interesting tape

NORTHERN MICHIGAN ORAL HISTORY PROJECT ITALIAN-AMERICAN COLLECTION

OH-77 Index

MANZOLINE, Mary Roti and TOUSIGNANT (Tassin), Genevieve (interview conducted 9/28/82, Ishpeming, MI)

Indexed by: Faye Oja Indexed May 24, 1983

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Interview with Mary T. Manzaline and ???

Ishpeming, MI

September 28, 1982

Interviewer: Dr. Russell Magnaghi

Transcribed: May 22, 2002

RM: Okay, Jenny, could you tell us a little about your Dad? Who he was, where he was from Italy, how he got here? Some of that background…

J: My Dad was from Calabria, Italy. He was very interested in his fellow human beings. He just loved the Italian people and did everything he could for them. But he also wanted them all to become citizens when they came to the United States. We had a house that had an upstairs and innumerable number of relatives lived up there when they came from Italy without any charge. No rent, he supplied the food and everything. My mother was kept busy working. They weren't always related to us. If a woman came from Italy and was to be married, he would have her stay there until she was married and he fathered everybody that came here. As time went on and the mines were doing well and prospering, he would get jobs for a lot of these men. Of course they had a language barrier, but they managed. He had a lot of influence politically. It isn't nice to say, but it's true that in those days you could almost tell somebody for whom to vote because they didn't know. They were illiterate and didn't realize. He influenced a lot of votes in this town. He was a Republican. The mining company was Republican. He could take these men over to one of the executives and get them a job at the drop of a hat.

RM: Just to get back when he first arrived, what did he do? Why did he come to Ishpeming?

J: Because of the hunting and fishing.

RM: Really.

J: That's why he came here. He had stopped in the east, in New York and then he came here because he heard the hunting and fishing was great. It was something he did right til 3 weeks before he passed away.

RM: So it wasn't that there were certain types of jobs here. That's very interesting.

J: He worked in the mines for some time, but he was on the police force for 43 years.

RM: When did he start on the police force?

J: 83 years ago.

RM: 1899 then. How long was he here before he got into the police?

J: I don't know exactly. I'm not sure. I should be, but I'm not.

RM: Something like 5 years or so?

J: At least that. Maybe 10 years. He worked in the mines for a while and then he got this opportunity. Every year he had to be voted in again by the councilmen. It wasn't something like now. He had no insurance of any kind. He had to buy his own uniforms and he was a short fellow. They were expensive. They were like a hundred some dollars and the pay wasn't great. He had to have his clothes tailor made. He was quite a guy. You would have loved him.

RM: So while he was working in the mines he learned English and got assimilated.

J: Yes. He and my mother hadn't had much of formal schooling, but they were both intelligent. My Dad loved to garden. They always had a garden and they preserved. That's why we always ate well. We didn't have much money, but we certainly had a comfortable home and during the holidays especially, we just didn't know what to do with all the food. He always had enough for somebody else. Do you know during the big Depression and also the one in 1929, we had a bench in our back yard and my Dad didn't know any healthy Italians, but he told my mother don't turn anybody back. Always give them something to eat. Make them a sandwich. Don't let them come in the house because you don't know who they are. They would stop here because of the railroad. This was a terminal. They would come here and they never turned anybody down. They always gave them a few sandwiches and gave them something to drink with

it. They'd sit on the bench and eat it. Nobody ever bothered her. The people down town, even if they were drunks, he wouldn't give them money, but he would take them to a restaurant to eat and he'd pay for their meals. He really was an unusual man. Very big hearted.

RM: You said he was very interested in getting the Italians to become citizens. This must have been something he…

J: He would be their witness.

RM: But also when he got here, he must have…

J: He became a citizen as soon as he could. And everybody that came, he went after them until they would. They had to learn certain things. Usually they could get their citizenship papers in Marquette. For once he even went to the Soo with them. He would pay his own expenses. They would give him a ride because he didn't have a car. But he would bring his own lunch because he wouldn't drink water in Marquette. Some people had drowned in Lake Superior and he thought that was just terrible. He was very eccentric in one way. But he was a great Dad.

RM: Was he…you mentioned earlier that he influenced people in voting and so on. Did he…

J: They probably wouldn't have voted at all.

RM: Was he like a...like they have in Chicago, a ward boss?

J: Not really. He got nothing out of it. But he got the satisfaction and pleasure of knowing he got somebody to vote. And he always said he was proud of being an Italian but he never wanted to go back because he knew what he left there, poverty. Here he made a pretty good living. It wasn't great, but we managed. We even had a store at one time. We could have made a lot of money, but my mother had to take part of his pay check to pay the bills because he would bring all his friends in there and treat them for nothing. Ice cream and everything. That was my father. So you can see what we really put up with in a way.

RM: It sounds like the best job he could have was being on the police force that way. He couldn't give the store away.

J: We finally sold the building because my mother said when we have to start paying the bills out of your paycheck it just isn't the way it's supposed to be. She could have made a go of it and we could have been wealthy today. But we never will be and never were.

RM: But you have that memory and legacy of your Dad.

J: And how he loved his grandchildren. My brother used to live on the other side and during the Depression he'd buy clothes for the kids and coal for their stoves and heater and everything. He never would let any of his family or anybody that he could help go in want. They would always be taken care of. There aren't enough people like that today. But I think that's typical of an Italian. My mother was a northern Italian, so it was like two different worlds. But she learned to talk the way he did. My aunt would come here. She was Piedmontese and couldn't understand a word she said. I couldn't understand one word when she and my aunt got together.

RM: What was your mother's name?

J: My mother's name was Oberto.

RM: Her first name?

J: Kathrine. Beautiful. You can see that in the picture of her with the baby.

RM: Did they speak Italian at home?

J: Oh yes. But we learned to speak English and they did too. My mother could read in English. She had never gone to school here. She didn't write letters or anything, but I have recipes from her. For salt she would put S-A-L-E like the Italians would you know. But she was intelligent. She really was.

RM: Did your family have any special foods they would eat, or celebrate any special holidays?

J: We had the whole family here for every holiday. Christmas, New Years, Easter, you name it. My father would have goose or duck. My father was very versatile in his eating. He wasn't like some of the Italians. They would only eat Italian food. He wasn't like that. He liked deserts, he liked everything. But he loved food. He ate a lot of fish. He would not eat meat on Wednesday or Friday ever. In Italy they didn't. It was for the Blessed Virgin on Wednesday. I don't know if you're very religious, but that's the way they were. He loved fish. He ate a lot of fish, but not too much on ethnic foods. My mother would make maveli for Christmas and Easter with honey and walnuts on it. Have you ever had it? They're very, very good. And my mother would make tavali, they're made with a lot of eggs. It's all the moisture that's in it. It's flour and sugar and eggs and a little bit of baking powder. You make biscuits out of it, especially for Easter with all different colors. She was a very good cook. And my mother was a very religious, wonderful woman. Everybody remembers her and my dad, all the grandchildren. The great-grandchildren didn't know them. My brother lived next door for 27 years. So his kids were greatly influenced. In fact, his daughter, did you know Dr. Bertussi?

RM: I just heard of him. Can you tell us a little about him?

J: He was a doctor here for 48 years, except for a couple years. Dr. Emmanuel came here, he was my cousin. But he couldn't get a license. They didn't want an Italian practicing here. But Dr. Bertussi went to Marquette University so he got his license for more than one state. Some states have ???. He did that. He was my Dad's nephew. His mother and my Dad were brother and sister. He was a humanitarian too. If he knew somebody was poor, he wouldn't even charge them. And they didn't have to be Italian. He was good to a lot of people. He was a very good doctor. He was in the service for a couple years. He was a captain. He was drafted during the war. They were doing that with doctors. They all had to take their turn. He practiced here for almost 50 years.

RM: You mention this doctor, and the cousin, what was his first or last name?

J: Nicolino Emmanuele. Then he had a brother, but he didn't come here. He was an eye, ears, and throat specialist. I have a lot of cousins in the medical field. My nieces are nurses. I think we sort of lean that way. My mother didn't go to school for nursing, but she would have been a good nurse. Mother and dad hardly ever needed to call a doctor. They knew how to take care of us and knew when something was wrong that was serious.

RM: Could you get into some of the home remedies?

J: My mother had cough syrup she made with brandy, honey, and lemon juice. It's great. It's an expectorant. That's what you need when you have a bad cold. We had so many different tenants next door and my mother could hear the kids coughing. She'd make up

the cough syrup for them and they'd call it Grandma Tasson's Cough Syrup. She didn't charge them for it either. She just brought it in to them.

RM: Were there other remedies that she had?

J: My father had a little snort of booze that he thought was a cure all. He wasn't a heavy drinker, but he would have his drink every day and then have chocolate covered peanuts to wash it down. All the grandchildren...you should have met him. They don't make them like him anymore.

RM: It sounds like he's quite...

J: There's still older people living that remember him and what a great guy he was. He was very highly respected and loved. He really was. It's too bad the Andriachi's couldn't give you some information. Theresa is 80 years old, the one in the store, and she's still working. She's my first cousin too. Mrs. Bertussi, Mrs. Andriachi, and my Dad, then my Uncle Louis had a grocery store on this street. They were my Dad's sisters and brothers.

RM: So Theresa Andriachi was a Tasson

J: No, her mother was a Tasson. I guess she isn't a bit interested in...but she's 80 years old and Joe is at least 72 because I'm 71 and they're still working. It's quite a place isn't it. It's unique.

RM: I think it's the last store like that. The old Italian general store.

J: With clothing, and very good quality.

RM: Going around to different communities, there aren't any stores like that. It would be an interesting one to do a story on.

J: It would, if they would do it. We used to have, but it was a large establishment. It was a co-op store. They had groceries and clothing. It was beautiful merchandise. Meijers was over where OK Auto Parts is. See what a good memory I have? I wish there were a lot of things I knew, that I should know. I wish my mother was here that I could ask. But it's too late.

RM: Things that you kind of talked about and you just listen to...

J: And it goes in one ear and out the other.

RM: In terms of the stores around here, were there a lot of Italian owned and operated stores?

J: Not that many. Andriachi's which is still there, and my Uncle Louis. He had a grocery store and a meat market. His sons are in California now. That's the way it is. You pass a business on to someone else and they don't know how to handle it. They finally had to fold. Andriachi's were just a few doors away from us and my mother would want to put food in her place to bring more business. He wasn't going to compete with them. That was his sister's store. So you see how he was? He was quite a guy. He was always looking out for the other fellow. But I think God blesses you for that in the end.

RM: When did he retire from the police force?

J: My dad never retired. He was 77 years old and he died on the job. He didn't actually die on the job, he was in the hospital 6 days. What happened, they used to have a switch to turn on the lights. Now they all go on automatically. Anyway, he had to turn a big switch. It was slippery and he fell. He must have kinked an intestine or something. About a week later he landed in the hospital. He was there less than a week and he died. He was working right up to that point. He was 77 years old.

RM: He died in what year?

J: He died 40 years ago. March 12, 1942. You can't do that now. Now they give you a pension. I was left to support my mother. She had no pension, no social security, no

nothing. They were just starting to take income tax at that time. There was nothing. I worked at the drug store and I supported her. He and I have only been married 15 years. We're still newlyweds. He lost his first wife. We have a good time together. He says my wife does all the talking.

RM: Mary why don't you tell us a little about your Dad, where he came from in the old country...

MM: He came from the same town that Jen's dad came from, Simbralio, in Calabria.

RM: What was his name?

MM: James Rolli. When he first came over they were in Chicago and he worked on the railroad for about 3 or 4 years before he came to Ishpeming. Then when he settled here, it seemed like the mines were the only thing open to these young men that were coming over from Italy. He got in and worked there all his life, up until he had an accident and his back was damaged. He was in the hospital for about 6 months. Finally he got strong enough and he was back on his feet. He never went back to work there. But he was hired by one of the Italian men here in Ishpeming at the Paradise Bar. He worked as a bartender for a long time. Then he worked as a gardener for one of the officers of the mine. He did a lot of their gardening. Then he went back to bartending because it was warmer for him and his back was bothering him and he would get chilled. So he had to take a job where he would be working inside. He retired after so many years of working

as a bartender. He led a very quiet life. He was a very quiet and reserved man. He raised his family. There were 4 boys and I was the only girl. He was a very good father, Christian, went to church and believed in the Catholic religion. I think he was proud of his family as they grew up.

RM: Did he belong to any lodges?

MM: Oh yes. He belonged to St. Rocco's Lodge and St. Anthony's. St. John's Church. And he played in Vampa's band years ago when he was still young. He was very good. He taught my brothers to play instruments as they grew up. My oldest brother, Roco, he played the trumpet and got to play the guitar after. Then my brother Frank wasn't very interested in music. But my brother Tuti, he played the violin. And my youngest brother wasn't very interested in music. They were very nice boys. Grew up very quietly. When they worked at the mine...this is something I almost forgot. We used to come home at noon time from school and walk up to the 16 mine that was called the 16th Mine. We carried their lunch bucket out there. Mother would have tea in the bottom and there was another container you could slide on top of that and there would be the hot food. Either the pork chops or potatoes or hot pasties. Then the desert would be on top, fruit, bananas, apples, oranges, whatever. We used to have to walk up there on our lunch hour from school to carry Dad the hot dinner so he could eat, and then walk back to school before 1:00. So would you wait there while he ate?

MM: Yes. Definitely. They'd come up from underground full of iron ore. You could just see their eyes shining. That was the only thing. They had to wash their hands in the dry. That's where they changed their clothes to come home. They would hurry because they only had that hour, then they would go underground again at 1:00. It was kind of a hard life for him. They worked so hard.

RM: You talk about these shafts, was it all Italians working in a shaft?

MM: No. There were English people too and Finnish people. Quite a few Finnish. And at that time there were quite a few English men too.

RM: Would they work in Italian crews underground?

MM: No, they were mixed groups. It was a very hard life for them.

RM: Did they ever express themselves about the mines and the danger and the work and so on?

MM: Yes. There were nights my mother would be sick from worry if they had to work overtime, or if there was something wrong underground, if there was a slight cave in of some kind. It upset the whole family because you were wondering were they killed? Was something dangerously wrong down there? Did they get out? In the winter time, it would be 8 or 9:00 before they would get home. Mother would be just frantic. Supper

would be held on the side trying to keep it warm for him. It was a hard life. One of my youngest uncles…my mother's youngest brother got killed underground, and my Dad's brother got killed underground.

RM: Was that here in Ishpeming?

MM: Yes.

RM: Did it end up with families losing people in the mines? Everybody knew somebody that had been killed?

MM: Oh yes. Definitely. There was always somebody. And most of the Italian people were related somehow or other. If it wasn't a cousin it was an uncle or distant relative from far away.

RM: Or somebody from the same town if they weren't related.

MM: That's right. Everybody would go to pieces when tragedy happened. He had a real hard life. One thing he always said to his boys was do any kind of job on the surface, but never go underground. None of them did go underground. They all found work elsewhere. My eldest brother was in Chicago, a butcher out there for a while. My second brother Frank was with the State Police after he graduated. My other brother joined the Marines after he graduated. He worked here in the grocery store for Mr. Tasson for a few

years and then he joined the Marine Corps. He retired as a Major in the Marine Corps. My youngest brother lives in Negaunee. He works for the Charter company for mining equipment. They all had pretty good jobs considering not having enough schooling and that.

RM: But nobody went underground.

MM: No. That was his psalm. No way were you to go underground to work. He knew how hard it was.

RM: During these years about how many Italians were living in Ishpeming?

MM: I can't even think. There have been families and families and families…

J: We have so many relatives here. You wouldn't believe. They used to think this should be called Tassontown because there were so many Tassons. They're not all related but most of them are. We have a lot of relatives. I'm the only one that didn't reproduce. I was too old when I got married.

RM: So if you were to go through the phone book today, would a lot of those Italian people be in some way related?

J: Oh yes. I should say so. On my mother's side, the Marietti's are all intermarried. My aunt just passed away. She was 96 years old. There's longevity on my mother's side. She was 85. My aunt was 96, I have one living that's 90. So maybe I'll be around for a while.

MM: On my Dad's side they were all in their 90s when grandpa and grandma died. Grandma was 94 and Grandpa was 98. So there's a long...I guess everybody in town, the Italians are all related somehow.

J: There's some Tassons that aren't related to us.

RM: Tell about the garden?

J: My Dad had a huge garden. There were only 3 of us at home at that time. He always had a huge garden.

RM: Where did he have it?

J: Across from the hospital on 4th Street.

RM: On his property or some place else?

J: The CCI let him have the property for $1 a year and that included the water and everything. He'd come home with a wheel barrow full of produce and we'd just give it away. He could have gone into the store and certainly helped our coffers, but he didn't do that either. He gave everything away. And he went fishing. He'd give the best fish away. You know what he used to tell my mother? The small ones are the best. She would complain that they were so small like sardines you know. He said they're the best ones. She would say if they're the best then why don't you give them away instead of keeping them for us. If I were more educated I could write a book on him. I think that would be interesting.

RM: Why not?

J: I guess you don't have to be too educated. I'm not that ambitious, let's put it that way. I don't need the money and I'm too lazy.

RM: You can always get an editor to clean it up for you.

MM: Don't you have to pay those fellows to do that?

RM: Yes.

SKIP IN TAPE

RM: You were talking something about the foods they ate on Christmas Eve?

J: Mary told you about the eels.

MM: Yes I told him about the eels and how hideous they were. My mother would cut them in slices. The black, the skin on them was so black. I used to have my Dad cut the skin off after my mother had made them nice and crispy you know.

J: It looked just like a snake.

MM: The inside of that fish was delicious.

J: Bakala. You had to soak it. It was hard and dry.

MM: For weeks you had to change the water every day so it wouldn't smell. When they prepare it though for Christmas Eve, wasn't it delicious?

J: It was made like ludicus from the Scandinavians and Norwegians do. Theirs has cream sauce, but the Italians had a tomato sauce. Of course everything had a tomato sauce. Her Dad had to have spaghetti every day. Even if they had a roast. My mother finally stopped that. When you have a roast you have potatoes and vegetables period. You don't have spaghetti. Two starches like that?

MM: Well with 4 brothers, I was the only girl. There were 5 men in the house. Mother had to. She would make homemade macaroni and cut them. Drying out on one side of the dining room table until we were ready to cook it, and then a great big roast, sometimes stuffed peppers and chicken with that. There's 5 men in the house. Dad worked hard, and my brothers were growing boys. Mother was baking bread 3 times a week. Great big Italian loaves of bread. They'd come home from being out in the evening and we'd have sandwiches. It was nothing for my oldest brother to come home and have a pasty for supper and...

MM: That's all they did is cook and bake.

J: With a coal stove. We couldn't have gas in the house until my father died. He thought the house would blow up. If we were still living at the old house we would have still had kerosene lamps. We didn't have electricity over there. I remember once my sister went down to the cellar to get something and her ponytail got caught in the lamp and started to catch on fire. She put it out in a hurry. She had it over her shoulder. It didn't end up tragically. It was okay.

MM: We had a nice living room.

J: It was always with a rug and davenport. I suppose it was second hand. I don't know. But we always had a nice living room. We used to have wallpaper with big roses. My father loved roses. I hated them. When he died I got rid of that in a hurry.

RM: So this was the house that they moved into from across the street.

J: It was right across from the hospital. The gymnasium is there. That's where I was born. 412 E. Pearl. So I've lived on this street all my life except one year I was in Chicago. When my husband and I were married he had a house and I had a house. We looked all over. We were going to sell both houses and get a real nice place. We did look. He said I'd like any house as long as it's on Pearl Street. We arrived at that conclusion. He's such a good husband.

RM: That's incredible. Most people don't live, let alone in the same house, but on the same street.

J: For 70 years. I'm an incredible person. Talk about my father, I'm one of a kind.

RM: I wanted to ask about the Italians here, do you remember Felix Chebano?

J: Might have been Negaunee. A lot of northern Italians were in Negaunee.

RM: This Mrs. Fredrickson, Jannet Barassa Fredrickson, but they're from Negaunee.

J: I don't know about you, do you practice your religion at all?

RM: Yes.

J: It kills me when an Italian isn't a Catholic. I'm not a snob and I'm not a racist. I'm not anti-anything. But to me that's part of our heritage like the Jewish people being Jewish. I just can't imagine an Italian not being a Catholic and there's a lot of them that aren't. That's important to me. I don't know why.

RM: Why don't you tell us about the Irish-Italian conflict in the church and parochial school here.

J: I went to the parochial school from kindergarten to the 8th grade and I loved the nuns, most of them. But the Irish were favored. Their fathers had better jobs. They had more money, so they had more prestige. I was one of the lucky ones that my father was a police man and he was well known and more respected than some of the others. There was no reason they shouldn't have been respected. They were good god-fearing people and worked hard for a living. But it does leave it's mark on you. I feel like I was a minority. I'm very proud of being an Italian, but I feel I was in a minority group. I remember going on a picnic and Katherine Adams, who was an only child and her father worked for CCI came. We just had our own lunch. She came with her leather chip with everything in it. She had lunch for sister. Then I thought why didn't I think of bringing lunch for sister? But then I wouldn't have had all these trappings to bring it with us. I remember that.

RM: Did you notice any discrimination in the school besides that?

J: Yes. There was discrimination, although it didn't affect me very much because my mother superior, I still have a prayer book for excellence from 8th grade. She's in a mother house in St. Louis now and she's still living. She was very fair. But I had a niece in Marquette who did not. She was the most intelligent in her class and she also had done a lot of extra curricular work that had taken a whole lot. There was a prize for something and the nun gave it to an Irish person because she was Irish. It left it's mark on my niece. She turned against the nuns because of that.