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Interview with Angelo Bonvetti, Italian immigrant, at his home, 4100 Lancaster Avenue, Wilmington, Delaware, on November 7, 1968 by Francis J. Fierro.

Q This is an interview with Mr. Angelo Bonvetti, 4100 Lancaster Avenue, Wilmington, Delaware. Mr. Bonvetti immigrated to the United States from Italy in 1913.

A 1913. We landed in Philadelphia September the 4th.

Q All right, fine. Now, we can just talk like this even though the machine records everything we say. I want to find out first where in Italy you were born.

A I was born Bellante, province of Teramo.

Q Bellante, would you spell that name, Bellante?

A I don't know if I can spell it--I can write it down.

Q O.K. Bellante is spelled B-e-l-l-a-n-t-e, and that's in the province of Teramo. Now, this is in Abruzzi, right?

A Yes.

Q What year were you born?

A What year? 1900.

Q In the year of 1900.

A June the 15th.

Q June 15th. What did your father do for a living in Italy?

A He was a farmer.

Q A farmer. Did he own his own land?

A No, he didn't.

Q He worked for someone else?

A No. Yes, he did, in Italy.

Q What was the arrangement? Now, I've spoken with some other people about this and they said they worked on a sharecropping arrangement that was quite oppressive, really.

A Well, I don't remember that, because my father left Italy pretty early. I was a boy about four or five years old. I don't remember that.

Q Oh, I see, then you left Italy . . .

A Yeah, my father left Italy 1901.

Q Oh, your father left Italy in 1901, then.

A He went to Germany, from Germany he came back and just stayed a few months, and he came to America.

Q Uh huh. Now, why did he leave Italy?

A Well, he was looking for work, for a better living.

Q And so he was looking to better himself because the situation was pretty difficult in Italy.

A Yes, at that time it was.

Q All right, now, how did he come to the United States? I don't suppose you would remember this, but do you remember what he told you--did he leave from Naples?

A From Naples, and he used to tell us that it took him 24, 25 days to get here.

Q Really? On a steamship?

A Yeah, then days, on a steamship.

Q Now, when you finally came to the United States was in 1913. Your father sent for you?

A Yes, sent for the whole family.

Q He sent for the whole family? Now, did he send the money from over there?

A He sent the money from here.

Q Well, from the United States to you over there, right. Now, how many of you were there, like brothers and sisters still in Italy?

A Two sisters and three brothers, and my mother.

Q Right. Now, did you have any brothers and sisters in the United States with your father?

A Yeah, one brother here with him.

Q You had one brother . . .

A He came here, oh, a few years after my father was here.

Q I see. And how old were you when you came to the United States?

A 13 years old.

Q 13. Now, you did go to school a little bit in Italy, right?

A Yes.

Q Now, was the school a public school or a church school or . . .

A Public school.

Q It was a public school. Now, this was free, was it not?

A Free.

Q Do you remember how old you were when you started school?

A About eight, nine years old, I don't know.

Q About eight or nine? Did you stay in the school until the time you came to the United States?

A Just on and off.

Q Now, while your father was in the United States and you were at home with your mother and brothers and sisters, how did you manage to live? Did your father send money or did your brothers work?

A Father send money, and my mother used to go to work for farmers surrounding us there.

Q Did you ever do any work also?

A Very little in Italy.

Q I see. Now, when you came to the United States, now I'm assuming that you left Italy from Naples.

A Yes.

Q You did leave from Naples. Now you came on a steamship, right?

A Steamship.

Q Do you remember what it was like at all?

A Oh, I believe it was a wonderful trip.

Q You did enjoy the trip.

A Yes, I enjoyed the trip.

Q Now, how did they have you in the ship? Did they have your whole family together in just one cabin?

A No, I was separated because I was 13 years old. I wasn't allowed to sleep with my mother, I was by myself, where all the men were.

Q Well, what were the--could you describe just what the conditions were like?

- A Well, the conditions wasn't so good. Was maybe fifty, sixty people sleeping in one room. The beds were all one on top of another.
- Q Like bunks that were stacked in.
- A Bunks, yes, stacked in.
- Q Now, they weren't anything like a hammock or anything, were they, did they swing . . .
- A No, no, they were solid.
- Q They were fixed. Now, how about the food? What was the food like, do you remember that?
- A The food wasn't bad, fair.
- Q Did they serve you in a dining room, or did you have to go get it like . . .
- A No, we'd just get it and we'd carry it and ate it anyplace.
- Q I see. Were only Italians aboard the ship, or were there other people as well?
- A The only ones I seen was Italians.
- Q So it was mostly Italian. Was the ship an Italian ship?
- A Italian ship. It was sunk by a German submarine in the First World War.
- Q I see. Now, when you landed in the United States, did you land in New York?
- A We stopped in New York to let off passengers, and then from New York we came to Philadelphia. We got off in Philadelphia.
- Q All right, now, you got off in Philadelphia. Did your father meet the family there?
- A Yes, he did.
- Q Did you have any trouble getting off the ship?
- A No.
- Q Going through customs and so forth?
- A No.
- Q You were not detained at all, then.
- A No.
- Q So you had physical examinations before you came . . .

A Before we came, yeah.

Q They didn't give you any after you got off?

A No.

Q All right, so you just got off, met your father, and . . .

A And came to Wilmington.

Q And you came to Wilmington. This is where your father was, then?

A Yeah.

Q Was there any particular reason why he came to Wilmington?

A I don't know. I believe he had some friends here before him and that's why he came here.

Q I see. What sort of work did your father do here?

A My father was a stonemason, a bricklayer.

Q Um hmm, bricklayer and stonemason. For whom did he work, do you remember?

A Well, he worked for many, Cantera, DiSabatino, so many contractors in town.

Q Well, I was wondering about this, because I was wondering if in 1913 there was an Italian contractor in Wilmington.

A I believe Cantera was in business then, DiSabatino, too, in a small way.

Q Was he in business at that time, in 1913?

A Yes.

Q I didn't realize that he was in business that early, at least I don't remember him. And so your father worked for them.

A Yes, he worked for another contractor, I cannot remember his name.

Q Was Franks Fox in business then, here?

A No, no.

Q O.K. So your father was a stonemason. Now, when you got to Wilmington, did your father have a house for the family, or were you living with someone else?

A Yes, he did. He had a house for us that he rented.

Q In other words, you had your own house to go to when you came here.

A Yes. Yes, we did.

Q All right, now, what were conditions like? Do you remember what the house was like, what it was like inside . . .

A Well, the house had a bathroom, and no electric . . .

Q It did have a bathroom inside--you had a bathroom inside?

A Yes--no, outside. We had no electric, we had to use oil lamps.

Q Uh huh. In other words, you had oil lamps in the house? Was there any central heating at all?

A Oh, no. Just the kitchen, just the kitchen.

Q In other words, in the kitchen you had the cooking stove also furnished heat.

A Cooking stove--we kept it lit all the time in the wintertime.

Q All right. Now how about the upstairs, any way of heating it?

A No.

Q No heat at all. In other words, just pile the blankets on.

A We used to put a brick in the stove, and at night, we used to fight, four or five of us, grab them bricks and take 'em with us, wrap 'em up in newspaper and take 'em upstairs with us.

Q Uh huh, you'd put 'em under the blankets?

A Under the bed.

Q Now, you had the oil lamps upstairs, too.

A Oh, yes, all over, in every room.

Q Tell me about these oil lamps, now. I've seen some of these oil lanterns, you know, but I've never seen these oil lamps used in a house, I was a little bit too young for them. Were they attached to the wall, or did you carry them, or were they on a table or what?

A We generally carried them. Very few was attached to the wall. And we used to take 'em downstairs, wash 'em every day, and bring 'em back to the rooms again. They had to be cleaned every day on account of they get dirty with oil.

Q Were they safe or unsafe?

A Well, they were pretty safe. You had to be careful. They was pretty safe. You never seen any?

Q I've seen the ones they used to use for the roads.

A Not them kind.

Q That's the only kind I've ever really seen.

A [Inaudible] . . . they make them with a tube and . . .

Q Oh, I've seen like the hurricane lamps, that's the kind, yeah. That's the kind you used to use, then. O.K. Now insofar as the houses in those days were concerned, did you have a living room, dining room, kitchen and then the regular rooms upstairs?

A Yes.

Q How were they furnished in those days? Now, I know we've come a long way since then.

A Very poor. We had--maybe the dining room was one table with four or five chairs and the kitchen the same way. That's it.

Q So that was it. Furnishings were sparse. And insofar as the floors, what kind of floors, now?

A Just floor, that's all, lumber.

Q Wooden floor. Painted, or . . .

A No, not painted. We used to scrub them every week, we had to scrub 'em with soap.

Q And that was just a bare wooden floor. All right, now, when you first came to the United States, in 1913 as a young chap--oh, one thing I forgot to ask you, how long did it take to get here, do you remember?

A I believe it took us about eight, ten days.

Q Eight to ten days. Did the ship stop anywhere?

A Yeah, in them days ships were pretty good.

Q Did it stop anywhere at all on the way? Most of them used to stop at Gibraltar.

A Gibraltar and I believe in New York was the next stop. And then Philadelphia--see they came in through the Delaware River here to Philadelphia.

Q Yes. Now, when you first came to the United States, did you go to school when you first got here, 'cause you were what, about 13 years old then.

A Yes, 13. I went to school about a year, and my father didn't make enough money to keep us, so I got a job at Bancroft and I got my working papers from the school.

Q Do you remember what school you went to?

A Number 11 School.

Q Where was it located?

A Ninth and Scott.

Q Ninth and Scott Streets--that's part of--well, that's part of Catholic--yeah, St. Anthony's has a school. Where did you live? I didn't ask you where your house was.

A We lived at--when we came here, we lived at 7th and Lincoln.

Q 7th and Lincoln. Where was it, on the corner, or . . .

A Right across from Mr. Colleta's [sp] saloon there at that time.

Q Where was Mr. Colleta's saloon?

A Well, he was at 7th and Lincoln up at the right-hand corner there, going toward 9th Street.

Q Uh huh, that would be what--be the northeast corner.

A Yeah.

Q Right. And you were right across--northwest corner?

A Yeah. We lived there for a while.

Q All right. Now, you went to school for maybe a year or so, right?

A Yeah.

Q How was school, what were your . . .

A School was wonderful except when I went to No. 1 room, I didn't fit in the chair. They gave me a kitchen table with a kitchen chair and I had to sit alongside the teacher. And she was very good to me, she teach me after school.

Q You were older, naturally, than the other children there because you didn't know any English.

A Yes. And every couple of weeks I'd get my table and chair moved to another room, No. 2, and then No. 3, and I guess No. 5 I quit and went to work.

Q Right. Now, they gave you, you say, your working papers from school.

A She didn't want to, but when I told her the conditions in my family, she did. She said, "Well," she said, "if you want to, but you should go to school a little bit more." So, "If you want your working paper, we'll give it to you." And I got a job at Bancroft.

Q Uh huh. What sort of work did you do at Bancroft?

A Oh, I worked over there night work. I worked 10 hours a day.

Q You were 14 years old?

A 14 years old.

Q Working 10 hours a day.

A Bancroft used to slave you in them days.

Q What kind of work was it, do you remember?

A In the bleach room, where they bleach the cloth, you know, with a stick you have the piles. And one night I fell asleep, I was pretty near covered up, they had to dig me out. I fell asleep against the wall, you know, like this. You make a pile--it comes down from here wet, and you pile it up. If you quit for 10 minutes, it cover you up.

Q How long did you work at Bancroft?

A I didn't work there very long. Then I went around with my father, tried to learn a trade, you know, tried to become a bricklayer or stonemason. I worked there quite a while, and then the war broke out, you know.

Q The First World War. Did that affect you in any way, the First World War?

A No. Then I got good jobs, you know. I--let me see, the first job I had was--I worked at the Pullman--no--yeah, I worked at Pullman Car Company.

Q Where was the Pullman Car Company located?

A Oh, I don't know--down on 11th Street Bridge on the east side. And I worked down there about 18 months, all during the war. And then the war broke out and the shipyards came on and they were paying big money--everybody went away from the Pullman, they went to the shipyard--I was the only one left down there.

Q When was this, during World War I?

A Yeah.

Q Now, let's see, when the war broke out, you were--how old were you then?

A Well, I was about 17, too young for that war and too old for the Second World War.

Q O.K. Financially then, when the war broke out, things were pretty good. Now, we could say this, then, that you worked with your father in the construction business until you were about 17 years old . . .

A No, about 16 or 17, yes.

Q About 16 or 17 when you went to the Pullman Company and then was when the war broke out, right, and you were still there. How long did you stay at the Pullman Company?

A Oh, I stayed there about 14 or 15 months.

- Q Um hmm. Now, was there any particular reason why you left there?
- A Well, I was young, and I heard they were making more money at DuPont, up at the Powder Mills, so I went up there and I got a job at the [sounds like "tack shop"].
- Q You worked up in the Powder Mills, then.
- A I worked there, yes, until the end of the war.
- Q What kind of work did you do there?
- A I used to run punch presses up there, and made pretty good money.
- Q Now tell me, I want to go back now to a couple of things. The first job you had was at Bancroft. What sort of pay did they give you at that time? Do you remember?
- A Oh, I think the pay was around \$11, \$12.00 a week.
- Q \$11 or \$12.00 a week? For how many hours a week?
- A We used to work 10 hours a day.
- Q 10 hours a day?
- A Night, I work night work.
- Q 10 hours a night for--how many days a week was it?
- A Oh, five days a week, five and a half. Them days they worked Saturdays.
- Q So you worked 55, 56 hours a week for about \$11 or \$12.00. And when you went to the Pullman Company, how--well, first you went to construction. Was that any better pay?
- A Well, construction didn't pay too much then days. I really don't remember. I believe they were paying \$.80, \$.90 a day for me--I was a young boy, you know.
- Q And that was it. And then you went to the Pullman Company. Do you recall what the wage scale was there?
- A Well, the wage scale wasn't so much 'til the war broke out and then the scale come up pretty good. We were getting over \$3.00 a day.
- Q Over \$3.00 a day, which is considerably more.
- A We went on a strike, we joined the union, I got \$300.00 back money then.
- Q Really? Which was really a small fortune, \$300.00.
- A Small fortune, yes.
- Q Now from there you left and went to DuPont. What changes did you see in

the conditions, the work conditions between these various jobs? What difference would you say--now, very frequently, you know, you go from one job to another. For example, if you're on a non-union job, conditions might possibly be a little tougher than on a union job.

A Well, the conditions when I left Pullman and went to DuPont, DuPont was a good company to work for, except you weren't allowed to smoke, you weren't allowed to carry matches in there, you had to be searched every morning before you went in the powder mill.

Q Yeah, well, that's understandable.

A It was even dangerous in there, too.

Q It was dangerous, but they're very safety-conscious, I suppose.

A Oh, yes. Very safety-conscious.

Q Of course you don't run into the same circumstances in other places, but then again you weren't fooling with gunpowder in other places, either.

A No, I wasn't very far from the mill where the [sounds like "granite"] is found, about maybe five, six hundred feet.

Q Did they ever have any explosions while you were there?

A Yes, they did. I was up there when they killed five men.

Q What happened?

A Well, they just destroyed these mills and in fact the company gave us three days off, with pay, and we went to the funeral.

Q How were these grinding mills set up?

A You know, I was up there the other day with my--they're set up on the Brandywine, have you ever been up there? On the Brandywine, one after another.

Q They're built in a way that if one explodes . . .

A Yeah, won't touch the other one. And they build it, the roof went up in the air and the wall remained there.

Q In other words, they were built facing the river, right? They had big, thick, solid stone walls in the back and the sides.

A Oh, yeah, 18, 20-inch walls, 30-inches, wall.

Q And the roof slanted towards the river, right? So that if it blew, everything blew right out into the river.

A Into the water, yes.

Q Right, and it wouldn't affect any of the mill.

- A It wouldn't affect the wall, either. The only thing, they had to build the roof back.
- Q Put a roof on and change some equipment inside.
- A Yeah. That happened many time.
- Q I see. How many men did they usually have working in those grinding mills, do you remember?
- A Oh, they had quite a few. Most of them were Italians.
- Q Were they really?
- A Yes, all Italians. They were the only ones that liked that kind of work.
- Q The reason I ask is that I had checked several years ago the pay ledgers at the Hagley Museum. I went back to the 1800's to see how far back we could find an Italian who had worked there. And I noticed that most of the workers there were Irish, though.
- A Well, Irish, Italian. When I was there, most of 'em--a few Irish, but mostly Italians. All the boys that worked in the powder mills, really, that turned the powder out, were Italians.
- Q Really? How did the Italians--you say they enjoyed working in there.
- A Yes, the work wasn't so hard, only dangerous, that's all.
- Q Just dangerous, wasn't too hard. Did the Italians always speak Italian with one another?
- A Well, yes, mostly [sounds like "Pumantes"].
- Q Oh, really? Most of them from northern Italy, then. Now, in the other jobs you had, were you working mostly with Italians there, too?
- A Oh, no, I worked--let me see, now. Well, after the war, DuPont--I mean up here in the Powder Mills--shut off, see they moved down in Virginia, somewhere, I don't know, North Carolina. They wanted to ship me down there and I didn't go. So then I was out of a job, I had to look for another job. And after the war, then we had a big depression, you couldn't buy a job. So I had a little money saved up, I spent it all, and one day I told my mother, I said, "Well, I'm gonna work on the railroad." I got a job on the railroad, on the main line, B&O. And I said, "Do I have to do this work?" I didn't learn no trade, the war is over, the depression's here, so one day I got my pay, I had a watch and chain, and I put it in a hock shop, I got \$20.00 for the watch and I got a pay of about \$30, \$40.00, and I went to the city and I bought a ticket and I went to Detroit. And I stayed there three years.
- Q Well, why did you go to Detroit?
- A Look for better jobs. And I find one, too.

Q Really? But what made you go to Detroit?

A I want--I couldn't go in the Army, so I wanted to learn how to live by myself.

Q Uh huh. Did you just arbitrarily pick out Detroit?

A Yes, I told my mother that I had to go out and learn how to live with strangers, other people. This is true.

Q Yes. Now, I've asked you before--had you worked mostly with Italian people before?

A No, I'd worked with different--most all kind of people.

Q Well, before going to Detroit, did you ever run into any kind of prejudice or bias against Italians or against you because you were Italian?

A Not that I know. We was treated all right everyplace I worked. If you mind your business, they treat you all right.

Q Well, you went to Detroit. What kind of a job did you find there?

A Over there I couldn't find a job so easy, you know. I went to the shipyard.

Q They had a shipyard in Detroit?

A Yes, they have a shipyard--Great Lake. And I worked there five, six months, and I was a reamer, you know, drilling holes. And they were working piece-work and I was making \$14, \$15.00 a day.

Q That was pretty good money then.

A Yeah, I made pretty good money.

Q How many days a week did you work?

A Well, I was working about six days a week, five and a half, six days a week then.

Q And how many hours a day, do you remember?

A Well, eight hours them days. Things were getting better.

Q Things were changing. There was a big change after the war.

A Oh, yeah, yeah.

Q Well, how did you live, now? Where did you live and what sort . . .

A Over there? I boarded with a nice family. I paid \$10.00 a week for the room and board.

Q For room and board. Did they take care of your laundry, too, or was that

separate?

A What do you mean?

Q Your laundry.

A Well, yes, they washed a little bit of the laundry, maybe a pair of pants and a shirt, the rest you had to send it to the cleaner.

Q Were these people Italian?

A Yes, they were Italians.

Q Do you remember where they were from?

A She was Italian, her husband was Irish.

Q I see. Had she come from Italy or was she born here?

A She was born in Jersey.

Q Oh, really? Then she was born in the United States, then.

A Yeah, she was from the United States, but she had five, six men boarding, she was making a good living, you know.

Q And you stayed in the same place for about three years?

A Yes, I stayed three years same place.

Q Now, I want to ask you one question that we've--to cover an area that we've been avoiding completely. When you first came to Wilmington, there was no Italian church. St. Anthony's wasn't built.

A No, we went to St. Thomas.

Q You went to St. Thomas. How was it at St. Thomas? Did they treat you all right there?

A Sometimes, yes. Father Connelly, I believe was his name, he spoke a little Italian, yes, he helped me out a good bit, and my mother.

Q They treated you real well there?

A They treated us all right.

Q Did they have one Mass for Italians?

A No, no, I don't remember that, no.

Q In other words, you could go to any Mass you wanted to.

A Yeah.

Q Now, you always went to St. Thomas, is that right?

- A We went to St. Thomas 'til St. Anthony was built.
- Q O.K. Now, when you left Wilmington, was St. Anthony's already built, or did you leave before it was built?
- A Oh, I left--I left Wilmington and then I come back. St. Anthony was built 1925. This what I'm telling you happened in 1921, '22, '23.
- Q In other words, you left before it was built. O.K. Now, what did you do during your spare time? You know, when you weren't working--you were a young man and . . .
- A You know, we used to go to Brandywine Springs, and I used to skate a lot--skate all day Sunday. Roller skate.
- Q Roller skates. Really?
- A Yeah, really. [Inaudible] . . . over there, we had all kind of fun. It was a nice park.
- Q Did you do anything besides that? For example during the week, you know, young fellows get together, some hang out on the . . .
- A Well, we used to play a little cards, shoot pool.
- Q Uh huh. And this was all up in Little Italy . . .
- A That's all. We didn't have no automobiles like we have today, you couldn't go many places.
- Q Everyplace you went, you walked, right? Or took a trolley.
- A We walked or go down on the Wilson line, excursion, every once in a while. We'd go down and up the river.
- Q How was the gang you ran around with? I mean, they were all young Italian boys, weren't they?
- A Oh, wonderful gang, wonderful gang.
- Q Fun-loving group? Did they ever get into any kind of trouble or anything, or did they pretty much just mind their own business?
- A Yeah, they were wonderful boys.
- Q When you were in Detroit, now, of course you left an area where you were known and where you knew people and you wound up in an area where you didn't know anybody. How did things go for you? You found a job and so forth . . .
- A Well, I learned how to live, how to take care of myself. I lived with strangers. But after I got acquainted with them, the lady that--the lady of the house, she used to say to me, "Hey, boy, you gonna sit at that desk and write to your mother. I know your mother wants to hear from you." She really did it. And I had a good job and I sent money. I bought a car

and brought it back twice, 1920, '22.

Q Really? What were the roads like?

A I came Route 1, it was ashes.

Q No kidding? How long did it take you to drive to Wilmington from Detroit?

A It took us three days, three days and a half.

Q Three days and a half.

A Yeah. Well them cars them days wouldn't go over 40, 45, 50 miles an hour.

Q And the roads weren't too good.

A And we had to reline the brakes twice, we done it ourselves. We had the tools and everything. We done it on the road, stopped and relined the wheels, take the wheels off and put new lining in there. Them days they only had two-wheel brakes, you know.

Q What kind of a car was it that you had?

A It was a Nash.

Q Oh, really, a Nash. Was it a convertible or . . .

A No, it was a touring car.

Q Oh, uh huh. Well, when you were in Detroit, how did you find out where to get a house where you could board and . . .

A Well, I had a friend of mine that lived in Detroit and I went to him. In fact, I didn't get a job for--oh, it took about a week or ten days, and I went broke, I didn't have no more money. And this fellow says, "Don't worry," he says, "I'll pay your board 'til you find a job. If you can't find a job, I give you enough money to go home." So I wasn't scared no more when I found him. He helped me. Then I found a good job and I stayed.

Q You stayed there about three years . . .

A And let me tell you where I found this job. You were--at L. A. Young Spring Factory, one of the biggest spring factories in the world still today. And there was 400 people in front for job. And I was right in the middle of this crowd with lunch and a pair of overalls under my arm, and a man called me from over there--"Come 'ere." And he said to me, "Look at your hands." When he looked at my hands, he said, "Come on in." My hands were full of calluses, I'd just come off the railroad, you know, full of calluses. He says, "Come on in." And I got the job. And I stayed there three years.

Q In a spring company.

A Spring company, yeah.

Q In Detroit. Well, when did you work in the boat . . .

- A Well, that's--yeah, I left the boats because it was too far away, then I worked in the spring factory. See, we don't get [inaudible] . . .
- Q We'll get it straightened up. When you first worked there you worked in a shipyard and then you went to the spring factory.
- A Yeah, the shipyard was so far away, I had to get up at 4:00 in the morning to go to work. Had to change three or four cars, it cost me a lot of money. So I got a job right near where I lived. And I stayed three years.
- Q Well, when you were in Detroit, what did you do for--you know--relaxation, entertainment, recreation?
- A Well, we used to go to the same as here, to the parks, skating and Fun City and all that stuff--movies.
- Q Were the friends that you had there, were they Italian or were they mostly mixed, or . . .
- A Some were French, Canadian French; some were Italians--a couple of Italians from Canada, we used to run around together. In fact, I brought 'em back with me here.
- Q Oh, really? Did they stay here or did they go back?
- A We stayed here a couple of weeks and then we went back.
- Q Good, now, why did you decide to leave Detroit permanently?
- A Well, my mother used to write to me to come on home, "We've got a lot of jobs here, what do you want to stay over there? The whole family's here, come on home, come on home," so I did. One day I made up my mind and I came home.
- Q Now, where did you go to work when you came home?
- A When I came home, I didn't go to work nowheres, I went in the mushroom business.
- Q I see. Now, how did you get interested in the mushroom business then?
- A Well, my sister married a fellow from Kennett Square and I seen he had greenhouses and a little mushroom place up there and I seen--and he asked me if I wanted to go in. So I says, "Yes," but I says, "I ain't got much money." I had a little money I brought back from Detroit. He says, "You don't need too much money." So I started in the mushroom business.
- Q So it was just like that.
- A Well, I worked pretty hard--very hard the first couple of years, then my brother-in-law and me and another fellow, we bought a big farm up in Coatesville. We bought a farm, about 60 acres of ground with a big barn, five horses and all the buildings, two living houses and a big mushroom plant. We worked there three or four years like mules.

Q Now, what year was this that you started . . .

A This was in 1924, '25.

Q Now, did you build all these buildings on that farm?

A No, the buildings were there. The fellow lost it--went bankrupt and we bought 'em [sounds like "sheriff"], and the bank gave us credit, we didn't have much money. I had a couple of thousand dollars and my brother-in-law had the same things. We paid \$22,000 for the buildings and things--it was a lot of money.

Q Yes it was, in those days, yes it was.

A And you know, we had about \$18,000 mortgage, we paid in two years.

Q With mushrooms.

A Mushrooms, yeah.

Q Well, was the mushroom business as good then?

A Mushroom business was good then, very good, better than it is today.

Q Really? Well, why would you say it was better then than today?

A Wasn't so many.

Q In other words, you didn't have the competition.

A Mushroom was a luxury in them days--very few, not too many like today.

Q Well, what changes were taking place in the way you lived? Now, we know that when you first got here, it was a pretty plain house, pretty plain furniture, the only stove in the house was in the kitchen.

A Yes, that's before--during the First World War. But after I come out of the mushroom, we were doing pretty good, we bought better furniture, we bought better clothes, I bought a new car. It was 1924, '25 now. Then we stayed there for a while after we break up. My brother-in-law bought the whole--and I sell it to him. And I came down and bought this place.

Q I see, this place where you are right now.

A Yeah, 1930.

Q You had mushroom barns here.

A Yeah, I bought this place with mushroom house already in it.

Q Oh, there were already mushroom houses here, uh huh. And you moved into the mushroom business for yourself right here.

A By myself here.

- Q I see. Now, by this time St. Anthony's Church was built, right?
- A Yeah. St. Anthony's Church was built in 1925, '24, '25. I got married there.
- Q Was it in the old church or the new church that . . .
- A The old church.
- Q In the old one. How did the building of this church change the life of the people in the Italian community in Wilmington?
- A Plenty. Plenty. I think the church changed the life of the Italians quite a bit, especially young Italians, the young ones.
- Q In what way?
- A Well, some of the young boys were pretty wild. After the church--Father [inaudible, sounds like "Tuck"] took 'em to the church there and they had the club for 'em and they can play there and they were all there--I guess you know this. Yes, he was very good. Father Tuck^{Tucker} done a wonderful job.
- Q You would say that Father Tuck probably had a greater impact on the Italian community here than any other single person or single thing?
- A Yes, yes he did.
- Q You would say he was probably the greatest thing that happened to the Italian community in Delaware.
- A I like him to come there, right, he done a wonderful job.
- Q All right, now, did you ever belong to any clubs, social clubs, political clubs?
- A No.
- Q Did you know of any that were active in the area--the Italian Republican Club, or Democratic . . .
- A Some of 'em, but I never bothered too much, no.
- Q Now, right after World War I, Mussolini started to gain power in Italy. Now he really started--in the early '20s he started agitating and then finally came to power around the middle '20s, late '20s. What were your feelings about the man at that time?
- A I didn't know too much about politics in them times. I didn't care what happened. I really didn't know about it.
- Q Did many of your friends--well, most of the people you knew were Italians who came from Italy.
- A Well, my father still for Italy, you know.

- Q Yeah. What did they say about Mussolini, did they think he was a good man, or did they think he was a crackpot, or what did they think of him?
- A No. They said that Mussolini did a lot of good things for Italy.
- Q They thought he was a pretty great man at that time, then.
- A Yes. When he started, he done a lot of good things, for the farmers, for the working people, he done--he built more schools, he built more roads and he done lots of things.
- Q Well, he did improve the conditions.
- A He improved Italy very much.
- Q He improved the conditions of sharecroppers and the relationship with the owners, he did a lot of good things there. Now, were there any organizations that you knew of, I mean Fascist organizations in the area?
- A Well, I guess there was a few of them, but I didn't ever belong to them. I never bothered with 'em. Very few.
- Q Right. But these people that belonged to them, they didn't bother anybody.
- A No, they didn't bother. They were working people.
- Q Just working people, they belonged to it because they were proud of the [inaudible] . . .
- A Yeah, they were proud of their country, that's all.
- Q And this was about the extent of it. Now, how did Prohibition affect most of the people, in Little Italy, say? How would you say it affected them?
- A I don't know. I mean Prohibition--the Italian had the wine anyway. They made wine all the time.
- Q They made their own wine, yes. So about the only way it would have affected a lot of these people was that they started to sell it.
- A Well, some of them were selling it, yes.
- Q Before they didn't have a market for it . . .
- A No--well, yeah, they just drink it.
- Q Not so much. Prohibition, it almost forced them to become criminals, you might say, when really . . .
- A Yeah, some of 'em started selling it.
- Q Right, when they wouldn't sell it before, then they started. Did you notice any change come over the Italian community because of this sort of thing? Were there any speakeasies in Little Italy that . . .

- A Well, there was a few, not too many. Most of the Italians were good workers, all good workers. They always had a job. They didn't make much money, but they had jobs.
- Q Oh, sure. I was wondering--I was just wondering on your observations on this, because I've interviewed a couple of ladies that said that Little Italy was one of the nicest places to live in in the city, for the Italians, and they said that you rarely ever saw a drunk on the street in Little Italy, never, but after Prohibition came in . . .
- A You see more drunks.
- Q Yes, you saw--as you said--most of 'em weren't even Italians. Is that true, would you agree with that?
- A That's the truth. That's the truth. They used to come from downtown and go up, get drunk, and that's it, they'd be laying up in the street.
- Q And that was it. I was just wondering, I just wanted to get your confirmation on this. Now, when the Depression hit, it started in about '29, in the early '30s--actually it lasted way into the '30s, almost 'til the start of World War II, really, it was a long time--how did this affect most people? How did it affect you and most of the people where you lived?
- A Well, it didn't affect me very much. We had a little money saved up; we spent it, because we didn't work for a while there. And then 1930, I went in this business, and I done good.
- Q In other words, 1930, the mushroom business wasn't affected by . . .
- A Not too much, no. We didn't have no trouble selling them at all. In fact, most of the trouble we had, we couldn't raise a big crop them days, we didn't know too much about 'em.
- Q I see, yeah. So in other words, the scarcity of 'em took care of that.
- A Yes, yes.
- Q O.K. In other words, the scarcity of gold is what makes it valuable, and the scarcity of mushrooms . . .
- A Yeah. Well, we didn't know too much about--we couldn't raise a big crop. But we raised enough to make a good living.
- Q I see. So the Depression, really, you might say, didn't affect you . . .
- A Well, the Depression didn't affect me at all, because I was working here, working 15 hours a day and maybe more, me and my wife, and we built a home in 1935 during the Depression. And I paid cash for this house when I built it.
- Q I see. Now, since there was a Depression and things were very difficult, how did you find the cost of living between the time before the Depression started and during the Depression?

- A Well, the cost of living was high during the good time when people were working. And after--then in the Depression, things went down. There was no money to buy.
- Q There just wasn't any money around. O.K. Now when would you say we started to come out of the Depression?
- A Oh, well, when the Second World War started . . .
- Q In '41?
- A '41.
- Q Well, we got into it in '41, but it started in Europe in . . .
- A Well, like '35, '36, '37--'37, '38, we started to come out. Then in 1940, '42, things went up good. We were in the war then, working, everybody working again.
- Q Everybody was working. After World War II ended--I'm not gonna--well, first let me ask you one question about World War II. In World War I, the United States and Italy were on the same side. In World War II, they were on opposite sides. Did you have any personal feelings about this?
- A No. I didn't have no personal feelings at all. I was American citizen at that time and I was a real American. As far as my concern, I'd have fought for this country.
- Q Yeah, well, I say, but did you ever have any--I'm sure you were a real American, but . . .
- A No, I really didn't. We forgot about the old country altogether, except my father had more feeling than I did.
- Q I see, he really felt bad about it then.
- A Yeah, he did, but . . .
- Q Well, I imagine a lot of Italians who had brothers over there or . . .
- A Yeah, he did, but us young folks, we were different.
- Q Uh huh. So you didn't worry too much about it.
- A No, we didn't worry too much about what was going on over there or what happened to them.
- Q Did you ever run into any problems with people who were not Italians who might make some comments about your being Italian or an alien or anything like that? Did you ever have any problems like that?
- A No.
- Q In other words, you'd say something like that was rare.

A It was rare, yeah.

Q In other words, you might find a thoughtless word being said here and there, but never really much. O.K. Did World War II have any real effect on you at all?

A No, I done good in World War II. It didn't affect me a bit.

Q O.K. Now, how about looking over the time that you have been in the United States. You've been here since 1913, it's now 1968--that's 55 years. Now, there have been a lot of changes that have taken place in 55 years. If you were to pick out--if someone were to say to you, what's the one single thing that you consider to be the greatest change, not only in your life, but in life in general in the United States, do you think you'd be able to pick out one particular thing that . . .

A The biggest change we had all these years?

Q Yes, change in our way of life, in our way of thinking and so on and so forth.

A Oh, so many things that you'd pick out.

Q There are a lot of things, you can write a book on the changes, there's no question.

A We have better homes and automobiles and we have a better living condition. We get along with each other better--oh, so many things.

Q Food is better.

A Food is better, everything is better.

Q There's one other thing I want to ask you. One of the big problems in our life today, especially in the city--not only in the city, it's all over--is violence in the streets. Now, people talk about violence in the street. People are afraid to go out on the street today. When would you say that this change started to take place, 'cause it wasn't always like that. There was a time when you could go out any time of day or night and not have to worry about a thing, but today you go out in your back yard and you're liable to get hit on the head.

A Yeah. I believe this change has been these last few--three year or so--it hasn't been very long.

Q Seems like these last few years . . .

A Yeah, last few years.

Q Now, how about the relationships between people? Now, there was a time, I'm sure that you'd remember if you'd think back on it, when you first came here, your younger years in this country, when people spent more time with other people, when people used to talk and people did things together, they visited more. . .

A They had no other place to go.

Q They had nothing else to do. But today, well, you might live next door to a man and not see him for a month. Would you notice that . . .

A Well, today he travels with his automobiles more.

Q Do you notice another change in that one? Well, people always go, but they stay in the house more, would you say that's . . .

A Yes, I would, that's right.

Q Well, when you look back on these differences in the way you live, and you've got more things today than you ever had before, do you think you do more things today than you used to do, or do you do less than you used to do?

A Oh, I believe I do less than I did years ago. I don't know. I no work as hard today as I did three years ago.

Q Well, I'm not talking about work now. I know work is less, but I'm talking about in your socializing and seeing other people and so forth.

A Oh, I don't know. I don't see much different. I have a lot of friends, make new ones, lose some, make new ones every day, so I don't know, it's no problem.

Q You don't see too big a difference in that respect. How about the way people are with one another today? Do you think that people treat one another the same today as they did maybe 20 or 30 years ago?

A I don't know, I don't think--I think so, I don't know.

Q You think it's pretty much the same?

A Yes.

Q O.K. Now, have you ever had a desire to go back to Italy? I mean to live, not just to visit. I know you wanted to go back to visit . . .

A No, never.

Q Never. In other words, you've never regretted coming to the United States.

A No.

Q Now, you feel that things are better now than they've ever been.

A Yes.

Q In other words, have you ever felt that--you know how people talk about the good old days, how good things used to be--have you ever felt like you'd like to go back to the good old days?

A No, I believe these days, today, are much better.

Q You think today is better than . . .

A Much better than my younger days, oh yes.

Q Well, I've asked you just about all I wanted to ask, except one thing I didn't touch on at all. I just scarcely touched on it--that was politics. Were you aware ever at all of politics as a young man in this country? You know, around election time, you'd see the politician come around shaking hands, giving out buttons and so on.

A Well, we had that trouble all the time, yeah we had that--that's no problem, that's the way this country runs.

Q Would you say politics is pretty much the same now as it was . . .

A The same, I think so too.

Q You don't notice too much of a difference, then. I was just wondering, you weren't affected too much . . .

A No, as far as I can remember, I've been voting the same. All looking for votes, all want to become President.

Q Tell me, when you were a young man in Wilmington, when you first came here, were there many Italians who would run for office, political office, do you remember?

A No, very few. We had very few Italians that were doctors or lawyers in them days, very few. We only had two or three doctors.

Q I see. And things have changed considerably in that regard. Now, how about the politicians now? In those days, the politicians who were supposed to be representing you were not even Italian, right?

A No.

Q They weren't Italian. Now, did they ever do anything for the Italian community? Did you ever see them except at election time?

A Yes, that happens all the time, you see them during election, then you don't see them no more.

Q You don't see them again 'til the next election.

A But I never asked for no favors, I never bothered with them too much.

Q Now, how about Italian people in general now? Today we hear so much about welfare. Now, until Roosevelt came in, there wasn't any welfare. What did Italians do during periods of depression when they couldn't work and didn't have any money?

A Well, you know, they just tied up their belt. They just lived with what

they had, and that's it, they were happy.

Q In other words, they didn't have any money to buy anything, what'd they do, go out and pick dandelions?

A Dandelions and my mother used to make homemade bread and she used to make bowls of soup and that was good for a couple of days at a time.

Q In other words, dandelions and beans and when you couldn't afford the beans, you just ate the dandelions. That's it, that's right.

A You know, when I was going to school, I got a job with a bread wagon and I was delivering bread, and he was giving me 60¢ a week and three breads a day. And one day I told Mom, "Hey, Mom, I'm gonna quit this job, this man don't give me nothing." She said, "Don't you quit that job, that's a lot of money, 60¢ a week and three breads a day feeds the family." This is true.

Q This was back in 1913, 1914.

A 1914, yeah, I was a young boy then.

Q 60¢ a week, seven days a week?

A The bread was 7¢ a bread them days.

Q Yes, 7¢ for a loaf of bread. What kind of bread was it, Italian bread or was it . . .

A Yeah, round loaves of bread.

Q Oh, round loaves, huh? Was it an Italian bakery or . . .

A Italian bakery.

Q Uh huh. Do you remember what the man's name was who was . . .

A [Sounds like "Tuscala"], on 5th Street, he's dead, he's gone.

Q Whereabouts on 5th Street was this? You know, I've never heard of it, this Italian bakery, Tuscala, right?

A Yeah. Oh, he had children, he's got several children living, mostly girls. That's why you never heard of him--all girls.

Q Where was his bakery located?

A Between Union and Lincoln on 5th Street. He had two houses, big houses there.

Q Oh, he had the bakery right in the house?

A No, he had a regular bakery back there. He had quite a few customers. We used to deliver bread to Stanton, we used to go all around here.

Q With like the round loaves of bread. Did he make the long ones too?

- A A few, but mostly them days the round ones. And we used to deliver on a horse. And I remember when we used to come out of Lancaster Pike here, we had to pay a nickel toll here, right down here at Greenhill Avenue.
- Q Oh, really?
- A Yeah, they had to pay a nickel.
- Q At Lancaster Pike here.
- A Same way on the Kennett Pike.
- Q I didn't realize Lancaster Pike was a toll road.
- A Oh, yes, right there where the liquor store is now. [Inaudible]--wife owns it.
- Q Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah, it's right on . . .
- A Right there used to be a gate.
- Q How about that? You know, this is the first time I've ever heard of that.
- A Yes, was a gate, we used to pay--I believe it was 5¢, 4¢, I don't know--8¢.
- Q Were there any other toll roads besides Penny Hill?
- A The only ones that I remember was this one here--Lancaster Pike--and Kennett Pike. Them days they used to go through here with horses.
- Q Um hmm. How about that. Well, is there anything else you'd like to add to what . . .
- A I don't know. I don't have much more. I guess you ask any question--I hope it makes a good story. This is--what I tell you, is all the truth, it's everything that really happened.
- Q Well, this is fine, these are the things I wanted to hear and also, you know, these things about the bakery and little items like that. How has Little Italy changed physically from what it was like when you first came over? For example, certainly when you first came over, it wasn't all built up all the way down in every direction. That was the suburbs of Wilmington, wasn't it? Wasn't that--that was the edge of town.
- A Well, let me tell you, the old Italians sent their children to school, and all the boys, Italians today, they have a better education, they moved out of Little Italy. They have a better home, better place to live, better jobs.
- Q Well, how did the Italian parents feel about education in general?
- A Oh, very much. My father beat me in the head many times to make me go to school. Yes, oh yes. But we couldn't afford it, couldn't go to school because I had to go to work, make a living.

Q But the old people really prized education, didn't they?

A They did, very much. My father, very much.

Q It was something they couldn't have themselves, they did want their families to have it, whatever they could afford to give to them.

A You know, it broke my heart, because I wanted to go to school but I couldn't go to school because my father couldn't make a living, there wasn't enough money to live. So I went to work and we got along better.

Q O.K., well this is fine, this about covers everything, I think, unless you have anything you'd like to add. Just keep right on talking if you have anything to add.

A I don't know what to tell you anymore.

[END OF INTERVIEW]