

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Warren Government Project

Government Experience

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WALTER PESTRAK

Interviewed

by

James Manross

on

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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: WALTER PESTRAK
INTERVIEWER: James Manross
SUBJECT: Warren government, Duties as Action Mayor
DATE: November 10, 1975

M: This is James Manross for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Warren Government. The date is November 10, 1975, and we are interviewing former Mayor Walter Pestrak of Warren, Ohio. Mr. Pestrak was mayor of Warren in 1960 and 1961.

Mr. Pestrak, could you give us a brief biographical sketch of your family's history?

P: Jim, I came to Warren in 1924 at age ten from Monessen, Pennsylvania, which is a coal mine-steel town in Western Pennsylvania. I have lived in Warren since 1924, this being my fiftieth year here.

M: What were your ambitions and goals when you were in school?

P: As strange as it may seem Jim, when I was a youngster and walked through Warren many times, especially where it concerned railroad crossings and facilities downtown, I used to wonder if, when I grew up and became old enough to vote, I could become mayor and could make changes in Warren. Ultimately, the dream came through many years later, in 1959.

M: What did you do after you graduated from high school?

P: Jim, I came out of school in 1932 from Warren G. Harding High School in January 1932, which were the Depression years. I had saved enough money to go to college, the University of Chicago, to study architecture, but in

view of the Depression I had to forego that to help my family. So, I went back to post-graduate work at Warren Harding High School and took night courses for many years to try to keep up my education since I couldn't go to college. I took an electrical engineering course, a home study course in 1936. I spent approximately 1,200 hours on that and got a degree from ICS and if anybody tells you it's soft going home study, don't let them kid you. That's tough because there's no one to assist you. You have to dig it out of the books. I took several other electronic courses. I became a welding engineer at Federal Machine and Welder in 1937. I was in and out of that business for 25 years with government service mixed up in between.

M: From my research, I gathered you had quite a successful term as Warren Safety Director from 1948 through 1950. What were some of your accomplishments during that?

P: Well, in 1948, 1949, and 1950, I was able to come up with Warren's overall master plan. I was a close personal friend of the late Congressman Michael Kirwan from Youngstown. He took a fancy to me for some reason or other. We did the first master plan study in Ohio for a city. The study has never been used, but among the first, the Warren outerbelt was begun in 1948 and 1949. In 1950, the downtown South Street relocation of the railroad tracks and the urban renewal projects, and housing were all put down first in a plan.

I think the biggest thing I can be proud of is that I negotiated a fifty year contract with the U.S. Corps of Engineers for a Warren water supply from Mosquito Reservoir for the City of Warren for sixteen million gallons per day. We signed a fifty year contract which is good until 1998. I think if I could point to one accomplishment, that would be the biggest.

M: I know in my research when you were mayor, I found things out about the South Street tracks and urban renewal program, but I had no idea they originally started then. I thought it started during your mayoral administration. After you were City Safety Director and before you were mayor, what did you do?

P: Jim, I went back into the welder business and became a welding consultant for several companies in Detroit and handled three states in this area. As a welder consultant, I was involved in all types of welder equipment as it related to steel mill operation. That would be companies like J&L [Jones & Laughlin] through Wean Engineering, Aetna Standard, US Steel, Allegheny Ludlum Corporation, Republic Steel, et cetera.

M: What prompted you to become mayor or decide to run for mayor in 1959?

P: Well, I had served as City Safety Director and there was a span from when I left in 1951 until 1959 that I felt that I still had some better ideas and the mayor had been there eight years. Politically speaking, I thought it was the right time to run for mayor.

I was on the Planning Commission, I was on the Fireman's Pension Board, and I was still active. I was Trumbull County Vice-Chairman of the Democratic Party and I felt the time was right.

M: Was former Mayor Burbank your opponent in 1959?

P: Yes, he was. He had been the first four-term mayor in Warren's history. They claimed he was unbeatable. But, we did put together a good organization. I hit the doors because that's how you win elections.

M: What was your margin of victory?

P: It was about 750.

M: Upon entering office in January 1960, you stated your many goals. You mentioned a program of progress, would you consider that a success?

P: I would consider it a partial success, Jim. Usually when you get into office it takes you six months to recover and catch up with what the former administration had been trying to do and you either undo it or come up with your new programs. So, it takes you about six months to get in the harness. Then, by the time that you plan your program, you've run out of time and you're running again. The terms now are four years, which are much better for mayor. They were two year terms. But, we did start the program of progress and started the beginning of the master plan. We did build some housing units. I got five million dollars HUD money for the first elderly housing, which is located in Warren. We did begin the South Street Project and the Northwest Bridge Project, which were part of my projects. The plans were made, but unfortunately I didn't get elected to a second term. The fellow that followed me took credit for a lot of work that we had started.

M: From my research, didn't you also get the Route 422 widening started, too?

- P: Yes, our plan was, Jim, to run a wheel outer belt around Warren. But, prior to that was to take care of the spokes. The spokes would be all of the major thoroughfares in the city that connected to the outer belt line. The idea was that if the state routes were permitted to remain there, we could get a 90/10 percent allocation from the state. In other words, all we needed was 10 percent of the money. So, 422 was shifted. We had intended then to widen Parkman Road and Elm Road, but unfortunately they're not widened yet.
- M: Was there something about East Market Street, too?
- P: Yes, I finished East Market Street widening which was begun many years previous to that. We did move Route 422 from East Market Street to South Street to make it eligible for federal aid and state aid.
- M: You called for strict law enforcement and the eradication of vice and gambling to make Warren a clean city. Would you consider this a success?
- P: I think so. I think that we were able to eradicate most of the crime and any of the gambling that was prevalent throughout the many years. Back in the late 1940's it was a lot more of a problem than it was in the 1960's.
- M: Why weren't you in favor of Champion's annexation unless water was supplied to the residents? From what I read, city council thought the other way. They wouldn't give Champion water unless they agreed to annexation?
- P: Well Jim, as you will note now, Champion has water. I did push for Champion water because I felt that we should be in the water business, the City of Warren. In other words, we had embarked on a forty year program of plant development and expansion. I had initially offered Champion water by coming down Routes 305 and 45 and they had turned it down. Then, many years later, the people realized they made a mistake. I feel Warren should now be in the water business. In other words, it's a commodity to sell and it can make a profit. My last official act as mayor was to sign legislation providing a master water meter for Champion.
- M: In 1960, there was a lot of controversy on the Warren Charter and what I read about I, frankly, couldn't understand. Could you say something about that?

P: Well, it was very simple. I got involved in the Warren Charter fight, because the Charter Commission had come to the city council one evening with one copy of the charter and decided that they were going to change the government of Warren overnight. It wasn't so much that I was opposed to possibly the type of charter they were coming forth with, I was opposed to the method they used.

They came in one evening with one copy to Warren City Council and said, "Here's your copy of the charter, and we want it passed immediately, tonight." They wanted council, in two ordinances, to come up with \$5,000 and turn it over to the Warren Charter Commission. Also, they wanted several other things in there that I thought were illegal, so I vetoed the ordinances. And they mandamus'd me to the Supreme Court of Ohio, where I defeated the Warren Charter Commission. The Supreme Court ruled that the mayor had the right to veto any portion of an ordinance that entailed money. They wanted to eliminate the two to four weeks advertising to less than two weeks, which is illegal.

M: From my research, I gather you initiated plans for the multi-million dollar sewage treatment project. Was this correct and was this anything to do with what you and Mr. Kirwan did when you were city safety director?

P: Partially, Jim. We had received an edict from the Ohio Water Development Authority which at that time was the forerunner for the EPA [Environmental Protection Agency]. They had indicated to the City of Warren that we must clean up the river. I had started back in the late 1940's the plans for the Warren interceptors and for the sewage plant. When I left in 1951, Mayor Burbank came in and successfully completed the plant but not the interceptors. We finished the job in 1960.

M: In 1960, there were some bad feelings between you and the Tribune over the widening of South Street. What instigated this and why were they so adamantly opposed to it?

P: Well, they were opposed to it for what I always considered selfish and political reasons. What I wanted to do, Jim, was to widen the South Street on the north side and then negotiate the track removal which was on the south side. In the meantime, we would have had a three lane highway which would have been better than a narrow street. They objected vehemently because we were about

to tear down one of their concrete block buildings; therefore, they started a campaign of photographs and editorials against it. But if you walk down to South Street you will see that exactly the way I wanted to do it is exactly the way it was done. The road was widened and the tracks were removed to the south. I think most of it was they didn't want a Democrat to take credit for it, because they talked about it for fifty years, but I was the one fellow who was the prime mover of it. Democrats get very little credit in the Warren Tribune.

M: I've noticed that. My father and I also can remember what a bottleneck 422 and South Street was before this.

Police Chief English complained during your administration that he needed more men and cars. From what I gathered, you were able to do this. How was this accomplished?

P: Well, I think the way it was accomplished was you set your priorities, Jim, when you go into office and you have X amount of dollars. We were able to, by prudent operation, affect some savings in other divisions and make sure that the police protection, law enforcement, and traffic safety were first.

One of the things which I instituted that they don't use anymore, which I still feel is good in the summer months, is I had a six man motorcycle patrol for traffic control. It's a lot easier and a lot cheaper to control traffic if you have six motorcycle policemen in the daylight hours than if you run two men in the cruiser. I think this is an expensive way to control traffic. In 1948 a record for minimum fatalities was established, one fatality.

M: You had a conflict with the council over the construction of the sewer. You wanted to pay it now and the council wanted a pay-as-you-go plan which, from what I read, you said it would take like twenty years or something like that. Is this correct and is this why you were against this?

P: No, I don't think that had much to do with it. The Ohio Water Development Authority was going to fine us \$500 a day until we completed the project; therefore, council was arguing pay-as-you-go. But they would have been in trouble if they had gone with that method. I

think it is easier if you do your project, come out with your mortgage revenue bonds, and set your interest rates, which are at the lower rates of years ago. If they would have been going pay-as-you-go now, they would be into high interest rates today. I still think I went the proper way. It was just not my idea; I consulted with Squires, Sanders, and Dempsey, our bond counsel in Cleveland, Ohio, and Havens and Emerson of Cleveland, Ohio, the consulting engineers. I felt they knew more about it than the ordinary laymen or councilman.

M: It was financed by the selling of bonds. Now, I'm a little vague on that. Could you explain that a little?

P: Well, Jim, let's assume that was a fifteen million dollar project, so what you do is borrow on a note. You put a mortgage against the City of Warren and you borrow the money. When you complete the project, you assess the people. You find out if the project was fifteen million dollars and you have X amount of people then you can set your sewer rates based on your water consumption. Then at home you'll get a bill every three months for water. If you look on your water bill, you'll see a sewage bill cost which I think is 90 percent of your water bill. So over a period of years, it was set up so money could be generated and in so many years that the debt could be paid off. It's like putting a mortgage on your house and paying the interest and the principle every month.

M: In 1961, why did council keep passing measures to advertise for the bids and get the contracts and then they never gave you authority to order the contracts and finance the project?

P: Well, Jim, as you know, right after that some of those councilmen went to jail. So, you draw your own conclusion. What the director and I wanted to do was based on the engineers' (Havens & Emerson) recommendations. The engineer got a half of a million dollars for designing the job and for advising us. Every time we would get bids and they would advise us, council would restrict us from awarding the contracts. So, you draw your own conclusions. As I said, some of them went to jail.

M: From what I read, it seemed like council was acting very irrational on everything. I can imagine you got very frustrated by this.

P: I was very frustrated. I was very upset that that thing broke about two weeks before the election, because it never gave me a chance to tell the people. Usually the public tars everybody with the same stick. I had

no involvement in that scandal. From the beginning I warned the prosecutors office and other people that there were some things going on they should look in to, but nobody was interested until it blew up in their faces.

M: Was Warren's sewage going into the Mahoning River at that time?

P: Yes, yes it was. It was not being processed. It is now being processed, I would say, 90 percent of it step one process and then it is returned to the river. I think under the EPA edict Warren has to go into step two, which means it'll be between 95 percent and 98 percent treated. Then, a third step would be to add phosphates and make it 100 percent pure water.

M: Did the robberies by a couple of members of the Warren Police Department at that time affect your ability to administrate and affect your relations with the police department?

P: Jim, I think you'll find that happened one year previous to my coming in in 1959. I think it had a lot of effect on the election due to the fact that the mayor was in trouble because there were not stern measures taken at that time. I don't know whether you recall this, Jim, but there was a Chief of Police removed by me in 1950. I might have had the second chief if I'd have stayed there two more years.

M: The Monzo Corporation and the head of it, who was later indicted, said that their bid was the lowest bid. Is this true, and if it is, why was it turned down?

P: No, it is not true. It was about \$50 thousand higher. Let me back up. He was the low bidder, but Havens & Emerson, due to the fact that the contractor had a lot of difficulty in Niles on a project and the fact that somebody was killed or injured on their job, indicated that they felt that he wasn't qualified to do that job. They wrote a letter, which is still on file, advising the Board of Control, which is the director, and the mayor, to award it to the second low bidder feeling that in the long run it would be a lot better than the actual low bidder. But previous to that, Jim, we had had bids even better than that but council refused to accept because of the stipulation that all we could do was advertise and they awarded the contract, more hanky-panky.

- M: Which they didn't do. Why was it that city council on numerous issues, besides the ones like we've been talking about, reject something and then were confronted with the disaster and the removal of services? They changed their vote only when confronted with a crisis. That seems very irrational to me.
- P: One of their problems with local government, Jim, is that usually the people elected to council are part-time councilmen and work in an industry plant. At that time there was nothing against anybody who works in a plant or shop, but here you are as the mayor or director and you spend anywhere from 60 to 80 hours a week at your job following up and familiarizing yourself. And council is part-time, a normal councilman comes in every two weeks and picks up his legislation. If he's subject to any pressure from any groups either in his ward or city-wide, then he looks at it from a political standpoint as to how it affects his reelection and not whether it's good or bad for the citizens.
- M: In September, as we've talked about, three councilmen, especially Councilman Little, were indicted and convicted of soliciting money for extortion purposes from the companies to construct the sewer system. You mentioned before, I think, that you had an inkling of what was going on, is this true?
- P: No, I did not have an inkling of what was going on in that particular case. When I first came into office, I was advised by other people that seven of the councilmen that were in there had been playing this game for eight years previously. I did go to the prosecutor on several occasions and to the Warren paper. Jim Griffin was the head of the union and I indicated to him that since three or four of them belonged to his union, I thought that he should call them in to try and put a stop to whatever they were doing, which he did. But they kept on doing it until the scandal broke and they were in trouble.
- M: When I read the newspaper, again, these three councilmen attempted to solicit money from two contracts for both companies, Monzo and Ferrar, I could not understand how they would intend to vote for one or the other when they were soliciting money from both. How could they please one and please both of them?
- P: Well, I'm sorry I couldn't answer that, because I wasn't privy or party to that, thank God. I don't know what they had in mind, but whatever it was it was wrong.

- M: Why did city council keep voting against the South Street Bridge? If I'm correct in what I gathered, you said the city only had to pay for something like fifteen percent of it?
- P: We could have built that bridge for \$15 thousand. You answered your own question up a few paragraphs before. They wouldn't vote for anything that I wanted to push for obvious reasons.
- M: Would you consider all of the bad publicity of the sewer scandal and everything as why you were defeated in the election?
- P: No doubt about it. The thing broke on October 15th and the election was in November. I never had a chance. People were stirred up about it. Regardless of what you said they wouldn't believe you. One of the reasons I ran for County Commissioner was to vindicate my term as mayor, if that's the word, since I didn't do anything. I was not involved, but I wanted to run to show that I could win an election.
- M: Summarize your two years in office. What would you consider your main accomplishments?
- P: Well, I would say the beginning of the master plan which included the removal of tracks and South Street widening, the resurfacing of Market Street, the beginning of the outer belt line, the engineering on it, urban renewal, and the high rise apartments for the elderly, which was my project; I did get five million or six million for that. I'd say in the span of two years that my administration did a lot more than some previous ones that have followed the administration. We were progressive. Had I had a decent council of men that were interested, this town could have been something great. I might indicate also, there was a downtown mall plan across from the courthouse which involved thirty-four stores way before Eastwood Mall. Council turned a deaf ear to me and so did the Chamber of Commerce and local press. That was the beginning of the end of the City of Warren's downtown.
- M: Despite the bad things that happened, would you say you're satisfied with your administration? I mean would you do it again?
- P: I don't know if I would run for mayor again now, but no, I wasn't satisfied with my administration. I was very unhappy, because I had to fight council all the way on what I thought were good projects. They turned

down \$50 or \$60 million worth of federal aid from the Kennedy administration.

I did have some advantages being a charter member of the John F. Kennedy for President Club. I was successful in bringing him here in 1960 where we had the largest crowd ever that turned out in Warren, 65 thousand people. After the election, President Kennedy promised me if he won and I needed some help for Warren I should contact him or Bob Kennedy, Attorney General, which I did. Through Congressman Michael Kirwan, I was able to get grants allocated to Warren, but city council fought every project. As a result of that, Warren fell by the wayside.

M: What have you been doing in political life since then?

P: Since then, since I was mayor, I left and went back into the welder consultant business. Then in 1964, I was appointed the first County Administrator for Trumbull County. I served there until 1969. Then, I resigned and went back into the welder consultant business. Somehow or other I had a challenge to run for County Commissioner. While a lot of people said I couldn't win, because President Nixon had a landslide going, I was able to unseat a one-term Republican, Lamar Young, which I consider a major feat, especially when I beat him by 3,100 votes.

M: What does the future hold for you? Do you intend to run again?

P: Well, I haven't decided that yet, Jim. I have some alternatives. I don't know whether I want to stay in the pressure cooker any longer or not. I've had thirty years in and out of public life. I've held four top jobs in the city and county plus countless other appointments. I don't know whether I'll run again or not. I haven't decided yet. I did run again in 1976, and won by 22,400 plurality, the largest ever for a commissioner.

M: Okay, thank you Mr. Pesttrak.

The city council scandal occurred when three councilmen were indicted for attempting to solicit money from contracting companies building the sewer system. It involved the head of the Democratic Party in Warren, Frank Cickell, Chairman of the Party, and a man from Niles, Paul LaMonge. LaMonge threatened to kill both the heads of the companies if they were not awarded the

contract and if the contracting company, Ferrar, from Detroit, would not give them \$200 thousand. The company would not do this. Then fearing for their lives they stopped work and left town. This started the whole process of indictments of the three councilmen, the Democratic Party chairman, and Paul LaMonge, and one other whose name I do not know.

END OF INTERVIEW