

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

History of Niles Project

Nursing Experiences

O. H. 246

HELEN THOMAS LANE

Interviewed

by

Beth Kantor

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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INTERVIEWEE: HELEN THOMAS LANE

INTERVIEWER: Beth Kantor

SUBJECT: Nursing in and around Niles, Niles during the
Depression

DATE: November 1, 1985

K: This is an interview with Helen Thomas Lane for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program by Beth Kantor at Central Park Apartments on November 1, 1983, at 8:00 p.m.

What do you remember about your parents and your family in your early childhood?

L: The first thing I remember in my early childhood was World War I.

K: What effect did it have upon your family?

L: We worked for the Red Cross and my mother always wanted to be a nurse. I was the only girl and I had two brothers. My father was a blacksmith in Niles and he worked very hard. He didn't want his children to work as hard as he did. He always looked forward to my brothers being doctors and me a schoolteacher.

K: What made you decide to be a nurse instead of a schoolteacher?

L: My mother and my brothers were in medical school. My father died in 1929.

K: How old were you in 1929?

L: I was 21. I had just graduated from high school and my brothers were in Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.

Then they were going to medical school in Cincinnati. My dad didn't want to give up his girl. Then the Depression came on and in 1929 of January my father went to the bank and they were closed and he died of a heart attack. He had two sons in college and it was heartbreaking to know that he had no means for their tuition. He was a hardworking man and he was the only blacksmith in town, and at that time blacksmithing was going out of style.

Our cars were coming into existence then. In that day of age it was the milkman, he would come to your door, and the butcherman would come to your door, and the grocery man would come to your door and get your order and then deliver your groceries.

His business was going down. Then when the crash came in 1929, my father was only 54 years old, the shock was too great because his heart was so set on his sons becoming professionals. When he was a boy his older brother was sent to the ministry in Hiram, Ohio, to the Hiram College and he was given a trade and his other brothers were given a trade of blacksmithing and carriage making. They had the brothers' shop here in Niles where the Bank Ohio drive-in is now. That was the original blacksmith shop.

K: Were the streets brick?

L: No, there were no brick streets.

K: What was it like to live on a farm?

L: We didn't live on a farm, we had an acre of ground in the city. We had a house with two lots and it still stands on the corner of West Park Avenue and Victor Avenue.

K: Your father lived on a farm?

L: My father was raised on a farm in Youngstown.

K: Do you know perhaps how your mom and dad met?

L: Yes, my mother was from Champion, Ohio, and she was the oldest of eight children. She would go to work at the Ohio Lamp in Warren and she would come into town with her dad in the horse and buggy. They would go down to the blacksmith shop and have their horse shod. That's how she met my father.

K: When were they married?

L: They were married in August 19, 1900.

K: How soon after did you and your brothers come along?

L: Well, my one brother, Warren E., was born in 1901, my second brother, Edward R., was born in 1904, and I was born in 1908.

K: What was school like?

L: Where we went to school? It was lovely. I went to school on Warren Avenue. It was modern; we had eight grades. They were building the high school which is on Chestnut Street now. Where I am living, here, that was the high school. It was called the Old Central High School. Then this was torn down to build these apartments for the senior citizens.

K: Was one through eight in the same room or in different rooms?

L: We had different rooms. We had first grade, second grade, third grade, fourth grade, and we had floors. The first floor was the first four grades and the second floor was the next four grades, fifth, sixth, seventh, and eighth grades. We were then transferred to Niles High School for the ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth grades. My one brother graduated in 1920 and the other one graduated in 1922. They played football for Niles High.

K: How did the football team do?

L: They did good. In 1920 they had the most victorious football team of the year and even the coach took them, the whole 1920 team, home to his hometown and they beat his hometown players. Then my brothers went on to Miami and they played on the football team down there, the Big Reds.

K: What was high school like?

L: High school was grand, oh it was lovely. Of course, I took the classical course and we had history and English, and science, and we had sewing and cooking. It was really lovely.

K: How were the dances? Did you have dances?

L: Oh yes, we had all kinds of activities. We had basketball and football.

K: What kind of outfit did you wear to school?

L: Being the only girl, my mother made all my clothes. I had outfits. In the morning she would cut out a dress and try it on me at noon. Of course, we walked to school; we walked home for dinner. We would come back to school. I think that our school took up at 9 o'clock and we got out about 3:30 in the afternoon. As I was saying about my mother making my clothes, she would cut out the dress in the morning, and I would leave, and at noon mother would try it on me, and it would be ready to wear the same day mother made it.

K: What did you do for entertainment or fun?

L: Entertainment, we had great entertainment. Milton Lake was developed in my time. We would go out there to picnics and dances. You know it was great entertainment to have a cottage. We would go out for the weekend just to have a lot of fun.

K: Did you work when you were in high school?

L: No.

K: When was your first job?

L: My first job was after I graduated from high school in 1926. Then I was a beauty operator. My father wanted me to be home, so I went to Warren and I enrolled in Marinella Beauty School. I work for three years before I went into nursing school. The reason I went into the University Nursing School in Cincinnati, Ohio, was my father died and my brothers decided to keep my mother and me together. They didn't want us to give up our home so they had my mother come down and she had an apartment in Cincinnati and my brothers were in medical school. They stayed with my mother and I had to stay in the hospital. My second brother graduated in June 1930, and I graduated in June of 1932. I came home in July and my mom wasn't well. She said to me, "I have been to the doctor today and he said I have cancer." I said, "Where," and she said, "here" on her tongue. I couldn't believe it. I was offered a job in Cincinnati when I graduated, but I wanted to be close to home. Cook County, Cincinnati, and Cleveland are about the same so my director of nurses asked me if I would like to go to Cleveland and then I would be close to my mother. I was to be there September 1. I came home in July. I thought I would stay with my mother. When she told me she had cancer I couldn't believe it. I said, "Do you want to go to Cleveland or do you want to go down to Cincinnati," where my brothers were. She said,

"We better go where your brothers are." We went down; I drove her down. I told my brothers what Dr. Thomas in Warren told her. My mother was only 49 years old. She was born July 8th and this was just around her birthday. My brothers said, "We don't believe it," and I said, "I don't either." Jewish Hospital is a great hospital there and it is right across from General Hospital.

My brothers went to the best doctors and Dr. Igular was one of the best eye, ear, nose, and throat surgeons. He just looked at my mother and he set up an operation immediately. Here it was in her throat and he said it had been coming on for eight years. There was no history of cancer in her family and my grandmother and grandfather lived to a ripe old age. My grandma died about 86 and my grandpa was about 86. My mom lived from July to February, but she was never bedfast; she was up the day she died on February 14, 1934.

K: There wasn't anything in that time frame that they could have done?

L: My brothers were doctors; they did the best they could for her. Dr. Igular operated. They didn't let any of us in the operating room. I think they removed part of the tongue, and then they told us to do the best we could for her. I kept my home open on Park Avenue and my brothers said they would keep their homes open in Cincinnati. My one brother was in Melford, Ohio. He had taken over a doctor's practice down there and he was very successful. We did that, but in the meantime in August, I married my first boyfriend.

K: From high school?

L: No, from Braceville. There is quite a history in back of him too. He was from Newton Falls. They wrote about Newton Falls. They had the history of Newton Falls about its salt. I meant to get that out for you about how precious salts were, and how they went to Cleveland to get the salt. Donnely loaned his oxen to go up and bring the salt back. On the way back they broke down and the Indians took after them. It was very interesting. I was trying to find that for you. I married him; we were married for 34 years. He then got cancer. He came home from work; he worked for McKay Machine in Youngstown. He came home and he didn't feel well. I took him to the hospital and they thought he had infectious hepatitis. He was only 61 years old. Dr. Miller and Dr. Westbrook operated and the doctor told me he knew the cause but he didn't have the cure. They operated on my husband February 1, 1967, and he died on July 3, 1967. I have been alone ever since.

K: Where did you move to when you got married?

L: I stayed in my same home, never moved, never left home.

K: What was Niles like?

L: Niles, at that time, we had the Republic Steel, we had Barrel Works, and we had Stanley Manufacturing. Niles never grew. They never had a hospital. The merchants had fashions, but they weren't the high fashions. You usually went to Warren or Youngstown if you wanted to buy a car. There were a lot of dealers in Niles, but Warren seemed to have the better dealerships. When you bought a car, they would probably give you the best deal. As far as working, you know we had the WPA /Works Progress Administration/, remember, through the Depression. Then sugar was scarce, coffee was scarce, and meat; you would do anything to get meat. I worked at the Ravenna Arsenal.

K: Tell me a little bit about the Ravenna Arsenal.

L: The Ravenna Arsenal was run by the government and by the Atlas Powder Company from Tamaqua, Pennsylvania. I worked for the Atlas Powder Company. I was a nurse out there. There were about 58 nurses, and there were 10 or 12 doctors. I just don't know how many they employed, but I worked turns. I was with the same people all the time. I worked out there three and a half years. It was very dangerous. I started on the detonator line, which was very dangerous. The ambulance was stationed at my dispensary. We had our own dispensaries, but we did have the main hospital. They were very, very strict. I worked with all women. They were searched for matches. You know women smoke today, they hadn't years ago. You didn't think of a women smoking, but women do smoke today. It seems to be that you can go so long without smoking and then you get the urge to smoke. With these girls, they had to change from street clothes to uniforms. It was very dangerous work. It was just clockwork, you were just like a machine. I had to give those ladies a Vitamin C pill every day because of the lack of sunshine; they didn't get the sunshine and their hair turned orange.

K: From the Vitamin C?

L: No, from the powder.

K: From the powder?

L: Yes. I had to take their blood pressure every month. They took very good care of their people. It was very interesting work.

K: What road did you travel to get there and how long did it take you?

L: I took three other people with me, I traveled from Niles to Newton Falls and then I went out of Newton Falls on a little short street which is Route 5 today. Or I could come out Route 5 to Warren and from Warren to Niles. It was shorter for me to go out of Niles, out through Lordstown, into Newton Falls, and then up to the Ravenna Arsenal.

K: In those times there was gas rationing?

L: Yes, and that's the reason I got the gas because I was a nurse and I would take three other people with me. I would take an hour in the morning to pick them up and an hour in the evening to take them home.

K: What time did you get home?

L: Well, we worked our shifts. We worked from 7 a.m. to 3 p.m., 3 p.m. to 11 p.m., and 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. It just depended. The snow was bad, and we were there in all kinds of weather. I don't think that I missed a day of work. Our wages weren't too high, but we were frozen in our jobs. I left Warren Trumbull Memorial Hospital and the director of nurses wasn't very happy with me because I left. Then when Ravenna Hospital closed, the nurses that had been at Trumbull Memorial were not given their jobs back. I went to work at Green Cross Hospital; that was an osteopathic hospital. My brothers weren't very happy with me either, working in an osteopathic. They said the medical people taught you what you know and we want you to work for medical people. I went to work for the Republic Steel Company in Warren.

K: As their nurse?

L: Yes, as their nurse. We worked the three shifts up there too. We worked around the clock. I have had an interesting life working.

K: Tell me a little bit about what Niles is like during a special holiday, Christmas would be a good one.

L: Yes, Niles is always decorated. They always had the homes decorated and the carol singers would always come around. The churches, you always went to church on Christmas Eve.

K: What were Depression Christmas' like?

- L: Of course, after my mother died, she left me everything. She left me the home where the Niles Post Office is. After my father died in 1929 the government came along and wanted that property. My father had invested in a home and property there where the Niles Post Office is now. My mother sold that in 1930. That's what helped finish my education and my brothers' education. Then what was left my mother left to me and she left me the home. I worked and my husband did a little work, but it wasn't steady work. My husband worked at the Newton Falls Mill and it was transferred to Monroe, Michigan, so then he just did little odd jobs. He had five sisters and a brother. They lived around Newton Falls, so my Christmases were sort of happy Christmases. We exchanged presents and all that. I was never deprived.
- K: I have a particular interest, I was very involved with fashion, what was the fashion?
- L: High fashion, we had muffs and hats to match our furs. The fashions were very elegant, I'll say. Our clothes were trimmed with fur; we had beautiful buttons, and we had buckles; and our clothes were long; our dresses were long.
- K: What did typical nurses wear to work?
- L: We had to send our uniforms to the laundry. You didn't wear pant suits; you didn't wear slacks.
- K: They were long skirts then?
- L: The laundry did our uniforms, they were professional uniforms. You always felt that you were well groomed. You always wore your cap, white shoes, and your pin because you worked hard for that. You sort of stood out. In the hospital you stood out and people admired you and they respected you.
- K: Was there ever a male nurse at that time?
- L: No. You could always get a job. Like with me, my brothers told me, they said if you graduated from the University of Cincinnati, you could go anywhere and get a job, and I did.
- K: Would you say that the University of Cincinnati was the place to go for medicine for this area?
- L: Yes. When you say you graduated from a school of nursing or a university of nursing, Cook County in Cleveland, John Hopkins, they were really well represented. We never had any trouble getting any work.

LANE

K: Tell me about the early romance of your marriage in Niles. Was there any particular place that you used to go?

L: Well . . .

K: How did you meet?

L: My early romance was my neighbor across the street from me. He was a coal dealer, Charles Raub. He had mules and my father shod his mules when they went up in the country to Graceville to this beautiful farm, they even had a sugar bush on it. There were two boys and five girls. Evelyn Raub was my best girlfriend, and her mother was a Lane. Her brother was Perry Lane. They had this beautiful farm up in Graceville. She asked me to go with her to visit her aunt and uncle so I did. This one little boy stood out. He was John Lane. I was about ten years old, and he was probably about thirteen. He looked at me and I looked at him, and he said, "Do you want to go down to the river and fish?" I didn't know anything about fishing. I had lived in the city all my life. I went down to the creek. He loved to fish. When he would come down to visit his aunt and uncle he would always come over to see me. Then when I went away to nursing school, he went to Hiram College. His father died so he had to work. He went to Ohio State then, but he never graduated. He was a draftsman. After I had graduated from nursing school, when I was home with my mother, he had come down to visit his aunt. She was very sick. His aunt said, "Helen's home," and he came over to see Helen, and the next thing you know, he asked me to marry him.

K: How soon after was it that he asked you to marry him?

L: This was in July and we were married in August 21, 1933. He was 28 and I was 25.

K: What was your wedding like?

L: It wasn't much of a wedding because my mother was dying, but I wanted my mother to know that I was married before she died. It was a very quiet wedding. My mother just worshiped my husband. He is buried beside her.

K: Are they buried in Niles?

L: No, Oakwook Cemetery in Warren.

K: What kind of things during the Depression did you do for fun?

L: I worked, I worked in the hospital.

K: Was there time for pleasure, or was there too much worry about . . .

L: Well, I had all this property on Park Avenue, and my husband was interested in a nursery. There was a greenhouse up on the corner, Evans' Green House. There was a man that came down from Gates Mills, that is a suburb out of Cleveland. He had this gorgeous nursery. His name was Mr. Mastrangelo. He took a liking to my husband. We had an acre of ground in the city. He said he couldn't give his shrubs and flowers to people around Gates Mill because that wasn't good for business, but it was good for business to give them to us. He said if we would take what he would give us, we could have it for free. We had a car and we rented a trailer and we went up to his nursery. It is still in existence up there in Gates Mills today. When we ended up we had \$2,400 worth of shrubs. We had every kind of shrub and flower you could think of. We have a magnolia that is still out there and blooms every year. Through him giving us them he got business in Warren and Niles. They would come to our home. That is what my husband and I did. We planted it all; we would go up there and dig it, and we would come home and plant it. We ended up with \$2,400 worth of shrubs. It was beautiful. We had the best looking lawn. We worked on that and that's how we put in our time. It was a great pleasure. In the spring our bulbs would bloom, our daffodils, hyacinths, tulips, lilacs, magnolias, and flowering crab apple trees. We even had the Washington, flowering, cherry trees like they have in Washington D.C. and Dogwoods; we had everything. This man gave it to us because he said we brought him business.

K: You would consider that your hobby and pleasure?

L: Yes, in gardening.

K: What was a daily routine of cleaning the house, what did you do?

L: We did everything, we papered, we cleaned, and remodeled. We put in a brick front; we put on aluminum siding; we put in a new bath, storm windows, and we put on a patio. It was a pleasure to do and improve our surroundings. We were home people. Helen and John Lane loved our home. We went to Canada fishing, and Florida. We went down to Orlando, Florida. We lived there for two winters, 1950 and 1951. I worked in Orlando, Florida. I worked with Heart and Alcohol. I worked, my husband fished.

We had every kind of a motor you could think of; we had a riding mower, and we had a boat. We had miniature fruit trees, apples, dwarf, they called them. We had dwarf cherry, peach and apple; we had everything. It was our pleasure just to go out in our yard.

K: After you worked at the Arsenal, going back to that, you worked at Green Cross?

L: I worked at Green Cross, and they called me to Copperweld Steel. I worked at Copperweld Steel with Mr. Holmquest. Then when I was at Copperweld some of my friends that were out at the Ravenna Arsenal contacted me about Republic Steel. They said, "Why don't you come down to Republic Steel?" It was closer to home, it was only three miles from my home out to Republic Steel. I used to go up on Warren Avenue. I worked under Mr. Frank Flynn; he was a wonderful supervisor. We didn't have too many accidents.

K: How many years did you work at Republic Steel?

L: For three years, and then I was a visiting nurse in Warren.

K: What kind of experience was that?

L: That was an experience to go out in the homes and help people, with doctor's orders of course. You go into the homes and help them and teach them how to do for people. We didn't have nursing homes then. You helped your own people.

K: What year did you start visiting nurses?

L: Visiting nurses, I worked as a visiting nurse in 1957.

K: What did you find changed in people during the Depression through your visiting nurse program?

L: We didn't have as much sickness as we have today. Our sickness was limited. It was more emergency, it wasn't chronic complainers.

K: People didn't get violently ill?

L: No they didn't cater to their pains and aches like today; arthritis, heart, back; everybody had a back condition, or they have a pain here that goes away and they get another pain.

K: Do you think it has changed because of the life style people live today as opposed to . . .

- L: I think with Medicare people say, "Well, I pay for this," and they want to get the benefit.
- K: Where as then they didn't have it?
- L: They didn't have it, no. You had to pay for your own medicines. Medicines have really gone sky high.
- K: What things did you do for people then, say with cancer, as a nurse?
- L: With cancer the main thing is keeping the patient comfortable, having beautiful surroundings.
- K: There was more emphasis upon helping the mental state than the physical state that was deteriorating?
- L: Yes, because there is no cure. Dr. Miller told me with my husband, "I know the cause, but I don't have the cure." I asked him if my husband would have to have another operation, and he said no. He said to take him home and do the best you can for him. I took him to the hospital at ten o'clock in the morning and he was passed away at nine o'clock that night on July 3rd.
- K: What happened to your brothers during this?
- L: My brothers are very, very successful. One of them is located in Melford, Ohio. He took his patients to Christ Hospital in Cincinnati. He was very well known. He was this old-fashioned type of doctor; he would go to your home. He was on the staff on Christ Hospital in Cincinnati, Ohio. He died at the age of 54. He worked very, very hard. His daughter left for John Hopkins Nursing School. He was sort of wishing that she would stay in Cincinnati, but she preferred to go to John Hopkins. She left and the next day he was found dead in his bed.
- K: And your other brother?
- L: My other brother, he was very successful and he was in Dayton, Ohio. He was an eye doctor. He was one of six doctors of the world that did eyes. He had his own eye bank. His son has taken over his work in Dayton. He had his office across from Miami Valley Hospital. My brother came home in 1972 for his 50th Alumni of Niles High. He had come from Russia. He lectured in every country. He had just come home from Russia, but he wanted to come back to Niles, Ohio, for his 50th Alumni. He came back in October. Thanksgiving Day he had his family home; there were fifteen of them. The following Sunday he died of a heart attack in 1972; he was 68. He was very successful.

K: So both of your brother were . . .

L: They were very successful. They were football players and they said probably it was a heart condition that they both developed from strenuous sports. They just loved outdoor sports.

K: How were they thought of by the people back home?

L: They were thought of as very successful. We had some of the schoolteachers here go to my brother in Dayton for their eyes. They were very well known. They worked hard, they wanted to be a success. My father did not want them going into the mill; he wanted them to be doctors. Each one of them had nine years in school. They did what their father asked of them, and I did what my mother asked of me.

K: Was that more common then, to do as your parents asked of you?

L: Yes. Your parents wanted you to do what they asked you to do.

K: What happened to some of your friends, what were their professions?

L: Well . . .

K: What happened to your best friend?

L: My best friend got married and had children and had a family. They didn't work; women didn't work then.

K: So you were almost somewhat of an oddity being a nurse or because you had a job?

L: Yes, you were expected to work because you had a profession. They thought that you should work. Women get married and are homemakers. That's a profession.

K: Yes it is.

L: I had to work and I had to keep my home. I had to pay my taxes and my utilities. I had to have transportation. You had to help.

K: In the 1950's, what had changed about Niles? For instance, when was the memorial built?

L: That was built in the 1920s.

K: Do you remember there being any dedication for it?

L: Yes. We had the library in the memorial when I was in high school, that was our library. We were very proud to think that we had something of President McKinley. We were very proud of our Niles. I didn't know any other place but Niles. I thought people all lived the same. You went to church, you had a car, you had good food, and you had a comfortable home.

K: The family unit was much more important than the social?

L: Yes. We were more family. They had the Masons; they had organizations. My father was an odd fellow, Mother Rebecca. Business people are in those organizations and they meet people. That's how business got about.

K: Was there always in Niles a pride about McKinley?

L: Yes, we like to claim him; he was born here. He is buried in Canton.

K: What was it like to be here during World War II? Did you know many people that went to war?

L: No, because I didn't have any children. My work was always the hospital. All I ever knew was sickness, taking care of the sick. I wasn't close. My brother had a son who was at Northwestern College. He was in the service, but as far as . . .

K: You did have a tie with a soldier then?

L: Yes.

K: How did Niles react to peace finally at the end of the war, was it a special . . .

L: Yes. To see our boys come back . . . There wasn't too much to offer them though. When they came back they had a scholarship to go to school. If they accepted it, it was a benefit for them.

K: Did many people come home and go straight to work in Republic Steel or Copperweld?

L: Yes, they went to Packard or they went into an industry.

K: What has Niles been like in the last twenty years? Is there a transition of change with the closing down of the plants?

- L: They have moved out of Niles out into the plazas. Of course Eastwood Mall is claimed by Niles. Downtown Niles is not the same. There is not that communication between people. Years ago when you would come down to Niles, you would meet people; you would go into the stores and you would greet people. It's not like that today; people do not know you.
- K: Do you think that the downtown structure of town is deteriorating?
- L: Very much. They have taken our hotel down and they have taken our stores out.
- K: There is not much left in downtown Niles as opposed to there was a great common.
- L: Yes. There is no future in Niles. We're senior citizens now. They've looked on us as the old folks. We have no transportation, we don't need it. They took the buses away from us and we only have two food stores to walk to. We had four banks to put out money in, which we don't have.
- K: Would you consider Niles an old town?
- L: Yes. The Mahoning River has always been in Niles. The railroads, we had Pennsylvania, Erie, and the B&O. Niles was really a settlement of Indians. Indians were here. We had salt springs over here; we had the mineral salt.
- K: In it being an old town does it have a place in 1983?
- L: At first it was the steel mills which had started Niles. Now that the steel mills are out of Niles people just can't pay their taxes anymore.
- K: Do you foresee a chance that Niles will come back or the whole Youngstown-Warren area, since it's all kind of together? I mean has it come back from great desperation before?
- L: No.
- K: It has never been tested.

END OF INTERVIEW