

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Niles Ku Klux Klan Riot of 1924

Personal Experience

O.H. 217

FRANK E. MCDERMOTT

Interviewed

by

Stephen Papalas

on

December 8, 1982

FRANK E. MCDERMOTT

Frank E. McDermott was born on Butler Street to John L. and Mary McDermott on May 12, 1905. Frank's father was an Ohio State Senator for several years and one of the most respected people of Niles as well.

Upon graduating from Niles McKinley High School in 1922, Frank went to work in his father's business, the McDermott Construction Company. The company built roads. Frank stayed with the business until 1932, when he joined the A.P. O'Horo Construction Company.

During the Second World War, Frank served with the U.S. Army as a medic and was honorably discharged in 1945. After the war he returned to the A.P. O'Horo Company and retired in 1971.

Frank presently lives with his sister at 611 North Main Street in Niles. He is a member of the St. Stephen's Church and the Knights of Columbus.

His account of the problems between the Ku Klux Klan and the Catholic community in Niles during the early 1920's was exceptional. It should be noted that Frank's father, John, played a leading role in attempting to bring peace during the Fall of 1924. Ironically, Frank later took part in an attack on a group of Klansmen on the eve of the Niles riot on November 1, 1924. In the episode that followed, he was shot twice by a Klansman when he leaped onto a running board of the man's fleeing car.

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INTERVIEWEE: FRANK E. MCDERMOTT

INTERVIEWER: Stephen Papalas

SUBJECT: Childhood; Schooling; Friends; Jennings' Nightclub; City Restaurant; Ku Klux Klan; Nile's East Side; Klan Riot of 1924; City Mayors; Chiefs of Police

DATE: December 8, 1982

P: This is an interview with Frank E. McDermott for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program dealing with the Niles Police Department and the Ku Klux Klan riot of 1924 in Niles. The interview is made with Stephen G. Papalas at Mr. McDermott's home at 611 North Main Street in Niles, Ohio. The time is exactly 7:30 p.m.

Mr. McDermott, could you please tell me where you were born?

M: In Niles.

P: On Butler Street?

M: Yes.

P: Right in your own parents' home, then?

M: Yes. I lived there most of my life.

P: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

M: I had three sisters and one brother, Jack.

P: Where did your parents come from originally?

M: Niles.

P: They were raised in Niles themselves?

M: Yes.

P: What about your grandparents, then?

M: Ireland.

P: Were you, yourself, married? Do you have a family?

M: No . . . I was, but it didn't count.

P: I want to know if you would have any recollection of what it was like in your neighborhood when you were young. What are some of your earliest memories? Who were some of your neighbors or some of your best friends?

M: Well, they're all dead. The Ducks and the Raiders . . . our neighbors . . . the Semples.

P: Did you ever have the opportunity to go up into the East End? Mason Street?

M: Oh, yes. I went around with Brutz for years.

THIRD PERSON: Nelson Brutz.

M: Brutz. We knew him by that name.

P: What was the East End like. You were born in 1905. What was it like when you were fifteen or so? Do you remember?

M: There was a lot of corn whiskey.

P: Must have been exciting days. Is it true that Sonny Jim had the best whiskey in the area?

M: That's what they all say. It was aged.

P: Rita and the others have told me that that was the best around.

M: Yes.

P: Later on, can you remember anything about the night club that they had?

M: Upstairs?

P: No, this would be in the 1930's and 1940's.

M: They had one upstairs for years. That was Joe's.

P: Right. What was the night club like?

THIRD PERSON: Did you ever go up there much?

M: I never went up there very much. You'd get good food and there was a bar . . . I don't know.

THIRD PERSON: Was there gambling?

M: Oh yes, we loved that.

P: What was school like for you?

M: I hated it. After I got out of St. Stephen's, it was bad enough there, but then I didn't do any good at all in high school. I played hooky too much before I was caught. (laughter)

P: What about sports? Were you involved in that?

M: Oh, I loved sports.

P: What did you play?

M: I went out for high school football. My brother, he and Leo Jennings had been stars ahead of me. Coach Loman wanted to make a star out of me.

P: Coach who?

M: Loman. He was their coach. I don't know. I got disgusted and quit that too.

P: Did you ever hear of Carmen DeChristofero?

M: I knew him well.

P: What kind of person was he?

M: Carmen hasn't been dead too long. He was around and helping with all the trouble at that time.

P: During the Klan riot?

M: Yes.

P: Was he active in sports before that?

M: Yes. His brother was a real athlete for the county. What's he in in Warren?

THIRD PERSON: He's a dentist.

M: Dentist. He's still up in Warren. He was quite a football player.

P: Was John in the riot, too?

M: No, he was a little young. He was pretty well-liked. He loved sports, but I don't remember him ever being active in it.

P: Did you remember much about the police department? Do you remember Chief Round? What kind of person is Chief Round?

M: He was getting old then. He was nice enough to us. Charlie Nicholas took his place when Chief Round retired.

P: What do you remember about Dicky Neiss?

M: Slow and easy. Nothing excited him!

P: How about Muche?

M: Louie Muche. We got along good with him.

P: Casper?

M: Casper . . . he was quiet, easy going . . . mill bum.

P: Lieutenant Gilbert?

M: They said he was a Ku Kluxer.

P: What do you remember about the Ku Klux Klan?

M: We were away working, up in Erie, and we got word they were going to parade so we shut the job down and came down. That's when I got shot, that night. The night before the parade.

P: How did that happen?

M: We thought they were hauling in ammunition for the next day. We didn't see any guns until I jumped on the car and Rex Dunn shot me. I happened to make their car first.

P: Let's go through this slowly so I can get some details. Where were they keeping the ammunition?

M: Supposedly keeping it in Rummell's Pool Room, I don't know.

P: In Rummell's Pool Room?

M: Yes. At the town hill.

THIRD PERSON: At the viaduct.

M: No, the viaduct wasn't there then.

P: No, but that's where it is now?

M: Yes.

P: Okay, so as you're going down this hill towards the Mahoning River, it was on the hill?

M: Pennsylvania tracks first, then the river.

P: Was Rummell's just before the river?

THIRD PERSON: Up farther.

M: It was a few stores down the hill from the top.

P: Right on Main Street?

M: I was at the bottom of the hill before I rolled off.

P: The Dunn brothers were part of this gang supposedly taking ammunition into the Rummell's Pool Room to use the next day. And you were with some people who went there to try and stop it?

M: We saw only one car in front of Rummell's. They had just pulled up. I got to their car, but nobody else was with me. They were at the top of the hill.

P: Why?

M: I don't know whether I was faster getting there, or what. But they were shooting at the car. They knew I was there.

P: Your own buddies were shooting at the car?

M: Yes.

P: And you were already on the running board?

M: Yes. Then when I rolled off at the foot of the hill, that's where I was shot at that point. After he

shot me the second time, then I rolled off.

P: At what point did you get shot the first time? Was it as soon as you jumped on the running board?

M: Yes.

P: And they shot you in the shoulder?

M: Yes, this one.

P: That's your left shoulder.

M: Yes.

P: And then what happened? You laid against the running board?

M: No, I sat down and hung on. Then, when I seen he hit me the second time . . .

P: Where did he get you the second time?

M: Right through the scalp.

P: On your right side of the head.

M: Yes. It just went in through my scalp and came out the bottom of my ear, right down there. That's when I left it, and I got all cut up.

P: How fast was the car moving?

M: I don't know. I knew it was time for me to leave it! (laughter) I got all skinned up. Hit the curb.

P: How many men were with you that night?

M: There was quite a gang.

P: More than a dozen?

M: Well, I'd say at least a dozen.

P: What time of night was it?

M: I don't know.

P: Was it dark? Dusk? Pitch black?

M: It had to be eleven or after.

P: Close to midnight then?

M: I'm guessing, because we drove down from Erie, John and I and Joe Jennings. Then we were in the City Restaurant when we heard about them hauling in ammunition. That's when we went down there.

P: You came from Erie and went to the restaurant?

M: Well, we went to the Scriven's Pool Room first. That was up further up on Main Street. Then we went down to the City Restaurant.

P: The City Restaurant?

M: Yes.

P: What happened there?

M: That's when we heard about they were hauling ammunition in.

P: Is that the name of the restaurant--City Restaurant?

M: I think it was. The Greeks had it.

P: What kind of a night was it? Was it warm that night? Was it raining?

M: No. You're asking the impossible.

P: This would be October 31.

M: Well, it wasn't a bad night, if I remember rightly. No rain that I know of.

P: So, from the City Restaurant, what happened?

M: That's when I jumped on the car.

P: You walked down towards Rummell's from the City Restaurant?

M: I didn't walk! We Ran! (laughter) But I happened to be the only one that made the car.

P: And you jumped on the running board?

M: Yes.

P: And what did you have in your hand?

M: Blackjack.

P: Did you hit any of these guys?

M: Well, it wasn't my fault if I didn't!

P: I'm going to ask you a stupid question. (laughter)
Did it sting when you were shot? Was it numb? Did you feel pain?

M: No, not till the next day.

P: What were your first thoughts?

M: Well, I knew I was shot.

P: Did it scare the dickens out of you?

M: No, not at that time.

P: What were your feelings? What were your first reactions?

M: Just numb. It didn't hurt too much at first.

P: No? When you heard the shot?

M: I just hung on to the car.

P: What did your partners say?

M: There was nobody with me.

P: I know, but what were their thoughts? Did they say anything to you afterwards? Were they afraid for you?

M: At the doctor's office?

THIRD PERSON: Did you go back up to where they were or did they follow you down?

P: Did they follow you down the hill?

M: Yes. They must have took me to the doctor's.

THIRD PERSON: They must have been right behind you then?

M: Yes.

P: Who was the doctor who treated you?

M: Dr. Ormerod.

P: In June of 1924 the Klan started to have conclaves, or meetings, in Niles--rallies and parades, Do you remember any of that?

M: We were away working then. Not at that time.

P: What was the word in Niles when you came home? Did anybody tell you about the Klan?

M: Yes. We knew a lot of what was going on. We heard they were in town.

P: What was your opinion of that organization, before the time period in which you were shot. Did they worry you? Did you look down on them? What were your thoughts?

M: Well, when they were against my church, you know what I thought.

P: What, to you, symbolized the burning of the cross? What did that mean to you? Was it religious to you? Was it a religious thing?

M: Yes!

P: What about with your friends? What were their thoughts?

M: Probably the same thing.

P: Did they ever talk about it? Standing on the corner on Main Street sometime in the evenings, did they ever happen to talk about it?

M: No.

P: What was the talk of the town then?

M: Well, we knew they were against our religion, against the Jews and the Catholics.

P: Did you ever see a Klansman in his robe?

M: No, I really didn't.

P: During the parade--well, the attempted parade--the next day after you were at home recuperating, weren't you?

M: I was at home in bed, bandaged up.

P: How long were you in bed?

M: About a week, week and a half.

P: So you missed the entire thing, then, after that.

M: Yes. The next thing was, supposedly, the parade. My dad and brother went. They wanted to stop the march.

P: What was their role? What did they do during the riot? Did they talk to you about it?

M: They lived right over here.

P: Federal Street and Main.

I want to ask you a question. Before the bridge was built over Main Street, right near the Burger Chef restaurant, that was just an embankment with the tracks on it, right? And the street went over the tracks?

M: Yes.

P: Is that where the line was drawn during this riot?

M: It was this side.

P: Going towards Warren a little bit.

M: Well, you know where the G.E. is?

P: Yes.

M: It was right out in front of that on Main Street.

THIRD PERSON: The streetcar ran that way.

M: The new part of the G.E. . . . that wasn't built then. It was all lawn.

P: Do you remember anything about the events of that day as people told you?

M: The day they tried the parade, they only got down this far and they stopped them.

P: Most of them were still on North Road, weren't they? The Klan?

M: I don't know. I wasn't there.

P: Did you know of other people that were shot?

M: Yes. A friend of mine who went to St. Stephen's School with me, Joe Mohan. He got shot through the mouth. I don't know whether he's still living in Warren or not.

P: Was that at Federal Street that he was shot?

M: Yes, I think it was. It was the next day, I know.

P: Did any Klansmen get shot?

M: If they did we didn't hear of it.

P: How did Joe do after he was shot? Did he recuperate?

M: Oh, yes. He's still living, as far as I know.

P: But he wasn't crippled from it or anything like this?

M: No, it just went out the back of his neck, right through his mouth. I don't know of anyone else on our side.

P: What ever became of the person that shot you, Rex Dunn?

M: Oh, I think they've been dead for a while.

P: But what did they do? Did they arrest him?

M: Yes, they had a jury trial in Warren.

P: What did he get?

M: All he got was six months or a year in the workhouse over there in Canton.-- Canton workhouse.

P: What were your feelings about that?

M: I don't know.

P: Don't you think he should have had a stronger sentence?

M: I never even thought much of it.

P: Do you remember Harvey Burgess?

M: I remember the name.

P: He was the prosecutor. What was your opinion of Burgess?

- M: I didn't pay no attention to that. You sure he was the prosecutor? I know Buchwalter, old Jerry, was their lawyer.
- P: Right, Jerry Buchwalter.
- M: Patty Fusco was mine.
- P: He was in the riot too! As a matter of fact he was arrested and then turned around and sued the mayor for \$50,000 for false arrest.
- M: Mayor Kistler. I never heard that.
- P: What kind of man was Fusco?
- M: You'd have to like him. Just a neat fellow.
- P: I want to ask you, can you remember in June, a sailor home on leave who was beaten in Central Park and forced to kiss the flag during a Klan rally? I don't want to mention his name. I think you know who I'm talking about.
- M: Yes.
- P: Did the Klan attempt to tie him to a tree to burn him? Were they going to burn him alive?
- M: No, I never heard that.
- P: But you heard the part where he was beaten and forced to kiss the flag?
- M: Something like that. I forget.
- P: What were his feelings in the following years, after the Navy, after he came home, about that? Did he ever talk . . . ?
- M: He never talked much about it. Before I got the sick spell, I used to see him every day at the rec room.
- P: Can you remember the Klan burning crosses in Niles?
- M: No. We were away working then. We heard about it.
- P: The Knights of Pythias, that hall now where the Daily Times is, do you know of a story where the Klan had their meetings and they put a big cross up with lights on the roof and they lit it up? Did you ever hear of

that?

M: I think I did hear something about it. I don't remember it.

P: What was the Knights of Pythias?

M: I don't know.

P: Can you tell me about your dad? What was his role before the riot started? I've read that your father was among the people who represented the Catholics and also the Knights of the Flaming Circle, and they met in the council chamber a few times with Sheriff Thomas. Thomas brought the guys together and he brought the Klan in there, five or six members of the Klan and six members from the Knights of the Flaming Circle, couple times council was present--city council--always it was with Kistler, the mayor, and with Hewitt. And a couple times, of course, Harvey Burgess was there. Did your dad ever talk about those meetings? Because they were closed-door meetings and I've never been able to find out what was said inside.

M: Not to me he didn't.

P: Who was with him in those meetings? Who represented the Knights of the Flaming Circle?

M: Gee, I don't know. You mentioned Pat Sheehan, didn't you.

THIRD PERSON: Yes.

M: He was superintendent of the brickyard for years.

P: What about Jim Jennings?

M: Jim was active as hell. All the Jennings were.

P: Was he in this peace committee?

M: I couldn't tell you. I don't know. He could have been.

P: The talks failed. What did your dad do then? And your brother?

M: I don't know.

P: Do you know if they were there at the riot?

M: I know they were. You mean when I got shot?

P: No, the next day.

M: Oh yes. I know my dad was. Sure. I was up in bed shot then and they went.

THIRD PERSON: They did try to bring peace, I remember that.

P: Who were some of the Klansmen, some of the leaders, other than Osborne?

M: Clyde Osborne.

P: His son is the judge today. Do you remember any Klansmen who were leaders?

M: [No.]

P: Years later, after the riot, did you ever have--this is a small town in Niles here--did you ever have the opportunity to accidentally meet any of the Dunn brothers?

M: We were paving some streets in Niles. I forget which one it was. I was down on the south side. I had a dump truck. I spotted Rex and I stopped and leathered him.

P: What do you mean, you leathered him?

M: I knocked him on his back. (Laughter) And he stayed there, so I got in the truck and went. You wouldn't call it much trouble.

P: What was your reaction with the others when, as you grew older and so forth, you met people who were on the other side during that riot? Wasn't it difficult to live in the same town, growing up with people who you knew [were part of the Klan]?

M: No! We ignored them! I don't know. That, and I kicked the hell out of a lot of them that we met.

P: Afterward?

M: Yes. We were always in a fight with one of them before and after. We had a circular route in Niles we called the doughnut. State Street was full of stories then--the old post office. You'd walk down Main Street and screw around and then you'd come up the town hill beside the Dollar Bank. There were

stories all around then.

P: What's your opinion of Harvey Kistler?

M: We didn't think much of him.

P: Did you see any policemen around during any of these problems before the riot? What was their role?

M: They didn't bother with us.

P: Why?

M: I don't know. There was a few that supposedly belonged to the Klan that we never had no trouble with them.

P: Did any of them belong to the Knights of the Flaming Circle?

M: Well, we knew they were on our side, so . . .

P: What can you tell me about that organization, the Knights of the Flaming Circle? Rita Jennings tells me that it actually was born, in Niles anyway, in Jennings Hall; that a lot of the men who got the weapons got them there at the hall. Do you remember anything about that? Did you ever go to any meetings of the Knights of the Flaming Circle?

M: No. I know you could always get a gun up there.

P: Was Jennings one of the leaders against the Klan?

M: Oh sure.

P: In what ways?

M: Well, he hated their guts just like we did! Him and his two brothers.

P: In what ways did they help organize any resistance?

M: Sonny Jim was active in any of that stuff. He and Shine mostly--Leo. Joe didn't bother much with it. If he did, he did it on the quiet. It has been so long. My memory's shadowy.

P: Did you ever see a Klan parade?

M: No.

P: Do you remember the day of the riot when you were in

bed? What was it like for you? Did you realize there was a problem going on in town?

M: Oh yes. The militia and this priest come out to see me in my bedroom.

P: When the militia men came to see you with the priest in your house, what did they want to know?

M: Just to see how I was and how I was doing. They didn't talk about it. I don't remember them talking about it even.

P: After the riot, in later years, looking back now, who was the police chief that you thought the most of?

M: In the olden days?

P: From the time you can remember earliest up until now.

M: There's only two I remember--Chief Round and Charlie Nicholas.

P: Were they pretty good guys, then?

M: Yes, I found them good.

P: What about mayors?

M: Well, Kistler was supposed to be a Klansman.

P: He had his front porch blown off, didn't he?

M: On Park Avenue.

THIRD PERSON: Sayers Avenue.

P: Do you remember when Hewitt's house was blown up? by the bootleggers in the late 1920's?

M: Hewitt?

P: O.O. Hewitt. He was the safety director.

M: I don't remember.

P: What do you remember about some of the mayors? Who was the mayor that you thought very highly of? Any one in particular?

M: You'd have to mention their names now.

P: Let's see. Let's go backward. How about DeChristofero?

M: He was way late.

THIRD PERSON: You don't remember Crow do you?

M: No.

P: How about Marshall?

M: George Marshall. He was all right.

P: Do you remember anything in particular about Ferguscn or Williams or Carney?

M: Sure. Bill Carney and I were good friends.

P: What sort of man was he.

M: He was on our side.

P: Pretty good mayor?

M: [Yes.]

P: How about Elmer Fisher?

M: As a mayor, you mean?

P: Yes.

M: Oh, I don't know. Everybody liked Elmer, I think.

P: What about Lenny?

M: As mayor? I never had no dealings with him. I think I went to school with him. He went to St. Stephen's when I was there.

P: Is there anything else that maybe I didn't ask you about this Klan business that you might be able to remember and fill me in on?

M: No, I don't remember much.

P: After the Niles riot was over with, did they kind of disappear from the scene or stay around very much longer after that?

M: The ones we knew, you never seen much of them. We had a lot of street fights if we spotted anybody.

P: Thank you. You were very helpful with some of this.

How often did you drive a truck for Jennings to distribute food during the Depression?

M: Several times.

P: What kind of food?

M: Food baskets. They had a list of people from all over town.

P: How did they thank Jim Jennings?

M: They didn't know who sent it. We had the backing of the Jennings in our construction work, Joe and Shine.

END OF INTERVIEW