

John Kosanovich

Where: Serbian Picnic Grounds

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Location: Weirton, WV

Interviewer: Emily Hilliard

Transcription: Emily Hilliard

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John Kosanovich

John Kosanovich is a Weirton native and retired Weirton Steel worker of Serbian descent. He is a member of the Steubenville, OH Serbian Holy Resurrection Serbian Church and Men’s Club and is one of the “old-timers” who manages the Men’s Club “Chicken Blasts” at the Weirton Serbian Picnic Grounds every Wednesday in the summer.

See the short video and audio documentary about the Chicken Blasts, produced by the West Virginia Folklife Program and West Virginia Public Broadcasting: <https://wvfolklife.org/2020/01/27/weirtons-serbian-heritage-is-a-chicken-blast/>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XpGF-MFUlhY>

<https://soundcloud.com/wvpublicnews/weirtons-serbian-heritage-is-a-chicken-blast>

JK: John Kosanovich

EH: Emily Hilliard

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00:00

EH: Why don't we start... why don't you tell me your name and when you were born and where you're from.

JK: Hi, my name is John Kosanovich, K-O-S-A-N-O-V-I-C-H. I was born October 9th, 1945 and I'm 72 years old. I've lived in Weirton all my life. I belong to the Serbian Holy Resurrection Serbian Church over in Steubenville, Ohio. I belong to the Men's Club, Serbian Orthodox Men's Club from the church, okay? Now, this is what I'm gonna say about the place. In 1949, a man named of Carl Frankovich (sp?) sold this land down here with 26 acres of land to our church for a nice paltry sum of a think it was 2500 dollars at the time. Like \$100/acre. And people bought, decided that they wanted to make this area like a picnic grounds so they built a shelter and some nice pavilion and a bar, and the time I came down there in the early 50s, they had 2 outhouses-- no indoor plumbing was down here. And it started like that. And eventually you know, we had oh probably at the time of our church at that time I was just a youngster about 5 or 6 years old, but we probably had close to 400, 350, 400 members. Now, 70-some years later, we're down to about maybe 100 members. So we've you know, we're losing people fast. But this Chicken Blast, what they call a Chicken Blast, nobody knows how it got started, the name of it. Started calling it the Chicken Blast, but it started in earnest in 1971. And the men from the Men's Club did it so they could maintain the picnic grounds. The lady up here doing the job--what's your name?

EH: Emily.

JK: Emily, yeah, she can tell you about the...

EH: No, that's my name (laughs)

JK: Oh!

EH: I don't know what her name. Her name?

JK: Her name's Molly.

EH: Molly!

JK: Yeah! She... maybe you could describe the spits that we use to cook the chickens and all that. She took pictures so she would be able to show you. But they built these back in the 50s also, 50s and 60s, so when they had our church picnic, they were able to cook lamb. Lamb and they cooked pigs in the winter and lamb in Easter you know, for Easter and pig for Christmas.

EH: Do they still do that?

JK: Yes, we do that. We still do that, you know and like I said, I ran the church picnic back in the early early 90s and at that time, would order maybe about, anywhere between 45 and 50 lambs to

cook for our church picnic. And now we have it down to about maybe 22-24. But again the church was a lot bigger then. And getting back to this Chicken Blast, right when we started it, they had a hard time selling chickens--nobody knew about it, you know. And then gradually it built up, built up and they picked it on a Wednesday because that's when the mill (Weirton Steel) got paid. So people were able to come down, you know, from the mill and eat a chicken, bring your family down, you know, and we sold cold beer and we sold pop and all that, you know, at the time and people would come down and bring your basket with their food and enjoy the picnic grounds. And at that time, we were probably doing anywhere between 6 and 700 chickens a week.

EH: Wow.

JK: I mean, and they almost had to have 2 shifts of guys down here. And it was a lot bigger, but guys would come out of the mill, some guys would work a night turn or something and they'd come in and work the morning down here, and then the guys that worked morning shift, you know, in the mill, they'd come out to work and finish up. So it kept a rotation and it was real nice. And that stayed that way 'till probably like 1985, 86, 87 when we started--the mill started going down. I started at the mill in 1966--we had close to 15,000 people in the mill. When I retired in 2003, we had about maybe 1100, 1200. So we lost a lot of people, so you know, people moving away and all that, so now we do anywhere between 300-400 chickens. We have to have a real good day to do 400 but our average is usually 3, 325, something like that. Now I've been down here since, cooking chickens down here since actually about 1986. That's when I got involved, getting back with the men's club. I was out of town, you know, not out of town but not... just didn't... it was like a good club and all that and I got back involved in it. And I've been retired since 2003 since I've been down here every day Wednesday since 2003. So, I'm one of the old-timers. That's what they tell me. But yeah, that's what we do. Can we take a break?

EH: Yeah, yeah! Sure.

05:48

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00:00

EH: Okay, why don't you walk me through the process--when you get in in the morning, all that.

JK: Okay. The first thing we do when we get here-- I bring the donuts. That's the first thing, that's the most important. I bring the donuts, the guys get the coffee ready, then they start the process by getting the motors on to the gear box in there, and then we loop the chains around the gears and all that so that they turn and then we get the fires ready, and we start the fires about maybe 35 minutes before we get the chickens ready. Now to get the chickens ready, they have to get them out of the boxes and all that, out of the cooler and what they'll do, they'll salt 'em and pepper 'em and they'll slide each one on to a pole-- 25 to a pole. Then they tie 'em up with string, their legs and all that, and tie the back and we put skewers in there to hold them, you know, secure. And after that, the process is just watching 'em 'til they, you know, turn golden brown and the temperature's right on 'em. We'll stick 'em with the thermometer and make sure the temperature's at the desired temperature. And we get our pallets that we get from local places, the mill, and we'll throw the pallets on the fire to keep 'em going at a continuous rate.

EH: So are there still people at the mill or are there just leftover pallets?

JK: Uh, yeah, you know, like I said, we used to get a lot of pallets from the mill and we have a lot stored from the mill from years ago. But they'll bring pallets now to us, but now we have to separate 'em because a lot of 'em have paint on 'em or we can't use 'em cause they'll have cardboard in there and we can't use that so they just have to be oak or pine and that's the best kind we have.

EH: Is there a tradition of wood-fire roasting? A Serbian tradition?

JK: You know most... growing up you know, I used to watch my grandfather do the same thing with pigs and lamb at the house. And we used to do it by hand, crank it, you know what I mean. And you'd get up and, like I said-- I was 10 years, 9, 10 years old and do that. And that's what they'd use. They'd just use wood from the forest and all that. You know the trees, and cut wood like that. But we've always used wood. And never done and charcoal or nothing like that but (sound of something rolling by). That's usually my job.

EH: Sorry, I'm keeping you from your job. So where do those... who rigged those up-- was it an engineer who worked at Weirton Steel?

JK: What was that?

EH: Who set up this whole system to begin with?

JK: Oh, you know that was like I say, the guys at the mill, the older guys you know, brick layers, you know, we had a guy Mishke (sp?)-- he was a top bricklayer in the mill and he made these whatever you want to call 'em-- spits or whatever. Hearths--okay that's a good word-- hearths for it and yeah, he built these all up and like I said, they got these motors with a slow turning so they could spin real slow--with the... what'd they do, reduce... (man chimes in: gear reduction) gear reduction. Okay? They have gear reduction of the motors, so they just spin nice and slow like I said, we serpentine the chains so that they go back and forth each way. One goes one way, the other goes another, you know. And these have been here, like I say, since the place has been built.

04:01

Right over there we used to have an oven--over there, but we don't use that no more because we don't actually need it. But when we used to do the large amount of lamb and all that, they used to put 10 of 'em in the oven and use it like that. Now we don't, we just use the spits and all that, so...

EH: Yeah. It'd be good for bread too.

JK: We, yeah, before these, we do it now, we get what they call a flatbread, which in Serbian is called pogacha, and we get that--the choir sells that--our church choir-- they sell that and halusky, which is cabbage and noodles, and they sell corn and fruit strudel, and that's their fundraiser for the summer too! So this is our fundraiser for the Men's Club and like I say, it takes a lot of money to keep these grounds going. We're probably-- I know since I've been here, we've probably spent over \$150,000 in improvements. So... you know what I mean, so it takes a lot when you're cutting grass and all that, you know. We just put new roofs, new tin roofs on every building down here and the pavilion, what actually happened, about 1974, '73, somebody came down and set fire to our wood pavilion and burned it all down. They burned the bar and the dancing pavilion--burned it down to the ground. And at the time it was real sad but it was a blessing because the pictures you'll see if you take pictures, now it's a stand structure and even the mill people came down on their time off and the mill was very generous to us, and they would come down and they brought down a couple cherry pickers, you know, down here and helped set up the structure, the beams and all that, the framing and all that and they did a nice job for us. And now

we have-- I think it's 140 feet by 60 feet structure, 150 feet structure that's all encased and closed where no rain can get to it and they can't set on that fire so we're lucky.

EH: So is it steel? Are the beams steel?

JK: Yeah, steel. The beams--yeah, everything's steel down there now, you know what I mean? The roof is tin, you know, and all that. And we finally after I don't know how long, but we finally have indoor plumbing and indoor restrooms (laughs) so yeah, and then... like I said from the days of going out to the old outhouses and all that.

EH: You have a few young people here-- I know you said that the Men's Club is dwindling-- but do you think it will continue?

JK: You know, what we do is, we let the kids come down here and they work for us and we give them a little stipend, you know what I mean? For helping us, and we, we take care of 'em and then at the end of the year we like to take care of them a little bit better, you know what I mean? But yeah, there's a couple guys in their, you know, our president Ted Zatezalo, his son and a couple other guys-- I think they'll maintain this place afterward. I know I've got a good 5, 6 years left in me down here, you know. We hope it'll continue, but if it doesn't, it was a good run. It was a good run just like everything comes to an end, but the grounds will always be here for the church, you know. So, you know, we'll do something I guess.

EH: What are some of the other Serbian--were both your parents Serbian?

JK: Both my parents were Serbian, yeah. My grandparents came over here one from Breznitsa (sp?), and one from Ogilvy (sp?). I gotta say that because my son always tells me that I don't know where they're from and I do, you know what I mean? But yeah, my parents were born here. One was born in McKeesport, Pennsylvania, my mother, and my father was born in Pittsburgh, and then their families moved down here and got jobs in the mill back in the early 1900s and they both grew up here and they're both gone now, but they both lived here. Most of the guys here are Serbian or part Serbian. A couple-- we have a Polish guy that comes down here and works, we have a Croatian friend of ours that comes down here and works, it's not just you have to be Serbian to be here, you know.

EH: Right.

08:35

JK: Chase, I don't think you are Serbian, are you Chase? No.

EH: He just likes the chicken!

JK: Right, right, yeah! Well, you know, we know his dad and all that... is actually it's his stepdad, but you know, good friend and all that and you know, just come down there and help. And the girl Molly, you know, her grandfather was Serbian so, she's been with us--she's 26 I think but she's been here 13 years.

EH: Wow!

JK: She's been doing it half her life, you know what I mean? She'll tell you--it's her favorite day of the week, you know?

EH: So she takes the orders and...

JK: She takes the orders in the morning. She gets here about 6 o'clock in the morning and we have orders taken from 6 o'clock until 8:30 every morning on Wednesdays. Now we get here at 5:30--the phone's already been ringing, already ringing. And then she takes over and takes all the orders and writes the names down in the book, you know, and how many chickens they want because that's how we know how many chickens to cook! We just don't cook a set number, you know what I mean? We hope that people come down and pick up their chicken. Sometimes people forget or maybe can't make it but that's okay 'cause if we have a lot of chickens left over, we'll give them to the Food Bank.

09:45

EH: Oh that's nice.

JK: One in Steubenville or one in Weirton and it helps them out too, you know, so we do it that way.

EH: When you make pigs for chicken... or for Christmas, does it get real snowy down here?

JK: You know, it can, it can. You know, it can get real cold. But the fire keeps you warm.

EH: It sounds kind of cozy, actually.

JK: Yeah, not too bad. We also do for Thanksgiving, for the people that buy chickens down here, we'll do turkeys for 'em over the fire. And one time we was up to doing about 55 turkeys but it got to be too much, so we cut it back to 35, 36 turkeys. (man chimes in: 36) 36 turkeys a year. But that's for our members here that come down here and for the people to buy--if you buy chickens all year down here on a... we call a standing order every week...you want to buy a turkey, want us to cook a turkey? We will. We'll cook you a turkey for that. You know what I mean? And they're good.

EH: I bet they're so good.

JK: Oh they're good. You know what I mean? Guys come down here and they have a blast all day--they get down here early in the morning on Thanksgiving Day and you come down here and there will be maybe 20, 35 guys down here, do a little bit of drinking, you know, bringing supersat (sp?) and food and all that? They hang out here all day 'til their turkeys are done.

EH: What's supersat?

JK: Supersat's like a sausage that you can make, you know? A dry sausage and all that, you know, so...

EH: So it keeps? It's cured and it keeps?

JK: Yeah, it's cured, you cure it, the guys'll make it and they'll bring it down here with cheese and all that. And the guys make ramp and all that... not one of my favorites.

EH: I want to come. (laughs)

JK: You can come! You're doing this? You can come here anytime you want! You know what I mean? We don't care--we'll cook ya a turkey!

EH: That'd be awesome!

JK: (laughs) You're giving us free advertisement; you know what I mean? So...

EH: My family lives in Indiana so I could... on my way up I could grab a turkey.

JK: Yeah! Grab a turkey and head up! Head that way! You know what I mean?

Man chimes in: You gotta have it cleaned, you gotta have it buttered, and you gotta have a pan.

JK: See? Clean, butter, and a pan. That's all you need and we'll do it, you know.

EH: Cool.

JK: So yeah, that's Chase's stepfather--he's coming for him, you know what I mean? So...

EH: What else does the Men's Club do?

JK: Well, this is basically our main objective for the year. You know what I mean? We keep this going all year round, like I said. It's not-- we have a shutdown party. We usually close up the place around end of September. You know, and after that it's, come down here in November, do the turkeys, come down in January-- our Christmas is January 7th, we go by a different calendar, and we'll do the pigs then. Then by Easter we'll do that, but basically we just you know, it's like a dry period until we start, probably around April, starting to get the grounds back in shape. March, April come down here I mean leaves are all over the place, we have to clean up the leaves. Start cleaning the place up, you know, wash the tables down, get this area up here clean, lamb shack and all that and it takes about you know, a good month, month and a half to get these grounds back in shape and all that. And we get ready for May and we have a service down here. Our--what we call our Saint Day, Saint George--that's our Saint Day for the club and we have a religious ceremony down here. Then we have our dinner, we invite anybody from the church to come down here, and cook lamb and pig and chickens and everybody can hang out down here for the day. And that's about it--then we start getting ready for the, for the blast, and we do the Chicken Blast the last Wednesday of May to the last Wednesday in August. It usually ends up around 14 or 15 of 'em.

EH: That's a lot!

JK: Oh yeah, like I said, you know, my thing is like, I always said the first 10 are fun. The last 5 are work. You know what I mean? You already... but yeah, that way... that's about it.

EH: Do people hang out during the day? They eat their chickens and drink beer?

JK: Yeah, most of the people they come early. They might bring some families down and eat but most of the people that come early around 12 or 1 o'clock take their chickens home. Usually around 4 o'clock people start coming down here with their family and they'll bring their own side dishes. You know, we just ask 'em to-- we sell our own beer and pop--you know, please don't bring that because that's how we make our money and all that.

EH: Right.

JK: Yeah, they come here and they can--we have a playground area for the kids, some swings and see-saws. We just got our basketball court back in order. We're waiting to get the hoops back up. We had a thing with--it was tore up because the water line ran right underneath it and there was a leak and they had to tear that up, so we finally got that secured again and we're waiting to have that back. But they got horseshoes, they got volleyball nets, Anything that people want to do--they play that cornhole there, so that's it.

EH: Thank you so much. Is there anything you'd like to add?

JK: No, not really. We appreciate all the advertisement and you know, what we do here is for the community. And the community, like I said, you've got people that have been coming here for 30, 40 years, getting the same chicken every Wednesday. And even if we've raised prices, which we had to do because everything is going up. Our chicken prices-- we pay by pound--has gone up by about 30, 35 cents per pound. And that's how we sell the chicken, but we've never had people complain. This one lady we told her last week we were raising prices, she said she didn't care, as long as she didn't have to cook.

EH: (laughs)

JK: (laughs) So... we were happy with the people that come here.

EH: I think it's still a deal.

JK: Oh, you get a real good deal. I mean like I said, you get a chicken here, it's well done, it's good, it tastes good, if you eat it over there, you're gonna have a good time.

EH: Yeah! Sounds great. That's my plan. (laughs)

JK: Okay! You do it. You go over there, okay?

EH: Yeah I will. Thanks.

JK: Alright.

16:12

END OF TAPE