YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown Small Business Project

Personal Experiences

O. H. 772

THOMAS WILLIAMS

Interviewed

by

Hugh Earnhart

on

October 29, 1974

O. H. 772

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Youngstown Small Business Project

INTERVIEWEE: THOMAS WILLIAMS

INTERVIEWER: Hugh Earnhart

SUBJECT: Great Depression, World War I, World War II, service, customers, other barber shops and owners

DATE: October 29, 1974

E: This is an interview with Thomas Williams at 316 East Florida Avenue in Youngstown for the Oral History Program at Youngstown State University. The interviewer is Hugh Earnhart. The date is October 29, 1974, at 10:30 a.m.

Mr. Williams, what do you recall about your early school days in Philadephia?

W: Well, I had no schooling in Philadelphia. I was eleven years old when I landed in Philly. I was born in Europe and I had some schooling from the ministry. I followed it through. I only had thirteen lessons, or six and one half hours. Before the ministry, I completed six grading periods of school in Italy. This is the same as twelve years here. I learned with the rest of them and picked it up myself.

I could read, write, or do anything. My biggest trouble is spelling. I have trouble with the five vowels. They're the ones that puzzle me especially "i" and "o". Those two drive me crazy. I just can't get the words out. I get twisted. When I have to write a letter, those two vowels stop me.

E: What did you do in your study lessons with the minister? What type of things did he teach you?

W: Oh, he taught me different things. This was long ago. My God, it has been sixty some years back. He gave me the key to go on.

The most education I got was through the funny paper. There was an old Irish man I knew while I was learning my trade. He saw me reading the Italian paper one day and he said, "Read

this." That old Irishman used to read funny papers of all types. He showed me two words in a paper and believe me, I went on from there. I started reading the paper and magazines and a few books and I read pretty well. I was self-educated, but I got along all right. I got along pretty well with what I knew.

E: Why did you come to Youngstown in 1916?

W: Well, that's kind of a funny story. I met a fellow one time in a poolroom. I used to be a pretty good pool shooter. I shot pool because there was a poolroom here by the barber shop where I learned my trade. In those days, you know, a poolroom had a bad name. When I was about fifteen or sixteen, I was a pretty good player. I used to enjoy playing until the gamblers started to get at it. I played for the pleasure of it. I was no gambler; I never was a gambler. It was not in me.

I was beating a fellow that was supposed to be so good at pool. His name was Crater. He was from Baltimore. In fact, he was from Sparrow's Point. His dad had a big job with a shipyard. We got acquainted and he said to me, "Tommy, do you know where I can get a job?" Well, in the city of Philadelphia, in those days, there were a lot of wild kids. Well, you would find them all over the country. So I said, "Yes. I think I can get you a job." I happened to know some people by the name of Roberts. I was boarding with them for five dollars a week, which was a lot of money. I paid Mrs. Roberts fifty cents more to iron my shirts. He said one day that he would come over. I told him, "If you come to 61 Elmwood Drive, I think I can get you a job."

Mrs. Roberts had two sons. One was a police lieutenant down at the City Hall in Philly. The younger son had a good job with Remington Arms. So I thought they could get George a job there. The boy was hungry and everything else. I said, "Are you hungry?" He said, "Yes." In those days, for twenty-five cents you could eat a meal. "Have you any place to go to sleep?" "No," he said. Well, I said, "There's a sign over there: Fifty cents a cot." I gave him an extra three quarters. It cost five cents in those days to ride on a streetcar.

I got up the next morning. Mrs. Roberts came up and said, "Tommy, there's someone down here that wants to see you." I came down and the first thing you know, there was George Crater! I said, "Wait a minute. Mrs. Roberts, is your son gone?" She said, "No. He didn't leave yet. He's having breakfast." I went up and asked him if there was a job for this boy. George was a couple of years older than I. Mrs. Roberts' son said, "Yes, I think I can get him a job. Come on. I'll take you with me." George got the job and I got acquainted with him. That's how it came to be that we were very close.

One day George said to me, "What do you say we leave here? Let's go to Chicago." I said, "I don't know." "Oh, come on," he said, "let's go." In those days they wrote letters back and forth and he wanted me to meet some people from Sparrow's Point. He said, "How about coming over? It's going to be a family reunion, a real evening. How about coming with me?" I said, "Okay." I was very young, you know, and it was not a question of money. It didn't take a lot of money, in those days, anyhow, but I always managed to have a dollar or so in my pocket. I always saved some on the side. If something happened to me, I had no one to go to.

We went to Sparrow's Point then. They treated me nice. It was a nice week of fun. We came back the Sunday after it was all over. We had met some people from Hubbard at the reunion in Sparrow's Point near Baltimore.

E: From Hubbard?

W: Yes, they were from Hubbard. George and I got better acquainted. One day he came to me and said, "Tom, let's go to Chicago and see what the city looks like." I said yes; I would go. Well, as you know, being a barber, I could always get a job. There wasn't a lot of money in it, but they didn't pay a lot of money in those days anyhow.

We went to the train to get our tickets and he said to me, "What do you say we stop at Youngstown? I have heard about Youngstown. It's a steel city." I said, "Yes." He said, "Do you remember those people you met? They live close to Youngstown." I said I didn't care. That we could spend a couple of days there and then go on.

When we landed in Youngstown I said, "George, what are we going to do? Are we going to go or stay?" He said, "Let's stay here a while. We ought to be able to get jobs. There's a lot of work here, you know." I said, "Well, I'll try to get work as a barber." He said he would get a job right away. I got a job as a barber and he got a job in one of the mills. I forget which one it was. As I say, he was a little older than I was.

We had been here for about four or five months and the war started. We made money. We made out all right. Then I figured since I was getting close to that age, I might as well stick around. I stuck around and I remained in Youngstown.

E: When did you enter the barber profession?

W: It was in 1907.

E: What was your decision to follow that profession?

W: I had to for two reasons. I started out and they gave me twenty-

five cents a week, but they also gave me board and fed me. There was a little room in the back of the shop and they let me sleep there. They kept it clean. I ate whatever I could. I started at twenty-five cents a week for a month or two. Then I got seventy-five cents a week. But I made my money in tips. I would brush off people. They used to give you pennies for a tip. That's true! A shave was only ten cents and a haircut was fifteen cents.

E: What type of training did you get if you were entering the barber profession?

W: Well, in those days you learned your trade in the barber shop. The majority of the bosses were very polite, old gentlemen. They were proud when they brought up a barber. You watched the boss and the rest of the barbers. But you were with him all the time. You would lather up the customer for him. You would wash off his combs and start combing the customer's hair and sometimes he would let you start to shear a little bit. You started gradually and that taught you. The biggest trouble I've had is when I had to sharpen razors. I couldn't turn my elbow a little bit. To sharpen the razor, you have to slap and twist the wrist over the leather strap. That's how they taught you, a little at a time.

Some of the kids came in and it would be an adventure for them. You would sit among the clippings of a haircut watching, and the boss would give you the clippers, start you out, and then he would finish it. It was up to you. I came up pretty fast. When I was thirteen years old, I was just as good as I ever was.

E: Did you have to have a license?

W: There was no license in those days. They were talking about starting some unions, but if I remember right, I think it was only for the owners. So I thought maybe the boss would join the union. It wasn't much of a union in those days.

E: I've often wondered why people would go to a barber shop to have a shave in 1916 and 1920 and that era.

W: Well, you see, in those days Gillette razors had just started to come out and very few people approved of them. They were not as good as they are today. A lot of people like businessmen used to shave every day. I would say about ten percent of the men shaved every day. About thirty percent shaved twice a week and the working man shaved about once a week. That's the way it used to be. Then some of the businessmen had their own cups, brushes, and razors.

E: This would be a straight razor.

W: Yes, it was a straight razor. Usually on Mondays or Tuesdays,

the boss would sharpen razors. He would keep them in shape. I had to take care of all that stuff, wash the clippers, and scrub the floor. What I would hate was cuspidors because in those days, everybody used to chew.

E: They would spit and miss.

W: Oh, God. It was a good thing they used to have a faucet outside. I used to open up the door and hose it down until everything was clean in that shop.

E: Then it would overflow the place. (Laughter)

What do you remember about Youngstown when you came here in 1916?

W: We landed at the old Pennsylvania station on West Federal Street. As George and I came up the street, we looked around and there were all coloreds. My first impression was that there were all poor people in Youngstown. It just happened that the end of the street was very run-down. Then I saw that the rest of the street had good business. Everybody was busy. A lot were working at the meat packing plant. That was my first impression.

I saw two or three barber shops and I said, "George, you and I have a job, therefore, we have to stay a while." We decided to stay in Youngstown.

E: How did you find a job?

W: The first thing I did was look around and ask for a job. I wanted to ask down at the "Diamond" at the square. I thought the square over there was a pretty good business spot because in those days a barber was apt to make more in tips than he made in wages. There were wages too, but it was the tips that counted.

I went down to the "Diamond" and there were three or four shops. I went in the first one. It was in the Union Bank Building. There was another one across the street. They tore it down when they built the Palace Theater. Bob Hall had that shop. This is where I started. I went in and asked for a job in the Union Bank Building. It was in a pretty good neighborhood. He said, "We pay well, you know." I looked at the shop. It was a neat shop. I thought this would be a nice place to work in. He said, "Where are you from?" I said, "Philadelphia." "Oh, no," he said, "you have to be from town." I thought that was strange.

I went over and asked for a job in a shop where the tower building is now. There used to be a shop up about three steps. I went in there and I said, "Do you need any help?" They said, "What are you, a barber?" I said, "Yes." They said, "Where are you from?" "Philly." "You're not from town? How

long have you been in town?" I said, "Oh, I just got here." I thought that was strange that nobody wanted to give me a job. I wasn't worried because I had money. I had my savings. I went over to Federal Street and up and there were two shops. One was run by a Greek. I got a job then with this Greek fellow, but I had to put down twenty-five dollars sothat I would stay a month and not pack up in a couple of days and leave. I didn't know if that was the system or not. He did it to protect himself.

I started in a week. I started on a Thursday and there were five chairs. I had the last chair. On Saturday the shop was full. I said to the fellow next to me, "Somebody should come over here to my chair. What the heck is this? Everybody is waiting on one barber?" I was waiting about a half hour for a customer and the shop was full. I saw the boss not moving, so I went up to him and said, "Hey, what is this? We have so much trade over here and I don't see you making a move to put somebody in my chair. What's wrong with it? What's going on in this town?" He said, "You'll make customers too, later on." I said, "What am I going to do in the meantime?" I wasn't used to this where bosses wouldn't push customers to a new barber. When I started my shop I would introduce my customers to the new barber. I would say, "He'll take good care of you." Over here, they didn't move. I thought that was strange. I got mad. I said, "The heck with this. I don't have to take this. I'm leaving." I went in the back room to get my coat. He came back there and he started laughing. He said, "It used to be fifteen dollars a week. I'll give you twenty-five." "Well," I said, "maybe I didn't mean it that way."

I used to go by this little shop when I came back from the war. I had a chance to go to work there. They only had three chairs there for years.

I used to live with some people over here near Rayen Avenue in a rooming house.

E: Was it [the shop] on Wood Street or Spring Street?

W: No, this was about three or four blocks from here. I used to go by it on Hazel Street. Hazel Street, in those days, was a very busy street. I thought I would like to have this little shop, but it was wartime and not the time to buy a shop. Soon I would be going to war. The first thing you know, they needed a barber and I went on and worked. I came to this shop and worked there from 1916 until I left for the war. I worked on my own and had a nice little shop. When I came back from the war I went back to the shop and the guy wanted to sell it. I had a few dollars and I had some rubber stock so I sold it and with that money, I bought the place.

E: How much money did you have to have to set up your own business in the 1920's?

W: I bought the shop in 1919, when I got discharged. You know, I was the first of the combat troops to come home. I went to work then when I returned in 1919.

E: What kind of capital did it take to start that business?

W: Well, I bought that shop pretty cheap. If you had to start a shop, you had to fix it up. In fact, after I bought the place, I spent money because it was a mess. The chairs were a mess. It used to be in the old Central Hotel. Now don't get that mixed up with the Hazel Street Hotel. This building was an old building. The rent was seventy-five dollars a month. There were three chairs; it was a small place. On the floor, he had fifteen different patterns of linoleum. (Laughter) You had to hold the chair when the customer sat down. I spent seven hundred and fifty dollars as soon as I got it. I just got three new chairs, one mirror, a sette, and a new washstand. I made a nice shop out of it, painted it inside and out, and I made good use of it.

E: Why did you have to be from Youngstown before they were willing to put you in a barber shop?

W: Think of it this way. I caught on to see what they wanted. If a man lived in town, he had friends and he had business.

E: In other words, you would bring business to the shop?

W: Yes. When I got discharged, there were about half a dozen barbers who wanted me to work for them. Why? The figured a soldier would bring the next soldier and his friends. I was known from the previous time I worked there too. The only reason you had to have friends was that they would get you a job. This guy gave me a job and I made good. I made out all right.

E: What did you get in, say, a day or a week's time, in wages?

W: The tips were few, you know. It was something. I got twenty-five dollars pay when I opened, but it was fifteen dollars to others just beginning a job.

E: The going rate was fifteen dollars then?

W: Yes.

E: What did you get in tips, say, in a week's time?

W: Well, tips used to average--after you got acquainted with a person--to as high as a dollar a tip. They had to pay thirty-

five cents for a haircut, a quarter for a shave, and then sometimes you got a tip.

E: Once you got your own shop, what type of people came in there?

W: I was pretty well centralized there and I got people from all walks of life. I was pretty well-known. I got business people, professionals, and tradespeople because they used to be pretty well centralized on Hazel Street in those days. I used to be well-known around unions. I started working pretty hard.

I moved to another building later on in 1927. I moved across the street. There were already two or three union offices in that building, the Hazel Street building. In 1927 when I opened a big shop, I used to get a lot of big shots as customers. I used to have the whole railroad office come in.

E: From the Erie Railroad?

W: The Erie Railroad, yes. The Sheet & Tube office was in there, and many of them came in for haircuts. They used to say that I had a very nice shop. In fact, I was rated the best shop, the loveliest shop with the best line of barbers in the state of Ohio.

E: Well, that's a compliment.

Was the barber shop, in the 1920's, a place where men would come in for a haircut and then several times during the week just to shoot the breeze or read the newspaper?

W: They never used to do that, no. Years back it was different and then it depends on the barber shop. It was like any other business, you know. After the war, things changed in the barber business. Some shops, I think, on the outskirts of the city or the shops downtown had a lot of extra means as well. But a first class shop was a barber shop only.

E: In other words, some shops had gambling activities or things of this sort to help supplement the income.

W: That's right.

E: And those were the more social type clubs, in a sense.

W: Many times people wanted to put things into my shop. One time one of the gamblers came to me and wanted to rent the back of my place. He said he would pay all of my rent. I was scared. That's when the "Jungle Inn" was open, and I wanted nothing to do with them. That's the way it was then. They had the power. It made me very scared.

E: Did any of the people who came into the shop in the 1920's talk

about the Ku Klux Klan?

W: Oh, you know it! The main office was across the street from mine in the Erie building. In fact, I had quite a few of the Klansmen as customers. One of them was a neighbor and we laughed at one another kiddingly. That was when we lived in the apartments that we called "Gasoline Alley". He was one of the big shots and after he was busted, he broke the Klan's safe and stole their money. He used to say to me, "You know Tom, I know it's all wrong, but I still get that feeling." He still wanted to be a ruler and get rid of all the Catholics and the colored people and the Chinese. I said, "Well, if you get rid of the Indians, you might as well get rid of the rest of them."

E: Did you ever look across the street at that office of the Ku Klux Klan and observe the types of people who went in and out of it?

W: Well, you see, from the building that I was in I could see if I went outside, but I never bothered with them.

I owned a little farm and they used to meet in my woods.

E: Where was this farm located?

W: It's on Churchill Road. They used to meet in our woods. We would hear people going over there. People said, "Why do you allow it?" I said, "Why not? As long as they don't burn my woods, it's okay. Let them go."

I used to stop at a gas station because we lived near one. One of the guys in the gas station said to a friend of mine, "Hey, this Williams, can we get him in the Klan?" "What are you talking about. That guy is a lieutenant in the 'Cat's Eye'. You don't want him. He has a lot of men behind him." He was kidding. He was a friend of mine, an Irishman. He said, "You don't want him!" He put me in a mess because every time I stopped to get gas--in those days, you had to get gas pretty often--they wouldn't even talk to me. I finally asked them why and they told me about my friend's story. He said, "So-and-so told me that you were a lieutenant in the 'Cat's Eye'".

E: What's Cat's Eye?

W: It used to be an organization of Catholics. If you want to know the truth, I don't think it was ever in existence. It was just a word. I don't think it existed.

They kept on meeting on the property. The were customers all right.

E: What do you recall about the days of the Depression? Did you have any feeling or inkling of bad times coming? Did people talk about it in the shop when they came in?

W: You must remember that really everybody blames Hoover. The damage was already done before that because I remember in May or June of 1925, we had five million people out of work. Previous to that, everything was good. They started to lay off. Hoover, I think, tried to do the best he could, but they took advantage of him. When he gave that money out to the mills, the storekeepers, and the factories, he figured that they would distribute it among the people, to give work to the people. Instead, they took care of the business and forgot about the people. I was troubled. I had a nice home on Mathews Road built brand new. In fact, there were three lots and I lost that. I saved the farm, so we went back there to live. The little farm had only four rooms, an enclosed porch, and a basement. I had a flock of kids and my mother-in-law stayed with us. I lost everything but we raised some of our food and managed.

E: As you look back at those day in 1929 and 1930, the early years of the Depression, did you notice a drop off in business? Did you have to extend any type of credit to people when you gave haircuts?

W: Oh, yes. I gave many haircuts for nothing. They were fine people, good people that were with me for so long! There was an official railroad strike and I had one hundred and ten customers that I gave haircuts to. When it was all over, they took advantage of me. Only about three came back to pay. I never forced them to pay. If they would come to me and would pay, it was fine. But I never asked them. If they came, all right. If they didn't, they knew that they owed me. After all, it was a friendship loan.

E: What was it like in the 1930's here in Youngstown?

W: The days were rough, very rough. The whole 1930's were rough. Of course, things picked up a little bit. See, in the 1930's things came back when they put in the WPA. I was by myself in my building. It was a good size building; it's down there yet. I was the only one left in that building.

I had some money in savings and some in bonds. I used to have two porters and a manicurist. Things got so bad that in one day, seven barbers, two porters and a manicurist took in eleven dollars and ten cents. I was the type of man that guaranteed money. The boys came to me and said, "Well, Tom, things are rough. You can't pay us. We'll work on a percentage basis." They made a living, but I lost everything. It took me five years to get out of debt.

I stuck it out because the landlord was good to me. Spitz Renner was the landlord. He came over and I said, "Well, Mr. Renner, I'm through." "You too, Tom? Well, keep on with the business. Tie it on if you can. We don't know where we're

going to land. Pay what you can and if you can. When things are over, we'll get together and discuss things." "Well," I said, "okay. I'll do what I can." I never did get the rent as low as fifty, seventy-five, or a hundred dollars, but they kept the building war in winter. They had their own plant. They used to burn coal. I was the only one left.

One man, a musician, was found dead in his office; he was a banjo teacher. He was so poor that he used to sleep on top of a table. They found him dead.

I was the only one that really stuck. After things picked up a little bit, Spitz Renner and I got together and fixed everything up. He treated me all right. They treat me fine to this day. Spitz Renner came to the retirement party his nephews gave for me.

E: Did the barbers seek work elsewhere?

W: There were about fifty barbers or more who went to work for the WPA. They made fifteen dollars a week. That was more than they could make in a barber shop. We tried hard too, but just couldn't make it. I lost my home.

E: Obviously the Depression was bad for all walks of life. As people came into the shop during these years of the Depression, did they spend all of their time talking about it and trying to come up with solutions?

W: Oh, yes. At that time, there were a lot of big, wealthy men and they were just shaken. Yes. When men in coveralls came in, the businessmen would ask me, "Where do they work at?" They wanted to know where there was work. It was rough. My family and I lost everything.

I knew a tailor who used to say to me, "Tommy, I have no money. How about cutting the kids' hair and if you have any pants or something, I could fix them." I said, "Yes." He had two boys. I picked up a bunch of pants. He put a sheet of patches on the inside. I was the best dressed barber in Youngstown. He was always good. I gave him eleven pairs of pants. He straightened them all up and kept them pressed and I kept on giving his kids haircuts.

E: What type of haircuts did people get in the 1930's?

W: Well, it was fine work. Now, it's not fine work anymore. Now, they call it style, stylists. You can do the same job just curling. It's no haircut anymore. That's finished. A barber used to be a "barber" and liked to see a good haircut. Now there is all long hair and a barber thinks he should please the public. That's perfectly all right but now a barber is a salesman.

E: When the Second World War came, were you still in business?

W: Oh, yes.

E: Did the trade change any with the coming of the war?

W: Oh, yes, it changed. I lost quite a few customers and I had great expenses and couldn't get any help. I couldn't get any help and I was in a mess for a while, but I managed.

E: What was it like in Youngstown during the Second World War?

W: Well, it was like any other town. War is war. Lots of people went broke even in wartime. You would be surprised how many. It was rough. When there's a war, it is rough everywhere. I don't care how you take it. In the war I was in, they were paying in gold. In the Second World War, they were paying in paper. Now they're paying in I.O.U.'s. Then this last war with all the paper we have; that's all I.O.U.'s.

E: Would you go into the barber trade today?

W: No, no. I made a good living then, but I was fortunate to know good men. I had two men for a long time. One of them had been with me for thirty-nine years. The other had been there thirty-eight years. I had two more that were with me for fifteen or eighteen years, since the opening. They're all dead, but two of us are living, the original barbers. Quite a few barbers died in a short time. They were older men. The original people were young. We were all young, and there are only two of us left.

E: Now that you've retired and you look back at those years, are there any events or experiences that you've had in all those years of the barber trade, that stand out as humorous? Do you remember anything that happened then that was kind of funny now, as you look back?

W: Well, there are a lot of little things that happened. They looked large at the time and little today. A lot of them seemed large in those days and seem like nothing today. A barber business was a funny business because it's a funny trade. It's more like being a jeweler or a doctor because it's only what you can do yourself. That's why I say it's not a business that you can go into to depend on. It's a service. If you like John and I don't like Joe or Frank, Frank leaves and Joe leaves to go along with him. You're in a mess all the time. We can't depend on things sometimes.

A lot of barbers, somehow, were tricky. They got somebody to work for them by offering him more money. The guy would get that much for a couple of weeks and then the barber said, "Well, now, you want to work, all right. But you're not worth

what I offered. You can't do what you said you could do." I know many barbers like that down there, lots of them. They get a guy under their thumb and then they say, "Now, I can't give you that much. You know you're not worth it. If you want to work, work at this wage." And many got stuck.

I know of two cases that I was told about. I didn't know this was going on. Some owners took a couple of barbers away from me. They offered them more money which was impossible to pay, you know, in late years. They took a barber away from me. One of them offered him eighty cents on a dollar and that can't be done. You have to pay social security and industrial insurance. There are a lot of expenses involved. They couldn't pay it. It was impossible. But they got together and naturally, chopped him down. He wanted to come back to me. I said, "No. You knew that when you left."

I had quite a few barbers that came back to work for me. If they quit clean, I took them back. If they quit dirty, I didn't take them back. Even if I needed them, I wouldn't take them back if they had treated me rotten. If they left without notice or just picked up an left, they were finished. I wouldn't take them back.

E: Did the barber who came into your shop bring his own equipment or did you supply equipment for him?

W: Well, some equipment I supplied and some they supplied. I hired some barbers without combs. I was particular about combs. They had to be clean and they had to be full. I hired them and I gave them one to start with and I said, "Now, here's a comb. Later by yourself some." Some of them won't spend money on combs. Then there were others who were wonderful. They cared for them. Oh, it's a funny business, the barber business.

E: Where did you by most of your supplies?

W: From supply houses.

E: Any one in particular?

W: I used to deal with C & S Supply in the late years; before that I used to deal with Youngstown Barber Supply. That was in the last ten years because there was nothing to sell in the barber shop anymore. Now, these new barbers they call stylists sell a lot of stuff and people fall for it. None of them are any good. The only thing that I think you could get in a barber shop today is a good shampoo. That's about it.

E: Did people who came in at that time have the shaving mugs?

W: That was in years gone by.

E: Yes. They used to have them on display on shelves.

W: Oh, yes, they were on racks.

E: That was sort of an institution in itself, wasn't it?

W: Yes. You know, I'm sorry I didn't keep some of those cups. The barber shops had to eliminate them because the shops were improving and they weren't needed. In about 1910, I would say, just about during the First World War, they started eliminating the cups. In fact, there were very few. There was only one old gentleman still in business as a barber who had them. I was friends with this barber on Market Street. I can't think of his name. He still had the old rack of cups that were never used because when the customer passed away, the cup remained in the shop. The family wouldn't take it or never called for it.

E: Did they buy their own shaving mugs?

W: Oh, yes.

E: Did they just bring them to the shop?

W: No, they ordered them from the barber. You usually had a catalog showing them what they wanted. Some had pictures on them. A butcher's mug, maybe had a cow on it. The name of the butcher was on it. A tailor may have scissors on his. The customer was better off to use a cup from the shop because the cup from the shop was cleaned every time it was used. I used to clean them every Sunday morning.

I used to work, in those days, on Sunday morning. I would get up and do the mirrors and cups and spitoons and scrub the floors. Just think of it the way it used to be in those days. There was a little screen and you wouldn't need an air conditioner or a fan to blow around.

If a man wanted his own cup, I was pleased as punch. Some had their own razors, but they were better off to use the shop razor. They thought it was better and the boss made some money out of it.

E: What did one of those shaving mugs cost?

W: Well, it depends. Even in those days they cost from a dollar and a quarter--the cheapest one--to about six or seven dollars if you wanted a photograph or something on it. A dollar and a quarter was the cheapest. About three or three and a half dollars was the average price for a cup.

E: Was it sort of like a status symbol?

W: Yes.

E: Not everybody had them.

W: No. Mostly the business people had them. I remember one time there was a fellow that worked in the mint in Philly. He had a cup which he bought himself. The boss said, "Take care of that man. He's a good customer." It must have cost him about four or five dollars. In those days, some people used to work for a dollar a day.

E: You haven't been retired that long, but what are the problems that you face in retirement now?

W: As you say, I haven't been retired very long. It's rough to find something to do, but there are a lot of people that want to do nothing. Now, myself, I'm not able to do anything. I'll tell you why. In my business, when I was younger, I wanted to do things but I wouldn't dare because I had to keep my hands looking like a woman's. I couldn't have callouses or hangnails. I couldn't do anything when I was a barber. Now that I'm retired, I want to do it but I don't know how. I've learned to do a little bit of gardening and I've planted a few flowers in my spare time.

One thing about me, I was particular. Nails had to be clean at all times. I went as far as inspecting the nails fo the barbers who were working. I would see these nails that a customer was watching and I would say, "Take care of those nails, boy. Take care of them right now. Let the manicurist take care of those nails."

This last year when I retired, I was in the hospital and I was operated on. That was the biggest mistake I made because I'm not as good as I was before the operation. It still hurts, lightly, but it still hurts. I had a hernia operation. I don't know if they did a good job or not. I know it's still swelling down there. When I sit down, it hurts. Oh, it takes time, I know. Besides, when you're operated on in your old age, it's rough. It's not like when you're a young man. I don't know. This winter, I will find out. I believe there are a lot of little things I can do downstairs even through the winter because I've got to do something or I'll go crazy.

E: Have you found that not having retirement benefits and health insurance and things of this sort, which obviously you didn't have, presented problems that you had not expected?

W: Oh, yes. I wish this inflation would stop a little bit, you know. Just think of it. I retired and I make a little over three hundred dollars a month between her and I. If I didn't own my own home and have a few dollars left, I couldn't make it.

These people who get pensions from the mill and the open hearth or who have a lot of health insurance, may be all right, but still it won't be right for them because their income is at a set price; they have a set income. The way things went up and up and up and up, they just couldn't do it. They claim, now, that during the last two years there were another two million poor people. Well, at the rate we're going there are going to be more. It seems to me that we're going to be like the old saying, "The very rich and the very poor." I don't know.

E: There's another question that I didn't ask before. What standards did you use to select the manicurist in your shop?

W: Well, I had to have an experienced manicurist.

E: This was usually a woman.

W: A woman, oh yes. They came over and I said, "Now look, young lady, if you don't know the business thoroughly of taking care of people's nails, don't take the job because I'll only have to let you go anyhow." In fact, I used to say the same thing to a barber. "Listen. I'm not your boss. The customer is your boss. You don't have to please me, please the customer. The most important thing is to please the customer." That's the way it worked because they made nice money. Manicurists made good money.

E: Did you pay her a salary?

W: I didn't have to.

E: What money she made was based on her work?

W: It was all hers. I used to pay the taxes for her, you know. When times got to so that she was making more money than I did . . Well, we were going through a hard time.

E: Did everyone take advantage of the services of a manicurist?

W: It depends, you see. No, not everybody wanted a manicure. Mostly businessmen or some young men. Quite a few young men got manicures but really young men or middle-aged men or anybody asked for one.

E: What did she charge for that?

W: She made her own price. Now towards the last days, it was three dollars. It was more than a haircut. A haircut was a dollar and a half or a dollar seventy-five. She charged three dollars. Of course, I haven't had a manicurist in about ten years. She finally got a big shop of her own.

E: In other words, they were fading. That service was probably ending around the Second World War.

W: Yes, yes, yes. That's very true. In fact, there are two manicurists downtown today I was told. They work in the barber shops about two days a week. I don't know if they're still around or not. I think they're out too, because they're up in age. The last manicurist I had was with me for twenty-three and a half years.

E: Did she work every day?

W: Yes, she worked every day. I had the champs of manicurists, but this last one, she was really a manicurist. When she gave a manicure, you had clean nails, and good looking nails. You could have ugly looking nails, but give her six months and she'll have your nails looking right. It's not just the color but it's the shape. Really, it's an art, to give a good manicure.

E: Can you think of anything else you would like to add at this point?

W: Well, really, what can I say? There's nothing more to say. The barber business is just doing its trade. A barber is nothing but a service. As long as you can please a man, even if you're a butcher, that's all that counts. Sometimes I get tired of trying to please a person who just can't be pleased.

E: Did you ever have any fellow really get upset with you about a haircut?

W: It only happened once. It was about three years ago. A man came in. I remember him because I had cut his hair before and he said to me, "Close." He couldn't speak English. He was one of these Sicilians and he said, "Short" over and over again. I cut it and cut it but I left it a little bit longer on the top and he motioned to me. So I thought he wanted it closer. I started cutting closer. Oh, boy, he jumped out of the chair. He wanted long hair. How the heck was I going to know that if the man who had cut it before didn't tell me. He was mad. I mean mad. Then I started to think, "Is this guy nuts or what?" So the barber said, "Let him go." What could I do? I said, "Well, go ahead. Go someplace else. I don't care." But you know, I thought that he might not pay me. (Laughter) He paid. I didn't want to get paid. I said, "Heck, go on."

E: I remember some barber shops used to have dry cleaning places with them.

W: Yes, I suppose.

E: You would bring a hat in and have it blocked or you could bring in dry cleaning. You never did that?

W: No, no. I only had a barber shop. There used to be some barber shops with poolrooms. There were also cigar stores and barber shops in years gone by. In fact, in Youngstown, the last one was on West Pearl Street. There used to be a cigar and tobacco store with a barber shop in the back. It was on the third block, I think. That was a good many years back too. A lot of barber shops used to have a storeroom and poolroom or a steam bath. A lot of them had bathrooms. Youngstown had about three shops with bathrooms.

E: Could you take a bath and get a haircut?

W: Yes. One of these barber shops had five tubs when I first came to town. Two of them, I think, were on East Federal Street. There were some big shops then when I came into town. I was surprised. By golly, the biggest shop we had in Philly had fourteen chairs. It was in the Reading Terminal. I used to go by and think that I would like to work there, but I was too young and they didn't want me to work there until I looked older. The barbers had good jobs there.

At times I had five minutes to give a haircut or shave and I used to do them in five minutes. In fact, I was too particular. If you looked clean, I guaranteed you you were clean. I had to take shortcuts to save time.

E: I always remember the barber shop when I was younger as a place where you were always welcome to come in, whether you needed a haircut or not. You might just come in and shoot the breeze with someone who was getting a haircut or could just read the paper. It was sort of a place to meet.

W: Well, it depends on the locality. There were a lot of shops, not downtown, but in the outskirts of Youngstown where they used to meet. People would be in there all day and pass the time away. But in town, it was different. You had to keep on working. The barber shops were barber shops. Sometimes they used to play a guitar and a customer would come in because he wanted to hear the song. That was years ago. Lately, say in the last thirty years, that has been eliminated. A barber shop is a barber shop. On, some little place on the outskirts of town might have done that but downtown you paid rent. That was expensive.

E: What was your busiest day?

W: In my case, there was no such thing as one busy day. I have seen bad Saturdays because most barbers used to depend on Saturdays for their customers. I had bad Saturdays and fine Mondays. Then at other times I had an awfully busy shop. Every day was the same thing. The poorest Saturdays were recently when I was alone in the shop. All the rest of the barbers had to close up too.

E: How many heads of hair could you cut in an eight hour day?

W: Well, you generally base it at two an hour or sixteen a day. Sometimes it depends on the man's head, and how much hair he has got on it. Sometimes, you could throw another customer in, if he was bald or if he just needed a light trim. If someone came in in a hurry to me and said, "Tom, I don't have much time." I would say, "Okay. We'll get you out. But that means a little trim around, not on top." That's fine, but it's not a first rate job. "The next time you come over, I'll give you a regular haircut." I could get you out in seven or eight minutes if I just rounded it up and it looked clean. But then, if you wanted to do a good job, it took time.

E: Was there ever any difficulty between the manicurist and you, because she might want to take more time on a customer?

W: No. I left it to her always.

E: Yes, but what happened if you were done with the haircut and you wanted to get on to someone else to make another dollar and she wasn't finished yet?

W: Well, she went to another chair or took the customer to her table to finish.

E: In other words, she would just go up there and finish it?

W: Oh, yes. It takes some time for a manicurist, a barber, and a shoe shine worker to work on a customer. When I was finished she got up and took him to her table. She had her own table and chairs and light. A lot of times if a man just came in to get a haircut or a shave, the barber was finished before she was.

E: When did the shaving practive start to drop off?

W: At the end of World War I. Well, when the war was over we didn't know how to shave. They issued me a straight razor and a safety razor. I just kept the safety razor for inspection only. I never touched it. When I had gotten out of the service and was coming home on the boat, Argonne, I hadn't shaved in about nine or ten days. I had no beard until I got into the Army and my whiskers grew terrific. I wanted to shave but, my hands were cold; my fingers were cold. They gave us three days rest. You had to shave in ice cold water. I couldn't shave. I was mad and I found a razor whip and my friend said, "Hey, come here, partner. I'll shave you." He couldn't shave me, so another one tried. I went through four of them that couldn't shave my face. They could shave themselves but they couldn't shave me with a safety razor. So I scraped. You have to have feeling when you start putting a razor on a hone, and my God, I had no feeling in it. I sharpened it and I chopped myself all up, you know. When you haven't shaved for eight

or ten days, it is rough. That's when shaving started at home.

When they came home from the service, the people that I knew, came in for a haircut only. They shaved themselves. During World War I, a lot of places in Youngstown on the north, south and east sides had outdoor "telephone booths". Those were outdoor bathrooms. Then with indoor plumbing the men started shaving themselves in bathrooms.

E: Did you ever refuse to give a shave or a haircut to any type of person who came into your shop?

W: I could but I never did.

E: Where did you get your hair cut?

W: One of the barbers cut it. I go to my own brother-in-law here. He's retired too, but he works part-time. He has a little shop and works two days a week.

E: So you just took turns in the shop cutting each other's hair?

W: Oh, yes. I was used to cutting his hair every week. Now, since I retired, I cut his hair once a month.

E: Thank you very much Mr. Williams for talking to me.

END OF INTERVIEW