

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Farrell Race Relations Project

Farrell Race Relations -- 1960's

O. H. 490

FRANK DONATELLI

Interviewed

by

Ronald Rice

on

July 1, 1981

FRANK B. DONATELLI

Frank B. Donatelli was born in Farrell, Pennsylvania on July 4, 1922. After graduating from Farrell High School in 1940, Donatelli was drafted into the U. S. Army for three years during World War II. He spent most of his service time overseas around the Philippine Islands. After he was discharged from the service, Donatelli began to work as an electrician. Donatelli currently works for the Pic Electric Company of Farrell.

Donatelli and his wife Rosaria have six children and have lived in Farrell all of their lives. His free time is spent gardening and working around his home. Donatelli has a lot of pride in his family and community. He is a member of Our Lady of Fatima Catholic Church. Donatelli does not feel that Farrell's racial problems were as bad as most people have made them out to be. He thinks that most of the racial problems in Farrell were caused by outside agitators and young juvenile Farrell residents.

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INTERVIEWEE: FRANK DONATELLI

INTERVIEWER: Ronald Rice

SUBJECT: Rioting, Community problems, Prejudice among
blacks

DATE: July 1, 1981

R: This is an interview with Mr. Frank Donatelli for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on the racial tensions in Farrell, Pennsylvania, during the 1960's by Ron Rice at 1229 Negley Street on July 1, 1981, at 9:30 in the evening.

Okay Mr. Donatelli, could we start by you telling me where you're from originally?

D: I was born in Farrell.

R: You grew up in Farrell?

D: Yes. I went to Farrell High School, graduated, went to the service, came home and made my home here since. I would have been in the service three years.

R: Alright, what do you remember most about your childhood here in Farrell?

D: My childhood in Farrell, I had a good childhood. I had to work hard because of bad times and everybody was more close-knit than they are today. Everybody comes in and out today, they run in and out of the house. Before when we were home we had chores to do, we did them, if we didn't do them dad took over.

R: What was high school like for you?

D: Good. I played three years of football. I played some basketball, some track. I had a good time. No fights or anything, a good time.

- R: When you graduated from high school then, did you enlist or were you drafted?
- D: No, I was drafted. I worked one year at Carnegie Illinois, then I was drafted in 1942.
- R: And you went into the Army?
- D: Yes. Then from there I went to New Cumberland, Pennsylvania, and was inducted there. Then I went to Camp Hale, Colorado. From Camp Hale, Colorado to Camp Stillman to Brisbane, Australia, to New Guinea, to Admiralty Islands, to the Philippine Islands to Tokyo, Japan.
- R: You did quite a bit of traveling!
- D: Yes, I spent a lot of time over there. Three years were filled. I had a good time.
- R: When you got out of the service you came back to Farrell then?
- D: We came back to Farrell and jobs were hard to get. I did get a job at Camp Shenango. They were tearing it down and I worked there for a year as a laborer. Then I went and took a test and got into the electrical industry and I've been at that since. I got married and had six children. Now I have eight grandchildren.
- R: Great! What factors caused you to get into the electrical work?
- D: I had a friend of mine . . . We used to play softball together; he got into the trade in 1947. I was talking to him about how tough it was to get a job and he told me, "Why don't you go down and put an application in there at the union hall," and I did. In the meantime, Mr. Palumbo hired me; that was my first job. Then I got all over, you might say, working.
- R: What are some of your chief interests besides work?
- D: I like to garden. I love gardening. I did it when I was a kid with my dad and I still do it. I don't get much, but it keeps me active. Besides that, I putter around my house and I have a little house I'm fixing up now. In other words, a little more work.
- R: During the 1960's did you live here in the same house?
- D: Yes, I lived right here on Negley Street.
- R: What was an average day for you like in the 1960's?
- D: The same as today. I would go to work, come home and in the summer I would go down in the garden. In the winter I would

mostly go to basketball games and that would be it, and take my wife out and raise children.

R: That is a job in itself.

D: I know.

R: Can you remember the first time you heard about some of the black minority leaders in the 1960's such as Martin Luther King.

D: Yes, I heard of him and then I heard of this, Reverend Jackson?

R: Jessie Jackson.

D: Jessie Jackson and one more, Julian Bonds. That's the guy that I remember more than the other two.

R: Why is that?

D: He's intelligent for one thing and I just liked the way he talked. He wanted things for the black race, but he didn't want it all for nothing. He wanted the people to work for it and he did come out and say that in a couple of speeches I heard on television. That's who I remember more, Julian Bonds.

R: Was TV mostly how you heard about him?

D: Yes, then I read that he was, I think, a senator from South Carolina; I forget now where he was from. Anyway, when I heard of him then, he was on TV and that was when I really understood, just listening to him.

R: How did most of your friends and relatives feel about him?

D: They didn't know too much about him, but they thought Martin Luther King--I suppose that would be the name you want--was just sort of like a hypocrite. I don't know how to say it. Anyway, that was the way they felt about him. He wanted everything for his people but to them he was keeping mostly for himself even though he did go on these marches and stuff. This is the way they all told me, that's the way they talked to me anyway.

R: Can you recall hearing or remembering anything about some racial rioting in other American cities throughout the 1960's?

D: I had read about them in the newspapers. I mean, I read about them and saw them on TV and it seemed like, to me, that they wanted everything, you know, more or less for nothing. I mean I knew they were, what would you call it . . .

R: . . . militant?

D: No, of the white race or the average American person, kept them down and figured they wanted to make it all in one year instead of taking their time like the old people that came from the old country. They worked for what they got; they didn't riot, they just went and worked. This is what the people, you know, they held that against them more than anything.

R: Okay. Well, during the 1960's could you sense any growing racial tension in Farrell?

D: Believe it or not, no. Not until Martin Luther King got killed, then it all broke loose, to me. I mean, all of the black people that I knew were my age and a little more conservative and they all worked. It wasn't them, it was the transients that came from the other cities I think that caused a lot of this. They got all of the young blacks and they were probably mad that Martin Luther King got killed anyway and they just had somebody tell them, "Well, let's go get those people and we'll start burning up." This is the way I feel and there was . . . no, in fact, I went golfing that night and I came home and we had a riot; I didn't even know it. There was no tension as far as I know.

R: Was there a lot of blacks who moved into Farrell from out of town during the 1960's?

D: I don't know if they moved in. There is a lot now, but at that time I think they were mostly transients from nearby cities, like, well, New Castle, Youngstown, wherever; I don't know, but it seemed like every time the police stopped somebody they were either from Ohio or from New Castle.

R: They weren't residents of Farrell?

D: They weren't residents of Farrell.

R: A lot of them were here looking for trouble or for something to do?

D: Not looking for it, they wanted to start it and they succeeded. As far as I could see, they went after the young people and the young people, I think, couldn't make up their minds anyway, they just had someone lead them and I think they followed them. They knew what they were doing, but they didn't know how serious it was. Now this is the way I feel about it. Like I say, I was out and I came in and boom, we had a riot.

R: Do you think the racial violence that did happen in Farrell was the result of sort of a domino effect throughout the country.

D: Yes, I think what started it, the second one was when Martin Luther King got killed, got shot. The first one I don't remember too much about what happened. Why they did it, I don't know, but the second one I do know that the outsiders had an effect on the race riots in Farrell. That's as far as I can see because the older black people in Farrell even to this day are afraid of their own young blacks because somebody is leading them or telling them or something or showing them and they're more afraid than the white people. They just pick on them, I don't know why. This is the way I see it now.

If you read the papers in Farrell, all of the robberies that are taking place are mostly down in their area and the older people are suffering, not the younger people.

R: That's interesting. At any time was your life or any of your family's lives ever affected by any racial tension or violence?

D: Not directly. I think what had happened when we had this race riot, it did have an effect on my children, the way they feel about the black people. They respect the older black; they're cautious of the younger black. In other words, they don't trust them too much. This is the way I see it and this is the way it had an effect on my children. Their good friends come over here . . . Farrell now is sixty percent black when my children went it was forty percent black and we always had black people here. We had no problem with them. They were nice young people, but unfortunately they're not all like that. I mean most of them.

R: Did you ever have any problems at work?

D: No, we have a few in our trade. It's a pretty tough trade; you have to know what you're doing. A lot of them, the reason why they can't get into the trade is because they have a record. A felony charge would you call it?

R: A criminal record.

D: Criminal record, whatever. They have some kind of a record and it states right on the application.

R: If you have any?

D: If you have any they won't except their application, but the other trades have them. We get along fine; there are no problems.

R: Did any of your children ever have any racial problems at school?

D: No, that's what I said, that's part of it all. My children

had them. The girls had the girls and the boys had the boys. I had three or four at a crack, five, six sometimes.

R: How about in your neighborhood here. Were you pretty much away from all of the violence down on Idaho, I think?

D: You're right. We were from . . . I would say from Beechwood Avenue on up there wasn't any what you would call violence. But they did come around one night and tried to . . . there were too many guns on them out there for them to try it again. They were warned not to come up.

R: What happened then?

D: They just stopped coming up. When this racial violence started, the last one that I remember, they weren't kids, young men. They just about told them that they were going to come up and build a fire in the area. They told them that if they came up they were going to get blown off the street. They were lined up. These young people were lined up with shotguns.

R: Residents here?

D: I don't know about here, but in the area.

R: What area was that?

D: That would be from the boulevard up to maybe Patt Drive and all up in Memorial Drive. I don't know of any of them personally, but I do know I heard rumors, pretty strong rumors, that they were told to watch so nothing happened up there important. It's a bad thing, but you know, you could have had a little war.

R: Yes. Were there any examples or things that you can think of, and clubs or organizations you belong to? Any racial problems there?

D: No. I belong to Italian Home. Socially I belong to the Knights of Columbus, and I belong to the V. F. W. We have no racial problems there. They come in the Italian Home as guests. They could be a social member there. They accept them; they haven't kept them out.

R: Do you know if there are any of your friends who were ever directly affected by any violence or tension?

D: That I couldn't say. All I know is it did turn a lot of my friends against all of the blacks, not just a part of them like me. I am against violence. Anybody, I don't care if they are black or white, they walk down the street now and they own the street. That's it; you move for them instead of both giving, but they just push you off. This is one of the bad things that happened out of this civil rights bit they got.

Civil rights is beautiful, but civil rights is civil rights. You don't go out and burn and kill. This is the way I feel about it. My dad and my grandfather came here and they were prejudice. You know, people didn't like the Italians. A lot of people didn't like Italians; a lot of people didn't like Germans, but they never went to this extent.

R: They work within the system?

D: Yes, well, they tried to work within the system. They all got their citizenship papers; they all worked hard; they all raised their families and they made a good living by going out and working.

One thing I don't believe about our civil rights is we're giving a lot that we shouldn't give, such as jobs. They get fired maybe once or twice and they still go back. I'm against this. I don't think this is civil rights, I think this is just . . .

R: Going overboard and giving . . .

D: Yes, well, they don't want the N.A.A.C.P. or anybody on their back. But I think if they went out and explained to these people what happened, why he got fired twice or she got fired twice, it was the simple reason that they didn't do their job. If you don't do your job you can't hold the job.

R: Right.

D: This is the way I feel. This is the way I see it.

R: What can you recall about some of the burning and damage done to some of the Farrell businesses such as Pic Electric?

D: Pic wasn't burned. Pic's, believe it or not, one of the business establishments wasn't picked on for one reason, they treated the black people like they treated the white people, fair. They had one window broken and that was after the tension had died down. They had no fire. But these other businesses, Mike Nevants' business was vandalized up there. I don't understand why, but they did vandalize him. He was a good man.

The other places that were burned weren't businesses, they were empty buildings actually. There weren't any that I know of. I can't recall of any that were burned outside of the empty buildings in Farrell. This I can say truthfully. I'm pretty sure, if I'm not mistaken.

R: Would you label what happened in Farrell during the summer of 1969 a riot? Why or why not?

D: No. I think it was more frustration to tell you the truth. I think it was more frustration instead of anything else. They lost a leader and like I say, they had to have somebody to lead them and they had the wrong people and it just mushroomed after that. It was more frustration than anything else I think and I don't blame them. They had been frustrated for, they say for 400 years. I don't know, but I didn't do it. Why take it out on me? I don't think I should take it out on them and I don't.

But I think it was more frustration than anything else. What would you call it, to hurt somebody or kill somebody? I don't think they shot at anyone.

R: No.

D: They just took it out on other things. The empty buildings, they burned them and that was it. They had the people in Farrell on pins and needles for three nights. You can't blame them.

R: Do you think most of the damage that was done was done by people from Farrell or from out of town?

D: I would say from Farrell. They were led there and that was it. I think it was more that way.

R: Can you recall anything about the Black Youth Action Committee? Do you remember anything about that?

D: Who?

R: The Black Youth Action Committee. They were a group, Bill Samuels and G. B. Thompson?

D: Oh yes. We had them at our basketball games and our football games. They did a good job. They kept it down to a minimum. I think they did a great job. Later on, they settled down and everything faded away. It's people like that who are concerned too about not only the blacks and the whites, but the city of Farrell. That's the way I see it.

R: How do you think the Sharon Herald reported the events in Farrell during the 1960's?

D: I think they overemphasized it about ten times of what it was; they usually do.

R: They helped add to the fire more than anything?

D: I think they added a little bit of fire to the furnace. Of course, you know, if you get a newspaper or a young

editor that wants to make a little name he'll stretch it a little bit. At the time nobody thinks anything of it because it's bad, but not as bad as it was. I don't remember reading too much about it in the paper because I had it first-hand. I knew policemen on the force, buddies of mine like Bill Caputo and the others. I would ask them. They said, "It's tense, but we have it under control," and they did.

R: You don't think the National Guard needed to be called in like some people did?

D: No! Like I say, I was as afraid as the next guy. I put double locks on my doors and I never did before. But it was bad, everybody I think was more afraid because it was the first time it ever happened here. Of course, the big cities always had their little race riots and stuff or gang wars. So far we're fortunate we don't have gang wars. That's the way I feel.

R: How do you feel the Farrell police dealt with all the racial problems Farrell had?

D: I think they did a good job. I think they could have done better job, but I think the mayor held them back a little bit. Maybe it was good because there were a couple of policemen that would have, I think, lost their cool. Mayor Giroski, I think, was the mayor at the time. He did things that we thought were wrong, but now you look back and I think they were the right decisions.

R: You feel the city government handled the problems pretty well?

D: As well as they could. For the first time or second time, the first time I don't remember too much about it. I think I was away.

R: Most of the bad stuff happened in 1969, I think.

D: Yes, right after Martin Luther King.

R: Was there any group or movement you knew which tried to better race relations in Farrell during the 1960's?

D: Oh yes, I remember there were a few blacks that were concerned about it. I think they were more concerned about their older people and the city of Farrell than anything else because it was happening down there. I think our city fathers got with them and I think they cooled it down within three days. I think in three days everything was almost back to normal.

I think they did a good job as far as I can remember because

we didn't have it linger on for a week, two weeks, had to call the National Guard in. We did have state troopers in, that I remember. They were on Idaho Street and they blocked all the entrances into Farrell, Pennsylvania. They stopped the cars coming from Ohio which were black. I know this for a fact, and they sent them back. All the areas, in other words, closed all the entrances and exits out of Farrell and they did a good job.

R: Then a lot of people do believe that there was trouble being bussed in?

D: Oh yes, they knew it. In fact, they did bus a bunch of people one time and I can't remember when it was, whether it was this time, but they were supposed to go up to the mall and get off. Of course it was a rumor, but I heard that they stopped the bus. They were coming in here. Now it's very vague to me because there were so darn many rumors going around and we did have a good center for rumors. They set one up and the blacks took care of that and some whites, down at the city building or . . . I forget where the center was. But they had that under control too.

R: Was it a rumor control?

D: Yes, that had that. I remember that.

R: A lot of the blacks felt that they weren't fairly represented on council and school board and stuff.

D: True, but everybody voted and their population was forty percent-- I don't know what it was then--black and sixty percent white. If they didn't register to vote I don't think it was our fault. We voted for every man. We just have a new Reverend Tatum in. When a black ran, Billy Samuels, he came close and I think his own people beat him, not the white people. I think he got more white votes than he did black. This I'm pretty sure of.

R: Do you think the voting at large is a fair system then? Do you think voting at large instead of by wards in electing councilmen . . . everyone's elected at large I think.

D: They're elected at large. We have voting precincts down there. One, two, three of them down there that I know of. We have three down there and we have four up here. I forget, but anyway it's evenly distributed. The blacks don't have to come up to Eccles building to vote and we don't have to go down to Our Lady of Fatima or the firehouse to vote. It was all distributed equally

If they look at the last election, I don't think Reverend Tatum carried too well in one precinct down there and in

Farrell High School he didn't carry too well, but all the other ones he carried good. I think he's a good man. I think we got a good man and that's who I think the people vote for. That's the way I feel.

R: Can you recall any specific examples of racial prejudice in Farrell during the 1960's say in real estate or economics?

D: I would say maybe in real estate. If you notice today there are signs posted by the people who are selling; real estate people, their names are on the front lawn. At that time it wasn't that way. I think you had to make a call or you had to come up in person and I think if they were black, which I think is wrong, they would either jack the price up or wouldn't even talk to them. They would say they changed their mind. I think now I'm glad they're putting them out there.

I know if they buy a home they're going to take care of it. I can cite you: There's one on the corner of Romer and Indiana, one on Romer Boulevard between Indiana and Pennsylvania, one here on Lincoln, one on Patton Avenue, and one on Indiana. I mean they're starting to get in the flow like they should be.

R: Do you think there was any red lining by realtors then in this area?

D: I think so.

R: Do you think any single group was responsible for all the racial unrest and violence in Farrell?

D: I don't know; I couldn't say anything; I wouldn't know that. Do you mean about the real estate?

R: No. I mean the racial prejudices and violence that happened. Would you single out any specific group?

D: No. Like I say, I think it was frustration more than anything else.

R: Do you think it was mostly young people?

D: Yes. Like I say, some of these fellows that came over here figured they could lead the lamb to slaughter, I don't know, but this is what they did. This is the way I see it.

R: Was there ever any Black Panthers or anything like that, Urban League, N.A.A.C.P. that you recall?

D: Yes, we had the Urban League, but they didn't do anything. We had no Black Panthers that I know of. If there were then it

was a pretty well kept secret.

R: Looking back at the 1960's now and all the racial unrest in Farrell, what changes would you liked to have seen instituted in the city as a whole that maybe would have perhaps bettered things?

D: I couldn't tell you. They had the opportunities in Farrell. Not only Farrell, I would say Sharon too.

R: Do you think more recreation facilities for blacks could have calmed things down?

D: I think they got a lot of recreation. I mean they do. They have a nice playground down in the southwest garden; they go up to the high school. We don't have one here; we have to go to the high school to play on the playground. We have one here, but there's no facilities for basketball or anything over here; at one time they did have it. But I think their recreational facilities are adequate. Maybe they could be improved, but adequate.

R: Overall do you think the racial problems Farrell had were inevitable?

D: Yes, I would think so, by the other big cities and everything. I would say they picked it up from that and then you had those leaders and it had to come.

R: It was a chain reaction type of thing.

D: And then boom! When he got killed, that's what happened. I think that's what set it off. I think the tension was always there, but something had to set it off and that was what set it off.

R: Did you yourself ever participate in any group or organization concerned about Farrell's racial problems?

D: No, I never was even asked.

R: How different are race relations in Farrell now compared to what they were in the 1960's?

D: They're a little better, but I don't think they're too much better.

R: You think there's still a lot of fear out there?

D: No, I wouldn't say fear. Now I think it's becoming a little more respect than fear, but I still think the whole problem is both the black and white leaders. Like I say, if a black gets fired and a white gets fired you don't hire the black

and not hire the white back or vice versa. This is one area they've got to straighten out I think.

R: It's a form of reversed discrimination almost?

D: It would be discrimination on both sides. Now if you get a black guy and hire him and he gets drunk and you fire him or you warn him and you give him a couple of days off and you fire him, bang! He goes to whatever organization he goes to and he gets hired back. Same way with the whites. He gets warned, then he gets fired, then he goes to somebody he knows and they say, "Hey, take care of him." I think this is one problem they have to straighten out.

R: Is there a lot of that in Farrell today?

D: I don't know in Farrell, but I know in the factories I've heard a few things happen. I don't know how true they are, but they're working; they're back to work. You know this isn't right to a fellow or girl who wants a job and keep it and go to work and you have to hire somebody like that and keep them and he's not doing any good for the company or anybody else. I think that's one area that should be straightened out.

R: Something has to be done?

D: Yes, I think.

R: Since you've lived in Farrell all of your life, how do you feel the racial problems in Farrell in the 1960's have affected the reputation of the city overall in the greater Shenango Valley?

D: Bad, bad publicity. Well, anywhere. Detroit still has a mark from their's in 1944 or 1949 when they had their riot. But they still have scars there; they'll never outlive that. The same way with me, we go out of town . . . that's where they burned all that town down. You get all this bit when you go, but they also do say, "Well, that's the home of the state basketball champions." So it's one or the other they remember it by.

R: Do you think the city can better its reputation in any way?

D: They're doing it right now I think with all this southwest garden, northwest garden building. Getting industry in, they're getting diversified industry. I think they're on the move; they're doing a good job. They're trying anyway, so let's hope.

R: Is there anything else important you would like to say that we didn't cover?

D: No. Like I say, the one area I think where a lot of people

have discriminated against is because of what I told you about that job market deal. I think if they straighten that out that would be one plus. That would be a big jump because I don't want to go to work when a guys comes up to me and says, "Hey, I'm going to get drunk tonight, don't come in tomorrow; I have to work!" Then he doesn't get fired, so then how do you feel when you're out working.

R: You're working and he's . . .

D: Right. So that's how the prejudice starts. You say, "What the hell am I working for?" So that's a big area I think that would straighten a lot of it out if it would only go to the proper channel. Go to your black leaders, go to your white leaders and say, "Hey, we can't have this; this is sick." Go to your unions and say, "Hey, we can't have this. I don't care what the union says, if he's not doing the job, out! That's the way it should be." That's the only thing I could say.

R: Do you ever consider moving out of Farrell at any time?

D: Only if . . .

R: Did you at all during the 1960's, when all the trouble started?

D: Yes. About 1971 I bought some property in West Middlesex. I was going to move there, but then I decided against it. That was the only time.

R: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW