

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Smoky Hollow Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 400

GALE MILLS

Interviewed

by

Annette Mills

on

June 3, 1976

GALE WENDELL MILLS

Gale Wendell Mills was born on December 6, 1923, in Freewater, Oregon. His parents are Edward (deceased) and Elizabeth Mills. After his birth, Gale moved to Vancouver, Washington, with his family and lived there until 1968 when he moved to Youngstown with his wife Annette and daughter Cecile. Gale married his wife, Annette, on March 19, 1946. Gale spent six years in the Naval Air Corps during World War II.

After his discharge from the service, Mr. Mills spent twenty years with the Vancouver Police Department. Since his arrival in Youngstown, he has been with Youngstown State University, in the Security Department. Gale is a graduate of Y.S.U. He is also a part-time instructor in Sociology.

Mr. Mills' association with Smoky Hollow stems from his marriage to Annette, the former Annette Lefoer, a native of the Hollow.

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INTERVIEWEE: GALE MILLS

INTERVIEWER: Annette Mills

SUBJECT: Culture of Smoky Hollow, Boundaries, Way of
life, Italian heritage

DATE: June 3, 1976

AM: This is an interview with Mr. Gale Mills for the Oral History Program on the Smoky Hollow Project. The interviewer is Annette Mills and it is being conducted at 2164 South Schenley Avenue, on June 3, 1976, at 7:45 p.m.

Mr. Mills, would you like to begin please?

GM: Yes, thank you. I first came to Smoky Hollow in 1947. As you know, I married a girl that lived on Adams Street, Annette Lefoer, who later became Annette Mills. We lived on the coast for two years and that was at the tail end of World War II. We came back for a visit in late April, May, and part of June. As an outsider I think I have kind of an unique opportunity to see Smoky Hollow at probably its halcyon day, right at the peak of what Smoky Hollow was.

I would like first to describe the geographical location of it. Smoky Hollow, at least my interpretations of its dimensions and boundaries, is approximately 70 to 75 acres in size and is in a dished out area. To me, the boundaries were Walnut Street with the big, stone wall with these massive stones mounted and mortared in place. Each stone would weigh a ton or more. In places the wall is seven or eight feet high. This certainly made at least a barrier on one side. Andrews Avenue, I think, is generally accepted as the other extreme, and the freeway on one end.

Talking to Charlie Young, a police officer from Youngstown Police Department, I discovered that originally the city of Youngstown had an Irish influence. If you look at the names of the streets in Smoky Hollow: Adams, Watt, Valley, Emerald, Wade, Spring, Harrison, Harrison Field, they are all Irish names. This suggests that possibly the Irish moved in first as immigrants and later gave way to the Italians.

When I was there in 1947 and several times after that, it was predominantly Italian. I recall very narrow streets built during the horse and buggy days. An average street would be 20', 24' in width; several of these brick streets are still in excellent condition despite the neglect that has transpired in Smoky Hollow since then. They're still in excellent shape. Today, two cars passing each other have an extremely difficult time on some of the extra narrow streets.

When I first came to Smoky Hollow one of the first things that impressed me was the deepness of the place. I remember walking with my brother-in-law, who was just a young fellow at the time, and as we walked down the street I noticed these Italian women working. I don't remember what day of the week it was, but they were scrubbing the steps going up to the house. Those boards, many of them bare, were almost bleached white. I asked my brother-in-law what the idea was. He said that once a week, a lot of them twice or more a week, would scrub their steps. It was just a matter of cleanliness. The women would be talking to each other across the street or maybe at an adjoining house. I noticed one Italian lady's voice sounded different than the other Italian women. I asked what it was. As I recall, this was a different walk. I don't recall who was with me, but he stated that this woman was Sicilian. It had kind of an oriental sound to it and that's kind of surprising, I think, in an Italian. Be that as it may, walking down the street the houses were all very close to the street and the sidewalk. It was down in the hollow that I first heard the expression, 'devil strip'. Coming from the west coast it was always called the parking strip. It was the parking strip because the horses would be anchored and they were allowed to graze on the grass that was on the parking strip. The interpretation of the devil's strip I never got an answer for, but the name just kind of stayed with me. As I say, the houses were very close to the street, and just walking you could smell cooking food, spice, and always spaghetti sauce. The yards were so clean and almost without exception some place those

people would be growing little gardens, some quite large gardens. I was tremendously impressed with the gardens themselves. The soil in the hollow and most of Ohio, I believe, is kind of a yellowish color. If you look at that soil it is rich, almost ebony black. I couldn't help but wonder about the tremendous numbers of hours that were involved of men down on their hands and knees, women on their hands and knees, planting gardens and tending that soil.

Youngstown State University has bought up numerous properties in the hollow. Eventually, it will all become university property. One of the big caterpillars they were using for grading the soil for what is now Bliss Hall was sloping some of the lower levels of Smoky Hollow. In so doing this big caterpillar with big, broad, metal treads got into one of the garden plots, I believe, on Wade Street. It got into that rich, black soil and quietly settled up to the top of the tread. They had to get other tractors to pull it out. I stood there and I watched that tractor spinning its threads and churning in this rich, black soil.

Again, the years of love that went in to that ground, to me it speaks quite highly of the Irish and certainly the Italians. When I was there first I had the opportunity to see them planting, to see the first green shoots coming up.

While I'm still speaking of gardens I would like to talk about my father-in-law's garden. Dominic Lefoer, who lived at 314 Adams Street, had a slightly larger lot than some of the other homes in the hollow. I would like to mention here, too, that most of the lots were thirty and forty feet in width, possibly one hundred feet deep, not much more than that. My father-in-law had a garden, certainly comparable to the best that grew there in the hollow. The first time that I visited there I noticed the garden and how rich the soil was. He planned very carefully what he was going to place in his garden.

Also in the backyard alongside the garden was the brick oven, the outside oven. This one happened to be broke, but many of the neighbors there in the Hollow would take at least one day out of the week to bake bread. It wasn't uncommon to see a neighbor that didn't have an oven come in with a number two galvanized washtub full of bread dough. These ovens, some of them were built square and some had the rounded top, like a Roman arch. They would build a fire inside of the little

kilnlike structure. When the bricks were hot then they would scrape out the fire and on flat boards put the mounds of bread dough, shove it into the oven, and block up the front. Almost by magic those loaves would come out golden brown and swollen up beautifully. On a given day, I believe Wednesday was one of the days, they would bake, the whole neighborhood would smell of fresh bread.

Speaking of the bread makes me think of possibly the best day in the Hollow, that was Sunday. My wife came from a large family of eleven children. The oldest ones were married and with their offspring it would make for quite a large gathering, but they came to visit. It was almost tradition that everybody came home for Sunday dinner at mom's and pop's after mass. My mother-in-law would place two, big stacks of dishes at the end of the table. She would work most of Saturday into Saturday night and early Sunday morning getting the dinner ready. The family was so large that she had two stoves; both of them were filled with food. Despite the fact that thirty or forty people would be in and eat, stay a little, some would take off, she would ask why hasn't someone been there or where is somebody, if they hadn't shown up. She would get on the telephone and find out if they were sick. By late Sunday afternoon just about all of the food would be gone, but it was an all-day process starting from 10:30, 11:00 until maybe 3:00 or 4:00 in the afternoon; it was one continuous meal. I couldn't believe that all of those people fit into that little house, eating, laughing, exchanging views.

Probably one of the outstanding features of Smoky Hollow was that sense of family that we all had. Almost everyone knew everybody else by first name, by last name, and by what they did. Most of them came from working class families and certainly the homes were a long way from being modern or new. Most of the homes, I would imagine, were built pretty close to the turn of the century. They were typical, working-class homes, yet there was this friendship that existed, this knowledge. It crossed ethnic boundaries. I recall seeing one or two colored families in the Hollow. There were the blonde, blue-eyed people, what nationality I don't know; I would imagine Polish, German, Irish. They were, at that time at least, in a minority. Essentially, the Hollow during the 1940's and 1950's, was Italian.

In the fall of the year you would see groups of men walking towards town. They would go down to a railroad siding that was right in town and there would be a string of boxcars that were full of grapes. The men

would place their orders and later pick up numerous boxes of grapes to take home and make into wine. That was when I became acquainted with Nick's wine cellar. There was one Italian there that I knew of who had a small, thriving, neighborhood business of selling homemade wine by the glass or by the bottle. He had the big kegs in the basement, tables and chairs down there, and a miniature bar. Wine was the only product. Nick kept it spotlessly clean down there. A big water tumbler full of wine would cost a quarter. I don't know if the man was ever arrested. Wine was pretty much a way of life; everybody drank down there in moderation.

The Hollow itself was a community all by itself. They had ready access to town and yet surprisingly there were numerous, small, family businesses that operated in the Hollow and had been there apparently for a good number of years: Small grocery stores, neighborhood bars. Most of them were obviously converted from house fronts into store fronts. Going into one of those places you could get the necessities that you needed; most of them handled Italian items that the Italian families would trade in. It seemed that people in the Hollow would trade there in preference to going to supermarkets downtown because it meant leaving the Hollow. You have to get his big, overall feeling that these people had of community pride. A modern day politician in the Youngstown area almost had a stamp of approval if he can say that his roots are in the Hollow. They boast of it. I can understand that. If you go to the main entrance of Smoky Hollow where the memorial is at and read those names, that feeling of pride and dignity that went with those people is part of Smoky Hollow. The Hollow turned out fine, prosperous businessmen, numerous professionals; it even turned out first grade hoodlums. They had that one thing in common, however, each one, professional, businessman, hoodlum, they boasted of belonging to the Hollow.

Right in the center of the Hollow was probably the meeting place of several generations, a playground called Harrison Field. It really wasn't too much, just a big, open field with a couple of sheds and some simple things to play with. Essentially it was a place where teens could choose up sides and play ball games, whatever was in season. There was a joy to walk through the area and see those dark-haired, bright-eyed, beautiful children playing ball, laughing, enjoying themselves, enjoying growing up. I can readily understand, again, how those people had a pride in the Hollow. It turned out fine ball players, fine athletes. If an athlete came out of the Hollow it was their own, he belonged.

As the years went by the foreign-born moved into the area. It was a place to get anchored, a place close to the mills, a place within easy walking distance, bus distance. They bought their little homes; they raised their families, and the older generation started dying off. Kind of a sad thing happened, the second generation and a few of the third generation stayed in the Hollow, but for the major part they all left. By leaving and dying off the first Italian settlers created kind of a vacuum for other ethnic groups. Since 1950, Smoky Hollow seemed to go downhill. They still meet; they have organizations that represent the old-timers from Smoky Hollow, but the properties are neglected now, many of them. As you walk down through Smoky Hollow today, in 1976, you can almost point out the old, old-timers that are still there because their houses are still neat, their gardens are still growing and tended. With very few exceptions those outstanding homes that still remain are the old-timers. A few of the newcomers did take care of their homes and do take care of them. By and large it's becoming more of a ghetto type of an area. It's really quite sad. It seems like the end of an era, an end of pride and a ghetto taking its place.

Mrs. Mills, I think that's about it.

AM: Thank you very much

END OF INTERVIEW