

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown Steel Strike Project

1937 "Little Steel" Strike

O. H. 228

JOSEPH J. PETACCIO

Interviewed

by

Philip Bracy

on

December 30, 1982

JOSEPH J. PETACCIO

Mr. Petaccio was born in Youngstown in 1914. He worked at a scrap yard at the time of the 1937 "Little Steel" Strike. The focus of his report is on the aftermath of the original volley on June 19, 1937. Presently he is retired. He was married in 1938. He attends St. Columba Cathedral.

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INTERVIEWEE: JOSEPH J. PETACCIO

INTERVIEWER: Philip Bracy

SUBJECT: Aftermath of 1937 "Little Steel" Strike

DATE: December 30, 1982

B: This is Philip Bracy for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program. Today is December 30, 1982. We're going to be talking about the 1937 incident at Stop 5.

First, I would like you to identify yourself and tell us where you lived at that particular time.

P: My name is Joseph Petaccio. At the time I was living at 647 Gibson Street in Youngstown, Ohio. Do you want me to talk about that night?

B: Yes. Where were you working on that particular night / June 19, 1937_/?

P: I was working for the scrap yard, Mahoning Metal Market. Howard Cooper was the boss. It was a job where you brought in scrap from old cars. We had a little press. We would throw it in there and it would press itself and make bales.

B: How did you come to go down to the Stop 5 area that night?

P: That evening we were sitting up on the corner where we all congregated. We would meet at the corner of Gibson and Myrtle. Looking down I said, "Hey, they are shooting fireworks?" We stood up there and watched. We said, "Man, who would be shooting fireworks. That is Stop 5. That ain't no picnic going on." We kept looking all around. A fellow came running up the hill

hollering. He was going home to get his gun. It was a big strike. They were shooting tear gas. It was just like a war going on down there. That did it, we went down. We ran.

B: You could see the tear gas? Was it that thick?

P: You couldn't see the tear gas. You could see flares mostly. Shots were like whistling. We cut right down the hill, right through the automatic sprinkler. We ran right over top of it.

B: How long was it from the time the flares started till you started walking down?

P: In those days we were down there in five minutes. It couldn't have lasted more than five or ten minutes at the most. When we got down there, the first thing I noticed right there by the fire station was a bus. I don't know how it got there, but it was turned. They had the whole road blocked up.

B: This would have been Poland Avenue?

P: Yes, right in front of the fire station, a couple hundred yards before Stop 5. The fire station is still down there. The tires were all flat on that bus. That was when the tear gas was really bad. You could just smell it. They had fire hydrants all wide open. The guys were saying that that helped to kill the gas. We kept walking down. Right at the corner of Powersdale is where the policemen had that brand new tera-plane. That was a strong road then. Thirty-seven tera-planes, Hudson tera-planes. This one was turned over on its roof. How it got like that, I don't know. Gas was leaking out of it. There was a big puddle of gas from the gas tank leaking. Some goofball came by and tossed a cigarette in it. When that cigarette hit it, it went "boom!" It blew up. Man, just like that, shots started coming! I mean shots! When you hear some whistling, you know it's that close.

B: Was it a machine gun kind of whistling?

P: Pistols, I presume. I have never seen a machine gun to tell you the truth so I don't know how they sound. It was pretty close to the sound.

The fellow next to me was hollering, "My knee, my knee!" That was when we took off and ran behind the billboard there. Standard was on the corner.

B: On the corner of where?

P: Powersdale and Poland Avenue. It was right there at Stop 5. I think where Standard Oil was, there is a junk yard there now. Most of that place is all torn down. Ain't much left down there.

We ran. There was some shooting going on, but I don't know how long that lasted. We didn't hang around too much after that. We were scared. We just got up, and went back home. Then my brother-in-law, who was there at the time, told me to get out of there. He said, "You ain't got no business down there!"

B: Could you see the field where the people had been assembled when you came down here, or was the tear gas too thick?

P: There were just so many people walking up and down. There was nothing organized or assembled that I could see. It just looked to me like curious people. I don't know.

B: Were there any armed union people? Did you see any union members with guns?

P: I didn't know any of the unionmen at that time. There was every kind of pistol or gun you could imagine. I followed a guy with a sawed-off shotgun in case he dropped it or got hit. I had some bad ideas. What I was going to do with it, I don't know. Any kind of gun you wanted. Who these people were, I don't know.

B: Were there any police that you saw?

P: Well, I saw two; they were up by the fire station just talking to the men. They would just stand there talking. They were the only two I saw.

B: They felt safe enough, because you said there was still shooting going on.

P: What they did when there was shooting, I don't know that. When I saw them it was by the fire station. When the shooting started they were about four or five hundred yards down the road. What they ever did when the shooting took place was probably run into the fire station. I don't really know because I took off up the hill after that. We didn't hang around much longer after that.

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B: Were you anywhere in the vicinity? I realize you weren't involved in the strike, that's why I ask.

P: No.

B: Did you ever occasionally go down to the strike area before or after that particular date, just passing through or anything?

P: No, actually, to tell you the truth, I don't even remember. I never even knew they were organizing or that there was going to be a strike, or anything. Being young kids we never paid that much attention to it, to tell you the truth.

B: The unidentified people that you saw with guns, were they shooting at the mill or were they just carrying guns trying to get out of there?

P: There was one guy who was laying on the ground shooting. Whether he could shoot and see I don't know. Unless he figured maybe he could see a flash over there.

Between there and the mill there are railroad tracks. To get into the mill there is a tunnel you go through.

They said the cops, or whomever fired shots in the mill, were walking up on the cat walks where the cranes go. All you could have seen from Poland Avenue was the railroad tracks.

B: I realize you were in danger so you may have been concerned with that, but did you see any shots fired from the mills?

P: No, but you could hear them. When I heard the first one I got on my knees. We were scared. That was when my brother-in-law chased me home anyhow.

B: Did you see any policemen on horseback?

P: No, not that day. No. Then after, I don't know when it was, when they brought the troops down, national guards, we walked down there one day. You weren't even allowed to stop. You walked. You just kept walking and didn't dare stop. They would make you move.

B: Then you went down there the next day?

P: I don't know if it was the next day or what. Curiously we heard that soldiers were down there in tents. They were there.

B: Where did they camp out?

P: Right there at Stop 5, there was an empty field there with a few small tents and a lot of trucks. You didn't stop there. No, you just went on by and left.

B: What do you recall about when you walked through there? What did you see? Did you see any evidence of bullet holes in buildings or anything that might have been hit.

P: No, I never even looked, or never even gave it a thought. Something like that, no. Just that one night of shooting was enough for me. Yes, that was something.

B: That was about the end of it, to the best of your knowledge? There was no other incidents of shooting that you know?

P: No.

B: Okay. Thank you very much for taking time this morning with me.

P: It was a pleasure.

B: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW