

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Democratic Party of Trumbull County

Political Experience

O. H. 403

MITCHELL SHAKER

Interviewed

by

Mark Dittmer

on

April 29, 1977

MITCHELL F. SHAKER

Mitchell F. Shaker, the past secretary and treasurer of the Democratic Party of Trumbull County for over 22 years, is an extremely important individual for the rise and success of the Democratic Party in Trumbull County for the past 26 years.

A native of Niles, Ohio, Shaker went to Niles McKinley High School and proceeded to college at John Carroll University. After graduation and during the height of World War II in 1943, Shaker served time in the U.S. Navy in the South Pacific. After the war, Shaker proceeded into the field of law and graduated from Case Western Reserve Law School in 1948.

After completion of law school Shaker set up a practice in Niles, Ohio as sole practitioner and remained there until 1983. At present he is the Administrative Judge of the Trumbull County Court of Common Pleas. With the law profession not extremely lucrative at the time in 1948, Shaker decided to listen to other candidates' opinions in the area. He ran in 1949 for city solicitor in Niles and had served off and on for some twenty years in that office.

In 1951 Shaker was elected a Democratic precinct committeeman for his ward and precinct in Niles. In 1960 Shaker was elected secretary of the party and worked effectively with Chairman Dr. William J. Timmins Jr. Shaker has made his office of almost equal importance to that of the chairman. For a short time Shaker served as Vice-Chairman of the Democratic Party and also as Chairman back in 1961 while waiting to replace the

resigned chairman Frank Cickelli. He had been in charge of running Democratic slates on the local, state and national scene.

In 1983 Governor Richard F. Celeste appointed Shaker to the Trumbull County Common Pleas bench. In 1984 he was elected to a six year term without opposition. That same year he became Administrative Judge of the Court.

Shaker resides in Niles, Ohio with his wife Mary K. Shaker. He is the father of eight children.

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INTERVIEWEE: MITCHELL SHAKER

INTERVIEWER: Mark Dittmer

SUBJECT: Political background, Political philosophies,  
Youth vote, Future of Democratic Party locally  
and nationally

DATE: April 29, 1977

D: This is an interview with Mitchell Shaker for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program. Today's interview is located in Niles, Ohio on April 29, 1977, at 3:45 p.m. The topic discussed will be on the history of the Democratic Party of Trumbull County.

First, Mr. Shaker, I would like to ask you to give a description of your family and political background and relate what has motivated you to go into politics.

S: I'm married and have been for over thirty-one years. I have eight children: Four daughters and four sons, the oldest of which is thirty-one and the youngest fourteen. I have lived all of my life in Niles, except for several years in the service when I was in the United States Navy and served in the south Pacific during World War II. Upon completing law school in 1948 and passing the bar, I opened my office here in Niles right in this building, the Niles Bank Building, and have been here ever since. I practice law as a sole practitioner and never associated in practice with anyone.

I started in politics in 1949; I was approached by the Democratic candidates at the time. They wanted a young man to run for city solicitor. Of course, in those days practicing law wasn't that lucrative because I just got out of law school several months ago. After discussing the matter with my parents--even though I was married, I still lived at home with my wife and a couple of children at that time--I decided to file as a candidate in the Democratic primary for city solicitor. I was elected after

the primary in the general election and had served on and off in the solicitor's office for some twenty plus years here in Niles.

Motivation for joining the Democratic Party was that of the two parties at the time, the Democratic Party represented by far the great majority of the thinking of the people. I still feel the same today. Having an ethnic background I felt that any future in politics as far as I was concerned would be more favorable with the Democratic Party rather than the Republican Party. The entrance into politics and my activity in politics has, of course, been very instrumental in assisting in my law practice and, of course, meeting a great number of people through the political campaigns and meetings that I have attended through the years. Naturally, people hear you talk and see how you run meetings and run campaigns and all. There have been a great number of clients that have resulted from that. That, of course, is not the primary reason I'm in politics; the primary reason, of course, is because I like it and it's fascinating. I like controversy. I was always active in debate in high school, through college, law school, and so on.

Since filing for the office of solicitor back in 1949, I have from 1951 up to the present date, been a precinct committeeman. I would say that started about 1952. Successively every two years thereafter I have been elected as the Democratic precinct committeeman in my precinct, which is on Hogarth Avenue, now known as ward 2, precinct B.

In the early part of my political life I was first vice-chairman of Trumbull County Democratic Party and served a short term as chairman. The chairman at the time resigned and I took over the office.

Since 1960 I have served as the executive secretary of the Trumbull County Democratic Party consecutively up to the present time and still hold that office. The office of secretary of the Democratic Party in Trumbull County is of almost equal importance as the chairman of the party, who is Dr. William J. Timmins Jr., and with whom I have had an association politically since 1960. We work together on all things and make our decisions jointly. Each one of us, before making any kind of a decision that affects the Trumbull County Democratic Party, makes sure that the other party agrees. As a secretary of the party I have several times run the campaign for the local, state, and national candidates. This past election I was a co-chairman for Jimmy Carter in this county for the Carter campaign committee. In addition,

due to the illness of Dr. Timmins, I ran the campaign of the local Trumbull County Democratic candidates. We were very successful; we won every contested race with the exception of one commissioner race. We now, in 1977, for the first time in the history of Trumbull County, have all Democratic judges sitting on the bench down at the courthouse. That is a complete reversal of the early 1950's when the opposite situation was in effect.

D: Mr. Shaker, your being in the legal profession, can you comment on the judicial system in Trumbull County and how it relates to the Democratic Party of Trumbull County?

S: The judges, of course, are separate and apart from the party itself. The only participations that the judges have in the functions of the Democratic Party is an occasional appearance at dinners or rallies or meetings as guests, or if they are candidates as participants in the election. Other than that the judges are fairly independent of the party. With the exception of the domestic relations court, the only employees that a judge has are a bailiff and a court reporter, and the party does not in any way get involved in their selection. However, we do recommend to the domestic relations court--which also covers juvenile--qualified people in some of the branches where it is not necessary that they have special legal training for employment.

D: When do you think that the Trumbull County Democratic Party was at its peak? Do you recall some of the individuals that made that peak possible?

S: I think the Trumbull County Democratic Party is probably at its peak right now. You would expect me to say that, of course. The reason why I say that is exactly what I've explained to you earlier. As I stated, in the early 1950's, at that time, we had on the bench, I think, one Democratic judge. For many years thereafter we had one, and maybe two. Now all six are Democratic. The only fly in the ointment as far as the Democratic Party is concerned, the only exception that doesn't make it one hundred percent effective, is that we do not have the majority of the Trumbull County Commissioners. I feel the reason for that is of course the candidates that have filed have not had that much appeal with the public. In the past election the presidential candidate carried Trumbull County with sixty-five percent of the vote, which is far and above a landslide. All of our state officials representing this county are Democratic: Three state representatives and a state senator. As I say, outside of the county commissioner's office it is one hundred percent effective.

The second reason I say it is at its peak is the total registration in Trumbull County; between sixty and seventy percent are registered Democrats. The Republican Party has about eighteen percent registration and the rest are independents. It's pretty much an accepted theory that most of your independents are Democrats. The Republican Party now, in this county, in my judgment, is probably at its lowest ebb.

D: Having accounted for its high point, could you speculate on its lowest ebb?

S: The Democratic Party's lowest ebb was long before I became involved in politics in the days of Hoover and when he was elected, which would be back in the 1930's. Since that time, gradually the party has increased. It had a little bit of a setback a couple of years with a former county chairman whose name I won't mention and some officials in the Warren area; they were involved in a political scandal. From that time on, which would be just around the 1960's when Dr. Timmins and I assumed the offices we now hold, there has been a gradual increase in the effectiveness of the party and of course in the percentage of people who register and who now vote the Democratic ticket. To further bring that out, this year you have city municipal elections in all of the cities. There are a very small number of Republicans running. For example, in the city of Niles only two Republicans are running. There are probably twenty-five Democrats. All of the offices but two in Niles are uncontested as far as Democrats are concerned. Whoever wins the primary as a Democrat will win. The same thing in Warren, Hubbard, and Girard. McDonald has no Republicans running. It is pretty much the story now in Trumbull county if you win the primary and have a halfway decent candidate in the Democratic Party, the election is over. The general election is fairly automatic.

D: This question pertains to the youth of Trumbull County. Where is the youth?

S: The last several years there has been a lot of activity on the part of the youth not in the off election period of time, but during election time. For example, the Carter campaign, there was a very strong display of youth activity: telephoning, pamphleting, canvassing, registration; just a general everyday electioneering process was covered very well by the youth. When Governor Gilligan ran the first time for governor there was strong youth activity. Dick Celeste has attracted a lot of activity among the youth the last election a little over three years ago; he ran for lieutenant governor. I think that the youth become active when you get to the national and state

campaigns, but are very inactive in between. The best answer for that is there hasn't been too much success or interest in young Democratic clubs. They seem to start out and then people pretty much still go with the organization which has been functioning effectively. They work within the organization rather than have separate units.

D: Wouldn't this have a lot to do with the times?

S: I think the candidates determine that more than the times. I think if you get a candidate that tells the young people what they want to hear, which Carter did in some of his statements about human rights, the war, Vietnam, and the marijuana situation and all that . . . with his position on those things, he was fairly attractive to the young people.

D: Now speaking on the internal structure of the party itself, is there a great significance of the precinct committeeman? What is the main role of the executive committee in Trumbull County?

S: You have over two hundred and seventy precinct committeemen. They are all elected in the even number year, every two years. This next election will be in 1978; they are elected in the primary. I would say that forty percent of the precinct committeemen are fairly active. A great number of precinct committeemen run for the office in order to staff the election precinct that day because they hire three people. Some of them are committeemen themselves. I find that the precinct committeemen are very active and participate when they have the duty of filling a vacancy. The law provides that if there is a vacancy in an office and that person was elected as a candidate in the Democratic Party, the office is filled by the precinct committeeman of the subdivision over which the person held office. For example, if Trumbull County Commissioner Walter Pestrak were to vacate his office tomorrow, within a certain number of days the Trumbull County Democratic precinct committeemen would meet on the call of the chairman and secretary and fill that vacancy with another person. Those kinds of meetings were well attended.

The other meeting that is well attended is when the chairman and the other officers of the party are elected, which is done sometime in June of every even numbered year. We have a practice here in Trumbull County--since Dr. Timmins and I have been in office--of having regional rallies and committeemen meetings during the county and state and federal years.



The executive committee is elected in districts, twenty-seven or twenty-eight in number, by the precinct committee-men. Members are appointed at large by the chairman and the secretary. They must receive both signatures to get appointment. All officers of the central committee are officers of the executive committee; that would be the chairman, first vice-chairman, secretary, treasurer, and seven second vice-chairmen. They are all officers in both. The executive committee meets more often than the central committee. Normally most of their meetings are in the even numbered years, or if there is some kind of function that is being planned the executive committee is called. The other important function of the executive committee is that every two years they recommend to the secretary of state a Democratic member of the board of elections. That recommendation is then sent in and that person is appointed. That happens in both parties. There are two from each party on the board of elections.

D: Let's say a person wanted to run for a post in Trumbull County and the central committee itself didn't like the candidate. How much of a chance could he have?

S: The Trumbull County Democratic central committee has a bylaw that provides for the possible endorsement of candidates. They have the option of endorsing or not endorsing, or leaving the field open. Where the central committee endorses, the chances are five to one that person will be nominated. There are exceptions. There was a gentleman who was selected by the central committee to fill a vacancy. Trumbull County treasurer had a vacancy a man was appointed by the central committee to fill that vacancy. He came up at the next primary to run as a candidate and he was defeated in the primary. My answer to that was he wasn't defeated because he was elected by the central committee, but because he did not cooperate with the executive committee after he got the appointment. In other words, he nullified the advantage that he had by being elected, which is similar to endorsement. By not doing that he then did not receive the endorsement. No one did for that office and he was defeated in the primary. It was a left-handed, nonendorsement by his not being endorsed.

D: If you were chairman of the Democratic Party what change would you make in the platform and what other things would you like to see come about?

S: What would I like to see come about? I don't know if I would change anything, but what I would like to see come about is more accounting by county officeholders of the Democratic Party to the local Democratic central committee. We find even though there is fairly good cooperation

there is just as much noncooperation at times from officeholders who have become firmly entrenched in the office. As the years go on they become a little less likely to cooperate. For example, when you have an election you expect a county officeholders to contact the people who work for him and to voluntarily request that they assist in the election of somebody else who has opposition or who happens to be running. We have some that do and we have some that don't. We're not the type of individuals--and I think that is why our party is successful here--who are vengeful about it. We just pass it along and figure it's better to have a Democrat in there that rules the office.

D: What makes Trumbull County different than other regional counties in this area as far as political philosophies?

S: I don't think Trumbull County is any different than neighboring counties. I think that in Mahoning County and Ashtabula County and Lake County particularly, the Democratic Parties there operate pretty much the same way. There was a time when everyone looked to Mahoning County as being the strong bulwark of the Democrats in this area. I believe at this point now that Trumbull County and even Lake County are at least on an equal par, and in fact in some categories are more effective for the Democratic Party than Mahoning. We don't have as much of the infighting as those counties, although we have had it sometimes in the past and we had the problems. We don't seem to have that anymore.

D: What are your main political philosophies and creeds and how do you apply them?

S: I consider myself more in the realm of being a conservative Democrat. I don't agree with the interference in party politics by the labor unions. I feel that they have exceeded their bounds. I don't think the Democratic Party should tell Mr. Meany what to do and I don't think Mr. Meany should tell the Democratic Party what to do. In other words I think that labor has violated the contract between the Democratic Party and labor more so than the party itself. I agree that labor has much more to gain by supporting Democratic candidates, which they do at least ninety percent of the time. I don't agree that because of that support they should exert the influence that obviously they have over officeholders and legislators to the point now where everyone is wondering when is it all going to end as far as the influence and what road we're going down and cost of government. You see now you have to credit labor with a lot of the advances that have been received by them and by the employees, but now government is ninety percent

employees and ten percent improvements and benefit to the public. Your budgets are all overwhelmingly employee oriented.

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

S: I think that the answer to that is in the very slight interest of people filing as Republican candidates in the city at this time, and in the county later. You're not going to have any problem with the Democratic Party short of anybody pulling up our net or something like that, which has just occurred. As long as it stays as it is I don't think there is any problem. It would be very difficult to get any better. When you get sixty to seventy-five percent of the people in the county that vote registering as Democrats, that is pretty far and away as much as you could expect.

D: Now speaking of the national Democratic Party, what future do you see for it?

S: On the national scene I just heard this morning on the news that President Carter has a sixty-five percent rating with the public. You always figure the first six or seven months of a new president's tenure in office is the honeymoon era. Of course, there are a lot of people who think it's going to end pretty quickly. I would think now that the Democratic Party is probably in as good of shape as it has been since Franklin Roosevelt.

D: Speaking of Carter himself, when he came out as being a conservative Democrat, do you think that now that he is in office that he is holding on to these conservative trends?

S: I think basically he still has that same gut feeling that he is practical enough to know there are some areas where he is going to have to bend. Basically, I think he is holding fast to his conservative philosophy because you'll note right off the go that the criticism is coming from the labor people, that he has not given them enough. You're getting some criticism from the pork barrel areas that want big water projects and big sewer projects and big dams and stuff like that where he has shut that off. On the other hand he has bent and accepted scientific advice, technical advice, from people whom he respects to go slower on the atomic era, on the use of uranium or plutonium in making these nuclear plants. That would be probably a little more toward the liberal thinking. Basically, I think you are going to find that he is going to run a tight ship. I expect within a fairly short period of time that some heads are going to fall. If

they don't agree with him I think he is going to be pretty firm about that. He is going to accept advice where he likes it. If it gets to where a person is giving him a lot of static, I think you'll find that person will be working somewhere else.

D: What do you think Congress' role will be?

S: I think Congress is going to be very firm. I don't think they're going to be snowed by Mr. Carter. They're going to make him justify his positions. Right now there have been some pretty harsh arguments between some congressmen and the president, some members of the Democratic Party. There have been some brick baths back and forth between Tip O'Neill and Carter. I just noticed a Connecticut congressman yesterday made the statement that he is not dealing with the Georgia legislature; he is dealing with the United States Congress.

D: The Ohio senators and congressmen at the present time are Metzenbaum, Glenn, and Carney. What are they doing for Trumbull County?

S: I don't think there is too much going on in Trumbull County outside of the routine things that congressmen and senators do, such as notify you that grants are being approved. I don't believe that anybody from Trumbull County is going to get any outstanding appointments at this stage. It's possible in the future that some appointments may come through. There really hasn't been anybody outside of the district attorney appointment that has been sponsored by the county. Maybe in the future, but I doubt at this point that there is anybody that is influential enough on the state level or federal level to receive anything. I do know that all three of them conduct a very efficient office; they answer the mail. As far as I'm concerned, anything that I write to them in this area they answer. They do a pretty good job there.

D: That is all my questions. Is there anything you would like to add?

S: I might add this, although I have eight children I don't think any of them are interested in politics. That might be a sign to many people that children of people who are very active politically and who are in office, are not the type who are politically oriented. I do have one daughter that is quite active on the political scene in Washington, D.C. She has been involved in the Vietnam moratorium; she was involved in Common Cause; she was involved in the B-1 bomber opposition, and now

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she is working with an agency that is funded to look into the CIA's spying. I think that one is done with now and she has joined another cause.

D: Which daughter is this?

S: The second daughter.

END OF INTERVIEW