

Field Notes - Gail Beattie

Interviewee: Gail Beattie

Interviewers: Garrett Sweeney, Lyndsey Taply and Tyler Samborski

Date: October 18, 2017

Location: 1890 House, Cortland, New York

Length: 25:55

The Interviewee: Gail Beattie was born on January 19, 1965 and has lived in Cortland her entire life. She works for Cortland County and still has a very active role in the community. Mrs. Beattie has a son that goes to SUNY Cortland and she went to college in Cortland also. She went to Tompkins County Community College. She loves the town of Cortland and is very grateful that the university is here because of all of the financial troubles the town had after all of the industry left. She lived across the street from the Wickwire factory, where her father worked. The factory played a big part in her family with the employment of her father and being the main source of income for her family.

The Interviewers: Garrett Sweeney is a junior transfer at SUNY Cortland from the University at Albany. He is a dual major of History and Social Studies Education, which his goal is to become a history teacher. Lyndsey Tapely is a sophomore at Cortland, who is also a History major. She has aspirations of going overseas to teach. Last, Tyler Samborski is a sophomore who majors in History and is also looking to become a history teacher after school. All three students are conducting this interview to be a part of and form an oral history section in the 1890 House Museum on the Wickwire factory.

Description of the Interview: The interview took place in the 1890 House in Cortland, on the second floor in a secluded room. The 1890 House is located on Tompkins Road. The interview had no interruptions and took about half an hour.

Recording: The audio recording was taken on 2 iPhones.

ABSTRACT - GAIL BEATTIE

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Gail Beattie was born on January 19, 1965 and has lived in Cortland, New York ever since. She attended Tompkins Cortland Community College. When she was younger she lived across the street from the Wickwire factory and remembered a handful of memories when her father worked at the factory, towards the end of the factory's life. Besides her father, her aunt and her husband both worked for the Wickwire family. She remembered seeing fire that took the Wickwire factory. Even though times were financially difficult at times for Mrs. Beattie's family, her parents were always able to find a way to make a living and support their children. Mrs. Beattie has lived through firsthand how life was after the closing of the Wickwire factory and a handful of other factories around the town of Cortland. She has said after all the industry left Cortland, Main Street followed soon after with a bunch of small mom and pop shops closing down and leaving the job market of Cortland very narrow. Mrs. Beattie did acknowledge the fact that SUNY Cortland has been very good economically to the city of Cortland but it does not come without any controversy. She says that there are people in the town of Cortland who do not like to have a college in the center of their town. Mrs. Beattie attended college and now works for Cortland County and has a son that attends SUNY Cortland. Mrs. Beattie's connection to the Wickwire factory and her memory of the town prior to the industry leaving Cortland can help shape how we view what Cortland once was and how much it has drastically changed in all those years since the Wickwire factory and many other factories and industry left Cortland. She serves as a great source of information in due part to her whole life being spent in the city of Cortland.

Transcript - Gail Beattie

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Lyndsey Tapley: Okay so first do you want to tell us about your childhood?

Gail Beattie: My childhood I have lived all my life in Cortland I've actually lived predominately within a four block area. The first apartment that I remember was right across the street from the Wickwire factory in 1971. We were still living in the apartment house when it burned down.

Garrett Sweeney: So you were right across the street when it burned down?

GB: Yes, it was a Sunday night and I just remember my sister coming in I was 6 years old my sister was 8 at that time and I remember her coming in saying, "You got to get up there is fire." And my father at that time no longer worked for Wickwire, they had closed by that point but the factory was still there. He was a fireman he was a volunteer fireman so he went out to help with the fire he went out to meet up with the host company that he volunteered with and they're fighting a fire. My mom came home and we went to a friend's house for overnight.

Tyler Samborski: How long did your dad work at the Wickwire factory and what did he do there?

GB: He was a laborer. He probably worked there for probably maybe 3 or 4 years right to the very end when it was closed. He was working when it was shut down. I am not exactly sure

what it was that he did, but I know that they made wire, they made mesh but he definitely he was a laborer.

LT: Do you want to tell us some more about your parents and their relationship to the factory?

GB: A lot of people in the extended family worked in the factory too. My mother was a cashier she worked at a grocery store here in Cortland and everybody knew her, Patti from the IGA. That was right over on Owego Street, so it is a very encapsulated area, I mean, just you know you say you didn't venture far, you didn't, and so of course being in a small town whatever happened your parents always found out about it long before you ever got home. Yeah you were pretty careful around Cortland not to get into too much trouble. My mother worked for the grocery store since the time I was born so 1965 and she worked basically in the same place until she retired. And that was in 2000. So she worked in the same place basically for 35 years. My father had a lot of different jobs, not just in this area. Some of the companies well the companies he all worked for were based here in Cortland, but from time to time he would get state contracts and he would work. One of the times I remember he worked up at Potsdam in January helping build some of the dormitories up at Potsdam. You know always worked. When he wasn't working his regular job he was an electrician by trade and so he would go out and do various jobs for people around Cortland, around the area, so it wasn't anything for him to come home, grab all his stuff, go out to somebody's house, work on their garage, to work on their lake house, work on their something.

GS: Never stopped working?

GB: Pardon?

GS: Never stopped working?

GB: Never stopped working. No he never stopped. He just really, you know, finally he retired but even then he enjoyed helping people out. He also volunteered for the Red Cross, often times unfortunately, if he would respond as a fireman to a house fire. Once the house fire was done he literally change hats and become the volunteer from the Red Cross and get people's information, get them settled for the night, get them into a hotel. So he was he was pretty involved in the community. He really cherished the community, he really liked the community so he did a lot

LT: When the factory was closing what was it like in your family?

GB: It was scary, you know, because the only person that had a full time job at that point well not even really full time job, the only other person that worked in the house was my mom. My sister and I were pretty small we were still in elementary school. So you know it was stressful, you know he would try and find odd jobs to fill in the gaps, you know, before he could get rehired. It was stressful

TS: And you also said you had some extended family that worked for the Wickwire...

GB: Yes, my grandmother's sister, my aunt Francis, was a maid for the Wickwire's, and she met her husband, Uncle Roy, when he was a chauffeur. So I asked earlier about the employment records from the house, but apparently they are not available, but I do remember my grandmother telling me that.

LT: If you don't mind me asking, what is you background like your nationality background?

GB: I am half Italian, and English and Irish.

LT: And after the factory closed, was there a difference that you could see in the town and the people around you?

GB: Well it wasn't just Wickwire's that closed. There was a really hard time Brockway's closed, then we had Wilson's sporting goods that closed. There was a huge industry in Cortland, really, really big industry in Cortland, and then one by one, they just started closing. One of the biggest was Smith Corona. You guys probably don't know what typewriter is, but any way Smith Corona was huge. It was a huge employer, and it was three shifts every single day. So it wasn't just, you know, one small group of people. It was generations that worked on Smith Corona. At any one given time, you could have three generations being employed at Smith Corona. Unfortunately it didn't follow, keep up with technology. They kept saying everyone is going to want typewriters. No, no, you know, unfortunately they didn't keep up with technology. They also wanted a cheaper workforce, so they transferred a lot of work down to Mexico, and it was just after that it was just not good. It folded.

LT: I know you grew up in the town. What was it like did you got to school with the Wickwire family kids or anything?

GB: No, no they weren't in the area at that time.

GS: No, yeah they went to boarding school. Did they go to boarding school?

LT: Yeah, the original Wickwire's, but I am talking about the relatives.

GB: Yeah not that I know of if I did it was not under that name. They just weren't a well known family. They weren't well known obviously, just not that generation at that point.

LT: If there was time capsule when you were younger, what do you think your parents or anyone that worked in the factory would put in them?

GB: Timecard, paystub, I don't know, I don't think there were things like newsletters or anything like that. Oh, I wish I could have found it. My dad's ID badge from Wickwire's. We

would joke, say "Is that your mugshot?" It looked pretty bad that's funny, I just remembered that he did have an ID badge so probably something like that too.

TS: Did your dad or your uncle and aunt worked for the Wickwire's right?

GB: My aunt and her husband on my maternal grandmother side.

TB: Did any of them tell you any stories of working for the Wickwire?

GB: Unfortunately, no because I didn't know about Aunt Fran and Uncle Roy connection until much later, but I just think it is a cool story that she was a maid and he was a chauffeur.

GS: What was it like living across from the factory, was it very busy?

GB: Yeah it was busy, dirty.

GS: Noisy?

GB: From time to time, yeah. The noon whistle you could always tell what time it was because the noon whistle, and that was lunch. And dad would come home come across the street, come home grab some lunch, and walk back to work.

GS: Pretty convenient.

GB: Yeah, it was pretty cool.

LT: Can you describe your daily life while the factory was still running?

GB: It really didn't affect me that much other than knowing that my dad worked there and a bunch of uncles worked there. We were always told, "Stay on the sidewalk, don't go near the building it's dangerous." You know dirty, dark.

TS: Did you hear a lot of ambulances driving by to go there?

GB: No, thankfully, I think early on, yes, there were probably a lot of accidents. I think maybe towards the end, things had gotten better and maybe some safety regulations had been put in place. I don't know if OSHA was existing at that point. I believe in speaking with a couple

people earlier. They were unionized, and so, certainly if a union was involved then safety regulations were probably put in place.

LT: Did you see a change in the town as you got older?

GB: Oh yeah definitely. Jobs were harder to come by after Wickwire's closed down after a lot of the industry left Cortland. It's definitely changed a lot. It's more of a bedroom community now, a lot of people work out of town.

LT: Can you describe in detail the changes you saw?

GB: It's hard to tell. A lot more housing has gone up lately, but the economy has definitely changed. I work for the county, and Cortland County, this is not meant to. We are the lowest paying county for employees in the state. Economically there has been a lot of changes, we have lost a lot.

TS: Was that like the biggest change after the Wickwire factory closed down or was there any social change as well?

GS: Did you see a lot of people leaving the town?

GB: Yeah, a lot of people left. Social, I was so young that it didn't impact me, but a lot of people left town. You know, it was sad. There has been a lot of differences. It has been so gradual. I have lived here I'm 52 I've lived here all my life the changes have been gradual, but you definitely do know that 30 years ago, there was this and this and now there is nothing we don't have a lot of industry here in Cortland. We have a lot of empty factories.

TS: Is this one of those things that you kind of step back and look back at time and realize how much it was different throughout the year?

GB: Yes, definitely. Smith Corona was a really good example, but we were pretty affluent in Cortland for a while, but because there is so much industry that has left, it's really different.

LT: Can you tell me if you can remember where exactly the different factories were located around Cortland?

GB: There was, you know, Huntington Street, Smith Corona had 4 or 5 factories. There was the one out on West Rd out on Route 13 there was also one on Huntington Street. There was a factory a smaller factory in Groton. We also had Wilson's Sporting Goods, Brockway trucks... Brockway was over by the railroad tracks, over on off Port Watson Street. Then after Brockway left, that building was empty for many years. Then we had Rubbermaid for a while. That didn't last either there was also Brewer Tickamyers. There was also a couple of others, but we had a lot of factories, a lot of industry, and it's just gone.

LT: When you were younger what sort of stores were in Cortland that aren't here anymore?

GB: Oh golly. We had Newberry's. My grandmother worked at Grant's, which was a big department store at the time. So let's see Main Street. There was Payne Brothers, which was an office supply. We had a movie theatre, we had a grocery store. Years and years ago, there was a hotel on the corner of do you know where the blue roof building is? Everybody calls it the blue roof building it's no longer blue! There was a hotel on the corner of Main and Groton Avenue there was a chocolate shop I remember Chaffey's Chocolate, but you know, just like little places like Newberry's and that was a five and dime, and there were dress shops on Main Street you could go down, you know, the ladies would go down to get their dresses, like Rose Company, was a big place for ladies to get dresses. Very family oriented. Not a lot of what do I want to say,

just like mom and pop stores not like chain stores, like Grant's and Newberry's were the only two chain stores on Main Street, and then Grant's moved out of town. Do you know where Burger King is? Out in that area they moved out in that strip mall.

LT: When did you begin to see the stores on Main Street close, was it before the factory closed or after?

GB: After, I remember Barbara Moss was huge. That was a clothing store and I think that was one of the last stores to close on Main Street, and that was like in the mid 1990s when it finally closed. The hallmark store that was real cute that was on Main Street that closed.

LT: Another question where did you go to college?

GB: Tompkins County Community College

TS: So do you think that Wickwire factory was the big economic that when that closed, there was a domino effect?

GB: I don't think that it was the Wickwire's, although I am sure that there was an impact I think one of the larger employers was Brockway. Brockway closed because there was a union dispute over wages, and that's why Brockway finally closed. The company was just like, "No we are not meeting your needs." And they pulled out and that was the worst thing they could have done.

LT: When did this around happen?

GB: Pardon?

LT: When did Brockway close?

GB: When did Brockway close, oh golly early 1970s, really early.

TS: Do you think Cortland as a town got more college oriented?

GB: Yes, yeah. We are very grateful that the college is here. I mean, as you know, I am sure you guys realize not everyone is thrilled to have a college in the middle of our city, but really economically, it's the saving grace. I mean, you guys, my son goes to Cortland. He's a theatre major, so I am very happy it is here. But no, I like having the college here, I really do. It's helped us stay established. I can't imagine what would happen if the college left.

LT: When the factories were closing did you see a decline in the number of like students coming was there a difference before the factory closed?

GB: I don't think it had an impact on the kids on the colleges. I don't think so.

TS: Do you think that the small mom and pop shops closing had an impact of the school since probably a lot of kids got jobs there?

GB: Yeah, you lose that chance to work after school. You don't have anything to look forward when you don't have anything to go to...but yeah, I think having not having a lot of things open on Main Street, not having a variety of stores open on Main Street, hurts Cortland. I know that we just got an award of 10 million dollars. It's be years and we have to figure out where that money is going to go, and how quickly it is going to help us. A lot of people are saying that when the New York Jets stopped coming here that was a big thing to Cortland too you know, for the first couple of summers after, they weren't coming in, you could see that the hotels were emptier, the restaurants were emptier.

LT: Before we turn off the audio recorder, is there anything else you would like to talk about?

GB: I just wish that Cortland could get more industry in. That's not something that can be solved here, that's more political, but I think that it would be helpful if we could get some more industry back.

LT: Thank you for letting us record you.