

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Democratic Party

Trumbull County

O. H. 280

WALTER PESTRAK

Interviewed

by

Mark Dittmer

on

May 2, 1977

## WALTER PESTRAK

Walter Pestrak, a County Commissioner, has been an active participant in local Trumbull County politics for more than thirty years. The John Pestrak family came to Warren, Ohio in 1930 from Monessen, Pennsylvania, a small coal mining town in Western Pennsylvania.

Pestrak's first taste of politics occurred while he was still a student at Warren Harding High School. He knocked on doors campaigning for Walter Lynn, who was running for mayor of Warren in 1934. Pestrak had a high interest in government while in high school.

After high school Pestrak went on to the electrical welding business and became a welding engineer. He learned his trade with on-the-job experience and also took a correspondence course with the ICS School of Electrical Engineering.

Pestrak's contributions to the welding industry have been many. Much of the original development work done on blitz cans, hydraulic landing gears, shells, shovels, ammunition containers, and invasion pipe couplings was done by Walter. He has assisted many companies throughout the United States in welding methods and in increasing production on their welding lines. Pestrak has published a book on Practical Resistance Welding. Many excellent comments have been heard from other manufacturers on the contributions the book will make to the industry as a whole. He has also taught a course in Practical Resistance Welding to the

employees of The Federal Machine and Welder Company and has won recognition by the State Department of Education for a job well done.

Pesttrak's first active role as a candidate came in 1947 when he ran for a councilman position in the third ward, Warren. He campaigned so hard for Harold Smith, the candidate running for Warren City Mayor, who had won the post, that Pesttrak lost his own campaign.

In 1948, under Harold Smith, Pesttrak took the position as Service and Safety Director in Warren. After two years, Pesttrak went back into the welding business, then returned in 1959 to run for Warren City Mayor and was successful. He served only one term.

In 1964, Pesttrak became Trumbull County's first County Administrator serving for five years. In 1972 Pesttrak ran for County Commissioner and is presently serving his second term in that post. Pesttrak holds high esteem in the area of city administration having recognition in Who's Who in Ohio - 1960 and Who's Who in U.S. Government - 1975.

Walter and his wife, Dolores, reside in Warren and are the parents of four sons, Walter Pesttrak, Jr., John, Thomas, and James, all of whom have left the Warren area to pursue perspective careers.

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INTERVIEWEE: WALTER PESTRAK

INTERVIEWER: Mark Dittmer

SUBJECT: Trumbull County Democratic Party, County  
Commissioner

DATE: May 2, 1977

D: This is an interview with Walter Pestrak for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program. Today's interview is located in Warren, Ohio, on May 2, 1977 at 4:00 p.m. The topic discussed will be on the history of the Democratic Party of Trumbull County by Mark Dittmer.

Mr. Pestrak, can you please give me a description of your political background and tell me what motivated you to proceed into the field of politics?

P: Well, let's start at the beginning. I've always been interested in government since I was a young man. My first initial taste of politics was in 1930 as a student at Warren Harding High School. I knocked on doors for a local candidate, Wally Lynn, who became mayor. Then in 1932, I campaigned for Roy Hardman for Sheriff and worked a precinct in the city of Girard on election day. It wasn't until 1947 that I became a candidate for office.

My first venture was to run for Third Ward Council in the city of Warren. I was influenced there by Clarence Hipple of the Warren Fire Department who thought that Warren City Council needed a change and I might be a welcome change for it. I came to Warren when I was ten years old from a coal mining and steel town, Monessen, Pennsylvania.

D: What year was this?

P: In 1924. And I went to First Street and McKinley Grade School, Central Junior High, and graduated from Warren G. Harding High School in January, 1932, in the heart of the Depression. My initial ambition was to be an architect and the Depression prevented that, so I went into the electrical welding field as an apprentice in 1936 and went to night school, attended and had some university training, and studied electrical engineering at home for three years through the mail from ICS School of Electrical Engineering, where I received a diploma in electrical engineering.

I had on-the-job training along with it because I worked for several graduate electrical engineers so that I was able to enlarge my education in that way, even though it was the hard way to do it.

In time I became a senior welding engineer at Federal Machine & Welder Co., local plants, and during the war I did liaison work between the welding industry and the Air Force, the Army, the Navy ordnance divisions on all types of weapons, tanks and planes.

So in 1947, after the war, I ran for city council in the third ward, which is predominantly Republican, and being a Democrat, I didn't have much show; but in the process of running for council, I became acquainted with Harold E. Smith, who was running for mayor. I spent more time as campaign manager for Harold Smith for mayor than I did for Walter Pestrak for Council. As a result, he won the election and I lost for council by 200 votes.

He requested that I become part of his administration, so in 1948, I accepted a position of Public Service and Safety Director for the city of Warren. That began my thirty-year service in local Democratic politics. In 1947, I also ran for Democrat precinct committeeman in my precinct, which was then 3-G. It later became 2-C. I've been a precinct committeeman now going into my thirty first year.

That made me a member of the Democrat Central Committee of Trumbull County. I also became a member of the Executive Committee, which I served for twenty-five years. I served as first vice-chairman of the party for ten years.

D: Could you give a summary of your years in service as commissioner?

P: Before I do that, Mark, maybe I should indicate that I served as director for two terms and went back in the

business because I had four sons that required my attention and I needed more income so they could go to college. All four are college graduates and successful.

I ran for mayor in 1959, was successful, and became Warren's mayor. I was one of five or six Democratic mayors in the last hundred years. There are not too many of them. I left the mayor's office in 1962 and went back to the welder business as a welding consultant. I came back in 1964 as the first Trumbull County Administrator. I served for five years, then left in 1969, and went back into the welder business. I was requested in 1972 to run for Trumbull County Commissioner by labor groups and Democrats. I was successful then and ran for reelection in 1976. And here I am on my second term.

D: What are the ups and downs of being a commissioner?  
Can you give me a summary of a typical day in office?

P: A typical day in office . . . There are no typical days, Mark, because if it rains heavily somewhere then most of our calls are problems with overabundance of water and no place to drain it. If it's dry, then we have other problems, dust. A typical day here usually starts out in the morning and somebody's looking for a job. One of our key problems in Trumbull County is that we have a high rate of unemployment. We're geared to a steel-automobile economy which fluctuates up and down. We have probably eight or nine percent of the work force unemployed.

There is a tendency that people feel if they get laid off in industry, they can always get a political job, which is not so because political jobs anymore have advanced from the casual labor classification into skilled and trained jobs. We have calls on welfare, people sometimes feel they do not get adequate welfare, over which we have no control, it's state managed. They come in and complain about the fact that they either can't get enough welfare or they don't get it in time.

Besides the complaints, we have a mountain of paper work to take care of, bills to approve daily. We have all types of communications from various divisions in the county, either requesting more money or requesting purchases of certain equipment requiring advertising for bids. The commissioners control the purse strings for all county operations, courts included.

A follow-up on our recent water-sewer projects involves a lot of paper work especially with only Federal monies involved. We're involved in all types of contracts so

that it's very hectic on many days.

I started in 1964 as the first county administrator when the commissioners only had to meet four times a year. The law was changed later and we meet every week now, minimum requirement fifty times a year, so that being a commissioner is now big business. Trumbull County is a billion and a quarter dollar corporation and it takes a lot of work and a lot of attendance to do your job properly.

D: Can you mention especially the ups and downs?

P: Ups and downs? Oh, I don't know. What do you mean by ups and downs?

D: What you like about being a commissioner and what you dislike?

P: Being a commissioner involves three of us, so sometimes it becomes russian roulette. As the mayor, I made the single decision; either I made a wrong decision or a right decision. Decisions here are made by two or three commissioners, so that as a minority commissioner and being a Democrat with two Republican colleagues I am at a disadvantage. My philosophy may vary from their philosophy. I know it does because I espouse the Democratic philosophy and they espouse the Republican. On certain matters we disagree and I have to vote no, that would be the "downs". For the most part though, we get along.

D: I'd like to ask you to give an analysis of your main political philosophies and how you put them into practice.

P: I think you first determine when you're a young man what your philosophy is and then later it has to fit into one of the major parties if you intend to participate in our process. Since I came from a coal mine area, the steel town of Monessen, Pennsylvania, and since my dad was an immigrant, I'm a first generation native of the United States.

D: Who was your father?

P: My father was John Pestrak, and he was a steelworker. He came from Austria, Hungary. In 1906, he came to the steel town and coal mines of Pennsylvania. So, my political philosophy was molded at a young age because my dad, being a steelworker, naturally was a strong union man and the Democratic Party has always supported strong unions, so I naturally followed this philosophy

But even more so than that, I developed a feeling that even though I was a professional engineer and didn't

always agree with people I worked with and for. It was my philosophy that people are more important than material things. I've always felt I was a liberal progressive. In the case of social change, we must have change for the social betterment of all the people constantly. I find that the Democratic Party, in my lifetime, from say 1932 to the present, is in the forefront for change, and always, I think, for the better.

D: What are your tactics for running the campaign during certain elections? You must have a mode by now?

P: Well, my strategy always has been that you have to sell yourself. Politics is a selling business, as you know. Lately they do selling jobs on TV and radio and magazines. Back in the 1930's, when I started in politics, selling was a door-to-door effort. You usually start out and, if you're running for third ward council as I was, you canvass the six precincts and try to meet the voters door-to-door, indicate who you were and let them take a look at you, and attempt to persuade them that you have the background, the experience, and the desire that could move the city ahead.

As time went on, the pattern changed. It was no longer what you did door-to-door, it became a radio method of campaigning. Back in the 1960's and 1970's we used the radio extensively by radio political ads, indicating that as a party we had more to offer than the opposition. We usually ran on a platform, a local platform, spelled it out indicating what we thought we would do if we were elected as a team. So we ran as a team. In other words, you ran as a group of candidates pledged to one platform for the betterment of the city of Warren. When I ran for mayor, I gathered around me the council candidates and indicated to them what my platform was and tried to get them to work around the platform. If we had any differences, we worked them out so that we had one common purpose.

When I ran for commissioner, I ran on a basis that I had the background as the county administrator, and I had the experience as mayor, and the education that I thought that I could run this as a business, as a corporation. I went to the people of Trumbull County and indicated that I thought I had more experience, more background, more knowledge than the commissioner that was here; and apparently, I convinced the people because I was elected in 1972 and reelected in 1976 by wide margins.

D: Okay. Switching to the party itself, when do you think the Trumbull Democratic Party was at its peak of existence,



and who were some of the individuals and events that made this high point possible?

P: I would say, Mark, that we are at the peak now. We control every office but two in the whole county. Of the five cities, I think we have all the mayors but one city. As far as peaks go, I can remember when I started in the 1930's that the Democrats were a mere handful. Even your grandfather, Harry Dittmer, the Democrat County Engineer, back thirty years ago, had a rough time convincing people to run on a Democrat ticket. As time went on, we became more Democrat; that was a normal procedure because Warren initially was a conservative town. As the local owners of industry and business died off--they were normally Republicans--we had an influx of steelworkers and autoworkers who are Democrats by tradition.

As far as the Trumbull County Democrat Party, we're at our peak now. We have all the judges in the courthouse. We do not control the commissioner's office, nor the coroner's office, or the county engineer's, but we control every other office. I'd say right now, we're peaking.

D: Having speculated on the highest point, when do you believe the Democratic Party was at it's lowest ebb?

P: Oh, I would say back in the 1960's we had a low spot where the Republicans were able to move in and pick up some county offices and some cities, but the trend normally in American politics is that people will let Republicans in there so long, and then they vote for changes going to the Democrats and vice versa.

Americans very seldom vote for candidates. They are usually anti-voters and usually say, "Well, let's throw the rascals out." I think indications are, from the national ticket to the local ticket, that people will vote for names and if they recognize names and they think that the party is doing a good job, then they'll maintain them in office. We've had low spots back in the 1940's, I'd say right after World War II. During the war people didn't pay too much attention to voting; therefore, there were no changes.

When the GI's came back in the late 1940's and began to run for public office, I think the veterans supported the veteran candidates and that began to change the picture.

D: Now speaking of the internal structure of the party, what is the significance of the precinct committeeman in

Trumbull County?

P: Well, I think that's the key to a good party organization where the member of the central committee will take care of the three or four streets that are involved in their precinct, and know his voters, and canvass it for the unregistered voters, and cooperate with the executive committee. The executive committee is made up of many districts. Several precincts are under a particular executive committee member, or the at-large executive committee members, of course, handle the complete county areas.

But the precinct committeeman is really the key to an election success. If they know their voters, if they'll canvass their precincts, if they'll get the message across, then inevitably you're going to carry the precincts.

I would say of the 285 precincts, the Democrats now prevail in probably 230 or 240 of them because we have a strong central committee organization, where the opposition party has failed to, in fifty of sixty committee posts, select a committeeman. We fill within ten of ours every two years when there are contests for central committees. There's no pay, there is some prestige. The heart of the Democrat Party is a tight organization from the grass roots.

D: Let's say a person wanted to run for a position in the county, and he wasn't well liked by the central committee, what would be his chances of being picked in a primary?

P: Very good, normally, the party does not interfere in a primary. We do not endorse. We have not endorsed; therefore, even if you are unpopular with the party per se, there wouldn't be any organized effort against you because the Democrat Party of Trumbull County does not endorse in primaries.

The Democrat Party in Mahoning County does endorse and pick candidates in a primary. We do not to this point. Depending on the amount of effort you wanted to put out, I would say you had as good a chance as anybody.

D: Where is the strength of the executive committee, or is there a strength?

P: No, I think the executive committee is important in that it's a liaison between the chairman and the secretary in spelling out the policy of the party in executive

session, but the executive committee members really not the grass roots. The central committee is the grass roots of our party.

D: At this present time, if you were ordained as the head of the Democratic Party or chairman, what type of platform would you run and what changes would you like to see come about?

P: Well, that's kind of a hard question. The Democratic chairman in Ohio in each county does not have the strength or the power that he used to have because officeholders today are more or less responsible for their personnel, and it's getting more professional. Most people either are college graduates or trained for their position or are classified or certified employees in civil service, so the political influence is downplayed.

I would only say that if I were chairman, I don't know whether I'd do things any differently or not. To maintain a strong organization, I would say that you have frequent meetings with the officeholders to see that we're all in accordance with what we're trying to achieve. I don't see where there's any panacea for saying that if I were chairman, I'd do this or that differently. I don't see where the chairman makes that much difference.

D: What future do you see for the Trumbull County Democratic Party?

P: Well, I'd like to see us take the rest of the offices. I think it has a bright future, because we're attracting, according to my information, more young people into our party in Trumbull County than the opposition is attracting to theirs. I think the younger generation is more liberal, more progressive, more social conscious; therefore, they're attracted more to our party because of, well, President Carter and John Glenn. We have some outstanding younger senators and people in office that do attract the younger generation.

I think our future is very bright. I think the opposition party is having problems because the conservative element of the Republican Party, of course, does control the party. I think they've had a revolt in their party. A lot of the opposition party voted Democrat in the last election. They had to or things might have been different.

D: If there was a decade in the twentieth century that you could see that had a vital change in the area of politics, what decade would you specifically pick out? This is on the national scene. Why would it be important to you

as far as the change in a mode or a change in style of politics?

P: The Democrat Party did an about-shift in my opinion in 1932 with Franklin Delano Roosevelt. That's when the Democratic Party became the people's party, the populace party. When F.D.R. came into office, we were probably at the lowest ebb this country has ever been in. F.D.R., being the astute politician he was and having the people around him, understood that, and he knew that unless he made some drastic changes--and there were some benefits for the farmer and the man that worked in the mills and the unemployed--the system wouldn't survive.

I would say from the 1930's to the 1940's was the turn-around in the Democratic Party. We became the party of change for social good, social change. That's when Social Security became an effort on behalf of those who retire. The banks were folding and the FDIC [Federal Deposit Insurance Corporation] became a law. The three C's [Civilian Conservation Corps] came into being to help young men of the 1930's.

I think that from 1930 to 1940, from 1932 to the World War, 1941, World War II, this was the effort that changed the party around and we became a party of the people. Prior to that, I think that we did not make the impact as evidenced by the fact that Coolidge, Harding, and Hoover were elected presidents; therefore, Democratic leadership was not attune with the people.

D: Political scientists today have come to believe that there's very little difference between the Democratic Party and the Republican Party on the national scale, and that this mode of the two being very similar will eventually cause a splitting or an external device of having the two eventually merge and then one splitting off into a tangent. What future do you see for the Democratic Party as a whole and where do you think the Republican Party will branch off to?

P: I can't see the Democratic Party splitting. The conservative Democrats in our party do not have the influence they once had. I think the committee structure is changing in the Senate and in the House, and the old guard is dying off and the young breed is coming in, forty or fifty new congressmen and senators; and I think they're tuned more in to social change.

I think the Republican Party has a problem in that they have a liberal element in their party that is at odds with the conservative wing of the party. Ronald Reagan

versus Paul McClosky, for instance. I think they may have a split. It may be that some day instead of the Democrat and Republican Party, we may wind up with a conservative and liberal party; and that the Republicans who are liberal will find their way into the Democrat Party and the Democrats who are conservative will find their way into the conservative party.

But I don't see in my lifetime that the Democrat Party is in any serious problem of splitting up. The president from Georgia indicates that political winds are shifting, and that people no longer follow geographic areas, and that their philosophy is more important than where you came from.

D: Speaking of Jimmy Carter now, where do you think Jimmy Carter is going to go as the new president, and why does Jimmy Carter have a good press?

P: I think Jimmy Carter found out the first thing he had to do was to sell Jimmy Carter. He wound up with a good press because he had good PR men. If you recall in the primary, people said, "Jimmy, who?" Jimmy Carter had to start out and sell the people the idea that Jimmy Carter was a serious candidate and that he had some ideas and they were different, and that he wanted a new approach to old problems, and the people bought it. I'd say he had a tremendous PR organization. I would say in running for president, that that's probably 75 percent of the battle, it's the image you create. I think he's still creating images.

I do say this, though, that I think he's seriously attempting to take a new approach to old problems. It's encouraging to see that he has the courage to do the things that his predecessor didn't. I have great confidence that in the four years he is there he will make some changes. At this point I don't think Jimmy Carter is worrying about whether he's going to get reelected again, which most politicians worry about when they first get elected. They worry about the second term. I think he's going to do what has to be done. He has to turn this country around. If he can't turn it around in four years, then I don't think he will be interested in being a candidate just for being a candidate's sake.

D: Well, these are all the questions I have up to now. Is there anything that I haven't mentioned that you would like to discuss?

P: No. I'm very happy to see that Youngstown State University

and you, Mark Dittmer, are interested in not only local politics, but national politics. I think the generation to come will decide which direction this country will move. I know the system works. I'm very happy that it did work during the Watergate episode. It proved that you could stretch it to its ultimate and it still held together. It's the best system man ever devised. There isn't a thing wrong with it except that our people sometimes get lax. When 39 or 40 percent of the people make an effort to vote, that's a very sad commentary because then special interest groups could control situations in this country that may not be for the best interest.

I always admire anybody that gets into the political arena. You have to have a thick skin, and it takes a lot of your time, but government is very important. I think it is an honorable profession. I think it has been degraded to some extent by certain people, but you can't say that politics is rotten and all politicians are thieves because if you say that, then you're saying that the system that was set forth two hundred years ago by some brilliant men, young men at that, the oldest probably was Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, and Thomas Paine . . .

I feel that it's a worthy profession and I think that young people should think about serving in public life. I think it's the most important thing you can do, is to serve your government.

- D: One last question, talking about Watergate, a lot of people have speculated that Watergate was a low point for American politics, but essentially do you see anything good that came out of Watergate?
- P: I see a lot of good that came out of it. As I indicated, the system has not been tested since Andrew Johnson was impeached and it withstood it in 1876 and it withstood it again in the 1970's. The good that came out of it was that party lines were forgotten in Congress by the impeachment committee. You had Republicans and Democrats who had to search their souls and who had to put their politics aside and decide that the future of our country was at stake.

A lot of good came out of it because it was a cleansing process, and maybe that's what we needed to indicate that even the President of the United States has to answer to somebody. I think that was good. It's unfortunate that it happened, but I think it pointed out to the world that here we are, a free society, and in the highest office in our land, the man there has to answer to the

people. I think that was the good that came out of it.

The sad parts that came out of it were that a lot of people and their families were affected adversely, and you have to feel sorry for them. But ours is a government of checks and balances, and where you have the legislative, the judicial, and the executive branches one checks the other, and it works.

END OF INTERVIEW