

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown Sheet & Tube Shutdown Project

Sheet & Tube Shutdown

O. H. 146

ANTHONY S. CENTOFANTI

Interviewed

by

Philip Bracy

on

December 4, 1981

ANTHONY S. CENTOFANTI

Mr. Centofanti was born in Youngstown, Ohio on September 27, 1929, a son of Theodore and Nellie Centofanti. He graduated from Struthers High School. In 1946 he received a medial discharge from the Marine Corps. Mr. Centofanti married in June 1951 and he and his wife Shirley have two children.

Of import among his employment was the fact that he was the Mayor of Struthers in 1977 when the Sheet and Tube facility was closed. Presently Mr. Centofanti is heading Congressman (19th District) Lyle Williams' District office in Youngstown, Ohio.

While Mr. Centofanti is of no particular religious denomination, he does attend various churches. Among the organizations he is a member of the K. of C. #4224 and the Struthers Grid Iron Club. His hobbies include golf, almost all sports and card playing.

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INTERVIEWEE: ANTHONY S. CENTOFANTI

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SUBJECT: Sheet & Tube Shutdown

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B: This is an interview with Mr. Anthony Centofanti, the former Mayor of Struthers by Philip Bracy for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program concerning the Shutdown of Youngstown Sheet and Tube and how it affected his community.

First of all, Mr. Centofanti, if you would give us a little bit about your background, biography and so forth.

C: Well, I was elected Mayor of the City of Struthers in 1975, served for four years. I was the mayor at the time of the closing of the Youngstown Sheet and Tube. I believe it was September 20, 1977 and since then I've resigned the mayor's job to take this position as District Aide for Mahoning County for Congressman Lyle Williams. And basically, that's about it.

B: Where were you and how did you find out about the announcement of the shutdown?

C: I received a call on Friday, the previous Friday to the Monday, yes it would be Friday the 17th from, I can't remember the gentleman's name from Youngstown Sheet and Tube, requesting that I be at their main office in Boardman the following Monday at, I believe it was ten o'clock in the morning. We had heard rumors of something was going to happen. They indicated to me, in fact, they specified that they'd appreciate if I, personally, would not mention anything to anybody else at this time

about the meeting. But again, as I said, there had been rumors flying around but the thought of that happening just was unheard of and nobody would believe it would ever happen.

And so, I did go the following Monday at ten o'clock and there was the Mayor of Campbell, I believe the Mayor of Lowellville. There were some other representatives, I believe, state representatives, quite a few other city officials and local politicians. They handed us, I believe I still have it at home in my file, a typed, prepared statement for the news media. And it was devastating, I mean informing that they were closing and it would affect 10,000 employees. And it just was really earth-shaking. But again, we didn't really realize the effects of it at that particular time. Then they had the official announcement with the news media. But that's how it came about.

B: In total, about how many people attended that meeting?

C: If I had to guess I would say probably around twenty.

B: And they were all elected officials?

C: Most of them were.

B: What did it mean in terms of the number of jobs and the total amount of layoffs and the impact on your budget?

C: Really, as far as the number of employees working for the Sheet and Tube that lived in the City of Struthers, it was quite surprising, it wasn't as much as we really thought. We just thought it seemed like every other employee that had a job in the City of Struthers worked in the Sheet and Tube. Well, this wasn't true. Actually, as it turned out, as far as employees are concerned, more of them lived in the City of Youngstown than they did anyplace else.

But again, it took a little while before the City of Struthers felt the effects of it, simply because the personal property tax and so on and so forth, which is always usually a year behind, and the school tax and the property tax that way. We didn't really feel the effect of it even while I was in office. And I think we acted quick enough. That's when we formed the Mahoning Valley Economic Development Committee. Congressman Carney was in at the time. And so we took steps immediately.

And in fact, Mayor Hunter and myself and Mayor Katula, we thought we had a prospective buyer for the Sheet and Tube in Japan. And we had our passports all ready within a matter of three days that this came about, we were prepared to go. And I can't prove this, nobody can, but we feel very strongly that Washington had something to do with it, stopped it. And we never did get to go and make the pitch, the presentation to the Japanese concerns that was interested in possibly taking over the whole Sheet and Tube.

- B: Were you contacted by Congressman Carney in that same time frame, approximately when that took place?
- C: He called a meeting and he formed this Mahoning Valley Economic Development Committee. And at the time, I still believe it was done as a political move more than anything else. I don't think anybody expected anything really to come of it. In fact, myself, Mayor Katula of Campbell, and Mayor Russo of Lowellville were not even appointed to the committee, the original. And due to the insistence on our part and the news media getting involved, they said, "Well, how can you form something like this without the three major cities that would be hurt the most from this. So, we were, I really believe, as a token, we were put on the Committee. But again, for a few years it didn't really do too much. It has only been lately that it's really starting to come in.
- B: Returning to the number that were affected, would you guess that it was like about a third as far as the number of layoffs?
- C: Do you mean a third of the ones laid off. . .
- B: Were directly affected or residents of your city?
- C: No, I wouldn't say it was that high. No, more like really 20% would be a high figure.
- B: You've already alluded this. On Sunday, October 2nd, there was a meeting in Mayor Hunter's office about 7:00 a.m.
- C: Right.
- B: Can you tell me who participated in the meeting and the contents?
- C: Oh, to my knowledge there was Mayor Katula, Mayor Hunter,

myself, the Congressman never was there. Congressman Carney wasn't there. It was really sort of a hush-hush supposedly. I got a call Saturday, be there early. And this was when we discussed the trip to Japan. So, we had to go back to our council, in fact, on that same day, Sunday, to try to get a meeting set up in my city so they could pass legislation to appropriate funds to allow me to go, which they did. And I think that we were talking about \$5,000 just for the trip for myself. There were some other people there, I guess the heads of the cities.

B: And the basic conversation was the proposed trip to Tokyo?

C: Right.

B: Could I back up maybe one step? It was alleged, and I've heard it kicked around several times, that a week before the actual announcement of the shutdown the Japanese delegation actually went through the plant. To the best of your knowledge, is that true?

C: I really don't know. I heard rumors of this effect by even some friends of mine that were employees at the Sheet and Tube. They had seen some Japanese going through. Yes, but I couldn't prove it per se.

B: Yes, I mean I was just trying to nail it down if it's possible.

Okay, the proposed Tokyo trip did not come off. There was a meeting, I believe, the first week, the 23rd, I think it was a Friday. The announcement took place on the 19th and then the 23rd was that Friday. Was there a meeting at the Higbee's Auditorium?

C: Yes, that was the one, I think, that was called by Congressman Carney. And again, that was also attended by the local and State politicians. I remember there was definitely Senator Tom Carney, young Tom Carney, Representative, I think Senator Harry Meshel, Gilmartin, the State officials. And yes, I remember that quite well. And that's when, I think, Carney said that he was going to see what they could do. I think that's when that Mahoning Valley Economic Development Committee came about.

B: There was also, I believe, a followup meeting on October 11th, which would have been the second meeting

at Higbee's, where Congressman Carney brought in Mr. Bat and Mr. Shepard from Studebaker.

C: Yes, I remember that. I believe it was to tell their story what they did when I guess Studebaker and that went out, the effects it had. Again, my personal opinion, I just think all this was, all good politics, nothing really concrete came of it, the thing really is when Governor Rhodes entered the picture.

B: I'd like to get into CASTLO a little bit later on.

C: Okay, fine.

B: What kind of feeling did you come away from that meeting with? Did you think that anything had been proposed that you could. . .

C: No, absolutely not. When that Japan trip was called off, the mayors, and I'm not speaking for Mayor Hunter or Mayor Katula, but I know I felt, and I conveyed it back to my council, that just really nothing was going to happen, nobody was going to help us but ourselves. That's the way I felt. And I believe my council felt that way too. It was just all show and no go. They kept bringing everybody in but. . .

But see, we still hadn't felt the effects of it. In fact, truthfully, we never did get the impact, thank the good Lord, that everybody thought would happen. The city is still there, it's still surviving. In fact, I just saw in the paper last night, Struthers council all voted themselves a nice hefty raise and everybody else. So, I guess, they're not closing the city down, that's for sure.

B: I believe Mr. Coglin of BOCHI, USA was the person that had approached Mayor Hunter and others. Mayor Hunter wasn't that specific on who he may have contacted about the Japanese trip. How much were you involved in that early process of even talking about going?

C: Not too much. More or less, Jack Hunter, or Mayor Hunter was spearheading the thing and being the lead city more or less. I had a lot of respect for Mayor Hunter and I still do and I just felt, let him go ahead and handle it because really, we just more or less went along with it to see what was going to happen. We were very enthused, I must say this though. We had high hopes, we really did, that something could have happened on that Japanese trip to Japan.

B: What led you to have realistic expectations that that might come to fruition?

C: Well, I think that because we knew that Japan was more or less the leader in the advancements in the steel industry, whether we like it or not and admit it. They had the most modern facilities and they were thriving. The unemployment rate was very low there. And I realize the federal government works different over there than we do. And I guess we really were grasping. Even though we had a few bad comments from people, some people still had ill feelings about the Second World War and with Japan. But we just felt that this time, if we had to we would do it. We would do anything we can to preserve the jobs and everything.

B: As you alluded to earlier, CASTLO came into being and I guess maybe you could shed more light on that like what led to the schism, if that's the correct terminology, between MVEDC and CASTLO. Was it just exclusion?

C: Well, there was, I won't say competition, but they were two completely separate political adventures. If anybody gets complete credit for CASTLO, first it has to be Governor Rhodes, and second George Wilson, who was one of the aides for Governor Rhodes. Governor Rhodes came to my city. We had a meeting and he said he would help, and he did. They did send some financial aid. They sent some people in to interview the people that were getting laid off. And they set up an office down at the local steelworker's union on Walton Street in Struthers. He sent George Wilson in to form a consortium of some sort for Campbell, Struthers, and Lowellville. And that is how the name CASTLO was formed.

And I was happy to say that I think, if anything else, that was one of the most positive things that ever came out of that closing was CASTLO was formed. And George Wilson, who did an excellent job, and through the efforts of the Governor and that, they actually purchased the works down at Struthers and they formed that Rod and Wire.

B: What steps kind of led to it? Was there a formal break or was it just the exclusion?

C: No, I think we felt, and check something else here that hasn't been brought up yet, and that is the Ecumenical Coalition. Now you had three entities and everybody was pulling a different way. I really feel the Ecumenical Coalition had the right idea, but again, in politics,

being realistic, when you have religious leaders involved, they mean very well, but I just don't think that too many of the politicians take them as serious as they would another organization.

And as you know, Sheet and Tube at that time, before J. & L., Lykes, made the gesture to the Ecumenical Coalition: "Okay, you want it you can have the whole works." And I think the price was \$25,000,000. I stand to be corrected, but I feel quite sure. That's everything, lock, stock, and barrel. They could have had Brier Hill or Campbell and Rod and Wire. Well, then they came up with this Save Our Valley accounts and which I thought was an excellent gesture, but I don't know, a little over a million dollars I think they. . . which was surprising because the people, see, the effect really wasn't felt yet. The men were getting S.U.B. and they were getting severance pay and they were collecting unemployment, the T.R.A. came into it. So, financially they weren't affected. It really didn't affect them till, I'd say, eighteen months to two years later when it really affected them. So, nobody really was too, I won't say concerned, they were concerned, but they weren't really worried at this point. And I think that's the word, they were concerned, but weren't worried yet. But later on it came to pass that some of them did have some problems.

B: How did the Coalition tie into the formation of CASTLO?

C: The Ecumenical Coalition again, the cities that were involved were really not taken into it. Again, Campbell, Struthers, and Lowellville were more or less put aside. And as you have it in a lot of organizations, somebody wants to be the leader and they just more or less did not include us, so we said, "Well, we're going to have to do something on our own." It was really a first, because Struthers and Campbell, it's a proven known fact that we're politically enemies, more or less, always competing against each other for whatever. And this was the first time they ever really worked together.

And again, through the efforts of George Wilson, we formed this. It didn't happen overnight. It took some time. We had joint meetings with Campbell's Council and Struthers'. And we had to iron things out. There were some problems, when the thing happened that the industrial park was coming to be CASTLO, being it was located in Struthers, who was going to get the income tax from it, who was going to get the most jobs and so on and so forth. But we worked it out to the point that no

matter who worked there that the income tax and that would have been divided up equally. We finally worked it out. We were very proud of the accomplishment.

I was the first President of CASTLO. And if I had to say any one organization that really did good was CASTLO because it was done right; it really was. It was slow in coming, it didn't happen overnight. We had one of the greatest, I think, leaders in George Wilson because he was the first Economic Development Director for the State of Ohio under Governor Rhodes, so he had expertise.

- B: So, you would say that because of the efforts of the Coalition and including your communities, as well as the efforts of George Wilson, especially the efforts of George Wilson, led to the formation of CASTLO?
- C: Right. And that gave us a lot of hope. We really believed in CASTLO. I mean, we had no problem, the city council, usually they fought me and anybody else on anything else, but when it came to CASTLO, they were 100% behind it.
- B: Do you think the fact that CASTLO came into being, was it because of . . . did you have a good relationship with Mayor Katula and Mayor Russo?
- C: Oh yes. It is, again, we were thrown together in a common cause and we really buried our petty, whatever, differences there might be, to go for one cause. And that was to build this industrial park to try to save some jobs.
- B: What I was trying to get at--I don't know what the relationship was between you three men--but I mean, do you think that helped facilitate getting things done. I mean, were you amenable to each other? Were you very friendly people?
- C: Oh yes, yes. We always were in that sense. The only thing as I just said, the competition we had was applying for grants and everything. And the Federal Government does this to you and so does the State. They let you fight amongst each other to try to get the most you can for your city. I mean, nothing is really done fair I don't think. Whoever cries the loudest gets the most.
- B: One speculation has been that the CASTLO communities would not, probably to this day, be participating in

the Mahoning Valley Economic Development Committee if it wasn't for the SUDS Grant.

C: Yes, that's right.

B: That took place approximately in March of 1978.

C: Well, you would know probably better than I do.

B: I'm guessing. I'm going by their minutes and some of the other things. It looks like. . .

C: Off hand, yes, I'd say.

B: Could you tell us about the first meeting that took place in the formation of CASTLO?

C: Well, the Governor came in and his first trip he went to Campbell, I think maybe about ten o'clock in the morning, he had a meeting with them. And then he came over to Struthers and we had our council there and State Senator Meshel was there, I believe State Senator Tom Carney was there, the Governor, George Wilson. And this was the first time I had met George Wilson. And the Governor said, "I'm here to help you people and we're going to help you." And he did. He gave us financial aid. I don't know the exact amount, but I know it was, for three cities, it was over a half a million dollars. And fast, I mean, we got aid for improvements, whatever we wanted to do. But he came in and probably was the only one that really did us any financial help that quick. He was there within, I don't know the exact date, but it wasn't much more than a couple weeks if that, past the announcement.

B: The funding sources was from the State Controlling Board?

C: Right. I believe it was Federal funds appropriated to the State. They were discretionary funds that the Governor could have used to his discretion to any communities in Ohio. And he chose to help Struthers, Campbell, Lowellville. We went down to a meeting to Columbus right after that, I don't know if it was the following week, and he asked each mayor, Katula--no, it was after that because it was Mayor Mico, 1978 right. And Mayor Mico and myself and Mayor Russo, we went down and he asked what our immediate needs were. I remember, in the City of Struthers we wanted to improve State Street, which goes along the Campbell Works of Sheet and Tube on the Struthers side. And the road was in bad shape. And we felt that if we improved it it

would be more advantageous for industry to come into Struthers to purchase the Campbell Works. So, he asked what I wanted. Well then he said, "How much do you need." And I said, off the top of my head, I didn't know, I said, "A quarter of a million dollars," \$250,000 I think. And I think we got \$225,000 out of it. Campbell said they wanted to put a new sewer line in along Wilson Avenue. Lowellville wanted to improve a new street going back into an industrial park. And they were all funded, just like that. It wasn't long.

- B: During this period, did you attend any White House meetings?
- C: Yes we did, through absolutely wasted time, wasted trip. We went up through CASTLO now. We did not go up as individual cities anymore. Once CASTLO was formed, we all went as a group. I have it in my file there, I could give you the date when we attended a meeting in Washington, with who it was from EDA.
- B: Sometime, probably the latter part of October you attended a White House meeting I believe. Could you tell me what you recall from that meeting, what the topics were?
- C: Again, we were supposed to meet with top people of the EDA, Economic Development Agency for some financial assistance for CASTLO. I recall there must have been seven of us from CASTLO. All the officials, including the three mayors, we went to Washington D.C., met at the White House Annex. We were supposed to meet with top key people, but as it turned out, they just sent one of their aides down. We were not too enthusiastic when we left the meeting. We just felt that it was a wasted trip. But we were grasping, we followed every angle we could. The trip at that time, as it turned out, was not beneficial at all, financially to CASTLO.
- B: What were the actual goals of the organization of CASTLO?
- C: Very simply this, to bring as many new industries into the CASTLO Park, diversified. We felt that potentially there could have been employed 1,500 to 2,000 people, even more than was ever hired there in its heyday, the Rod and Wire. The idea was terrific, but the point is what happened is, we had a tremendous amount of inquiries, but everybody that wanted to come there, they didn't have any funds and they wanted the Federal Government to subsidize them. So consequently, in fact,

even to this day, there's really only one company in there.

- B: Do you think the fact that there was, there appeared to be anyway if you go on the surface of it, no central figure or figures that came forward to lead. . . Like Pittsburgh has the Mellon Family. Do you think that says something about the Mahoning Valley or is that . . . ?
- C: Yes, I think I know what you're saying. Was there any particular somebody to step forward to spearhead and assist, to offer any assistance? No. After the impact, and after the national news media came in and did their thing and a few months later it was all over with. I mean we knew we had to do it ourselves, nobody else was going to help, even the federal politicians who were in office at that time, they just didn't help us. Other than, again, like I say, Governor Rhodes was the only one that did help at that time.
- B: So, do you think the fragmentation of the various communities involved, perhaps, hurt the Valley's efforts?
- C: No question. I think everybody meant well. We had the formation of the Ecumenical Coalition, they meant well; we had MVEDC, which is the Mahoning Valley Economic Development Committee, they meant well; we had the formation of CASTLO. And so, consequently again you had the bureaucracy of three organizations. And also you had EDATA at that time, which you still do, you had WREDA [Western Reserve Economic Development Agency]. You had five agencies and you had a tremendous amount of administrative costs. The Federal Government and the State Government spent a lot of money on the administrative cost, but nothing really came about.
- B: What was your feeling about the proposal that the Mahoning Valley Economic Development Committee put forward about the steel research center?
- C: That was a good idea. That was the proposed lab up at the Sheet and Tube in Boardman, general offices. That was an excellent idea, but again, I attended a lot of meetings in Pittsburgh, at the Pittsburgh Airport, they even had Father Hogan from Fordham University, who made a report, excellent study, excellent. I mean, really told it like it was. Congressman Carney was the congressman at that time, he set it up. In fact, he was appointed on the National Steel Council or

something, but nothing ever came about.

B: There were a number of proposals, but the other one that was given serious consideration was the Coalition's idea of employee stock ownership. What was your feeling about that? Did you think that was viable?

C: Again yes. I'm a firm believer of employee-owned. But it's something that almost has never been done around here at that time. Now, I think you have one, which I think is Republic Rubber. I think that's the only one. The sad part of it is, you couldn't get the employees that were laid off, that were affected by this, they wouldn't even attend any of the meetings or anything. It was ridiculous; because they were not financially hurting. I guess they weren't hungry enough. When the time came they'd ever get hungry they they'd be worried. Some of them, financially, were making almost as much as they were when they worked with TRA, the S.U.B., and unemployment.

B: Some people felt uncomfortable with the concept because it so-called smacked of socialism. Did you get the impression from some of these public meetings or other officials that they held those particular views? Do you think it was a dominant theme or do you just think that they would have taken anything that would have been viable?

C: If it didn't cost the employee or the potential stockholder or whatever you want to call it, the participant, if it didn't cost him anything, he would be interested. If the Federal Government or the State Government could subsidize it, they would do it. Again, I revert back to the Save Our Valley Accounts, a little over a million dollars, which, for a community the size of this community, the Valley with a population of, probably then, over 400,000 in the Valley, they just. . . I don't know. I think a lot of it too, was that they were disgusted because of the political thing. Everybody wanted to get in the limelight, the politicians, everybody wanted to do something and nothing was ever being done, I should say, nothing ever resulted from it. They couldn't say: Now, we do have a new company coming into CASTLO or now we have a new plant opening up. They couldn't see anything solid happening. It was all just talk, and that's all it was. Some of them had good intentions, but some of them just did it for their own. . . because I guess, it was expected of them because they

were politicians. They figured they better show something.

B: Some people's concern was focused on the Center for Economic Alternatives that the Coalition had utilized as far as doing some of the studies, like Gar Alpervitz's group. Again, I'm going basically because you sat in on a lot of these and talked to other officials. Some of the concerns that I read in the papers were as relevant to the political spectrum as they're always portraying it to be. In other words, were you and your fellow officials concerned about that?

C: We felt that there was too darn many studies. The only people who were getting fat were these consultants and they were getting fat. And there was one in Cincinnati, the Batelle [Institute]. I mean, they received some nice contracts and I mean running into the hundreds of thousands of dollars, and to tell us what was wrong with the Valley. We knew what was wrong. You didn't have to go make a study, just get in your car and drive by down at Sheet and Tube somewhere and you could see, no smoke coming out of the stacks, you got^{to} have problems. But too many studies, and even when the studies were completed, nobody utilized them.

We really felt that each city was being used. We felt that they really didn't care what happened to the City of Struthers, Campbell, or Lowellville. They just were getting all they could get. And a lot of them got quite a bit.

B: Is there anything that I haven't asked you that I probably should have asked you or some point that you'd like to make that I haven't asked you about?

C: I think what it boils down to, I just don't think the fear that we had, I say we, the Valley as a whole, thank the good Lord that never came to be. The fear that everybody, this is going to go down the drain, it never happened. Sure, we hit a low, but it never went as low as we thought it would go. And thank the good Lord for that. Through the news media and everything else, we thought it was going to be much worse than it ever was. Again, like I say, the Valley, now it's on the upgrade. And it was devastating, but it was not crucial.

B: I'd like to thank you for taking the time this morning to share some of your thoughts.

C: My pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW