

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Coal Mining Project

Belmont Avenue Area

O. H. 439

RICHARD SHOOK

Interviewed

by

Judy Rasmussen

on

June 8, 1978

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: RICHARD SHOOK

INTERVIEWER: Judy Rasmussen

SUBJECT: Mines in Belmont Avenue Area, Grandfather's
farm, Quarries

DATE: June 8, 1978

R: This is an interview with Richard Shook, by Judy Rasmussen, for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the Coal Mining Project, Belmont Avenue area, on June 8, 1978, at 3:30 p.m.

Mr. Shook, could you tell me a little bit about your parents and your family?

S: My family has been in Youngstown for a long time. My great great-grandfather came to Youngstown in the early 1800's, when Western Reserve was opened up. I think he came from New York State. The family had been there for a while. He came to Ashtabula and settled in Warren. Then he finally settled between Warren and Youngstown, and then Coitsville, and then on the old homestead which is on Belmont Avenue. It is where the Schiavone Funeral Home is now. That is the building I was born in. I was raised in that area. I lived with my grandfather; my father died when I was very young. My mother and my brother and I lived with the grandparents. We had the best of both possible worlds: We lived right on the edge of Youngstown and went to the city of schools and had all the advantages of the country. We prowled the whole area so there have been Shook's around here for a long time.

R: What did your grandfather do?

S: He was a farmer, a real estate man, and ran a livery stable on West Federal Street.

R: What ethnic background was he?

S: German. We came from the Upper Rhine.

R: Could you tell me a little bit about the farm that your grandfather had?

S: This farm belonged to his father, and he was the only one of three sons who continued the farming so he got the farm. It was situated just outside of Youngstown at that time. The county line and city line were right where the 20th Century Restaurant is today. He was just outside of town. I think he had 75 acres that went from Belmont Avenue practically down to Federal Street, down to Briar Hill. He farmed most of it and then as the city grew he plotted out and sold off lots, a lot of them to immigrants who were coming in to Briar Hill then. I can remember as a kid every Saturday our back porch was full of Italians who couldn't speak English. They were up to pay Mr. Shook \$10 on the lot. He loaned them money to bring their wives back from Italy and never charged them interest.

R: Do you know the year this was happening?

S: That would be right before World War I.

R: What schools did you go to?

S: I went to Parmalee School and Rayen in Youngstown. Then I graduated from Case Institute of Technology. Parmalee is no longer in existence, but it was a good school. It was an experimental school; it was one of the first schools in Youngstown to have the platoon system, or what they called the Gary System. Up until the time I was in the sixth grade you sat in one classroom all day and the same teacher taught you all subjects. At that time they instituted moving from class to class for specialized teachers. It was the first school in the city to institute that.

R: Can you tell me a little bit about the mine that was on your grandfather's farm?

S: I think that mine was there when he bought it and had been closed; it was there. We always knew it as just a dump, a hole in the ground. The air shaft was full of water and it was a flowing spring. That was maybe half a mile away from the main entrance to the mine. It was always known as the Gunnot Mine. Gunnot's were early Vienna settlers. We didn't pay too much attention to the mine except we played around the spoil banks and the slate piles. There were mines all over the place at that time. There were old worked out mines; there weren't any working when I was a kid.

R: When was this?

S: From 1910 to 1920. I used to pass one mine opening when I went to school

R: How did you recognize a mine?

S: We were told. There were enough of the old miners living around here then.

R: How did you get in contact with these men? How did you meet them?

S: They were neighbors. Nobody thought of them as miners, but I realize now that they were.

R: Do you have any idea how large the mine was on your grandfather's property?

S: No. It must have been fairly extensive because the air shaft was about maybe half of a mile away from the main shaft. That is pretty indicative that it covered a lot of area underground. The parcel where the mine was was a 35 acre piece of land.

R: What did the air shaft look like? Do you remember what it was made out of?

S: It was shored up with wood timbers along the side. It was maybe eight feet square. There was a big, wood platform on top of it. We had a pump on there because the water was excellent.

R: We talked about the main opening to the mine, what did that look like?

S: That was off of Sodum Hutchings, and of course, it is still there. As I remember it was just a large hole, just a large depression in the ground. We were warned not to go near it. It wasn't a great deal larger than the air shaft really.

R: Did they work mainly out of the main entrance?

S: Yes, entirely.

R: Did you use the coal for your own personal use?

S: We never had any coal from there. The man who operated it leased it from the Shook estate in the later 1920's. He came here from Wheeling. He operated until 1941 approximately. He was selling coal, and I think mostly locally. It was a good grade of coal. When the pricing administration was established during World War II, they set ceiling prices on coal, and the ceiling prices were too low for him to make a profit, so he just closed up shop.

- R: Do you have any idea when the mine was first opened?
- S: No.
- R: It was closed down and then reopened?
- S: It had been closed for years; it flooded and they couldn't pump the water out fast enough. When this man opened it up in the 1920's he had more modern machinery and more modern pumps and could keep it dry.
- R: It remained open until the 1940's?
- S: I remained open until 1941.
- R: Do you have any idea the effect the Depression had on the production in the mine?
- S: I don't know that he had any problem during the Depression because he sold the coal locally and people were hauling their own coal then. I think he sold that around here too then. He probably got along all right, or as well as anybody did during the Depression.
- R: Do you remember the type of men that worked in the mine, what they wore?
- S: No, I don't really.
- R: Were they from around here?
- S: I think they were mostly from West Virginia. I don't think he had any local help. He didn't have too many people there.
- R: Where did they live when they got here?
- S: I think they had kind of a bunkhouse out there.
- R: Can you remember at all how much this man paid your grandfather for leasing the land?
- S: No.
- R: How much coal did they get out of the mine?
- S: It was a good quality coal. It was a narrow seam, about three and a half feet. It took a lot of work to get it out. It was costly to mine because of the fact that they had to pump the water out. It was a very marginal operation.
- R: Do you think there is still coal down there?
- S: Yes. He was getting it out at the time that they shut him down.

- R: Do you remember how it was closed in the 1940's?
- S: He just took all the machinery and left town.
- R: How did they block up the shaft?
- S: I think they just dumped a lot of tree stumps and trash down there and leveled it off with dirt over top.
- R: Are you aware of any other mines around the area?
- S: Yes, I mentioned the one off of Belmont Avenue. Then there was one off of Goldie Road, south of Goldie. There was one north of Belmont Cemetery; the spoil bank from that was on my grandfather's farm. That was a huge mine.
- R: Do you know if that was owned by Governor Tod?
- S: It could very well have been. I thought it was closer to town, but it may not have been.
- R: I heard that when Governor Tod had that mine he would offer a free stove, a coal burning stove with so much coal, so that once the stove was established inside the house he had an open market for his coal.
- S: My grandfather used to tell that story.
- R: Do you remember anything else that he said about it?
- S: He was quite a civic-minded citizen. I had an old friend who was a very old black man. Governor Tod brought him back from the south after the Civil War. He had been a slave. He did odd jobs and became a painter for my grandfather. He had a picture of Governor Tod that Governor Tod had given him. It was in a very fancy brass filigree frame. One each side of the frame were little tapers that you took out of the well and held to a lamp or flame in order to light a cigar. He prized that and carried it with him wherever he went.
- R: Was there any Red Dog, the red shale, associated with the mine?
- S: When they bring it out of the mine it is not red. It's black and you set it on fire and make Red Dog. It made good roads and driveways and it filled up the mud holes.
- R: Was it very durable?
- S: Yes, it lasted pretty well. The burning took all the volatile and organic substances out of it. It was not as good as oyster shells though.

- R: I've never heard of that.
- S: On the last farm that my brother and I have there is still one driveway out of oyster shells.
- R: How long was the mine that was on your grandfather's farm in production?
- S: About fifteen years after it was reopened. How long it was in production before it closed the first time I have no idea. From the amount of stuff that was taken out, the overburden, they must have taken a good deal of coal out of there.
- R: Can you remember anything about the man who came up from West Virginia, if this was his only endeavor?
- S: Evidently he had made some money in mining in West Virginia because he had some capital when he came here. He had to close because he couldn't afford to sell the coal at the price they told him.
- R: Did he have a lot of trouble with water?
- S: The mine was wet, but he kept ahead of the water. The modern pumps that he put in were efficient and they kept it dry enough to work down there.
- R: Can you remember how long a day would be that the miners would have to work, what their shift was like?
- S: I have no idea.
- R: Can you think of anything else that you would like to say? I know we had been talking about the quarrying.
- S: They took a lot of things out of the ground around here: Limestone, sandstone, and coal. I guess the original iron ore came out of the swamps; it was bog ore. Quarries, there were a lot of them around in what they called Andrew's Hollow, which is the extension of Crandall Park East. I think it's still there. They took a lot of stone out of there.
- R: Do you remember what kind of machinery they had used?
- S: It was very crude. It wasn't in operation in my lifetime, so I don't know.
- R: Can you remember how they got the coal out?
- S: They hauled it up the elevator on a skip, which was very primitive, but it got it up to the surface in a mine care. So far as I know those cars were moved by manpower. I don't

think they ever had any animals or anything.

R: Can you remember how much coal was going for?

S: I suppose \$3 or \$4 a ton; not more than that I don't think. That is a guess; I don't remember. It was low.

R: Was your house heated by coal?

S: The old house over there had a coal furnace in it, but we used coke. That was a fourteen-room house. Originally every room was heated by its own fireplace. They were all coal-burning fireplaces. They all had coal baskets in them. Then central heat was put in and they used wood for a while, but it burned too much wood. Then they started using coke. It was easier to handle than coal because that furnace would take a huge amount. It gave more even heat than coal. Most of the heating around town though was soft coal.

R: Was the coal stove from the mine on your property a good grade?

S: Yes.

R: Have you been inside the mine?

S: I was down to the bottom of the shaft once, just as a lark. I went just for a ride on the elevator. I don't remember too much about it except that the head room was very low.

R: How high would you say it was?

S: Five and a half feet maybe. You were pretty scrunched down there. They didn't waste any space.

R: Were there any accidents associated where any miners were hurt?

S: I don't think so. I don't know of any.

R: Can you remember if there was any regulation on mining?

S: Yes, there were laws then on mining safety. They aren't as stringent as they are now.

R: I wonder how the man from West Virginia found out about your grandfather's mine that he would choose yours to invest in?

S: He maybe got state geological surveys. He must have found out that this mine was closed because of water and production was stopped. So he was pretty certain there was coal down there. Maybe he even talked to somebody who had been associated with the mine.

At the time that I went in that mine I was in college. I spent a week surveying a clay mine; it was a project south of Canfield. We had a surveying camp for about a month. It's the same thing as a coal mine.

R: Did you mine it actually?

S: No, we were down there with transits surveying, mapping.

R: Was it operating?

S: Yes.

R: How was it different from the coal mine?

S: They didn't have to blast, loosen the coal. They just dug and loaded it on a cart.

R: Can you remember what kind of ethnic groups settled in Vienna?

S: The Welsh, of course, came for the mines.

R: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW