

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Niles Project

Ku Klux Klan Riot of 1924

O. H. 628

PASQUALE RUBERTO

Interviewed

by

William Jenkins

on

January 9, 1985

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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INTERVIEWEE: PASQUALE RUBERTO

INTERVIEWER: William Jenkins

SUBJECT: Italian origins, acceptance of Italians,
work, Ku Klux Klan riot

DATE: January 9, 1985

J: This is Bill Jenkins for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program. Today I'm interviewing Pasquale J. Ruberto of 40 Lafayette Street in Niles, Ohio. Today is January 9, 1985.

Mr. Ruberto, could you give me some idea of when you were born and where you were born?

R: I was born in 1896, November 11.

J: Where were you born?

R: Salerno, Italy.

J: When did you come to the United States?

R: 1913.

J: Did your parents come too?

R: No. I landed in New York when I came here.

J: Did you go through Ellis Island?

R: Yes.

J: Did you have lots of trouble?

R: I could not speak English, not a word.

J: Did you come immediately to Niles from New York?

R: No. I stayed three years in New York.

J: What did you do in New York?

R: I was a junk man. We would get paid for selling rags. It was a rotten job. It was dirty.

J: You came in 1916 to Niles. Why did you come to Niles?

R: I came in 1915. I came because I didn't like New York. I worked for 75¢ a day. In Italy I made 15¢. I traveled 5,000 miles to get 15¢.

J: You were making 15¢ in New York?

R: Seventy-five cents in New York. I was making 60¢ in Italy.

J: When you came to Niles . . .

R: I got into the railroad.

J: You made more money here?

R: Yes.

J: Did you have family here in Niles?

R: No.

J: You just came by yourself?

R: I came by myself. A cousin of mine came to this country in 1914. He stopped in New York and thought it was dirty. He had red eye all of the time. The doctor said the only way he could cure his eye was to go back to Italy or back to a farm.

We lived here in Niles. My cousin wrote a letter asking if he had a chance to get a job here. I said, "Sure, come anytime." When he got here immediately he said, "I finally found a fellow American." He made \$1.50 a day here, over there 75¢. Things were more expensive there than here also.

J: You worked for the railroad for how many years?

R: About a year.

J: Which company did you work for?

R: Republic Steel for 25 years.

J: What kind of work did you do for them?

R: (No response)

J: You were working for Republic then during the early 1920's when the Klan came to Niles?

R: Yes.

J: What is your earliest memory of the Klan being in Niles?

R: The time that they put the masks on and they were marching the street. The people didn't like that. They were burning the cross down on Wick Avenue, but we couldn't see that. We could see them running across town so they started burning rubber tires. They were just silly. They wanted to get the Catholic people out of the country. The caller was a joke.

J: Did you, yourself, set up some of those tires?

R: No. I just kept away because it was dangerous. I had two kids, my daughter and my son, and I was taking care of my family. Then I came over . . . It was Saturday midnight, and there was too much confusion.

J: You did not work then, or were not part of the Knights of the Flaming Circle, because of that? Were you involved with that group at all?

R: No.

J: Basically you were more of a spectator on that day?

R: I went on the last day when it was dark. There were a lot of people. I was scared. The people were so crazy they were shooting each other.

J: You said that when you went over by Mason Street they had set up a machine gun?

R: Yes. It was a machine gun set up at Jennings Hall.

J: So at the Jennings Place and across the street they had machine guns so if anyone tried to come through there they would be shot?

R: Yes.

J: When you went down to the glass works field right in front of the General Electric plant there, is that where you walked?

R: Yes.

J: Did you see any of the incidents, any of the shooting?

R: No.

J: You didn't see the actual shooting then. But you did see the people there with their guns ready to stop the Klan?

R: Yes.

J: Do you remember who were some of the leaders of the different groups? Do you remember who led the Klan? Do you remember who lead the Knights?

R: They were from out of town.

J: So the colonel of the National Guard stopped the Klan training and told them to keep going?

R: Yes.

J: You walked around town actually before the Klan came in?

R: Yes.

J: And you went over to work at Republic in the afternoon?

R: Yes.

J: When you came to Niles, did you find Niles prejudice against the Italians? Did you have a problem when you came here yourself? Was there prejudice and did you experience some of that yourself?

R: Well, some of my friends were members of the Ku Klux Klan.

J: Some of your friends at the mill, people you worked with, were members of the Klan?

R: Yes.

J: Did you ever ask them why they joined?

R: No, I didn't ask them.

J: They were able to work with you in the mill?

R: Yes, they worked with us. They were good friends.

J: Usually the people that joined the Klan were from the Anglo-Saxon, Protestant background. In the mills, was there a difference between the type of job an Italian could get and the Anglo-Saxon, Protestant could get?

R: We got all the rotten jobs.

- J: Were many Italians promoted in the Republic Steel Company, at all? I mean were they becoming foremen at that time?
- R: No, they were delivery boys, except for Philip Ross.
- J: He was a foreman. But most Italians were not?
- R: Yes.
- J: Did they keep Italians from moving up on the ladder?
- R: Yes.
- J: So this was a fight between the Irish and the Italians?
- R: Yes.
- J: So the Irish and the Italians really didn't like each other back then is that what you're saying?
- R: I got along with everybody. I minded my own business. Some try to cheat you, some don't.
- J: After the riot, were things any better in Niles between the Irish, the Italians, and the Klan people?
- R: We, we had to work together. It was crazy.
- J: You considered that a little bit crazy. I'll mention some name of some people who took part in the riot, maybe you'll have some ideas about them and maybe not. These were some of the people who were mentioned in the newspapers. The mayor at that time was Harvey Kissler. Do you remember him at all?
- R: Yes.
- J: Pat Fusco and Mayor Kissler met . . . About the march of the Klan, Fusco was trying to stop the march. Some of the leaders on the other side, I gathered, were arrested. Jennings was arrested and Murphy?
- R: Yes. A lot of guys were arrested. Some colored people came from Youngstown.
- J: And what did they do?
- R: I was about 29 years old. I was scared.
- J: The Italian community was that very united at that time? What were some of the clubs and organizations?
- R: Bella Napoli Club.

J: You were the president of the Bella Napoli Club. What kinds of things did the clubs and organizations do?

R: We would get together and play cards and bocce.

J: Do you remember the Mount Carmel Church going up around that time?

R: Yes. I remember that.

J: Do you remember Father Centori?

R: Yes.

J: Did he try to do anything in terms of the Klan?

R: No.

J: In other words, did he try to organize things or did he just kind of stay in the background?

R: He stayed in the background.

J: He married you?

R: Yes.

J: What year did he marry you?

R: 1919.

J: And you have two children?

R: Four. Two girls, two boys.

J: One last question. Do you think Niles today is past those ethnic and religious prejudices? Do you think it's kind of finished with that?

R: No.

J: It still exists, some of it?

R: Yes.

J: I remember one other question I was going to ask you. You said that the Klan had prejudice against the colored as well. I was told a story by several people that Niles at the Erie Station had a sign, "Nigger, don't let the sun shine on your . . . "

R: They [the Klan] killed a woman.

J: Was this in Niles?

R: No.

J: The woman was from Niles.

R: Yes. The woman was from Niles.

J: You don't remember what year or thereabouts? Apparently, there was some incident where some woman from Niles had been raped and murdered and this led to the placement of that sign.

R: I saw the sign.

J: Was it an official sign or a sign that somebody put up there?

R: It was on a piece of wood.

J: I guess what I'm getting at is it wasn't the city council or anybody like that that put it up? Somebody just made it up, did it kind of officially and tacked it up. How long was that sign there?

R: I don't know.

J: Are there any other things that you remember that I perhaps haven't asked?

R: I tried to mind my own business.

J: Is your wife from Niles?

R: She was born in Niles.

J: What was your wife's maiden name?

R: Mordente.

J: I would like to thank you very much. On the day of the riot there was at least one major incident in front of Mount Carmel Church which involved a car. Can you tell us a little bit about that, what happened?

R: Everyone was saying, "Get out of here, the KKK is coming!" People were searching the cars.

J: So the women were approaching the car and they had guns too? They were searching the car?

R: Yes. The Klan members had guns.

J: The Klan also had guns?

R: Yes, everyone of them There were people everywhere.

J: Lots of people mobbing around. Over a thousand people on the road. What was the incident involving the car? One car was overturned.

R: More than one. I don't know how they did it.

J: If they saw robes they automatically turned it [car] over?

R: Yes.

J: Did they chase the people away then? Did they allow them to get in their car and drive off or did they just chase them away?

R: The soldiers came and the Klan members left.

J: You mentioned also the incident where several Klansmen were captured and ran away, then brought back and shot. What do you remember about that?

R: You could see them there. They were starting to come right away, and then fifteen minutes the rest of the guys came. Then they went back.

J: Anything else about the confusion of that day?

R: No. It's been a long time, over sixty years.

J: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW