J: No, I didn't. I was too young to even think about it.

P: Did your father ever mention a Black Hand?

J: Yes, occasionally he would mention something about the Black Hands, but like I said once again I was too young to understand what he was talking about.

P: Did they ever try and shake them down, do you know?

J: No, my dad was just a family man trying to raise a family and he never had any problems.

P: What year did you come to Niles?

J: I don't really know, Steve. He came here from Italy. See my mother was born here, in Sharon or Sharpsville. My dad came here from Italy and I wouldn't have any idea what year it was.

P: Whereabouts from Italy did he come from?

J: It must be the northern because my brothers and sisters are all fair. I have one sister who is blue-eyed and blonde. They say that is characteristic of the north, so it must be the north, I don't know. My mom was born here in Sharpsville, Pennsylvania. She went to school here. Although she was Italian, she had no connections with Italy.

P: When you were here, did anyone ever talk about Jennings?

J: Not really. Everybody knew Jennings was down there on Mason Street and Wood Street.

P: How did they regard him? What was the opinion of him?

J: I don't know. They had a bingo game there; nobody much said anything against him or for him.

P: Was he powerful?

J: Yes, I would say Jennings was pretty powerful but nobody really condemned him for anything that he had done. It was just one of those things. They had a place of business there and that was it.

P: Do you remember anything about the Flask murder?

- J: Yes, the only thing that I remember really is that I heard one day that somebody shot Marty Flask. He had a Chrysler Town and Country, and he was driving around Niles. We got up one morning and found out that he was shot; he was killed.
- P: Do you think the power or the influence politically that Jennings had is gone now? Or do other people really pick up where he left off and still have that influence a little bit?
- J: In my own personal opinion I would have to say that Jennings was just an ordinary person.
- P: But the people that took over after Jennings left the scene, his proteges in other words, are some of them around? Do you think they still wheedle any of that influence that Jennings had?
- J: I doubt it; my own personal opinion, I doubt it.
- P: After you came back from the war, did you see any changes in Niles after the war ended?
- J: When I came back from the war I was in Youngstown. I really didn't come into Niles much. I came into Niles when I bought this lot and built a home. I wanted to live here. See when I came back from the service, I lived in Youngstown.
- P: Was your wife from Niles?
- J: No, she is from Campbell.
- P: When did you get married?
- J: In 1945. Thirty-eight years today.
- P: Do you think, generally speaking, that Niles has improved quite a bit since the post war years, the way the people are, the way the town has been?
- J: Yes, I would say so. I think Niles is a nice neighborhood. I like it better than Warren. I like it better than Youngstown, better than Girard. I think it is a good community to live in.
- P: When you were younger, did you remember any police officers or police chiefs?
- J: No, I didn't. There was one that drove a motorcycle.
- P: Both?

J: Yes, that was him.

P: Did you know him very well?

J: Well, I knew of him; that was the only one I knew of.

P: Why does that name stick in your mind?

J: I'll tell you why. He was chasing a man of mine who was driving up the avenue. She was Irish as "Patty Murphy's pig" and she got mad and she pulled her car right into him.

P: Hit him?

J: She didn't hurt him, but she pulled her car right into him.

P: Do you think the police department today is a little bit more militant than it might have been thirty years ago?

J: No, on the contrary. I think that the police department today is trying to do a good job. Of course there are always some, but the majority of them are pretty nice people and I don't say that because my son is a policeman. I've met them all. I know them all and basically they're all pretty nice fellows. Once in a while there is a mediocre one, but I would say that the department as a whole is made up of some pretty decent guys.

P: Did you know any of the police chiefs before Chief Ross?

J: No, I didn't.

P: Did you happen to know Ed Karowski? He was shot in 1967 at the Holiday Inn.

J: The name seems to ring a bell, but I just can't recall.

P: Is there anything that you would like to tell me about Niles, anything that you think that might be interesting that would help us?

J: I don't really know Steve. Like I said, "I think Niles is a nice community to live in." I think right now they are having a few problems, but I think they will get them ironed out. I've lived here most of my life except for a couple of years that I lived in Youngstown. I have no quarrel with the way I'm living. I think it is a nice town; I like it; I like the people that are in it. Of course most of the people in Niles that I know are Italian, and they're the same way as I am so that makes it pretty nice.

P: When you were young, did you ever experience any

discrimination because of your nationality?

J: No, not here.

P: I want to ask you one more question. Looking back over the years, who do you think was the best mayor that served in the executive seat?

J: The one that I think was the least partial, and tried to do a good job. I'm a Democrat, a registered Democrat, and he was a Republican. I forget his name. DeChristofaro and Thorpe were very fine mayors.

P: Why would you mention Thorpe?

J: I think he did a nice job; he tried. Like I said, I'm a registered Democrat and he was a Republican. I tried to look at a fellow at what he was trying to do, and I think that the man really tried to do a good job.

P: How would you sum Cicero's personality? I'm not going to write about him too much because he's more contemporary right now. He is a complex person.

J: I've known Joe Cicero for a good number of years, and he has always been a nice, congenial person. I've talked with him; I've gone down to his office. I feel a little bit disappointed in this vindictive attitude. It's not like him. So whatever it is that has caused it, I don't know, but it's not like him. Joe has been a nice person; his wife is a nice person; his son and daughter are nice people. I just detect a little bit of vindictiveness.

P: I want to go back to one other person you mentioned, DeChristofaro. How would you sum up his personality and his terms in office?

J: I think the man will probably go down in history as one of the best mayors that we ever had.

P: Why?

J: Because he kept everything under control.

P: Can you tell me any more about it?

J: There were never any outbreaks. He just kept everything under control. That's the only thing that I can tell you.

P: Anything else you can tell me?

J: No.

P: I certainly appreciate the time that you have given me.