

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Sheet and Tube Shutdown Project

Sheet and Tube Shutdown

O.H. 160

THOMAS BARRETT

Interviewed

by

Philip Bracy

on

April 7, 1981

THOMAS J. BARRETT

Thomas Barrett was born in Youngstown, Ohio on November 24, 1910, a son of Ben and Bridget Barrett. He grew up on Youngstown's South Side and attended St. Patrick's Parochial School. He graduated from South High School and received a Bachelors degree from Ohio State University in 1939.

Mr. Barrett worked for the City of Youngstown from 1964 to 1965 after he left the State Legislature, having served that body since 1935. Since 1965 he has served as County Commissioner, Mahoning County.

Mr. Barrett is married to his wife, Hilda, attends St. Charles Church in Boardman, Ohio and enjoys swimming.

He has been honored by the United Veterans Council, State Legislature and the Health and Welfare Council of the United Way. He is an active member of Elks, Irish Arts, East Side Civics, the Chesterton Club and Glencrest Lodge.

Philip Bracy

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INTERVIEWEE: THOMAS BARRETT
INTERVIEWER: Philip Bracy
SUBJECT: Sheet and Tube Shutdown
DATE: April 7, 1981

PB: This is an interview with County Commissioner Thomas Barrett for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project concerning the Shutdown of the Youngstown Sheet and Tube by Philip Bracy at the County Commissioner's Office on April 7, 1981 at 9:15 a.m.

This morning, Commissioner Barrett, could you tell me a little bit about yourself and where you grew up and so forth?

TB: My name is Thomas Barrett, I'm Mahoning County Commissioner. I was born on the South Side of Youngstown and grew up on the South Side of Youngstown. My grandfather came up what they call the tow path, which was along the canal back in the middle 1870's to what was know as the blocks in Youngstown where former old coalminer's houses to the McKinley Block's Coal Mine, which was up around the lower part of the South Side. I've always been interested in Youngstown. My parents all worked in the steel mills and the railroads. I will say that my father was able to educate most of the family and most of them reside in the City of Youngstown today. Some have been in politics and athletics.

PB: Could you tell me any schools that you attended here in Mahoning County?

TB: I attended St. Patrick's Parochial School, South High School in Mahoning County, and graduated from Ohio State

University.

PB: Could you give me the dates on that please?

TB: I graduated from St. Patricks in 1925, from South High School in January of 1930 and from Ohio State in 1939.

PB: Could you please tell me, Commissioner Barrett, where you were and how you first found out about the shutdown of the Youngstown Sheet and Tube?

TB: Well, there had been rumors about the closing of the Sheet and Tube. I think the first rumor came when we had a public hearing at the Voyager Hotel on environmental qualities of the Mahoning River; the public officials, including the commissioners and other local public officials, plus other interested citizens; mostly asking for an extension of time so they could put into effect the various methods of controlling the wastes going into the Mahoning River. It was something that they just couldn't put in by--I forget the year they wanted it in--but the expense and the amount of money that you would put into capital equipment into the mill just couldn't be put into a non-producing product for air and water pollution. There was a feeling around that the day of reckoning had come. Either you had to abide by all the standards of water and air pollution or good-bye steel mills.

PB: Do you remember the date of that hearing?

TB: At the Voyager Hotel it was possible when Mayor Flask was Mayor and that's about ten years ago at least.

PB: That was the first indication that you had that. . .

TB: That the day was coming, that the Valley was going to be in trouble. And I was on the Board of WREDA [Western Reserve Economic Development Agency] and Father Hogan from Fordham University was hired as a consultant. As I remember it, he brought up the idea of one central blast furnace up where the US Steel is now located or was located, and they could haul the hot metal from a distance of, I think, ten to fifteen miles, as far away as the Sharon Steel up in Sharon anyway.

And another question was the rail transportation to move the raw products. We do have a very good transportation system with highways, but there's also the need for rail transportation.

PB: You're speaking of the unitrain I believe?

TB: Unitrain, that was brought into discussion.

PB: On September 19, 1977 the day of the announcement of the shutdown, do you recall how you were informed of the shutdown?

TB: The rumors had been so rampant that you couldn't say it came that particular day because everybody seemed to know in advance that it was coming. So, it just happened to be that day. It was no surprise to anybody.

PB: I recognize you were telling me this goes back to Mayor Flask, that there was a clear indication that things were not going along correctly. But do you recall where you were? What you were doing at the time?

TB: I was downtown in the office and probably at lunch time when they announced it. Somebody probably was listening to the radio but. . . I remember it caused quite an upset. I called up the Welfare Director and asked him what we would do. He suggested that we get hold of Russ Baxter, who was head of the union down at the Sheet and Tube and set up a meeting so they could plan what their future would be as far as the agencies in Youngstown that they could go to and what relief they could expect. I always remember this, that we got in quite a hassle there because most of the men that worked in the mill had an automobile over \$1,200. and the State of Ohio said if you had a car over \$1,200. you wouldn't be eligible for welfare.

PB: Did you speak to Mr. Baxter or did Mr. Armour?

TB: We all had our little word, but I'm not the Welfare Director. I may have been President of the Board of County Commissioners at the time and introduced those that were present. There was our Welfare Director, and people from different service agencies, and the hotline. Incidentally, if workers needed any particular questions answered they had a hotline in those days.

PB: In the early weeks after the announcement of the shutdown, what efforts did the commissioners take, besides the one you just mentioned of course?

TB: Well, the first thing the Ecumenical group was formed. It took, sort of, the leadership of the shutdown of Sheet

and Tube. I attended several meetings and offered what support the Board of County Commissioners could give to the Ecumenical Coalition. Bishop Malone, the Council of Churches, a rabbi and Reo Miller of the First Presbyterian led the Ecumenical group.

PB: Were those the breakfast meetings that the Coalition had?

TB: They had evening meetings and. . . I remember going to a church, the Methodist Church in Boardman, the First Presbyterian Church in Youngstown. They met and you selected what group you could best serve on. And then the Council of Churches had a group that informed most of the agencies in Youngstown. I more or less represented the County Commissioners on that group too. They met monthly and discussed the social aspect of the Sheet and Tube shutdown.

PB: That was through the Mahoning Valley Association of Churches.

TB: Yes, Council of Churches, their headquarters is on Wick Avenue.

PB: Reverend Speicher?

TB: Yes. Most of the agencies belonged to that group and they were taking a very strong look at what they could provide and what to expect.

PB: Did the County Commissioners participate in the Steel Community's Coalition and could you tell me about that?

TB: County Commissioners were very active in the Steel Community's Coalition, naturally because we had the plants, not only in Youngstown, but Campbell, Struthers, McDonald, Girard, Warren. So, through the WREDA organization we had become interested. And I was Chairman of the Board of WREDA, so naturally, I moved in the position of one of the directors.

PB: I realize your position with WREDA, but were you contacted by Mr. Sullivan or how were you brought on board?

TB: I was contacted by Jim Flarharty, President of the Board of County Commissioners, Allegheny County at that time. If I wasn't there, it probably would have been another commissioner, but it so happened that it was me. So, we all flew down to Washington. As a matter of fact,

we went down to Washington several times. We were very well received by the Department of Commerce.

PB: This would be approximately when, sir? I was trying to put it in a time frame. Would that be just following the shutdown announcement, just after that?

TB: Just before the 22nd of September 1977. We were trying to get the "trigger price" set on steel and save the mills. They had problems in the Ohio River area, particularly around Wheeling, West Virginia. I believe it was Weirton Steel. It was down around Steubenville or Wheeling in that area where they were already closing down around Portsmouth. We saw the handwriting on the wall both in Pittsburgh and in Youngstown.

PB: What groups or what entities served on the Steel Communities Coalition, and how many?

TB: In the beginning of the Steel Communities Coalition, meetings were largely attended because down where Bethlehem Steel was, in Eastern Pennsylvania, they had already closed down and one town was pretty hard hit. And the mayors and the commissioners, had quite a large group at their first hearing. At their first meeting in Washington, it was surprising how many people went to the Department of Commerce.

PB: But I meant, the main groups were they governmental units?

TB: The main groups were governmental units and groups like the Chamber of Commerce from down around the Beaver Valley, the Chamber of Commerce from Pittsburgh--I won't say the Chamber of Commerce per se, but the members that were active in the part representing the steel section were always represented at the meeting, plus quite a few of the news media.

We got quite a bit of publicity. As a matter of fact, I think we were the ones that were responsible for Mr. Strauss and the administration putting the trigger price on the Solomon Report.

PB: Was that as a result of the meeting?

TB: It was a result of our meeting in Washington that they started the Steel Caucus in the Congress of the United States.

PB: That resulted from a meeting with Congressman Carney?

TB: Well, when we went to Washington and the Commissioners were coming down doing the Congressman's work and the Mayor's, we met in the morning and they met in the afternoon, so we were about eight hours ahead of them with our Steel Communities group. We met with the Department of Commerce at 9:00 in the morning, at 1:00 in the afternoon they had formed a caucus in Congress.

PB: Do you recall the date that that took place?

TB: September 22nd, 1977. Mayor Hunter was Mayor, I flew down with Mayor Hunter, Father Stanton, Bob Machuga, who was an attorney. There were about five of us who went to Washington. We went several times, but I'm talking of our first meeting. As a matter of fact, that's where I met Hal Williams and showed him the map of Mahoning County. He had gone over I-80 and he remembered that truckstop out at Route 46, which is the largest truck stop in the U.S. and Hal Williams said he was familiar with it.

PB: Hal Williams was . . . ?

TB: He was third in line in the Department of Commerce, and he was interested in trying to do what he could do for the Valley. And through Economic Development we received \$5,000,000. for a sewer line.

PB: Do you recall generally Commissioner, about how many trips you would have made to Washington?

TB: I know we made three trips to Washington because we had a meeting with the Senator; Senator Glen, spoke at a luncheon. Then we had another meeting with Senator Glenn and others at different hotels in Washington. I went to Washington at least four times, to Pittsburgh Airport at least a dozen times. The meetings were held at the Pittsburgh Airport because it was easy to get into Pittsburgh either by driving or flying.

PB: How was the Steel Communities Coalition funded?

TB: It was funded by assessment.

PB: Through the various governmental units.

TB: Yes, through the governmental units.

PB: Do you remember approximately how much the dues were? Was it based on size?

- TB: Well of course, Pittsburgh put up the most money because they were the largest.
- PB: It seemed like the Steel Community's Coalition was active prior to and following the Lykes decision, then it seemed to taper off.
- TB: It tapered off. Mr. John Palermo now is Vice Chairman of the Steel Community's Coalition and Mr. Tom Forrester of Pittsburgh is the Chairman.
- PB: But the effort now, is still going on though.
- TB: The effort is still going on, but it's not as active as it was five years ago.
- PB: Do you feel that the response of the various groups in the Mahoning Valley was adequate to the problem that you were facing?
- TB: I would say that everybody was trying to do the best they knew how, but it's like everything else, there were too many groups at one time trying to do the same thing.
- PB: But you feel overall though that it was adequate?
- TB: Overall it had its effect, because it did bring attention to the federal authorities. And it's my understanding, if it still holds, that the low interest or whatever they're going to do to help bring economic development into the Valley.
- PB: One final question, do you feel that the Mahoning Valley will recover from these problems, or do you believe the doomsdayers that we're going to be suffering from the so called "sun belt strategy" and all those other things?
- TB: One thing we do have around here--and I read in the paper about a water drought in the South--is that we have coal, we have water, right now we have some rail transportation, but if Conrail and Amtrak pull out I don't know what we're going to have left there, but we do have good highway transportation, probably best in the United States of America. And it has been explained already that the commissioners, without too much fanfare, are putting a sewer line out in an area where there's water and transportation. Packard Electric has already put a plant in there, 500 people are employed.

And a plant is moving their main offices from Indianapolis into our area. It's not a gigantic plant, but at least they'll bring their business offices to Mahoning County.

PB: I'd like to thank you very much Mr. Barrett for taking the time this morning for an interview.

TB: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW