

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Canfield Fair Project

Fair Board Experience

O.H. 213

ELBERT L. AGNEW

Interviewed

by

Carrie A. Stanton

on

October 27, 1983

ELBERT L. AGNEW

The Agnew family settled in Boardman, Ohio in 1824. The Boardman Methodist Church was started by Thomas Agnew in 1827. His son, Ralph, was the marrying justice for Mahoning County. Frank, Ralph's son, was in the legislature and was the father of Elbert Agnew.

Charlie Agnew, Frank's brother, was county commissioner and was president of the Canfield Fair in 1929. Agnew Farm Equipment was established by Elbert and his brothers in 1939.

Elbert graduated from Ohio State University with a Master's Degree in horticulture. Upon graduation, he went to Massachusetts and became a county agricultural agent.

Following the Second World War he returned to Boardman and subsequently became president of the Fair Board. He is currently in charge of the police department at the Canfield Fair.

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INTERVIEWEE: ELBERT L. AGNEW

INTERVIEWER: Carrie A. Stanton

SUBJECT: Canfield Fair Board; Police and Fire departments; Old MacDonald's Farm; international convention; Rooster Crowing Contest; Grandstand attractions; Pumpkin show

DATE: October 27, 1983

S: This is an interview with Elbert Agnew for the Youngstown State University Canfield Fair Project, by Carrie Stanton, at Mr. Agnew's business on October 27, 1983 at 10:00 a.m.

First of all, before we start talking about the fair, why don't you tell me about your background, when you were born, your family, if you are from around here, your education, and that kind of thing.

A: The Agnew's came here in 1824.

S: Really!

A: They bought this property right here, the old homestead up there. Thomas Agnew started the Boardman Methodist Church in 1827. He was quite active. His son, Ralph, was the marrying justice for, more or less, Mahoning County. His son was Frank, my father. Frank was in the legislature and he had every nonpaying job in Mahoning County. (Laughter)

He was county roads commissioner before they had county commissioners. He had a brother, Charlie Agnew, who was the most well known man in Mahoning County. He was county commissioner also. He had his name on the courthouse when it was built. He was president of the Canfield Fair in 1929, when he died of a heart attack.

S: So you go back a long way?

A: I was the youngest of five boys. We had a farm here, 75 acres of potatoes and 25 acres of apples. We started Agnew Farm Equipment in 1939. I graduated from Ohio State majoring in Horticulture, which is fruits and vegetables. I had a Master's Degree and almost a Doctor's Degree, and I was offered a job up in Massachusetts that I couldn't turn down. I went up to Massachusetts and during the war they wouldn't release me from my job up there. I finally came back here and helped Dad grow potatoes and apples.

S: What did you do in Massachusetts?

A: I was a country agricultural agent. It was the largest county agent set-up in the United States.

S: Similar to what Bill Phillips does?

A: Yes, only I had just fruits and vegetables and the greenhouse. That one spring before I left to come back here, I spoke to 60 garden clubs in and around Boston. Then I came back here and I grew potatoes. I was on the State Potato Grower's Association and the Two County Horticultural Society.

When my Uncle Charlie died in 1929, they put Vernon Crouse in Charlie Agnew's place. When Vernon Crouse retired--he was my cousin--they put me in his place. The Agnews or our relatives have been on the board for probably 100 years.

S: Let me ask you something before we go on with this: Do you still grow potatoes? Do you farm at all?

A: No. The high school is back here, and they bought 90 acres from us. The junior high school--you can see a little blue right through there--they bought 40 acres. The rest of it is in the housing development back there. We're down to six acres, but we have Agnew Farm Equipment, I own my home, and we have Pier One and the restaurant next door.

S: Are those your buildings?

A: Yes. So, I'm still active in a lot of things. Right now I'm lay leader of the Boardman Methodist Church and we have 2,000 members. I've always been very active in that. I'll never retire.

S: That's probably good.

A: Grace Williams and I are--well, I'm probably the closest one of the board members to Grace.

S: Isn't she a marvelous person?

A: Yes. I started exhibiting out there when I was in 4-H, which was probably about the middle 1920's.

S: What was it like then?

A: Well, to me it was big.

S: Were there midways then?

A: Oh sure, one midway.

S: Was the grandstand open?

A: Part of it was. In 1936, when the W.P.A. [Works Progress Administration] came in, we had to transfer the ground over to the county commissioners so that they could put the grandstand up, and put the addition on with W.P.A. funds.

S: Did you know anybody who worked on that grandstand, that actually helped build it?

A: No, I don't.

S: Who did they use, did they use local workers?

A: Oh sure! It was W.P.A., they had to be local.

S: The grandstand has got a lot of history behind it.

A: Oh yes.

S: Tell us how you got on the fair board.

A: I got on because I knew so many people. I knew Howard Kohler and George Bishop. When Vernon Crouse retired, why, they said, "Agnew, you want to be on the fair board?"

S: What did you start out doing?

A: The same thing I'm doing now.

S: What are you doing now?

A: I'm in charge of the police and the watchmen. At that time I had the roads, gates, policemen, and watchmen.

I had nineteen policemen. Around 1968 it was just too much of a job, so they split my job up with Roy Bowman. He took part of mine and I kept the police, fire department, and watchmen. I've still got around 80 policemen, half a dozen watchmen, all the fire department, and also take care of the Red Cross.

S: They are all under you?

A: I hire 80 policemen. I take care of the security and the traffic control and everything else.

S: Oh, you're in traffic!

A: No, inside the grounds. You've heard of the disaster down in Texas where somebody got killed. If something like that would happen, any major disaster on the fairgrounds, it's completely my responsibility.

If you want to ask any questions about what happens if we have a disaster, nobody can answer any questions except Albert Agnew. That's the way we have the board set up, so there aren't a bunch of rumors going around.

S: What would you do if there was a disaster?

A: I'm all prepared. We have the fire department; we have the police department. I more or less supervise the Red Cross, any emergency.

S: Are you connected by walkie-talkie and this type of thing?

A: Yes, walkie-talkies. Most all of my division policemen have walkie-talkies and talk into them constantly. If there's any problem, it takes five seconds from the time the problem comes to my main office. We're right next door to the Red Cross, and the Red Cross takes over with direct communication to all fire departments.

S: Any small disasters in the years?

A: Oh, we have half a dozen of them every year.

S: What kind?

A: Well, if a kid falls off a ride. It's kind of my responsibility that all of these 'carnies', when they come in here . . . Now, in West Virginia down there, if they use marijuana, if they're half drunk on the job, or if they're in dirty clothes, that's okay, but not in Canfield.

In Canfield they have to have clean clothes every day. They have to be shined up and we check them all the time to see that they're not drinking, to see that they're not on drugs.

S: This would be the people that run the rides?

A: Run the rides and the shows.

S: What's the name, what did you call them?

A: Carnies. That's what they are, they're carnies.

S: They go around to all the fairs?

A: Yes, they go around to all the fairs. They start down in Florida and they go to all the fairs up north. They're carnies, that's their whole life. They sleep in their car, their station wagon.

S: I was going to say, I've never myself run into any disreputable characters out there.

A: Oh, I see them once in a while. I've seen some of them. We used to get a scad of them, but they know when they come to Canfield they'd better straighten up because we just won't stand for it. We usually get maybe half a dozen of them every year.

S: That's how you handle it?

A: Yes. If there's any accident, or if they don't treat the kids right, or if they start shortchanging or something, why, I'm right there or my men are.

You've heard of Orly Dilullo? He's head of the Liberty Police.

S: Yes.

A: He is an excellent guy. He's my night chairman and Paul Robinson is my day chairman. We have it split up into five divisions: the grandstand division, the 4-H division, the midway division, and the parking lot division. We can tell everything that's going on at the fairgrounds. You do anything bad, I'll know it.
(laughter)

S: How do you recruit these members? Do they volunteer every year?

A: No. If they've been with me and they've been doing a

good job, these 80 people, we have a meeting in the summer and talk about things. If they've been doing a good job, they take their vacations during this time, then they come back and work for me.

My job starts two weeks before the fair, and lasts during the fair, and five days after the fair. Most of the directors come up two days before the fair. During the fair, and the night of the fair, why, they're done and gone.

My job runs twelve months a year. My policeman comes in three or four times every night of the year to watch the grounds, the traffic, and the people. Every show over there we hire policemen to watch, if there's an antique show or a horse show or anything.

S: They have to report directly to you then?

A: Yes, but my job is a twelve-months-a-year job.

S: Well-paid, right?

A: Yes, \$80 a year! The only reason I do that now is that if I get in an accident or if somebody hits me on the head or something like that in my job, we're covered by workman's compensation. That's the only reason we're paid.

S: I thought it was just the gas.

A: No, we get a daily wage so that we are covered with workman's compensation.

S: Gee, that doesn't work out to too much money, \$80 a year.

A: It covers me under workman's compensation. In other words, if I get hit with an automobile, or fall off of the grandstand, or something like that in my line of duty, we're covered.

S: This is what you've always done, with the police?

A: Yes.

S: Are you on any other committee?

A: The entertainment committee.

S: Do you have any interesting experiences you want to tell about the entertainment committee? What do you do exactly?

- A: Not too much anymore because now we turn the whole thing over to Klein Attractions and they're the experts and we're not. We can suggest that we have Eddie Rabbit or whoever and they take them and make the contracts.
- S: Why did you start using outsiders, because it just got too big do you think?
- A: We used to have rodeos and water shows and entertainment like that. Shortly after I got on the board, we went into the big time. Bill Kilcawley, he was on the board when I was there. You've probably heard his name mentioned. He was a very wealthy man with Standard Slag. He brought in the Lennon Sisters. We had never had any name in front of the grandstand at all before. The board kind of said, "No, that's too big of a deal." Bill said, "Here's 5,000 bucks. If they make a flop, I'll pay for the bill. If they make the money, you keep the money." We hired the Lennon Sisters for \$5,000 and then we took in \$15,000 so we made \$10,000 on the deal. Since then we've had big names.
- S: Do you usually make money on that?
- A: We try to make money or break even. Most fairs, most of the state fairs and the Ohio State Fair, give their grandstand away.
- S: I wouldn't think it's profitable.
- A: If they have 100,000 on the grounds per day, the grandstand at the most, even with chairs and everything, will only seat 18,000. What happened to the other 82,000? They can't get into the grandstand. They paid for it, but they can't get into it unless they come six hours early.
- S: You said that there was a big change when you came on the board, why?
- A: There was Bob Rose, Chuck Blunt, Bob Hammett, and myself. In other words, when I came on the board there were these old men who were on the board. This was 25 years ago. Of course, I'm an old man now compared to what I was 25 years ago. The old boys were all conservative and never did anything like getting these big names or putting themselves out. We never went to the international conventions. I was the first one that took Grace out. My wife and I took her to the international convention. Since then we've been going ever since and quite a bit of the board has been going.
- S: Grace mentioned this international convention, but I

never really went into it with her. What's it like?

A: We go to Las Vegas now. Las Vegas is the biggest convention.

S: Every year it's in Las Vegas?

A: Every year. And they tried to change it away from there, but nobody can handle that big of a crowd.

S: Really! Do you happen to know how many people?

A: I think 12,000 go to the convention.

S: What do you do, are there exhibits?

A: Exhibits and they have the big convention room there in the MGM that has displays of rides, shows, tickets, and the whole works.

S: At that MGM! First class.

A: Yes. We take pretty near all the rooms in the MGM and four or five surrounding hotels. They're all filled up with fair people.

S: You kind of get ideas?

A: Oh sure! That's why we go, to get ideas. If we get one idea that will help the Canfield Fair, it's worth going to the convention.

S: Did somebody say the rooster crowing contest was an idea that came out of there? I don't remember. Do you know where that idea came from?

A: I think Grace more or less hatched it out. Maybe Howard Moore, probably. He was the head of the poultry and so on.

S: It's unique. Do you think any other fairs probably have this?

A: Oh sure. People from all over the country come to Canfield to see how we do it. Now we're starting to go around to other big fairs to see how they do it.

S: How do you get a rooster to crow? (laughter)

A: You train it.

S: Really?

A: Yes. If you have food there for a cat or something, they'll come to eat. The rooster knows that if he crows he gets a benefit, a grain of corn or something like that. You train it. The boys now train it so they get pretty near two crows a minute out of them.

S: (laughter) That's unbelievable. I like that.

As far as the grounds and things, did they start buying more grounds when you were on the board?

A: I got on the board in 1957. In 1957 we bought ten acres right in here. [Looking at map] Then we kept buying more. When I got on the board that was all the parking we had. We didn't own this, and we didn't own this. Now, we own clear over to Route 11.

S: You don't use all that though, do you?

A: We're cleaning it off just in case. This side down here is the Wolf farm. We pay money to lease that. South of Leffingwell Road, that's being developed, sold off in five-acre plots. That will not be available so we have to make our own parking.

S: Somebody was telling me that they were trying to get a ramp made off of Route 11.

A: Maybe someday, I'm not sure.

S: I don't know how they'd go about doing something like that. Seems like there would be a lot of red tape.

A: I think we've got enough parking area.

S: When was the biggest fair, a couple of years ago? I mean as far as people, attendance.

A: The biggest Sunday we ever had was, I think, two years after I was president. We didn't have parking area for it. We had 140,000 people come in and we had 25,000 people all on the highways that never got to the fair.

S: That would be the year of the gigantic traffic jam.

A: Yes. We were jammed five miles every way to the fair. There was no room to put the people.

S: They don't seem to have that problem now.

A: No.

- S: Why? Is it because they have so much more room or is it just better organized? Did they have the fence around then?
- A: Not at that time, no.
- S: You had to pay when you went in.
- A: You would pay to park, not pay to get in. You would pay at the gates. Now they get in and get out.
- S: Do you think that when they put that fence around, it helped?
- A: Oh yes.
- S: It helped with the parking project because people didn't have to stop, they'd just go right in.
- A: Yes, you didn't have to stop, you would just keep on going. Now we have sufficient parking. We spend a lot of money on these parking girls. We used to do it for \$1,800 and now we're up to about \$30,000 a year to park the people.
- S: Your police, are they responsible for any of these people?
- A: No.
- S: Who handles that?
- A: Kenny McMullen did until this year, and Don Booth has taken that over now.
- S: I would like to ask this question, what do you think makes the Canfield Fair, as people say, "the fair?"
- A: It's seventeen directors at work.
- S: Do you think . . .
- A: You read the articles about the Trumbull Fair and how they fight and squabble among each other, we don't. We argue during the meeting, then we walk out arm in arm and that's it. Each of us has a job to do and we do it, every one of them. Everyone of the seventeen directors is a worker. Bob Rose, Gib James, Kenny McMullen, Chuck Blunt, Homer Schaeffer, the old men of the fair board, we all work.
- S: And all year round too.

A: Yes, all year round.

S: So you think that's what does it?

A: Sure. That's what does it. We spend our money wisely. We bought the grounds now. We're not going to buy any more grounds. You've got to make money to put back money in it, build new buildings, widen a midway, and so on.

S: Did you put up a lot of buildings since you've been on the board?

A: Oh yes.

S: I remember back when it was mostly tents.

A: Agnew Farm Equipment is the oldest exhibitor at the fairgrounds. We started in 1939. They put us clear at the South end of the fairgrounds away from everybody.

S: Here's a new question I've never asked anybody. If you were to change anything at the fair or on the board or anything, what would it be? Is there something that you would change? Do you think that everything just works so well now that nothing would ever be changed?

A: I might irritate some of those board members if they ever hear this. I would like a tremendous big building in here, a big building; and maybe not spend so much on the antiques and the Pioneer Village and stuff like that.

S: What would they do with this big building? What did you have in mind for it, exhibitions?

A: A big exhibition center.

S: That could really be used a lot more during the year?

A: In other words, we would have the trade shows for their territory, and these antique shows and places like that, we would have the center to show them. That was kind of my dream instead of putting all the money into a lot of these other things.

S: Did you have anything to do with the Western Reserve Village?

A: Oh sure.

- S: Did you make any contacts for those buildings?
- A: Not too much, no. Bob Rose and Gib James did most of that.
- S: I heard that they wanted to give the St. James Church, but it was too much money.
- A: Yes, too much money. In other words, it would have cost us at that time \$30,000 to build, which is a lot of money. They said \$30,000 to move this big building.
- S: Well, it's nice down there.
- A: Yes it is, isn't it? It'll always be there.
- S: Is there anything you'd like to add?
- A: I don't think so.
- S: Are you in charge of the Red Cross, too?
- A: Dr. Shreiber is directly in charge, but I'm the board member that goes to the Red Cross. In other words, I see them three or four times a day if they need anything, and I furnish the golf carts. Anything they need, they come to me to get it done.
- S: They've never had any big problems out there have they?
- A: No.
- S: There's never been a big storm on the fairgrounds?
- A: We had a storm probably twenty years ago that blew some tents down and did a lot of damage, but nobody got hurt.
- S: You probably wouldn't have that many problems now, since almost everything is buildings now.
- A: Yes.
- S: Well, if there's nothing else to add, I thank you.
- A: Anything to help this Canfield Fair.
- S: That's what everyone says.
- A: Anything to help the Canfield Fair. I know, when I was president in 1966 and 1967 . . .

- S: Everyone takes two years?
- A: Yes, everyone takes two years, a little more than two years. We have a wonderful fair board and they all help and dig in. Grace Williams has always been my favorite gal. She and I and my wife went to the first convention that we ever had. When we go to the state convention or the national convention I see that Grace is taken care of and I escort her around, things like that.
- S: What do you think is going to happen? A lot of the members I've talked to are older men and they'll probably be retiring one of these days. What do you think is going to happen? Do you think the people who replace them . . . do you think it's going to be as good a caliber?
- A: The fair board directors more or less pick who is going to come in. If I retire, there's a job opening in the police department, the watchmen, the firemen, and so on. We have to pay somebody to take my job. In other words, we just can't take you, for example, and make you a fair board director because you don't know anything about what my job would entail. Anybody that retires, we have to pick somebody in the county that will fill that job, and not just be a fair board member.
- S: Will the person that's being replaced kind of have a say in it? They would know, maybe, who was . . .
- A: They would know when they're appointed on the job and what their job is going to be, unless one of the fair board members switches, and that doesn't happen very often.
- S: Usually what you go in as is what you stay at?
- A: Right.
- S: And you get to know your job very well.
- A: Very well. It's too bad that each of us don't know the other board members' jobs though. There's seventeen jobs that are just divided up. There is no way that you can get to know all of them.
- S: When you become president for those two years, do you kind of get a feel for the other people's jobs a little bit?

A: Oh yes.

S: Do you have to attend all the different meetings?

A: Most of them, yes. Another thing that the president usually does is to pick out some distinction that he's going to leave as his 'baby'. The Old MacDonald's Farm is Elbert Agnew's baby.

S: There, we didn't talk about that.

A: I got that started and that is what I'm leaving to the fairgrounds.

S: Where did you get that idea?

A: A national convention. There were one or two fairs in the United States that had it and now we have it. Now pretty near every fair in the United States has it.

S: They don't charge extra admission . . .

A: No. It cost us money to get the kittens, cows, little calves, turkeys, and the little guinea pigs. It costs money to get in, but boy it's a big attraction.

S: Yes. That building must have been an expensive building to put up.

A: Not too much, no.

S: No? It sure looks expensive.

A: It just looks expensive.

S: When was that put up, do you remember?

A: 1968. Things really started popping in the early 1960's.

S: I did an interview with Homer Schaeffer. Boy, he had a lot of ideas. He did a lot of things there.

A: Yes, Homer started a lot of things, international.

S: Did he start the pumpkin show?

A: Yes. People weren't too much interested in the pumpkin show until the first or second year. I grew a pumpkin back here that weighed 168 pounds. They'd never seen a pumpkin or a squash that big at all. Now they're coming in over 300 pounds.

S: Oh my! How do you get it out there? Are pumpkins fragile?

A: No. You just roll them on the blanket and four guys get a hold of the four corners of the blanket, just like a sick man or something.

S: I was reading in those articles about the kid who took his sunflower out to the fair this year, in the back of a Chevette I think it was; and he put the root on the seat and had the flower sticking out the back.

Nothing else you want to add?

A: I don't believe so.

S: Okay. Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW