

Bill Conrad
The Beethoven Singing Society

Bill Conrad: ... Conrad. I've been a lifelong resident of Wheeling. And when I was between eight and ten years old, I used to go to Singing Society Festivals with my parents. One that I remember was on Middle Wheeling Creek at a place called The Dells. And it was the Beethoven Singing Society. And they would just come en mass and sing and drink! That's about it. And I can remember it was somewhere up above what is now the Louis Wetzel Shooting Range on Middle Wheeling Creek. Whether that's under water or not, I don't know. Because, see, they dammed that.

Carrie Nobel Kline: Hold on just one second, let me--

(009)

BC: Yeah, they dammed Middle Wheeling Creek to make the Middle Wheeling Creek Lake and its watershed. It's run by the Department of Natural Resources now. But The Dells was somewhere between the Louis Wetzel Range and the breast of the dam. That's about all I remember other than, you know, just getting into stories as a little kid and hearing them all sing. One of the, one of the people that sang was named Fred Kanabe. He was a friend of my father's, and that was the reason my father and them went. But it--

CNK: Just paint me a picture of, of what it looked like when--

(017)

BC: I remember it was--As you were going up the road, it was on the left-hand side of the road. And it was a big framed, long framed building with a big field in front of it and on both sides. And as the Singing Society, you know, grouped together and sang songs, there was guys playing horseshoes and this kind of thing. It was a lot of beer drinking! I mean that's what I remember the most, you know, was a lot of beer drinking! And the singing. And of course me being a little kid and other little kids would happen to be there, we'd go down across the road and go into Middle Wheeling Creek and play in the water and pretend we was fishing or whatnot. And if it was warm enough, we swam or fell in. As it got colder, then we just kind of like hung on the bank. But I remember being

(027)

there two or three times. And it was one other place that they sang that I, I can't quite remember where that was, but it wasn't in that area. It was down south of Moundsville. And I don't know if it was actually sanctioned by the Singing Society or it was just a bunch of friends got together. But it seems like whenever they got the group of them together, they would sing and drink and have some pretty good times! And that's about it.

CNK: What was the singing like?

(032)

BC: Well, it was, it was singing--It was a lot of, a lot of stuff in German, you know. They would sing German songs, you know, that, that weren't operas or anything like that, but they all had like German connotations to them, you know. Wasn't they sang in English. Some of it they did, but there was a lot of refrains and, and stuff that they would harmonize, and they were singing like in the German language.

CNK: People understand what they were singing?

(037)

BC: Well, yeah, because they were basically all Germans and Polish and whatnot, you know. And they had sheet music because I remember like looking at it and seeing it. But, you know, where that all went to, I don't know. But that was, that was what they did. I mean they were German Singing Societies, but they were--You know, they sang in German, a good bit of it. And, you know, like I said, that's about all I remember of it.

CNK: I thought you had said one time it got kind of scary after the drinking.

(042)

BC: Oh, yeah, it would. Because I'm a little kid, and I'd see people, you know, like falling down drunk and whatever, you know. And, you know, as a little kid you see that, and you don't know what's wrong with these people and, you know, they're drunk. After you'd been around it a few times, then you realize, you know, that the more they drank the weirder they got, you know. And that's the truth. I mean that--And it was usually always beer. They, you know, they're--Very, very little liquor at all. And most of it was like--I mean some guys even made their own beer, home brew, you know, whatnot. I know my father did. He was famous for his beer. But he'd make it in the basement and, you know, whatever.

CNK: So, what'd that feel like for a kid then?

(050)

BC: Well, I mean I was just--It was just like a Sunday afternoon outing to me. That, you know, I just went with my parents because I was the youngest in the family, and I was kind of like forced to go. But, you know, it just--They'd start like on a Sunday afternoon and go into the wee hours of the morning, you know. And they'd just have a good old time.

CNK: And you'd stay?

(054)

BC: Oh, I wouldn't, no. I was--We--I would stay there, you know, because I was with my parents, and that was, you know, how we got to and from it. And then I can remember another time they went down to Cooper's Rock in West Virginia, and a bunch of people showed up. Whether they were part of a club or what--And they were down there on top of Cheat Mountain, and they had a big party out in the, actually in the state park and were drinking and singing.

CNK: Singing again?

(059)

BC: Yeah. Carrying on, having a good old time. But that, you know, what they did.

CNK: What were they singing there?

BC: Songs, German songs and--You know, I can remember down there is that it wasn't so much German

songs as it was just like singing, you know, classics. And they harmonized. It was almost barbershop quartetish like. But they still--You know, when they started drinking, having a good time, they'd all start singing. I can't think of any other names of any people because--If my dad were alive today, he'd be well in his eighties. So, you know, I don't know anybody else that would know more. My older sister would probably know more, but, you know, she was already married and was starting her own family when this was all going on. Because there's--I'm fifty-one years old, and my one, my oldest sister's like sixty-eight.

CNK: How many were there in your family?

(070)

BC: I--My--It was my mom and my dad, and I had three older sisters. I'm the youngest of the family. So that's, you know--I can't, I can't remember any other of the names because, you know, they were always older people, you know. So, I probably say--I'm fifty-one right now, so I'd say this was in the, probably early '50s that I remember this. Now Mozart Park was famous for, you know, having a, a big gazebo up there. And they had singing societies meet there. Actually, Mozart Park was built by Schulmbach the brewer. And it was built for his employees. And that was in South Wheeling. And that's when they had the incline that went up to Mozart, Incline Avenue. And then trolleys went on up into Mozart to the park. But Mozart Park is just totally different from how it was

(081)

then. There's probably some old timers in Mozart who still would remember what it looked like, but even, even some of those people are gone, you know, that would remember the actual layout of the park and stuff.

CNK: But you say it was built for his employees?

(083)

BC: Right. Schulmbach built Mozart Park. The brewer, the guy that owned the brewery. And it was, actually started out to be built for his employees to, you know, to go to on the weekends and stuff. But then with the German involvement in the beer industry, it kind of all stemmed from that. And that's, you know, about all I remember about that. But there are some people in Mozart, you know, that are up in their seventies and even eighties that would remember, you know, some of the layouts of the park. Because it does have a long history, you know, because Mozart's a pretty tight-knit community. And most people it was just, you know, hearsay down through generation and generation be able to tell you. ...

CNK: Can I just--

BC: Give you some--

CNK: Ask you one other--You were talking about all this beer, was it, was it beer that was made in Wheeling, you know?

(094)

BC: Probably, yes. I mean, you know, at that time in the '50s beer was, you know, there was--Most of the breweries were actually probably gone by then, but there was, you know--State of West Virginia has a thing where you can't buy beer over the counter; you have to buy it through a distributor. And the distributor sells it to the bars and the taverns and the wholesale places. And then, you know, I don't know how many years back that you can, you can buy it now in grocery stores and whatnot. But they'd get it from the beer

distributors. And those are Carenbauer and McKnight, and it's different brands are distributed by different ones. But in the days of the breweries, you know, you

(101)

had to like actually go to the brewery to buy the beer. Whether you bought it by keg or by quart or by bottle or what, you know, I don't know because I was too young to buy it then. But I knew it was always around and plentiful whenever there was a gathering of singing societies.

CNK: You can't remember the labels necessarily, huh?

(105)

BC: No, it was--And most of them were like German, German names, you know. Like it was Augustiner and--Let's see, what else. Well, Karling's and it was Red Top. What the local beers were, I don't know, you know. But they, you know, if they had a select brand or whatnot. And there's supposed to be a professor up at West Liberty, a Mr. Wolf, I don't know if you know him or not.

CNK: Heard his name.

(110)

BC: He--Early on when I started working for Independence Hall, we used to have a gift shop. And we used to get these little like quarterly booklets, and it was on, you know, the Wheeling area and the heritage and stuff that this professor wrote up. And I'd read a couple articles in there about the singing societies of Wheeling. And he would, you know, he would know all of them. I guess there was like three or four. But the one I remember and my parents were associated with was the Beethoven.

CNK: But your parents didn't actually sing?

(116)

BC: No, they weren't actually, you know, registered members. But they would go as guests because my name is Conrad and German background. And they were just friends with people who were in the society, and they went.

CNK: Would your parents know the songs?

(120)

BC: Well, they had sheet music. I can remember, you know, them singing, men standing in groups. And they'd have sheet music and be singing. And a lot of it was in German.

CNK: And your dad, did he join in?

BC: Oh, yeah. He, he spoke the Deutsch. Whatever.

CNK: Teach you any?

(123)

BC: Well, I spent three years in Germany in the Air Force, but, you know, I knew GI German not, you know, real German. I knew enough to get, not get lost or find my way around and talk to people. But I don't think there's any of them, you know, the actual card carrying Beethoven Society members probably still alive. The only way you could find out, if you had a name and knew, you know, like who their sons or daughters were, you may be able to get some recollection from them. But, like I said, I don't, I don't really know any of them.

CNK: Well, now the--Wasn't there kind of a distinction, like maybe some of them were more a working man's society?

(132)

BC: Right. Well, I would say that the Beethoven Society, just from, you know, my experiences as a young kid being around my parents and, and the people that they associated with, that they were probably the blue collar class of the singing society. There may have been one that was, you know, a little more ritzy or whatever. But, yeah, I can remember, I can remember them and going to them. And there were just a couple, you know. There was just a couple, you know, during a couple summers and, and they were, they were pretty wild! But I do remember the music. Now, they've had a few sings too, I think, even at Wheeling Park.

Whether they were at a sheltered site or--They even sang at the old bandstand, which is right up from--Well, the White Palace sits--Where the White Palace sits, the bandstand was towards, towards the playground right to the left going over the hill. But the park, you know, itself's changed over the

(144)

years too. But I can remember being in there for one. I don't know if we ever went to Oglebay and had one or not. But the one at The Dells is the one that sticks out in my mind the most. And they were, they were, you know--I was too young to really appreciate what it was, but, you know, when it's mentioned to me, I, I can recall what it was. And that's about it.