

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM  
Youngstown Law School Graduates

Family, Political Experiences, and  
Youngstown Law School Days

O.H. 91

ALVY T. WITT

Interviewed

by

Paul Carlson

on

May 5, 1977

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: ALVY T. WITT

INTERVIEWER: Paul Carlson

SUBJECT: Family, early experiences, work experiences, political jobs, important cases, Youngstown Law School days.

DATE: May 5, 1977

CARLSON: This is an interview with Mr. Alvy T. Witt for the Youngstown State University Law School Graduate Project by Paul Carlson. We are at 264 North Heights Avenue, Youngstown, Ohio. The date is May 5, 1977 at approximately 3:00 p.m.

Mr. Witt, could you tell us something about your background?

WITT: I am married to Lillian M. Keffer. I am 75 years old. We had five children, one of whom died in infancy, and one of whom became a professor at the Youngstown College of Music, and he died in 1967. His wife died in 1968. They left five children whom we have raised and reared and have now living with us one grandchild. His name is Robert Charles Witt.

I started practicing law in 1927 and continued in the practice of law by myself until the present time. I have served over fifty years in the practice of law. Besides the one boy who is since deceased, we have three daughters. Their names are Mrs. Ervin Sanders, Mrs. John Carlon and Mrs. Gloria or Nick Reachmack. We are going to celebrate our fiftieth wedding anniversary next month.

- C: Could you tell us something about your family, your parents?
- W: I am a descendant of a German family who immigrated to this country in about 1872. I am the grandson of Nicholas and Katherine Governor. In German that is known as Gouveneur. They came from Trier Rheinland Germany in the Alsace Loraine district, which is near Munich or Munchen. My grandfather was a coal miner by profession and then later started in farming. He lived in Vienna, Ohio and Girard, Ohio in his later years. My father was Joseph Witt and mother was Mary Elizabeth Governor Witt. My father during the biggest part of his life was an undertaker, and in the later years of his life became a grocer. My father died in 1943 and my mother died in 1951.
- C: What do you remember about your early experiences growing up in Youngstown?
- W: Oh, I grew up the same as any other kid did in the city. We lived on Grant Street until about 1919. And then we moved to Arlington Street and lived there for 28 years. I grew up in a neighborhood where the corner gang was the peer group and had such neighbors as Quinlan from the police department, Murphy, a carpenter contractor, Joyce, a contractor of cement. And we just grew up. I don't know what else to say. One of my early neighbors was Sid Rigelhaupt. This was on Grant Street and when we moved to Arlington Street. He is now a judge. Of course that is not important either.
- C: Did you go to St. Columba School?
- W: Yes, I went to St. Columba School, parochial school. I graduated from there and went to law school. I graduated from there and started practicing law and have never quit.
- C: What do you think your early influences were on you that maybe steered you towards law? Or when did you decide you wanted to go to law school and why?
- W: Well, I always wanted to be a lawyer. That is the only thing that I ever did want to be. And I was encouraged in that by my mother and father and brothers and sisters. And I passed the bar examination in due time and started practicing law in about 1927 or 1926. And I ran right in head on into the Depression of 1930. I never quit practicing law even in spite of the hard times and continued in the practice until the present time. Of course at the present

time, I am retired, I don't do anything except consult with a couple of friends that want to talk to me; I will talk to them.

C: As far as your early schooling, I noticed in one of the articles that I read in the Vindicator that you had a flair for history. Is that one of your favorite subjects?

W: Well, I have a flair for reading. And I always did like history and have done quite some work on the Civil War subjects. And have made biographies and history the main sources of my reading material other than law.

I had a series of articles on historical subjects mostly being generals of the Civil War period, concerning generals particularly of the southern states, of the Confederacy. I have one of them here that is dated, which was given over WKBN radio on April 25, 1938, at 7:45 p.m. That would be the general date of when these were issued. Within a year or two years of that date. It was headed, "The Series Under the Southern Skies." I have done many articles for radio stations, they are so numerous that I can't recall them. They were on many subjects, but they were usually along historical lines. Now I have some of them here. I haven't made a fetish of keeping these, but these are some that I have got and there are many more that I haven't got. I would give them over the radio stations for a period of about three or four years. And they were all on the general subject and idea of history.

As you can see here, I see now that I have a clipping here from November 29, 1935, in which I invited Senator William E. Borah, who was a leading contender for the presidency at that time. And I wrote a letter to him and invited him to come and he said that he would, but he didn't.

C: Were you going to have him speak on the show or to interview him?

W: No, to come here to address us. And he promised to me and said that he had not made any speaking engagements. He wrote me an appreciation letter and everything, but he didn't do it. And certificates of appreciation from the Liberty Optimist Club, Power Squadron, certificates of membership in Power Squadron. Which was an educational project that we had here in town for Power Squadron, which is still in existence, voting.

C: I noticed that you attended Halls Business College.

W: Yes, I attended Halls Business College which was the foremost business college in the city at that time. I graduated from there both in bookkeeping and stenographic work.

C: Could you tell us what you remember about your law school days?

W: Not much. I was one of Governor Bricker's campaign men and quite an interested man in him. I was assistant attorney general to Bricker, and Tom Herbert when they were attorney generals of the state. And I was assistant to Hugh Jenkins when he was attorney general of the state. I worked in all phases of the legal affairs of the state. Now, I can't tell you what I did. We did whatever we were assigned to do. Whatever work that came up to do, we did it. And anything of that kind. And I was sent, I traveled all over the United States trying cases for the State of Ohio. Mrs. Witt and I traveled, we tried cases in Cincinnati and West Virginia.

One trip I went to take care of legal work for the Attorney General in the Mayo Clinic, up in Seattle, and then into California. Well, we made a circle trip. From Youngstown to California, to Spokane, and Bakersfield and Los Angeles and many points in between. Because when we set the trip up to go that way we would touch all bases. Any place where they had any work to be done, I took care of it. That was one trip.

On other trips I went to New York, Philadelphia, Chicago, and other points in between. My regular assignment took me to these places. I made many trips. To Philadelphia, Baltimore, New York, Boston, and places of that kind; that was routine work for us.

C: You were instrumental in Attorney General Bricker's campaign when he ran for governor in 1936, right? And you probably played a part in that campaign?

W: He ran for governor and if 1936 is the year, then yes. I got these dates all wrong. I don't want to give you any dates to be accurate and sure of them. He ran for governor once, I think. I don't know whether he was defeated for governor.

C: Okay, that is not really important.

W: No, that isn't important; it is that I was involved with

Governor Bricker when he was governor for all his term. Then I was involved with Tom Herbert. He went from Attorney General to Governor and I was involved with him in both positions. And then Hugh Jenkins came after them, followed them as attorney general. And I was involved with him as attorney general. And I have been with these fellows as a matter of course we just traveled with them all the time. If we were in town then we would be with them. And if they wanted us they would call us and if they didn't, why we went about our business. But we were the ones that would be in the office and they would call us up and talk to us and everything of that kind, see.

C: Did you get along better with any one of them more so than another one?

W: I got along with everybody. I wouldn't say that there was anybody that I had any differences with, nor had any feuds with. I did my work, did what was assigned to me, went to where I was supposed to be and took care of my business as best I could. When they assigned us to go any place, they would send us there or they would give us an order, go to Chicago, go to Philadelphia, go to New York, go to where ever it is and they would have their cases set up for us, see. And we would go in and handle whatever matter was there for us and then come home when we could. And when I went on the trip around California, I went and I had my assignments. I went in and took care of them, whatever was to be done, nobody would tell me what to do. Just to take care of them.

C: It sounds like that had to be very challenging, exciting.

W: Oh, it was exciting, but the glory is gone. It is a "has-been" thing now. It is just another has-been. I have had many cases that were notable. Many cases that were immense, I handled cases that amounted to millions of dollars. And everything of that kind. But we don't talk about those things. There are cases where you just sit in on them and they are just routine. They are just routine cases and you don't even think about them after they are over. You go in, take care of your work, and go on to the next job. And I don't know what to tell you about them.

C: Well, you told me quite a bit. What about this, the year again is unimportant, but I noticed that in 1937 you were candidate for municipal judge. Do you recall that, anything about that episode in your life?

W: Now wait a minute, that was one mistake that I made in my life. That was the only mistake that I made, that I ran for office. If I hadn't run for office everything would have been happy and everything else. I ran for office and I was defeated. I am not proud of it and I am not ashamed of it in any respect. But oh, I was interested in politics all of my life. And many, oh, I had many dinners for people here for different candidates, different ones that were running for office and such a that. In Mayor Lionel Evans' campaign, when he was running for mayor, my son made several talks for him. He was about four years old then, or five, and he made talks for him. So that is the son that died.

C: You spent seven years in the state office, what was it like to come back here and set up practice? Did you have to start a whole new routine again then when you set up your own office?

W: Yes. But I was better acquainted and it was then that I started in on a specialized practice, workman's compensation. I was the only workman's compensation, I am not going to say specialist, but yet I gravitated towards that practice. And I became known as being knowledgeable of workman's compensation.

I pursued that practice, then, for the rest of my years in practice. So, while I was representing the state I had several cases that were rather memorable. There was one where about 145 men were killed in one accident and I represented the state in connection with that. That was East Ohio Gas Company of Cleveland. And there was another one where there were about 140 men killed in an accident in a coal mine in the southern part of the state. And I represented them in that case. And there were many, many other cases that we had individual problems with that were new problems that we had to deal with. Because the law was changed and with every change of the law became different problems involved with it. And so from the time in 1936 when I first started working with compensations until the rest of my life, I was involved in workman's compensation, either for the state or for the claimant.

C: What do you remember about your race for mayor against Frank Kryzan? That seemed to be quite a challenging period?

R: Let's see, that is when he defeated me, isn't it?

C: No, you were only in the primary on that.

R: I would rather not talk about being in the race. I have been in them and I just don't want to talk about them. Because they are not a satisfying portion of my activity. I would rather think of the time when I was helping somebody else. Because most of my life, most of my actual working was in the helping of people who were in need, who were injured, who were out of work, and such as that. And I was engaged most of the time in trying to help them get some money. And that is what I want to think of as being the times that I spent in helping people. When I would take a case, and when it was hopeless and I would come up with something of a novel experience where I could get in and make a case for them. And that is where I made a reputation for being skillful in seeing what is necessary to make a case. And I distinctly remember one case, I am not going to start naming cases, but where I got money for three different widows from the workman's compensation.

When I attended Youngstown College of Law, Teddy Johnson, Theodore Johnson, was dean when I first started there. And then Judge Gessner was dean of the school. And then I think, oh, I don't know who else came after.

C: Well, they have that record down there.

R: Yes, they have that record down there, don't they? Theodore Johnson was a very fine dean. And Judge Gessner was a very fine dean. But those two men were at odds on the way to handle the school. Until it was that Dean Johnson resigned and Judge Gessner was put in charge. And there is nothing to tell about a law school, it is just a law school, and that is all. You go in and you argue about cases. And one case may mean something or it may not mean anything.

C: Were they good instructors, did you learn a lot from those instructors?

W: I knew enough to pass the bar examination.

C: But you got one of the highest grades on record. At least they said that in the Vindicator, that your score on the bar was one of the highest they had on record.

W: I would rather not talk about that. I got past the bar examination on the first chance, the first trial. And that



is all that needs to be said. I passed the bar examination the first time that I took it. And I had a good grade, I don't know. If you want to know what grade I got, we got it in the file down there. I don't care what it is, I passed. And there were a lot of them that didn't pass the first time. I don't know what grade it was. There was a fellow by the name of Kane. . . Don't put this story on tape.

C: You don't want this on the tape?

W: No, shut that off.

C: Mr. Witt, can you think of any of the episodes of your early career?

W: Yes. A young man was arrested here in the fall of 1931, I think it was, as being wanted in Virginia. He had been picked up in Virginia some years earlier for stealing a pair of overalls from a railroad car, and had been sentenced to a term in the penitentiary. After a short time he was placed on a road building gang and placed on trust, from which he had simply walked away.

There was a group of us formed a committee who felt he was entitled to help, since he had married here, acquired a family of several youngsters, and was living the life of a good citizen. The question was how best to help him.

The former Youngstown Telegram was interested, as well as Attorney Kedgewin Powell, former Chief of Police, myself and others. Attorney Powell favored refusing extradition; several other plans were suggested, and my plan, which was to take him back and attempt to have him pardoned. The Telegram agreed with me and offered to pay my expenses to take him back and try to have him freed. An automobile agency loaned me a car and the Telegram sent along a photographer. My wife and my father accompanied me.

The trip to Virginia was beautiful through the Pennsylvania mountains in the fall of the year, with the leaves turning color.

We drove to Richmond and went to visit the Penitentiary warden, who treated us very well, but stated he would not even talk to us about the case until his prisoner was back in custody. We told him he would be in the penitentiary the

following morning. We got him a room in the Y.M.C.A. where he had a good night's sleep, a shower and a shave. Next morning he was placed in the custody of the warden and I went to the Office of the Governor. He heard our story, had it checked thoroughly, and questioned me to be sure I was telling the truth and to check my identity, and then issued a pardon for my client.

We were taken on a tour of the penitentiary, which was quite up-to-date, and then our man was released to come home with us.

(This story, of course, can be checked in the files of the Telegram, which was later taken over by the Vindicator. Copies of the story should be available at the Public Library.)

END OF FIRST INTERVIEW. SECOND TAPE WAS INAUDIBLE.