

ABSTRACT- Donald Ferris

Interviewee: Donald Ferris

Interviewers: Chris Dutcher, Jeremy Dzigas, and Zach Frechette

Date: October 6, 2017

Location: Conference Room Old Main, SUNY Cortland, Cortland New York

Length: 1:09:28

Donald Ferris was born on February 7, 1945, in Cortland, New York. He lived all but two years of his life in Cortland and Homer. He had a good relationship with his family, especially with his grandfather who immigrated to the United States from Lebanon and worked in the Wickwire factory. As a child, Donald became interested in newspapers and delivered the local paper throughout Cortland and to the Wickwire factory. Early in Donald's life, his grandfather, who worked in the Wickwire factory, would tell him stories about working in the factory and some of the incidents that occurred. Donald also grew up across the street from the Wickwire factory and recalls factory workers paying nickels to park their cars in his garage. Donald also recalled hearing the ambulances go back and forth between the factory and the hospital. One day, Mr. Ferris took a test and received a Regents scholarship. Unsure of what to do, he went and talked to an Air Force recruiter, who told him to go to college. So, he decided to take an entrance exam at the Rochester Institute of Technology, since they had a printing program, and passed. When he graduated, he moved to Chicago, and got a job with the Continental. However, his draft came up for the Vietnam War. A medical condition deferred him from deployment. He moved back to New York, and began working for a pharmaceutical company for his junior and senior year of college. He decided to not move back to Chicago, and decided to work for the company that he worked for over the summer. His brother convinced him to start a printing business, which he started in 1972, which he still does to this day. He's also been the village treasurer for Homer. He has lived in Homer since 1976 with his wife and children, and continues printing until this day. He took over a bi-weekly newspaper for a friend, and is still looking for someone to take over it.

FIELD NOTES – Donald Ferris

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Interviewer: Zach Frechette

Date: October 6, 2017

Location: Conference Room, Old Main, SUNY Cortland, Cortland New York

Length of Interview: 1:09:28

The Interviewee: Donald Ferris was born on February 7, 1945. Mr. Ferris grew up across the street from the Wickwire factory in Cortland. He recalled stories from his grandfather about the factory. Mr. Ferris had a passion for newspapers, as he had his own paper route as a kid. He later attended Rochester Institute of Technology to enroll in the printing program, Mr. Ferris completed his degree in four years and moved to Chicago for a job with continental. Mr. Ferris moved to Cortland and started his own newspaper company in 1972. Since 1976 Mr. Ferris now resides in the city of Homer as the treasurer as well as running the *Homer News* newspaper.

The Interviewers: Zachary Frechette is an undergraduate student at SUNY Cortland studying history and education. Jeremy Dzigas is an undergraduate student at SUNY Cortland studying history and education. Christopher Dutcher is an undergraduate student at SUNY Cortland studying history and education. This interview was recorded in Fall 2017 for History 280: Introduction to Public History, for a project on the Wickwire factory in Cortland, New York, for the 1890 House to use for their future exhibit on the factory.

Description of Interview: The interview took place in a side conference room in Old Main at SUNY Cortland. For the interview, we sat at a large conference table with the interviewers facing the interviewee. The interviewers set up three recording devices in a triangular formation around Mr. Ferris. We had little to no interruptions and talked for over an hour.

Note on recording: Recorded on an iPhone, a Dell laptop, and a Samsung HMX-F90 camcorder. The iPhone ran out of room within the first five minutes, and the camcorder's battery died five minutes before the interview ended.



TRANSCRIPT- DONALD FERRIS

Interviewee: Donald Ferris

Interviewers: Chris Dutcher, Zach Frechette, and Jeremy Dzigas

Interview Date: October 6, 2017

Location: Conference Room, Old Main, SUNY Cortland, Cortland, New York

Length: 1 audio file, 1:09:28

Chris Dutcher: Today is October 6, 2017, and it is 4:50 and we are interviewing Mr. Donald Ferris. You can start since you're left, and we'll go left to right.

Jeremy DZigas: Okay. Good afternoon. Would you be willing to tell me a little bit about your family and growing up in Cortland?

Donald Ferris: Yes. I was born in 1945, the youngest of four children, and I grew up within about 500 feet of the main entrance to the Wickwire factory. My grandfather was born in the Middle East in 1887, came to this country, early 1900s, worked at the railroad, and bought a grocery store in Solon, New York. And in early 1920s, [he] built the building where I grew up on South Main Street in Cortland. He actually contracted with his nephew for the building there. And in 1926, my grandparents and my father and my aunts moved to South Main Street. I'm not sure what year my grandfather started working at Wickwire. But he lived, as I said from the beginning, within real easy walking distance and my earliest recollections are that he worked in the rod mill. And I'm not really all that familiar, except that I know that there was the steel mill where they melted down whatever raw materials that they had, they had a huge scrap pile, and made steel bars of some sort, and then from there it was processed into rods, and I don't recall the size, probably an inch in diameter, 20, 30 feet long. And the rods were then, run through a

series of dies getting progressively smaller. These rods were red hot. And as the dies got smaller, the material got longer, so eventually you got it down to something like a thirty second inch in diameter, and whatever miles long. In the rod mill, they just started off making rods. But my older siblings were more active in the neighborhood. My grandfather retired around 1950, maybe a little later than that. So then he was always around when I was a kid. He worked the nightshift a lot of times. The whole neighborhood was employees that worked either in the Wickwire, some worked in the corset factory down the street. Some on the railroad, but Wickwire was the big employer at that time. And then people didn't have two cars in the family. A lot of times they didn't even have one car. As a kid, 12, 13 years old, bunches of us, my older brother did the same thing, we'd go down the railroad tracks, and crawl under the fence, go to the scrap pile. Did you ever play marbles? Well if you go to the scrap pile, you get those big ball bearings, huge. We'd sneak under the fence, grab them and run home, smash them with a sledgehammer, take the little steel balls out of them to play marbles with the steelies. You whacked everybody and broke their marbles with a steelie. And we were always in the shadow of Wickwire. I used to see, probably once a week anyway, an ambulance come down. People were getting injured all the time on the job. You had no OSHA(Occupational Safety and Health Administration), and you know you wear safety glasses, the guys in the steel mill and the rod mill wore them and some face shields, but I really believe, there may have been steel toed shoes, it was dirty and it was not well lit. We were never in the factory. My grandfather, sometimes he worked a double shift, he worked from seven or eight in the morning, and then he was working the second shift, without a break he'd have another eight hour shift, and one of us kids would take a lunch pail up and leave it at the guard shack for him. I don't know what the wages were, they weren't much for the area. I do remember in that neighborhood there were people from all ethnic backgrounds. Like I said

my grandfather came from the Middle East, from what's now Beirut, Lebanon. There were a few other families from the same general area, a lot of Italians, a lot of Russians, those were the major groups. They were most of the neighbors. There were also, probably what would be referred to as Anglos today, and those were mostly the manager people. And my grandparents, like I said wanted to build a new house, and they lived on the main floor, and my grandmother ran a little grocery store. She had bread, milk, that kind of thing, but she also had a lot of imported food stuffs from the Middle East, things like cracked wheat, hummus, chickpeas, olives, I remember wooden barrels of olives like 30 gallons, with different kinds of Greek olives, some of them brined, some of them in oil, and she was probably the major source where the Middle Eastern people could get what they would like for their home cooking. But also there were probably 13 or 14 garages, and my grandfather rented those out to the people who worked at Wickwire, and they were manager people. And he charged \$4 a month. And they got to park their car in their during the day, cause these folks had pretty decent cars. And the stuff that belched out of the smoke stacks at Wickwire would do a job on paint. And so it was real cheap for them to protect their car for \$4 a month. And when they left the day and the shift, if we had our own cars, we would put our cars inside, as long as we moved them out in seven o'clock in the morning, we didn't have any problems with it. But I remember some of the names of some of the folks. There was guy named Jack Berry, Bill Hill, Frank Hill was his brother, and a guy named Wayne Howell. I don't why I remember them but I do. They were all nice guys. When they got out of work at the shift change, sometimes we'd run out and open the garage door for them, so they could back their car out. And we'd close his garage door, and he'd throw a nickel out to us. It was spending money. 1952, 1953, for a nickel I could buy a popsicle, buy a pack of

gum. It was an interesting time. I don't know how far along you want me to go with this. If you've got any questions, I'll babble for hours!

CD: Well that's totally fine! We encourage that actually. I'm actually going to shut the window.

DF: Okay!

CD: If you guys have any other questions.

Zach Frechette: Could you maybe tell me a little bit about the town? How it was like for you growing up?

DF: Oh god. I don't know how you could relate today. In those days, a kid growing up, no cares, no worries. When I was five, six years old, I didn't have that much freedom, but, it was really a good time. We didn't worry about child predators. The worst thing to worry about was probably some vandalism, some minor vandalism. When I got to be 10 or 12 years old, my parents both worked, my mother was at work by seven o'clock in the morning at the corset factory, my dad was gone at six o'clock in his trucking business. In the summer time, I was free as a bird all day. My grandparents were there, and they would say "Where you going to go?" So I could wander anywhere from South Main to any part of town. I didn't go a long ways away. I had cousins that lived next door. We did unorganized football, softball, that kind of stuff. It'd be in the backyard. It was all driveways and peer groups. Kickball or baseball kind of thing. It was real easy times going on. But we didn't have a lot of money. We didn't have fancy clothes. Nike wasn't around, so we didn't have sneakers. PF's or something like that, canvas sneakers. But like I said, all summer, we were just really free. Parents didn't worry about us getting into trouble, or somebody coming along and bothering us. The south end at that time was working class. Once you got up around West Main Street and that area, it was a newer part of town, that was more

white collar, that type of employees. From probably, oh I'm going to say, Huntington Street area, south of Union Street, was more really blue collar, factory worker people. There were bars. You start at Huntington Street, and there was, within a block, four bars. Mantella's, Crescent Grill, Frank's Inn, and Lehigh Hotel. You went up South Avenue, which at the time was called Railway Avenue, somebody thought it'd be better to change the name from Railway Avenue to South Avenue, to give a better impression. South Avenue you had one bar, that I recall, a hotel. And about midway in the block, there was another one that was closed by the time I was old enough to do anything, it was small, couldn't have been much bigger than this room probably, it was the main floor of somebody's house. Further up Main Street, South Main, there were two more bars. And at shift change, four o'clock in the afternoon, between four and five, those places were packed. Those guys came out of the factory and they were just drinking beer, just washing the crap out of their throat, well at least that's what I believe. Generally, they were not rowdy, they didn't have fights, they just got out of work and wanted to have a beer, and did. There were several grocery stores, again 1950s, I don't know where you folks are from, but every block, or almost every two blocks, there was a small grocery store. You didn't have TOPS, Price Chopper, or Great Value, just little neighborhood stores, and there was a couple meat markets. There was a couple of grocery stores on South Avenue, Railway Avenue, that were run by some Russian people. My grandmother had a store. Next door to her was another store, that had more American type staple goods. A block the other way, there was a red and white grocery store, and they had a meat department, they were big timing. There were a couple down on South Main, near where Ivan's restaurant is, down next door, that was a grocery store. Two, three places up that was another grocery store, on the corner. You go down Scammell Street, there was another grocery store. At the end of Scammell, Owego, was another grocery store. And across the street

from him was a grocery store. It was just little mom and pop operations that, they had the basis of what you need, you need a box of macaroni, you get a box of macaroni, canned goods. You never had to travel outside of your neighborhood very much to get your basics. There were groceries stores on Main Street. There was one where Bernard's is now, it was a meat market. There was a Grand Union on the North end of Main Street, just before Saint Mary's church. Those were the two biggest stores. There were smaller groceries stores and smaller meat markets. I remember some of the people at Wickwire. There was a family of Portuguese people, and I remember the gentleman would ride his bicycle to work. A lot of people did ride bicycles, but I remember I think he worked nights, because I remember his little lean to in front of the building where he parked his bicycle, when he went to work at night. And I don't think he ever locked it. Try leaving anything unlocked today. Talking about safety, I remember I delivered newspapers and one of my first stops on my route was Wickwire factory. I gave the paper for one of the Wickwires, a grandson for one of the original founders. And there was a guard, I mean he wasn't really a guard, he was a watchman, and he had a bulletin board. Now the bulletin board had a pair of safety glasses that one lens was shattered. There was a little note that said "Where your safety glasses Nick Minelli was wearing these when a rod hit him, and it saved his eyesight." That's the whole substance of your safety program. In the early 1950s there was a town fair in Cortland, where there was large fairgrounds, where the fairgrounds are now, that's off of Homer Avenue, the James Strates Show, which used to run the New York State Fair, up until about 3 or 4 years ago. They used to come in on a train. Their whole show would be on railcars, and there would be, I don't know, 10 or 12 Pullman type cars, which were the cars that the employees and roustabouts lived in for the duration of the fair. So as you went down South Main street, the Pullman cars went to the right, to the left, down along the tracks by Wickwire,

were the freight cars, and they had circus wagons basically, hard rubber tired wagons, and they'd unload, and pull them off with tractors that were only good for a couple thousand feet, couldn't run them on the road for anything more than that, and they hook them onto a regular road tractor and pull them up to the fairgrounds. They'd put the ramps out and these guys would go out and they'd hook on to four wagons at a time, and they'd come off the thing, put the sharp right and goes a little way, unhook it, and go back and get more. It kept like that until five o'clock in the morning and the alarm bells, crossing bells, would be ringing all day long, while they unloaded. It would just drive you nuts. But we used to love to watch them, and they were mostly blacks that lived there. And when they came to town, we were always told "Oh be careful! Be careful! Don't be out." I don't think we ever had any trouble with any of the people that came in. They did their job and they would sit there and do what they were paid to do, they never bothered anybody. I'm trying to think of some other things.

CD: I actually have a question.

DF: Sure!

CD: You said that the blue collar workers were more Italian, whereas the white collar workers and the managers were more Anglo?

DF: Yeah, well. Irish, Scotch, English.

CD: Could you tell me a little bit about, just from your recollection, the relationship between the two as far?

DF: You know, nothing first hand. I do know that, from what I heard, very few of the Italians and Russians got into management positions. Could be several reasons. One, being that they weren't really fluent in English, and they weren't very well educated. And again, there probably will be someone that will come along, when you hear from other people, that often

times, often times in a department, you have a couple different languages spoken besides English. There had to be somebody in there that could interpret between the workers and the supervisors. And they always did have. My grandfather was fairly fluent in English for whatever reason he was. In fact, he came to this country as I said at about 13 years old maybe, maybe a little older. I know when he died he could read and write English and Arabic. And speak both well. He was one of the most literate, and not really because of his education, I don't know what his education was. But many of the Lebanese people, Syrian people that got letters from back from the country, they couldn't even read and write Arabic. They'd bring him the letter to read to them and he'd tell him what it said, and then he would write a letter back for them, to whatever their response was. He died in 1959, which would have made him, let's see, he was born in 1887, seventy two years old. And I remember growing up, he had a grocery store, and I'd sit with him in the front, there was a big window in the front, and almost daily, these old folks would come around and they would sit and talk, and sometimes they'd go over to his room, and played, I don't even know what the name of the instrument was but it was a stringed instrument that looked like a big half a squash, it was bigger than a mandolin. And they would sing songs. One of my aunts had recordings, she bought a recording machine, took blank records and you could make records out of it. And they kept a lot of their ethnic background, they merged in with the American community. But they maintained strong ties to their country of origin. They weren't ashamed of their country they came from, but they were glad for the opportunity to work in America. And I told Evan [Faulkenbury] that there are two sides to that story. One is that Wickwire took advantage of these immigrants and didn't pay them very much money, and worked them and didn't provide them with the greatest of working conditions. The other side of it is that you had a group of people who came to this country, didn't have a nickel to their name,

and were glad to have any kind of opportunity to work. They would do anything you asked them to do, and they would work and all they wanted was a wage. Didn't even have to be a high wage. And unlike in today's world, it isn't that way. At least it doesn't seem to be. People are not willing to. They want to maintain an identity, which is great, because you should never forget your roots, and these people didn't. One of the Italians came up with their own Catholic church down on east side of town, St. Anthony's. Down on the South end, there was a Russian club. They had their own building, over on Owego Street, just south of Scammell Street. Building's still there, but the Russian club is long gone. When my dad was in his twenties, there was a big young Syrian's club. They used to have picnics in the summer, large group of people, 75 to 100 group of people would get together. I hear conflicting stories as to where the grove was, but one was that it was over near or past McGraw, another was that it up towards Virgil. They got movie theaters but that was the extent of it. You could listen to the radio. I mean you had no television. You didn't have a lot of money to go to the theater. So they made their own entertainment. They were a real cohesive group mostly. I don't have a lot of first hand, I'm second hand oral. It's the interesting things that happen. When my grandfather came here he worked on the railroad out an Oneonta. And as I said, within seven or eight years, he owned a grocery store. And I remember the Portuguese family that came here when I was probably 12 or 14 years old. Mother, father, and two boys. Actually there was a daughter. Mother, father, and daughter went to work. Mother and Daughter went to work in the garment factory, father worked construction, and the two boys were still in school. Within four years of living here, they bought a house and paid cash for it. That house at the time, I think it was on South Avenue, and I think it was \$12,000 or \$14,000 house. But they saved enough money, they were very frugal. They had a goal and they worked for it. There was no handout for them. The people that I saw, growing up as a kid I delivered

newspapers on South Avenue, there were a lot of people here, they were renters, some were owners, but they worked and they lived very frugally. And they made sure that they had their own home. There's always some outliers, as soon as they got paid they were in the bar drinking away all their money. But the ethnic groups, mostly, were there, and once they bought their house, and they moved up to the North end or West end of the city, there were some real old time Russians and Italians that were still there, their seventies and eighties when I was delivering papers. They settled in there and moved out. And as I said, you'd go down Scammell Street, and there'd be some Italians, a couple of houses with some Russians, more Italians, just a real ethnic mix. I can recall as a kid going by, looking in the windows, Wickwires, if you were looking in the windows, the buildings were tight to the sidewalk, and you'd look into the windows, and in the summers it was hotter than hell in there. And the guys are working in there. They're just covered in dirt and grease and crud, and very poor lighting. And some of them I knew, but most of them I didn't. As kids, we played around there, it was like the whole world was our playground. Beaudry Park was two or three blocks away, and I'd only go over there just to swing on the swing set.

JD: I have a question!

DF: Sure!

JD: You were talking about how during the summers you were more on your own, and how your parents worked a lot of long shifts, same thing with your grandfather. That being said, would you be able to tell me about who was influential for your life when you were growing up?

DF: Well, my early years, my grandfather, my grandmother. My grandfather was one that didn't believe that kids should play. He had work for you to do. He would put me to work in the summer. And my dad. My dad had a trucking business. And he picked up milk from the

farms. At that time they didn't have big tanks, they had cans. So he hauled milk cans around. And I'd go with him, and by going with him, I got to meet ten or twelve different farmers, and then he would work for other farmers, whether they were bringing hay in, or wheat or oats. And as I got older, I have an older brother four years older than I am, and he's, from the time I was probably twelve, even to this day, he's one of the most influential persons in my life. In almost everything I've done, as far as my business, and my work experience, if I need counsel, I always run it by him. He's never failed me.

JD: With that being said, do you mind telling us a little bit about your education and what you went through, and with that being said, also the career that you had?

DF: I started at the Owego Street School. It's apartments now. My older brother was there, and when he went from there to the junior high school, and my oldest brother was going to Saint Mary's school at the time, so I didn't really want to go to the Owego School, being the only one there, so I started going to Saint Mary's school in the second grade. I stayed there through seventh grade, and I don't want to disparage the nuns, but they did not like nonconformity, they didn't like people that acted independently, and I had a tendency at times to do that. So I decided it wasn't for me, so I went to Cortland High School and finished eighth through twelfth grade, and as I mentioned I worked at the *Cortland Standard* and delivered newspapers, and when I got to be sixteen, I got a chance to get off the newspaper route, that was pretty small kiddish stuff, and got a job working in the mail unit, bundling papers for the mail. Two advantages, first, I didn't want to walk the streets for an hour a day hauling a bag of papers around. The other was I got out of school early. And that was the best part. And the money was about the same as working all week delivering papers. So I worked an hour in the mailroom, six days a week. And I thought I wanted to become a printer. So I asked the publisher, who was a

gentleman at the time that was probably in his sixties, I don't know, I always thought he was old, big white shock of white hair. I asked him for a job. And he said "Well, our people who work for us here, they work their whole life." And he was right! They had people there who worked until their seventies, they started in their twenties, or even eighteen. And he told me no! Didn't want to give me a job. I guess he figured I wouldn't stay. I don't know why. At that time, New York State Regents scholarship were probably, I don't know how long they've been in effect, but they had them. I took a test one Saturday, and never thought anymore about it. And then in February, I think, the principal came over the PA system, and announced the scholarship winners, and I won a State Regents scholarship, and I said, "The heck did I do to get that?" "Don't you remember we came in on a Saturday and spent all day taking that test?" "Oh yeah. That's what it was okay." Don't know why I took it, I don't know if somebody encouraged me, it's hard to tell at this point. I still didn't know what I wanted to do. 1963, as far as the military was concerned, we were just breaking into Vietnam, so my older brother had a business, and next door was an air force recruiter. So I went to the recruiter, I said "Hey I'm thinking about joining the Air Force. I got a Regents Scholarship, but I don't know what I want to do." He says "Go to college." This is from a guy whose job it is to get bodies into the military. So I poked around, and I found that RIT (Rochester Institute of Technology) had a printing program. At first, I didn't take any college entrance exams, so I went up one day to Rochester, I took an entrance test and I passed. I got up there, I didn't know anybody. I had some friends from Cortland who were in engineering programs up there. I didn't really have much of a background in printing. Not in the modest, and I get thrown in with kids who at eighteen, twenty, years olds whose parents owned a printing business, most of them. That's what they would do, they were going to go back home and take over their dad's business. They knew all the phases of printing, I didn't know squat! But I

survived four years there, and when I graduated, I got a job with the Continental Can Company in Chicago, doing research and development. Lasted all year, Uncle Sam came calling.

Continental wasn't interested in asking for a deferent. So I jumped through the hoops and found that I had a medical condition that deferred me. And during junior and senior year I had worked for a pharmaceutical company out in Pearl River, New York. I don't know if you know where that is, it's in Rockland County, just before the Tappan Zee Bridge. And so when I got bounced back, I said, "No I don't want to go back to Chicago." I dumped my apartment, got rid of my stuff. I didn't want to go back. They didn't want me bad enough, then I don't want to care about them. So I went to the company that I worked for during the summer, and talking to the boss, "Well, I'm free, do you got anything?" He says "No, but go fill out an application anyway." And I did. A week later I had a job offer. I only worked there for about four years. And it was becoming politics. It just wasn't going to work out. So my older brother, when I talked it over, he says "Well, why don't you start a printing business here in Cortland?" He had a building that I could rent really cheap, so I did. So in 1972, I started a printing business. I'm still doing a little bit, not much. And that's really what I've done. A little politics here and there. Mostly printing has been my game. And when I finally got a moment of insanity, I felt, a friend in Homer, and his daughter started a bi-weekly newspaper. The daughter ran it for a little over a year, she wasn't doing well with it, he says "I'm going to close it down," and I've lived in Homer since 1976. And I said "Well" He kept saying, "Nobody will take it. Will you take it?" After about six months, I said "Yeah, okay I'll do it for a couple of years." It's been five years now, and I still got it. I can't find anybody to take it. He was lucky he got me. I'm not that lucky.

ZF: Is there anything specific that's important to you about Cortland?

DF: No I hate to tell you this. Homer's more important to me than Cortland. I grew up in Cortland, but, when I was growing up, Homer mind as well have been 100 miles away. We never interacted with the Homer kids, to any great extent. I never had any reason to go to Homer, I never had any friends in Homer, but when I moved back here, and my wife moved up here, and we got married, we were looking for a house, I found one in Homer, she wasn't really keen on it, but we've been there since 1976. There's probably very few places in the city of Cortland I'd want to live. I shouldn't say that. There are several places. But given the tax situation in the city, and what it costs to live here, I think that the quality of life, two miles north, for the money it's worth it.

CD: So, you grew up here in the 1950s right? And so you moved back here in 1976.

DF: 1972.

CD: Sorry 1972 right.

DF: I was gone for about five years.

CD: Could you tell me about the change in the town between that time?

DF: A lot of it's a blur because I didn't benchmark most of anything. The building on the corner of North Main Street and Groton Avenue, the Blue Roof Building, which is no longer the Blue Roof Building. That was a big old Hotel. And in the 1960's, urban renewal was a big buzz word. So they came and they tore all kinds of stuff down, with no plan, no money to replace it with anything. That property sat as a parking lot for several years, before somebody came along and said "Hey, I've got this plan to build this building." The building was the ugliest monstrosity you could ever imagine among a bunch of older buildings. A lot of good changes I see. The good changes are that the architectural structures have been preserved to a great extent. The downside is that we've lost a lot of retail. Cortland had so much retail. Two or three men's stores. Half a

dozen women's clothing stores. Kids clothing stores. Three pharmacies I think. Downtown, when I was a kid, it was bustling. Stores opened late on Thursday night. I don't know why on Thursday but they did. Now, for better for worse, it's all restaurants and bars. It's social activities. They pay the taxes, they keep the buildings up, you can't hate that. But there's a big change. You don't know the store owners any more. There was a time when I could walk into either of the two office supply stores over on Main Street and talk to the owners and knew them by their name, first name. I still know Mr. Mullen, he's almost ninety something years old, I don't know how he keeps going, but he does, but the rest of it keeps changing. Those shop owners. You got Hairy Tony's, but I just don't go downtown that much. I feel like everything goes out on 281. Walmart, Staples, Staples is gone. There used to be a lot smaller businesses, that gave you a sense of community, and I think that's one of the things that's missing. The neighborhoods still have some sense of community. At least, I think. I don't know. I'm not really in the city anymore. I don't regret the choices that we've made as far as moving out to Homer.

JD: I have a question actually. You talked about how Homer's actually more important to you than Cortland. What is special about Homer to you?

DF: Well, only I've lived over half my life there, mainly. My kids grew up there, went to school there. I was on the village board there for eight years, I was on the town board for ten years. I moved my business from Cortland up to Homer in 1979. My whole day to day world centered around being in Homer. I don't have any deep roots other than that. It's always been good to me. Cortland wasn't bad. Don't get me wrong. In high school, we had an hour for lunch. I could walk home for lunch. And some other things. My mother and dad both worked. My dad worked his later years working, he worked across the street from where we lived. My mother worked in the garment factory making corsets. So I would get home a quarter to twelve, my

grandmother always cooked more for lunch than she did, she gave you a small dish of food to bring up for lunch, and my mother would always say, “When you get home, get some lunch. Here’s somethings. Here’s hotdogs, here’s whatever it is,” And I’d be excited! She’d come home, she had an hour for lunch. My dad would get home at 12, he’d go back at 12:30. It was just a gimme, “Oh yeah I’ll come home for lunch.” Walk back. Participate. It wasn’t opening a cans of beans or something like that. It was a little bit more elaborate. I had forgotten about that stuff. Thanks for reminding me!

CD, ZF, JD: No problem!

ZF: Could you tell me about what kind of changes happened to the city of Cortland after the factory closed?

DF: I’m not sure what year they closed, late 1970s I think. By that time, I remember in 1977 Brockway closed. Brockway was a big hit. That was a big loss. Brockway employees were your United Auto Workers, union scale, their wages were tied to Mack Truck wages in Allentown, PA, because Brockway was owned by Mack. And when Mack took them over, somehow the first couple contracts, the wages were tied with Mack’s wages. If Mack’s people were making twenty bucks an hour, Brockway people would be making twenty bucks an hour. Mack wanted to separate the two, wanted Cortland on a different contract from Allentown, the local guys said, “That means we won’t be able to get the good money.” They went on strike, and Mack closed the plant. So that was a big hit. I don’t know what the wages were at Wickwire, toward the end. But Wickwire was bought by a company called Keystone Steel, I’m not sure buy Keystone sounds like Pennsylvania, but they were Pennsylvania or Ohio based company. They started pulling equipment out, and I think Keystone basically bought the accounts, they wanted the customers that Wickwire had. And I don’t know if Wickwire went on strike before they

closed or not. I think they might have. Wickwire had a union, and remind me to go back to that, because they weren't a strong union. They didn't have the bargaining power, and anyway Wickwire didn't have the money to pay them. But if Brockway people were making twenty bucks and hour, Wickwire people were probably only making five or six. The loss of those jobs, and Wickwire jobs, went slowly. They didn't go all at once. They just kept going and going until finally they said "No we're done. But we go back to the unions. United Auto workers, AFL-CIO. Wickwires union, when it first started was CIO, Congress of Industrial Organizations. There were also something called the AFL, back in the 1930s and 1940s. The CIO was more of a socialist organization than the AFL was. I remember when the CIO Cortland local had an office on Railway Avenue, or South Avenue, and it was again about the size of this room. Then they moved to a little bit bigger place, a little closer to the corner of South Avenue. My uncle was the president of the CIO, and I don't remember what years and he worked in the plant. And he was an Italian. He never got into management. A couple of the other guys, the other men, who were probably in the same age, they were also union presidents. But when I was about five or six years old I guess, there was a big strike at the Wickwire factory. This was before the AFL-CIO partnership, and didn't mention this to everyone, when we had the meeting over at the 1890 House. I woke up one morning, heard loud music playing. "What the hell is that?" And it was a song, the chorus of it was, "Well you can't scare me I'm sticking to the union. I'm sticking to the union. Sticking to the union. I'm sticking to the union. Oh you can't scare me I'm sticking to the union till the day I die." So they played that damn thing for the duration of the strike. Just endlessly kept playing. And they paid the kids in the neighborhood, I was too young, so that must have been around 1950, they paid the kids a nickel to march around a picket line in front of the plant during the strike. Mrs. [Sue Buggs] Guido who also at the meeting, I don't know if

you're going to be interviewing or somebody else, her father was the head of the dye making department at Wickwire, and she remembers the strike, and she's a little older than I am, but she remembers the strike and her dad told her about a lot of stuff. He had to cross the picket line all the time. I think, maybe he didn't. Anyway, I had heard something about that song, so I did a little research on it, and Woody Guthrie wrote it, and it's called "American Maid," M-A-I-D. And I sent Evan [Faulkenbury] the lyrics of it. I'll remember that song, it sticks with me, because I heard it, it woke me up one morning, just kept hearing it day after day after day during the strike. And there's an interesting story behind it, if you get a chance google it and see "American Maid" by Woody Guthrie, how he wrote the song. Basically it was because he was out in Oklahoma and there was a strike in some woman said "You always write about the men! You don't write about the women!" And it was about women involved with unions. There was another strike at Wickwire, I think, prior to that, and I don't know what year. I saw a picture and it looked like the strikers had set up barricades across the driveway. Now I don't remember any barricades when I was a kid, they may have been there, I just never saw them. Wickwire, I guess, it's sad but, their loss had a big impact on the few families that were left employed there. I don't know if it had a big impact on the rest of the community. But it was overshadowed by the loss of Brockway.

CD: Could you tell me about any particular stories about maltreatment in the factory that you remember hearing about?

DF: You know I don't. I do know that people got killed working there. I don't know anything about maltreatment. I just know about working conditions. They didn't have safety lockouts on. One guy got crushed by a crane, and the crane went back and forth on a set of tracks, like this, it also went back on another set of tracks like this. And something happened and

they shut the crane down, this guy was working on one end, and the thing activated and it just crushed him. And those were the kind of injuries that happened in the factory. Again, not to disparage them, you got to put it in the context, 1950s not 2010s, probably the same thing happened in factories all around the country. There wasn't that awareness, there wasn't that union strength to fight for better working conditions. You know like I said, my grandfather, I don't think I ever heard him complain about it. He was just glad to have a paycheck! Except he worked two shifts I think, when he was there. And I think Wickwire, my oldest brother told me that, they apparently had horses at Wickwire at one time. Because my grandfather and my father owned a 5 acre plot of land, planted vegetables on and had hay on the other half, they sold the hay to Wickwire for the horses, and delivered it over to the factory. I don't know anything about it other than that.

CD: Interesting.

DF: You find anyone that knows about the horses at Wickwire, that's great. And again, before EPA and EPC, like I said, we crawled under the fence, and we walked past the scrap pile, and we looked and there was, I don't what you'd call it, a pit? Hole in the ground? There was this rubber hose coming out, and crap came dripping out of it and it was all white around the end of the hose. It was obviously some kind of toxic waste. I don't know if it was an acid or whatever it was. And probably the remnants of it are still there from when they closed the factory. Part of it became a brown field, somebody subsequently buried a whole bunch of oil, PCV oils and stuff like that, but I remember that one pit. When you mix steel, you get slag which is a crap that's on top of the furnace, and they skim it off, to get rid of it, if you go out Clinton Avenue, Route 13 in Cortland, just outside the city there's a church on the left, Faith Baptist Church or something like that.

CD: Oh yep, yep!

DF: Before Faith Baptist Church, way back there was a gravel mine there. The ready-mix company that would make concrete, dug out the gravel and made concrete. So there was a pond there. Wickwire had a one or two ton dump truck, that trucked slag and dumped the slag into that pond. For years and years. And finally it got filled in and now they built a church on top of it. I don't know if the slag was hazardous waste, I don't know. It was just crud. If you got anything?

ZF: If you could describe the Wickwire factory in one word what would it be?

DF: Depressing.

ZF: Depressing. Okay.

DF: Just to elaborate, it was old brick. Wasn't nice brick. Never been cleaned. It was just a big ol' brick building. Wooden beams inside. I got to go very limited inside, when I went to deliver newspapers I got in probably 100 feet into the building, because there was a restaurant in there I had to deliver to. But big old wooden beams and when they were tearing it down, it caught fire, and I don't know if you've seen that stuff. And that fire, the wind was out of the South that night, I don't even remember if I was in town when it happened. But they had embers from that at the hospital, the wind carried it. It's a wonder they didn't lose more of the city. That thing was just cooking. And again, I'm looking at retrospect. As a kid growing up, it didn't make a big difference to me one way or the other way, it was just a factory. When I look back at it now, it's a depressing thing. But, again, the other side, a whole lot of families, made a lot of living, for a lot of years. The seven or eight bars that sold lunches and beer, you know whatever, my uncle had a gas station next door to us, made good living selling gas to the employees, you know. It fed a lot of the neighborhood economy. It wasn't all take. It was a lot of give back. Not

intentionally, but it was. It was a business. Businesses weren't, usually, very socially active at the time. Today every business you expect to have a social conscience. It wasn't thought of.

CD: I'm all out of questions. I don't know if you have anything else. Well thank you so much for your time.

DF: You're welcome! It told you it's not a problem.

CD: Do you have anything you'd like to tell us before we leave?

DF: Nah. I think I hit on most of the stuff that I could recall. I hope you find, there's some folks that are a little older than I am, that had families that were even more involved in the factory. It was influential in our lives no doubt about it. If Wickwire was shut down for some reason, it impacted everybody in the neighborhood. It couldn't help but, you know. It provided a lot of entry level income for entry level people. One time there was a guy that worked there in the summer, my older brother had a bar, which is where Hairy Tony's is now, and I can't remember the guy's name, he came in, and we were talking, and we asked him "What are you doing?" He says "Ahh I'm working at Wu-Wu-Wu- Wickwires" I said "Oh really? Doing what?" "Ch-Ch-Ch-Chipping shit off the furnaces" That's how he paid for his college. So it wasn't all bad. Nothing is all good or all bad. And the people. It's too bad it's taken it's taken this many years since the closure of the factory, because most of the people who worked there are all dead, all you're going to hear is second and third hand stories. It'd be nice to hear what the people who worked there thought about it. You know because what were their impressions ? They were the ones that it really impacted the most. The ones that I knew I don't remember them complaining it was a hell hole. Brought a lot of farmers in. Not farmers rural people. Farming was always a poor way of living as far as I'm concerned. You made a living and that was it. If you milked 40, 50 cows, that was a lot. And you couldn't make a lot of money selling milk. So you had cows

you had milk, you had some vegetables, you had some cash to buy some groceries with. But beyond that you didn't have much. So a young guy coming off the farm, what's his future? For the factory, you could make 40 bucks a week. That was rich. Couldn't make 40 bucks a month on a farm. Not in cash. So you know, you guys, you make that in an hour right? Well maybe not an hour, but I know you're laughing about it. I used to make \$10 a week delivering newspapers. That was pretty good money back in that time, 1957, 1958, 1959. Get 10 bucks, wow! I had the world by the tail. I could do a lot with 10 bucks. Give kids 50 bucks now and it's pshh. Doesn't mean anything. It's gone. Like I said ice cream was a nickel, you can't buy anything for a nickel today. Not even a stick of gum, let alone a pack of gum. I appreciate you guys taking the time. And I really look forward to seeing the total package when you get done, because there's two or three more oral histories that should be done about Cortland, and I talked with Evan about that. Maybe more will come of this.

CD: Yeah maybe! Well thank you so much!

DF: No problem!

CD: This is Chris, Jeremy, and Zach, signing off.