

Interview with Dominic Ombrello

Ishpeming, Michigan

December 29, 1988

Interviewer (I): I'm doing an autobiographical interview with Dominic Ombrello at his home in Ishpeming on December 29, 1988. When and where were you born?

Dominic Ombrello (DO): I was born in Ishpeming, Michigan. In December the 7th, 1919. I was born 130 Division Street, West division.

I: Were your parents American citizens when at the time of your birth?

DO: No they weren't.

I: How many children were in your family and where did you fit in?

DO: There was eight, nine children and I was the fifth.

I: How did you get your nickname "daddy"?

DO: A boarder of my ma's, and lived with my mom boarding, he came up with that name when I was about five years old, but I really don't know why he named me daddy, and I had it ever since.

I: How old were you when you got your first job?

DO: I was 13 years old, and I worked for Atlanteger [SPELLED PHONETICALLY] if anybody remember Atlanteger [SPELLED PHONETICALLY] it was an undertaker and I dug graves for him at 5 dollars a grave.

I: What kind of jobs did you have after that?

DO: Then I went and worked when I was 15 I was in the eighth grade I went to work for Sharien [SPELLED PHONETICALLY] company, building a highway out there and that's all north of Ishpeming. And I worked there for a year. And then when I was 16 I went to work for Cohodas.

I: And how did you get a job at so young an age out there?

DO: Were kind of depression at time, we went to Marquette, my mom took me to Marquette and looked up in the state department because it was a state job, on the state highway. And she kind of lied

to them that I was 18 years old, because I was pretty big and so they said okay. So I went out, they gave me the job out there with uncle Dom [SPELLED PHONETICALLY], me and him got hired the same time out there, and that's how I got there and I stayed there for the summer.

I: What did you do there?

DO: We loaded sand on the dump trucks by hand with shovels, we shoveled dirt into dump trucks all day long.

I: And how much did you get paid?

DO: 40 cents an hour. When I was 16 I went to work for Walter Togen [SPELLED PHONETICALLY] building those bridges across the highway out there on 41. And I stayed with him that year, and I went back the next year which was 17, and we finished them and he wanted me to go with them and I said I can't because I was 17 and he was pretty mad at me because I had lied my age, but then he did get me a job with Green Bay paving company. Which I spent the rest of the summer working there.

I: What did you do?

DO: We paved the highways out there, you know, cement. And then from there I went to Cohodas, in 1938.

I: When did you get your job in the mine?

DO: In April of 1941 I started in the Greenwood mine.

I: And did you do digging jobs there or loading or?

DO: Well I started out smucking dirt and after that I got a job mining, and I stayed mining all the time I was there.

I: How old were you when Pearl Harbor was attacked?

DO: I was, Pearl Harbor was attacked in December the 7th, 1941, I was 22 years old on that day. And I say, I went the next day and had to sign up for the draft but I got a deferment because I was in the mines and I got three deferments and finally I found out what this was all about I went to the superintendent told him that I don't care for the deferments I'd like to go into the service. So in 1943, November of 1943 I joined the U. S Navy and I went to Great Lakes for training and Great Lakes I went to Norman, Oklahoma.

I: What did you do in Norman, Oklahoma?

DO: Well I was lucky, I got a job driving around the commander, every day. And I stayed there for nine months driving him around. From there I went, to California and from Shoemaker, California we went to, oh I forget now, Treasure Island I think it was, Treasure Island, California where we were shipped out oversea then, in which I went to the Amerty [SPELLED PHONETICALLY] Islands and I stayed there in the Navy working off of a dry dock.

I: Did you see any fighting while you were there?

DO: No. No fighting.

I: Did you know anybody who was killed?

DO: Well we on these dry docks we used to have a lot of these ships come in that were blasted you know wrecked, and we had to repair it just enough so that they could get to the States. If you know the pumps were gone or something was bug we had to repair all that so they could take off and go to the States because we weren't that big.

I: How did the war effect your family back home?

DO: Well I really don't know. My ma, she felt bad because I had to go because I think I was a big supporter for my ma because I was the only one really working at the time that I went to the service and that, so she kind of missed me. [Tape pauses] And my ma not being the citizen at the time, they had came in the house and searched the house for weapons or if we had radios or whatever we had but we really didn't have anything. But they did take my mom to Marquette, she had to be fingerprinted and all that down in, and they released her during the war. But I supported my ma while I was in the service. I sent her aid, because the government paid so much and I paid so much so she got something out of it.

I: What were your feelings when you heard about the atomic bombs being dropped in Japan?

DO: Well in a way, we felt pretty good because we figured that this would be it, the war would be over and then it was bad in another way, but it saved many lives as part of the Americans.

I: And how were you treated by the people of Ishpeming when you returned home from the war?

DO: Well they always treated me good, the people in Ishpeming because it's such a small town everybody knew each other and that. And then when I got back home I was off of work for, oh I came home in February or January and I went to work in February back at the mine because I kept my

seniority so when, after the strike was over in 1946 I went back to the mine and stayed there and I worked in the mine ever since 1959 where I got really hurt at the Tracy mine and after that I couldn't go back no more.

I: When you weren't able to go back what did you do?

DO: Well in 1960 Arthur Nolt [SPELLED PHONETICALLY] had a tavern next to where I was living and he asked me if I would buy the bar and said I would love to, but I don't have the money. But he said well I'll back you up, I want to get out of business and I will back you up in the bar. But I had a brother in law that had a few dollars and he came and said well I'll be partners with you. So we both pitched in and we bought to bar next to where I lived, the Paradise bar. And I've been there for 25 years, which after I retired.

I: After you retired what did you do?

DO: Well after, three years before I retired I bought a cottage on Lake Michigamme which me and brother in law we kind of repaired and fixed it up, and then when I retired we spend most of the summers there and in the winters we spend in Florida.

I: During your life do you have any stories you could tell us?

DO: Well I had one big experience one time I was digging graves I was only 14 years old and I had to go out there at night to dig it and it was dark and here I was digging this grave. And this guy comes in, he was up on top and he hollered down, what are you doing? And that was enough to make my hair turn gray. [Tape pauses] A lot of times, we used to plant the dead in the summer and in the spring of year just before Memorial Day. They used to keep them at the chapel there in the cemetery and I had to go over and get a body. So when I was in there looking for this body, the name, this little old hunch back guy came around the corner and he said what are you doing [tape cuts out] and I said I wheeled it and I never gone back. [Tape pauses] And when we worked for Walter Toben [SPELLED PHONETICALLY], he was tough on the men, really tough, because any, this fellow came here on day got the job gave him a job and we had to unload this rock car. And they had it by shovel they never had equipment like they do today, and we were shoveling there and shoveling there and finally the guy looked at his watch and he put it back in his pocket and it wasn't 5 minutes the boss was there with his check and he told him we got a whistle that calls for lunch time you don't need no watch here and he said here's your check and go home. [Tape stops] And I had a different odd jobs, I worked for Spears [SPELLED PHONETICALLY] over there unloading box cars there when they used to get these box cars, then go over and work a day or

two unloading box cars. That wasn't easy either, you know that's a ____ company, Munising, Michigan. As I got social security in 1937 and that was in April when I went there to work [Tape cuts out] I think social security first started, it passed in '36 but I don't think they drew any money out until the first of January of 1937, and people started paying into social security. And Franklin Roosevelt passed that in 1936.

I: Did you get it right away?

DO: No I just started social security, you gotta be 62 or 65 you know.

I: What did your family and friends think of Hoover and Franklin Roosevelt.

DO: Well Hoover, he wasn't much of a president because we hit the depression and it was real bad where people never had nothing and nobody was working and they had to get county relief which nobody ever got because I know times where we never had bread in the house and they wouldn't give us any flour, and my ma used to ran up grocery bills all over at Mr. Andract [SPELLED PHONETICALLY] down here and Mr. Tassen [SPELLED PHONETICALLY] had a grocery store if you remember over on Pearl Street. And she had bills all over until after the depression which when Roosevelt when in in 1932 things started to pick up because then he come up with WPA and NYA and there wasn't much but at least they were getting some work and they were getting around 42 dollars or 48 dollars a month and that's when I went out and got odd jobs and started to help out a little bit.

I: Did you ever have to beg, go to house to house?

DO: Yes we had to go up here to Mr. Elliot's [SPELLED PHONETICALLY] and people know where he lives up on the hill up here where CCI owned that land and beg for flour but you wouldn't get nothing from him because they thought you were a millionaire so they never did give you anything to eat.

I: Tell me about picking coal from the railroad tracks?

DO: Well during the depression to heat the house we used to have to go out at night to the round house and steal coal by the bag and haul it all the way home and the town where I lived and then go back again back and forth because we had a big home and a bag of coal never last too long and we used to have to steal enough that would last us for the whole night. So every night during the winter we used to have to go up the round house and steal coal.

I: Did you ever get caught?

DO: No I don't think they even mind us taking the coal because they knew that you couldn't buy it you know, they never were too bad about it.

I: Did you go to school and work?

DO: Well when I got that job up the highway there on 41 up north I was in the eighth grade and I used to have to go to work in the morning from 6 in the morning to 12 because I told them my class that that's the best shift for me so they gave me that shift because it was only a 6 hour deal, 6 hour a day deal so I used to work from 6 to 12 and then go to school at St. Johns school at around quarter to one school started. Until I graduated out the of the eighth grade.

I: And after the eighth grade did you just quit and not go on to high school?

DO: I quit because then I work the next summer I went to work for Sharry [SPELLED PHONETICALLY], Walter Toben [SPELLED PHONETICALLY] up there.

I: You said that the day Pearl Harbor was bombed it was your birthday, how were you spending it?

DO: Well it was kind of a nice day and I was in Marquette because I was going with my wife at the time. You know I mean she was my girlfriend and we were walking down Washington street and somebody come along and said that the Japanese blasted Pearl Harbor, bombed Pearl Harbor and well we didn't believe them because you know people are kind of jokes so we went back up her house and turned the radio on and sure enough they did it, and the next day it was a Sunday as far as up here, so Monday morning we had to go down and sign up for the draft. Because right after that they said you had to sign up for the draft. And then when I signed up for the draft, they classified you like if you were 1A that meant the certain couple of weeks or a month or so after that you were going to be drafted. So I got my classification which was 2B, and I didn't think nothing of it, and you had to carry this with you because if somebody stopped you that always had to have your classification. So I got that and I kept that and I never go called, six months after I got another one, not a classification, 2B so I just put it in my pocket and for that went by 6 months and then another time I got another classification 2B after 6 months. So I told my girlfriend I said I don't know Im getting tired of this I said, I ain't being drafted, so I said I think I'm going down to the post office in Marquette and see if I can sign up for the Navy. So we go down there and I told the man there I would like to register to join the Navy. He said well let me see your classification so I gave him my classification and he looked at it and it was 2B and he said what are you trying to be, funny? He says you know we can't touch you. And I said why? And he said 'cuz you're class B and you are working in places where you can't touch you, I was working in the mine at the time. So I

had to go the next day to the mine and tell my superintendent not to send in no more deferments for me I wanted to join the service and he said, well I don't know why you're doing enough work here you shouldn't have to go into the military you are doing your duty right here and I said no, no I wanted to go into the service so in my classification is up in November forget it. So it was over and they said, and they sent me one and I went in and joined the Navy then.

I: And did they save the job for you when you came back?

DO: After we got back home, I got back home in '46 in January and then there was a strike at that time, it was a big strike here at that time because people remembered that in '46. I know it was a 120 something days that time, but when we got home we were getting 20 dollars a week from the government anyway. But then after the strike I went back to the mine and I had gotten my seniority and everything you know, back again. So we had our jobs as far as that goes.

I: During the war did you see anybody famous?

DO: Well when I was stationed in Norman, Oklahoma I was on the, this commander I chauffeured, had charged of a gunman range and I used to have to stay there and wait for him and that and there was a movie actor, Robert Stack was his name, he acts on the Untouchables. And when I was stationed in Shoemaker, California and I went to the mess hall, I met Jackie Cooper, in the mess hall at that time because I guess he kind of screwed up and they put him in the mess hall.

I: Did you ever see a president?

DO: No I had never seen any presidents or that.

I: What was your life like on Amenty [SPELLED PHONETICALLY] Island?

DO: Well it wasn't too bad, when I first got on the islands it was really hot. I mean the heat itself could kill you and you were, couldn't drink enough water and the people that had been there for months before me they said don't drink too much water you'll get used to this heat you'll get used to, after I was there for a month it wasn't that bad. The heat never bothered ya 'cuz then when it got down to 70 [degrees] you had to put a coat on because you were cold, and especially at night if it got that temperature you put blankets on. But yeah we got around the island and we had a very good chief of, and our plot to him, he used to borrow us a jeep and we would go riding over to the native country, which you could ride there but you couldn't talk or speak to them or do nothing there. Just go over and look and come back because the British was in charge of the natives over at the island at that time. They

wanted a British command and they told us that the natives at that time while I was there never lived to be over 30 years old, they were all at that 30 and passed away. But we had a lot of fun over there we played baseball and all that and we had movies at night. We used to go see, not every night but some nights when they figured it was okay they'd have a movie for ya.

I: Did they like the Americans over there?

DO: Oh yeah we got along good, you just couldn't talk to the natives because well, especially the women, they went around with nothing on they never, but you couldn't talk to them or do nothing.

I: When you were overseas what was Christmas and holidays like?

DO: Well over on the Islands Christmas didn't mean too much, we worked. But they did give us a very good meal, they served us like a big Christmas meal but we still had to work and you know, it didn't look like Christmas because it was so warm, temperatures up around 120 [degrees] but we used to get these mail planes in, and my buddy over there he was from New Jersey he wanted to get a case of beer and whiskey for himself because he wanted something to celebrate so he asked this pilot if he would bring in some for him and he said well I'll try. So he did sneak him in a case of beer and some whiskey which cost him 45 dollars which was a lot of money at the time but I guess he didn't mind because he kind of celebrated Christmas himself then.

I: Could you get anything to your families or them to you?

DO: No we got packages you know, but by the time you got them they weren't too good. They weren't the best. Because on the island three times a week they would allow you two cans of beer, they would give you two cans of beer, but the beer was so terrible nobody could drink it.

I: Did you go to church services?

DO: Oh yes church, they had church there they had different churches and where I was, my place my tent was, the church wasn't too far I didn't have to walk that far away to go there.

I: When you were a child what responsibilities did you have?

DO: Oh I didn't have too much until I got about 13 but when I was younger all we had to do was go out and saw wood and haul the wood in and that because everything was wood, your stove, we never had electric stoves or gas stoves it was all wood and you had to have chips by the stove and wood there every night and then in the summer when I was 11 we used to have to go out the woods and cut our

wood and then bring it in and then saw it up and then pile it in the basement and our basement used to be loaded from one end to the other end where you could just go down the steps to the basement and get down there to get the wood because we used to have it loaded with car wood and ties and anything you could get to heat the home for the winter.

I: And when the stock market crashed did it have any effect on your family?

DO: No, they never had nothing to worry about as far as the crash because our family never had nothing. But a lot of people jumped out of windows and that and killed themselves because of the '29 crash.

I: Did they blame the president?

DO: Yes everybody blamed Hoover for it because he never really do nothing as far as his four years in term and I don't know anybody that really would give him a medal.

I: And what were the, what was the scenery like around Ishpeming when the depression was?

DO: Well it was a lot of time for mope around because nobody worked, but anybody would do anything for a quarter them days. Because a quarter was a lot of money, you could I think for a quarter you could go down and buy a pound of pork chops for less than that at that time if you had the money.

I: Were there bums?

DO: Oh yes, lots of bums on the highway on the road them days that come in and that and I had a brother that went on the road for a while say get off of the out of the bambi and bumming and working so hard.

I: Did the depression make you grow up faster?

DO: Yes in a way because you know it made you realize that you had to work to get money to do something. You didn't just sit down like the kids do nowadays they just depend on their parents to give them a dollar or two dollars or ten dollars to go out.

I: Did prohibition have any effect on your family?

DO: Well yes it was hard, I was around the 6th or 7th grade when my dad got caught selling moonshine and he spent three years in Leavenworth, Kansas for it because it was a federal prison and this was a federal offense and he took three years over there and my ma tried to do the best he could over here

with us kids because we had, I had a few older brothers that tried to help but things were real tough. And then when he came home my ma never gave up so she had to go into the business and then she got caught and they took her down to Marquette but they let her go for being a woman they just let her go because we had smaller children home so they let her come home but they warned her so from then on we never bothered with the moonshine, we said that's it.

I: Then what did you do?

DO: Well my dad was working and I was working and that so we got along pretty good.

I: When did things start to get better for you?

DO: Well Roosevelt went in in '32 and then if I remember right 1936 the mines started hiring back because I had a brother that got a job then in '37 at Cliffs Shaft and things were going real good because the car manufacturers started working and they came out with new cars and people were buying them and that so things were starting to pick up. So I'd say about '36 '37 we could figure the depression was over and everybody was happy and having a good living.

I: Do you think the war brought prosperity to this country?

DO: Well I'd have to say it did because when the war started, or even before the war everybody was working and making good money and like in the city all the factory were booming the mines were going full blast and then when the war did, the war in Japan and the United States started the war then things really went good because they needed the iron ore they needed the iron and everything so everything went well until a few years after the war and then things started to go down again.

I: What about the rationing of food during the war?

DO: Well, I wasn't hurt at the time because well I was hurt in gasoline because they rationed the gasoline and I was driving to Marquette when I used to be dayshift I used to drive to Marquette every night and they only allowed us 5 gallons so somewhere or another we had to connive and dickle with people to get gasoline so we could drive to Marquette. But that was the only thing that really hurt me because as far as the food we used to get enough food and that from the ration.

I: Cars were coming out, so when did you get your first car?

DO: Well during the war cars were hard to get in '46 but when I left for the service I had a '36 Ford and I put it in the garage and I stored it in the garage, and when I came home in '46 that summer, my brother

in law which was a pretty good mechanic, we took it up and we took it to his house and we worked on it and fixed it all up. And then Jimmy Automatic came and they offered me 800 dollars for that car which was it wasn't even worth maybe a couple hundred dollars but at that time they were going around buying all these used cars for big money because I remember my brother in law he was lucky enough to get a '46 mercury at that time and he paid around 800 or 900 hundred dollars for it and they wanted to give him 1,200 or 1,500 dollars for it, and he wouldn't trade it because he wanted the car he didn't want the money but really for a few years cars were really hard to get so I kept my '36 until I came from the service and then back later in '47 I traded it in for a '41 Ford I think it was.

I: And how much did you pay for that one?

DO: Well I don't remember the price on it, but then after that I, '52 I bought a '52 a Plymouth from Northern Motor down there in Marquette and I think I only payed about 3000 dollars for that at that time. The cars weren't that bad then but the wages weren't too high either, we worked in the mine for 78 cents an hour so you know. And then after the strike when I first went it was 78 [cents] but after the strike in '46 when I went back we were getting a dollar and a few cents over an hour, I'm not quite sure but it was over a dollar [TAPE CUTS OUT ABRUPTLY]

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DO: We did have a telephone back in the thirties but my ma she used to call my dad up in, in other words she ran up such a big bill and then she couldn't pay it so they came and took the telephone out because she couldn't afford to pay it because she ran it so high up. So they took it out and we never had a phone put in the house until after I got married in '46 when I came from the service then we put a telephone in.

I: And when did you get your first TV?

DO: Well I don't remember the year, it must have been in the fifties you know I went down to Lower Michigan because I had a brother that was in Lower Michigan and he got me one and we brought it up but you couldn't get good TV. And then I forget what year I bought one from Pat and Arty [SPELLED PHONETICALLY] when they had the TV's over there are First Street and they had the big antennas put up on your roof and it wasn't too bad, but it was still snowy so we didn't really get good TV until cable came in and then you got good TV.

I: Now that you are 69 years old are you glad that you stayed in Ishpeming?

DO: Oh yes I like Ishpeming, it's a small town you get to know everybody and everybody knows you and you get along real good. Especially when I was in the bar, I got to know a lot of people and they were really nice people and I had very good friends and customers and so I got no regret that I stayed here and spent my 69 years here.

I: Well thank you for the interview. I appreciate it.